Batten Down the Hatches
by Eccentric_Red

Summary

There's a storm coming with Helena Wayne caught right in the middle of it. When Selina gave birth to her daughter things weren't so complicated, but now, a new criminal's donned the Red Hood, Batman's hair has gotten greyer, and there're too many teenage Metahumans running around.
Selina's body ached all over, her skin caked in sweat, with a thick smell of blood in the hospital room. Her short brown hair was damp and clung to her cheeks and her green eyes were closed tightly.

"One last push, Ms Dubrovna," the Nurse with faded red hair told her.

Selina gritted her teeth, digging her nails into the side bars of the bed. Her legs were spread further apart. She screamed, scrunching her face up tightly until her pale skin was flushed red, and with one final push the baby came out, piercing the air with its screams.

She breathed shallowly, collapsing against the bed as the baby – her little baby – was taken into the doctor's hands, as its umbilical cord was cut.

Selina felt dizzy, barely having enough strength to speak. The baby was tiny, wriggling around as the nurse wrapped it up in a towel.

The nurse smiled and moved closer. "Congratulations, it's a girl."

Selina could barely register what was going on as the baby was presented to her. Her lips strained upwards when she stared at her daughter, a pair of bright blue eyes – Bruce's eyes - staring back at her. The little baby's face was chubby and the tiny amount of hair on her head was black.

Selina shakily held her daughter in her arms. She was so small. The baby girl stared up at her, the crying faded into confused whimpers.

"Hello," she said quietly, rocking her slowly. "Hi..." She smiled widely, feeling a swell of warmth.

The baby blinked and sucked her tiny fist.

Selina let out a shaky sigh.

For the first time in her life, she felt like she'd actually fallen in love.

She called her Helena.
The city lights hid the stars from view, not a cloud in sight. A young woman observed the city from a High-rise, with loose black hair and a dark purple, pointed, the mask hiding most of her face. The slim costume covered her from the neck downwards, with the large white cross emblem on her chest and purple shoulder pads fastened in place. Her purple utility belt was full to the brim, with matching gloves and boots firmly in place. Huntress took a big whiff of the polluted air and smiled to herself as she stared out at the city.

"Huntress," Robin's voice rang in her ear.

She smiled slightly and touched the com-link. "You called?" She strained her gaze to the tower further up, where she could see the faint outline of Robin's form.

"An alarm just went off at the jewellery store on East Loxbone Street," he informed.

Huntress smiled crookedly and pulled out her grappling hook. "Race you?"

"You're on!" She could hear the smile in his voice, acting his age for once.

She released the hook and jumped, swinging down, the wind rushing through her hair. She dived onto the next building, flipping back onto her feet as she broke into a run.

There was something about racing through the air that sent a shiver down her spine. It was like she was dancing, going faster and faster until she hit the unavoidable end. It made her fingers tingle.

Huntress arrived at the jewellery store two seconds before Robin, as the Boy Wonder landed across the street. His forehead creased and his face scrunched up a little from behind his domino mask.

She smiled to herself and approached the building from behind while he followed. She quickly brought up her holographic computer to send a message to the cops.

The robbers had gone in from the back door, broken through the locks, by the looks of it, and were now quickly trying to gather all the loot they could hold. The getaway car was parked down the side-alley, but Robin could deal with that on his own.

She pressed her finger to her ear. "I already called the cops, so the car's all yours, shrimp," she whispered.

"Oh, gee, thanks," he replied dryly. She glanced over her shoulder to see him preying down on the car, approaching from the shadows.

Huntress moved slowly, peeking her head from around the door. There were three of them; mid or late thirties, thickly built and only two of them were armed. A Crossman C12 and a Glock G19.

She'd only need to be gentle with these three, they weren't the big game.

She threw two small bombs at the armed guys. The bombs latched onto their guns and stuck like magnets, melting the weapon.
"The fuck?!" The big guy was the first one to notice, practically trying to rip his trousers off. The other guy collapsed onto the floor and screamed when the hot metal burned him.

"Shit," the third guy—dirty blond with a bad rash—tried to run, scrambling to the far side of the room.

She swooped in and attacked the blond hitting him in the gut just when he pulled a knife. She disarmed him, twisting his arm back, before grabbing his head to slam it against the floor, knocking him out.

The stolen goods scattered onto the floor like marbles.

She threw a Batarang at the second guy when he tried to run, hitting him in the head.

Robin zoomed in and kicked him in the face, flipping him over onto the ground. Then Robin shot two Birdarangs at the last guy left who was trying to limp away, pinning the guy to the wall.

She flipped over to the man and punched him in the face, knocking him unconscious, hurting her knuckles. "How did we do?" Huntress looked back over at her partner.

The scrawny, raven-haired, boy checked his Holographic computer for the time and frowned. "Two minutes."

"Damn it," she murmured. Twenty seconds longer than last time. Huntress sighed and walked over to him. "Let's tell Batman it was a minute."

The corner of Robin's lip twitched upwards. "Let's say a minute and a half to be safe."

She grinned and ruffled his hair. "Come on, let's tie them up and get out of here."

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**Boston**

**11/02/2013**

**14:00**

Selina sighed and stepped into the St Camilla's Elementary school, readjusting the bag on her shoulder. She ran a hand through her short black hair as she walked down the hallway towards the principal's office.

Helena was waiting outside the office, sitting in a chair with an ice pack held to her cheek, her long black hair hiding half her face.

Selina felt a swell of protectiveness rise up inside of her. She let out a deep breath and reigned in her temper. "Kitten?" she called softly, coming to a stop in front of her little girl.

Helena looked up, blue eyes shining brightly. "Hey, mama..." Her city accent was thick.

The older woman sighed and stroked back her daughter's hair, tilting her head back. "Who won?" Her lips set in a thin line.

A smile crept its way onto her daughter's face. "...Me."

Selina tried to hide her smile, sitting down. "Girl or boy?" she asked.
"Boy." Helena lowered the ice pack, revealing the purple bruise on the lower side of her cheek.

The woman stroked the bruise, letting out a slow sigh. "What did he do?"

Helen scowled. "His name's Hank, a-and he's always picking on my friend Kelly," she answered quickly. "And it ain't fair, mama. He's mean. I just… I just wanted him to stop." Her shoulders tensed as her scowl deepened. "I didn't mean to hurt his nose…"

Selina remained silent, looking at her thoughtfully, not sure whether to praise or scold her. Catwoman would have smirked and told her to keep up the good work, but then again a cat-burglar wasn't the model parent figure.

"You did the right thing standing up for your friend," Selina finally said, stroking her hair back. Helena smiled. "But, violence isn't always the answer." The smile faded. "And, I don't want you getting in trouble because of some thick-headed punk." She sighed again and cupped her daughter's cheek. "You understand?"

Helena's lips were set in a thin line. "…Yes, mama."

She smiled faintly and kissed the top of her head. "Good," she replied, holding her hand. "Now come on, let's go face the beast," she whispered playfully, glancing over shoulder at the door, making Helena grin.

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**09/07/2023**

**02:00**

The sound of a motorcycle echoed around the cave as Huntress drove in with Robin. Old relics, vehicles, training equipment, and the Batcomputer decorated the room.

Huntress parked next to the Batmobile and removed her helmet, her gaze wandering over to her dad who was sitting in front of the computer, his cowl lowered. She smiled faintly and dismounted the bike while Robin was already half-way towards Batman, his helmet carelessly left on the floor.

"Slow night?" Boy Wonder spoke, flipping towards the older man whose gaze was transfixed on the screen.

Batman hummed lowly, not tearing his face away from the screen as he browsed through some police records. "Crime's low," he replied grimly.

Huntress arched an eyebrow as she made her way over, removing her mask. "The end is neigh," she remarked ominously.

Tim smirked as he perched on a railing near the computer. Batman finally looked at her, narrowing his eyes. "How was your night?" he asked, glancing over at Tim briefly.

She shrugged. "Just a few robberies, a mugging, nothing big." She sighed and crossed her arms. "Not one bruise or scratch, it was like we were fighting training dummies. Only took a minute and a half."

"Don't be cocky." Dad turned to her fully. Tim's smirk disappeared as he looked away, kicking the air. Her lips pursed. "This isn't a game, Helena," Batman coldly reminded her, returning his
attention to the screen as he steeped his fingers.

Her brow furrowed, folding her arms. "...I know," she muttered under her breath.

Batman sighed deeply, shaking his head. "It's a school night, you two should head upstairs." He cast her a brief glance before he looked back at the screen.

Tim jumped off the railing while Helena narrowed her eyes in irritation as she started to take off her heavy boots. She stared at her dad, wondering why he was more wound up than usual.

He looked tired, which was peculiar seeing how he'd been getting a whole five hours sleep this week. Knowing him, he wouldn't tell her what was wrong even if she asked.

Her irritation faded slightly, knowing what he could be like when he got into one of these moods. Helena walked over to her dad, boots in hand, and sighed, kissing his cheek, making him tense. "Goodnight, daddy," she murmured, turning away.

Tim was waiting for her by the entrance, standing there in his training pants and vest, ready to go upstairs. She unzipped her costume and slipped out of it like she was shedding a second skin, leaving her exposed in a pair of gym shorts and a sports bra. She folded her costume up and left it next to Robin's.

"...Goodnight," Dad replied gruffly when she was at the edge of the stairs.

She smiled to herself and followed Tim up the stairs.

Roxbury, Boston
02/10/2014
22:35

Helena stirred awake, holding her stuffed kitty tight to her chest. The small toy was a dirty grey with big green eyes, the left eye was cracked from the time that nasty, smelly, girl from down the hallway had smashed it against the elevator.

Her eyes opened when she realised her mom wasn't in the double bed with her. She frowned, sitting up to look around the dim room. The street lamps shone through the window like a nightlight, illuminating the cluttered room.

"Mama?" Helena got out bed, her bare feet hitting the carpet. She held her kitty closer to her chest and walked over to the door.

She gently creaked the door open, revealing the living room and kitchen but no one was there.
"Mama!" she called louder, feeling a swell of fear. She strained on her tiptoes to turn on the light, illuminating the apartment.

*Maybe Mama is in the bathroom?*

Helena hurried to the bathroom and twisted the doorknob, expecting it to be locked, the door opened but no one was in the bathroom.

She looked around, afraid something bad was hiding in the shadows. "Mama!" Helena scrunched up her eyes because Mama wouldn't leave home this late without telling her or tell their neighbour
Rachel to watch her.

Helena hunched her shoulders and sat down on the couch. Maybe her mom had just gone outside to smoke, or gone to get groceries…

So, Helena curled up on the couch and waited...

Chapter End Notes

Hi, thanks for giving my story a look. I've been wanting to write a Batfam centric fic for a while now, so here it is.

The characters listed in the tags will be introduced gradually since I don't want to overstuff this bacon sandwich.

I love reviews so even a brief 'I like it' or 'I don't like it!' is appreciated in some way or another. I Just like feedback in general.

Story cover
The New Kid on the Block

Chapter Notes

Spanish:
Hijo = son
Mierda = Shit
Estoy Bien = I'm fine
Senora = ma'am
Jesucristo = Jesus Christ

If I've made any mistakes with the Spanish I apologise beforehand. Tell me and I'll correct it.

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Issue #1

The New Guy on the Block

Gotham City

09/08/2023

07:30

Helena gripped the steering wheel tightly as she hastily stopped at a red light in her new. Tim clutched his seat for dear life, tense, with his green eyes wide open like tennis balls. The both of them were dressed for school, well groomed. Her black hair tied back into a ponytail while his was neatly slicked back with gel.

"Are you even in the right gear?" Tim looked at her in alarm.

She gritted her teeth and scowled. "It's automatic." Helena drove on when the light turned green. "Just relax-"

"Blindspot!" A car nearly drove into them.

Helena swerved out of the way, getting beeped, as she turned a corner. Her nails dug into the wheel, palms sweaty. "Okay, so maybe I'm still getting the hang of it…we'll get there in one piece." She'd only passed her test two days ago, so what did he expect?

"Unless the cops pull us over first," he muttered, letting out a breath he'd been holding in.
"Ha. Ha, shut it," she replied, rolling her eyes. She turned onto a quieter road, sighing "Next time you can walk to school."

Tim raised an eyebrow but didn't comment, shaking his head. "So, Bruce seemed more on edge than usual…" Wisely changing the subject.

She shrugged. "I noticed. Any ideas as to why?" she said, sparing him a glance.

He straightened up. "…Well, I may have taken a look at the files he was so obsessed with," he told her.

"And?" Her brow creased.

"The drug lords are making payments to an offshore account," he replied, frowning as he looked out of the window. "I tried tracing it but the money kept moving…" Tim sighed. "Then I had to back out when the program tried to infect the computer with malware."

Her eyes narrowed. "Okay, so no luck there. What about the other files on Dad's computer?" she asked, chewing her tongue. "This new crime lord is bound to ruffle Black Mask's feathers."

"Well, he is stealing his profits, but Black Mask hasn't lashed out yet," he answered, tensing when she drove back onto the main road.

Helena's frown deepened. "So, next question, why hasn't Dad kept us in the loop?" She turned a corner, nearing the middle school. A number of students were chatting outside the building, dressed in their gold and blue uniforms. "If he's protecting us from something, what is it?"

"I think we should just confront him," Tim reasoned. "Sneaking around will just get us in trouble."

She groaned. That was Tim's problem, he was too obedient, too cautious. "Don't be such a teacher's pet, Tim," she chided, shaking her head in exasperation. He scowled at her. "You know what he's like, he'll avoid answering us until he's in mortal danger and we have to save his ass." Helena sighed irritably. "It'll just waste time. We'll confront him after we find out what's going on, then he'll have to be straight with us."

"Or he'll lecture us for sneaking behind his back," Tim retorted dryly, grabbing his backpack from off the floor.

She ignored the comment. "He has a meeting with the Justice League this evening." She parked in front of the school, unlocking the doors. "We can start investigating while he's not around."

"I still think it's a bad idea…" He frowned, opening the door.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be a wet blanket." Then Helena smiled sweetly, her tone shifted to something more charming. "Besides, I can't do this without you, Timmy. Please."

His eyes narrowed, getting out of the car. "You're unbelievable," he muttered, sighing. "But, okay fine, I'll help."

She grinned. "I appreciate it," she chimed.

Tim shook his head and shut the door behind him, walking towards the school.

Helena smiled to herself as she drove to Gotham Academy. If her dad was keeping this from them, then the investigation must be personal. Her brow creased, trying to remember when Batman had
become broodier than usual…

Then her school came up into view, breaking her train of thought. She pulled up into the parking lot, struggling a bit to park on her left side but she managed it in the end, albeit a little off. Driving a motorcycle was a piece of cake compared to this and she would have preferred it, but the Principal disapproved of students driving mopeds or motorcycles, it created a bad image apparently, which was a load of crap but that was bureaucracy.

Helena removed the car radio to put it in the glove compartment, but she froze when she opened the compartment and saw a bright pink envelope inside.

Her family didn't do these types of surprises and Dad had instilled enough healthy paranoia in her to make her suspicious of any friendly packages she received.

Her eyes widened, dropping the radio as she hurriedly touched her black wrist strap, turning the dial to unlock the computer. "Activate," she ordered. A hologram appeared when the computer turned on. "Scan."

A red beam shot out and scanned the bag. 'Scanning,' the computer voiced.

She frowned when she saw the envelope was harmless and it wasn't connected to any triggers, pursing her lips thoughtfully. Helena turned off the computer, the hologram folding in on itself, as she reached out to take the envelope.

Hesitantly she opened the envelope, inside was a birthday card. Her eyes narrowed at the card, it had a generic Happy Birthday on the front with a picture of cake in the middle, and sweet sixteen written at the top. Inside was blank.

She tensed, feeling her stomach twist unpleasantly, putting the card back in the glove compartment.

Okay, so whoever had smuggled the card in had managed to get over the Mansion's electric fence, bypassed the security system and then broken into the garage and her car all without leaving so much as a moody footprint.

Most importantly this person knew her birthday was yesterday and knew she drove this car to school. This could compromise their entire operation… she needed to tell Dad…

The bell rang, signalling the start of school.

Monkey-shit…

Helena whipped out her phone and searched through her contacts. This wasn't something she should keep to herself and it was better to act early before things got messier.

She chewed her lower lip as the phone rang, her palms sweaty.

"Helena, I'm in the middle of a meeting," Bruce answered lightly, adding a chuckle in for good measure.

She forced herself to relax. "Sorry, Dad, I just wanted to let you know Cheer practice will be running late again," she replied evenly, staring at the glove compartment. "Oh, and Blackbird will need feeding, I forgot this morning."

Blackbird, a simple word for a simple code.
"I see," Dad's tone shifted. "Didn't Alfred feed him?"

"I think he assumed I'd done it, but I just thought I'd let you know in case he forgets," she said, swallowing a lump in her throat.

"I'll remember, don't worry." She could imagine him smiling indulgently at his board members. "Have fun at school."

"I'll try," she chimed, terminating the call.

Helena paused for a moment, sighing. She prayed this was nothing, but things were rarely that optimistic.

There was a blue rock latched onto his back like a leech.

Jaime muffled his screams in his pillow. He was sweating like he had a fever, writhing on the bed. His black hair was soaked and his light brown skin was washed out.

His room was cluttered with unopened boxes piled up against the wall. So much for a fresh start in Gotham…

"Jaime?" His Dad knocked on the door. "You're going to be late for school… Jaime?" his dad called, trying to unlock the door.

"I-I'm fine, dad!" Jaime fell out of bed, struggling to his feet. "I just need t-time to get… get ready," he stammered, staggering to the door. "I'm fine." He unlocked the door, opening it a crack.

His dad's eyes widened in alarm. "Hijo, what's wrong?" He tried to reach out.

Jaime flinched back. "I'm ill. I just need sleep."

"Jaime-"

"Estoy bien!" he repeated firmly, claiming he was fine, shutting the door with a sharp click. "I just need a few hours' sleep," he said quickly, feeling like he'd drunk curdled milk. He locked the door, falling back onto his bed, and curled up into a tight ball.

"Jaime!"

'Activation,' a voice spoke from out of nowhere.

He was going crazy.

His vision became blurry as the thing on his back sunk its claws into his spine. He passed out on the floor.

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Batcave, Gotham

09/08/2023

17:58

Helena watched her dad go over the Manor's security footage while Tim trained in the background. The card was bought at a gas station three days ago by a local drug dealer, who was now dead, and
that's where the trail ended. It was now resting next to the keyboard.

"Best case scenario my civilian identity has a secret admirer," she said uncertainly, cringing. "Well, more like stalker…"

"A civilian couldn't have pulled this off," Batman said, narrowing his eyes at the screen, pausing the video footage. "There, look." He played the video back, there was cut footage in the video.

"Forty-five seconds." Her eyes widened. "So, they hacked our cameras and got in and out in forty seconds, they're good," she said, running a hand through her hair.

Dad leant back in his chair and stared at the card pensively. "They've been trained well…" He clenched his hands tightly.

Helena frowned, touching his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

His lips thinned. "I just don't like these types games," he replied dismissively, looking at her pointedly. "They're too personal," he added, brushing her hand off when he stood up, pulling his cowl over his face. "I should cancel that meeting..." Batman grimaced, looking back at her.

"No," she interrupted. "Me and Tim will be fine, I'll have Oracle keep an eye on us."

His grimace grew. "You're being targeted, I should stay," he insisted.

"I can handle this, dad," she reassured, folding her arms. "Alfred's already at the safe house, and me and Tim will be able to hold our own in anything happens."

Her dad still didn't look convinced. "I'll tell Nightwing to come over," he said, as he apprehensively stroked her hair back in a show of affection. She smiled softly. "I'll be back in an hour." He kissed the top of her head, and then moved back, starting to walk towards the Zeta-tube at the far end of the cave. "And get rid of that card."

"Will do," she called, glancing over at Tim who'd stopped training to take a water break. She watched as Batman disappeared with a flash of light. Helena picked up the birthday card and frowned at it, ripping it in half. "Robin, suit up!" she ordered, the card shredded to tiny pieces on the floor.

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Gotham City

09/08/2023

18:30

Huntress perched next to Robin on the rooftop, the boy was sat down, cross-legged, messing around with his computer. "You find anything yet?" she asked, surveying the lowering sun.

His forehead creased, eyes still glued to the hologram. "You can't rush these things, H."

She rolled her eyes, looking away. "We have a time limit," she reminded testily.

Robin looked up, arching an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, but who's the hacker in this family?" he asked lightly.

"I can hack." She glared at him.
"Yeah, social media," he commented, shrugging. "I could do that by the time I was five."

Smart-ass.

"Just find something," she ground out, losing her patience.

A shadow of a smirk fell on his face. "Okay, let's see..." he trailed off, narrowing his eyes at the screen, the blue light from it shining on his face. "One of the drug lords sent their men to intercept a package." Robin frowned. "Okay, they're intercepting it at the docks in ten minutes." He stood up and took out his grappling hook. "We'll have to be quick."

She took out her grappling hook and released it. "Let's go."

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El Paso

09/06/2023

15:45

"Well, try and look on the bright side," Paco said, as the three of them, Brenda and Jaime, walked down the street. "At least Gotham's exciting."

Jaime sighed as he walked with his friends. "Like how it nearly gets destroyed every month?" he replied dryly. "The place is full of psychopaths."

"Well, yeah..." Paco frowned for a second before grinning. "But it's home to the Bat."

Jaime chewed his tongue for a moment, as the three of them wandered down another street, near the construction site. "Okay, that is something I'm kind of looking forward to."

"It's a pretty high-tech city as well," Brenda told him, smiling. "I mean Metropolis is better, but Gotham is more..."

"Bladerunner?" Paco suggested.

"Exactly, minus the androids," she said.

Jaime smiled a little. "It is a cool city," he agreed uncertainly, the smile faded. "But, I'm still hoping the move is temporary..." he trailed off when something caught his eye. "Was there always a smoking hole there?"

Brenda and Paco followed his line of site. Smack bang in the middle of the empty construction site was a smoking hole. The three of them exchanged a look before hurrying over to the hole.

"Careful," Brenda placed a hand on his shoulder when he got too close.

Jaime strained his neck out to look inside the hole, frowning when he saw a blue stone inside, the size of his hand. "It's just a rock," he said, brushing off her hand, stepping forward. "Probably a meteor." He removed his grey jacket so he could pick up the rock.

"It's a weird looking meteor," Paco commented. "Think it's worth something?"

Jaime bent down and picked up the blue rock with his jacket. He winced and nearly dropped the stone when the heat went through the jacket and hit his skin. He readjusted the material, making it thicker, as he stood up.
Brenda's brow creased as she stared at the rock. "It doesn't look like a meteor," she muttered.

"Yeah…” Jaime's forehead creased for a moment, staring at the rock, that almost seemed to glow. He took off his backpack and unzipped.

Paco eyed him warily. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Jaime wrapped the stone up in his jacket and stuffed it in the bag. "It's just a rock," he replied dismissively. "It can be a souvenir."

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The Docks, Gotham

09/08/2023

18:38

Jaime groaned, easing his brown eyes open. He was laid down on a gritty floor, the tiny stones digging into his bare chest. His pyjama trousers were caked in dirt and had a few small rips, and his feet were wet and muddy.

He shivered when a cold breeze touched his skin. Jaime hastily looked around. Was he at the Docks? He could see Gotham city over the bay, the lights blurring together.

Jaime tried to sit up, but winced, his muscles sore. "Mierda…” he swore faintly, forcing himself to sit up. "Where the...?" He clutched his stomach.

'Jaime Reyes: adolescent... sixteen years of age,'

He nearly jumped out of his skin, his back hitting a cold metal crate. "What the-?"

'Species: Human.' The voice continued to speak in a slow monotone.

Jaime looked around frantically, but he was the only one there. "What do you want!?" he yelled, wishing his was a bad dream.

'Calm down, Jaime Reyes. You cannot see me,' the voice was loud and clear. Jaime froze. 'We are one.'

He touched his back in alarm when he felt a sharp pain, feeling the stone. "This isn't happening," he hissed, shutting his eyes.

'I am the Scarab,' the voice went on, ignoring Jaime's distress. 'You are my host. Blue Beetle.'

Jaime scratched his back furiously, trying to claw the stone off.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the docks a white van, with a few dents in it, drove along the harbour.

Two men were inside, in faded clothes and soiled shoes, looked around shiftily. The driver's hands were sweaty, tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

His friend noticed, grimacing. "Just keep it together, Zack." He loaded his gun and looked out of the window while Zack kept his eyes focussed ahead. "The bat hasn't bothered us in days."
Zack scoffed weakly. "Don't jinx that shit, John," his voice hitched.

Then suddenly, the van jerked sideways. The remaining colour drained from Zack's face, while John's hands shook.

The van swerved out of control, all four tyres punctured.

John opened the window to shoot while Zack tried to regain control of the vehicle, but the minute the window was open, John was grabbed and pulled out of the window.

Jaime staggered to his feet, swallowing a thick lump in his throat as he cradled his head. There was a rock/scarab attached to his spine and he now had superpowers.

What kind of drug-trip was this?

Had some of that weird Scarecrow toxin got in the air and infected him?

He was pulled out of his thoughts when he heard a loud crash a few blocks away.

'Possible threat within distance,' the scarab spoke, making Jaime tense. 'Battle ready.' The thing beeped.

"Ow!" he yelled when a sharp pain erupted from the scarab again, releasing some kind of blue and black metal armour that covered his whole body, from head to toe.

Jaime opened his eyes and swerved around, looking his body over with wide eyes. He touched his face which was covered in covered in a weird mix of metal and black silicone that moulded to his face like a second skin, leaving his mouth exposed. There were orange lenses covering his eyes, the upper part of his face completely covered by armour.

"How can you do that?" he questioned, disturbed. This thing had taken control over his body.

He touched his back and strained his neck to look behind him… were those… wings?

'I am taking precautions to preserve this vessel,' the Scarab replied curtly.

Jaime's eyes darkened. "What did you call me?"

Robin threw the second guy across the yard, the man hit the grit with a harsh thud.

Huntress flipped the other one onto his back, punching him in the face while Robin tied up the first guy. She handcuffed the man in her grip, binding his hands behind his back. "We can do this the hard way or the easy-" she was cut off when a loud beep emitted from the van.

The man in her grip froze. "Shit," he hissed, the colour draining from his face.

The other man in Robin's grip started struggling. "We gotta get out of here!" the crook shouted.

Huntress pushed the man to the side, out of the way, and took out her crossbow.

The top of the van was ripped off, a large, orange, metal hand came up. Then a head with glowing red eyes emerged, face like a steroid body builder.

"Robin, get them to safety," she ordered, her blood ran cold when she realised what the thing in the
van was. "Now!"

Robin hurried dragged the second guy over towards the first, as AMAZO emerged.

She quickly slipped on her knuckle dusters, trying to remember the bio on this thing.

Weakness: same weak points as humans.

Robin shoved the two guys out of view behind the metal crate near the edge of the harbour, their legs and hands bound. AMAZO flew in the air before landing down on the ground, making the ground shudder, his eyes locking onto Huntress.

She threw a bomb at the robot, running forward. It exploded in AMAZO's face, making the machine flinch back and raise his arms. The strength of the blast ripped off the metal surrounding the robot's left eye.

Robin swung from behind and kicked him in the back of the head.

AMAZO swerved around and grabbed Robin by the cape, slamming him onto the ground, just when Huntress came round to punch him in the face, cracking the android's neck back. Then she flipped over him, throwing an explosive Birdarang as she ran, Robin keeping pace with her.

They ran over a metal crate. AMAZO flew in the air, throwing two crates up as he zoomed towards them.

"Oracle." Robin touched his com-link. "Lock onto our location and send Nightwing!"

"I've sent Nightwing your coordinates," Oracle responded in both their ear-pieces. "Now, what's the situation?"

Huntress touched her com-link to respond but stopped when she saw the android's large shadow looming over them like an impending typhoon.

They dove out of the way just in time when AMAZO slammed his fists down, denting the metal.

Robin and Huntress were thrown backwards by the force of the hit. Her body slammed against the crate, dislodging her shoulder. She gritted her teeth in pain, biting back a scream as she hit the ground.

"Robin and Huntress, report," Oracle demanded.

The ground shook when AMAZO landed back down. She looked up, clutching her injured shoulder. The android eyes glowed red.

Fucking lasers.

She rolled out of the way just in time before the lasers carved into the metal crate, the metal melting like Swiss cheese in a summer heat.

AMAZO aimed his lasers at her but was knocked off course when Robin attacked him from behind, sticking two Birdarangs in the android's ears. The robot twisted his head in agony, blindly reaching out to grab the boy, but Robin jumped out the way, making his way over to her.

AMAZO ripped the rods out and picked up one of the crates, lifting it over his shoulders and hurled it at them.
Huntress was dragged to her feet by Robin, moving out of the way before the crate could crush them, touching her com-link. "It's AMAZO," she snapped, figuring that was all the explanation needed.

Oracle swore under her breath. "Stall him as long as you can, I'm calling Batman."

Huntress gritted her teeth and clicked her shoulder back into place, wincing. "Not sure if we can survive that long," Robin stated. He frowned and shot a Birdarang in the air. AMAZO ducked out of the way, missing. "Wait for it," he said when he saw the irritated look she was giving him.

The Birdarang did a boomerang and lodged into the back of AMAZO's head. Robin grinned and tapped a button on his wrist computer. The Birdarang exploded, ripping off a layer of metal from the back of the robot's head, exposing the wiring.

Robin's grin disappeared. "That should have blown his head off."

Her jaw tightened, as she pulled out a knife. "Yeah, well, it looks like he got an upgrade," she commented bitterly, rushing forward.

She aimed the knife at AMAZO's eye, but the android was too quick, parrying her kicks and punches as he analysed her every move.

The robot grabbed her ankle and swung her around like a sports hammer. Robin jumped into help, but someone else intercepted beforehand.

A ray of blue light hit AMAZO in the back, releasing Huntress and sending her flying into another metal grate.

She hit her back again, but worse this time, as the blow knocked the air out of her. She hit the floor, bruising her chin, sprawled on the ground like a ragdoll. Huntress groaned and forced herself to look up, backtracking when she saw a guy – who had the body build of an average teenager - in blue armour flying in the air, smoke emitting from the cannon attached to his arm.

He was a dead man.

Jaime flew out of the way, nearly falling out of the air, as he tried to control his new wings.

'Allow me control,' the scarab insisted, its tone changing to something more threatening. 'Or you will get us both killed!'"

Jaime shot another energy bolt at the orange robot. "My body, my rules," he replied firmly, looking over his shoulder at the scarab.

'Duck."

Jaime hesitated for a second, just enough time for the orange android to tackle him. "AHH!" he recoiled, his eyes bulging out their sockets. "Help!"

The cannon on his right hand morphed into a spear, stabbing the android in the stomach, piercing through the metal. The robot lurched back in the air, losing its balance.

Jaime grinned. "Thanks." He stared at his hand as it transformed back to normal. He jumped back when the two people below jumped down from the crane.

Robin and Huntress, the real deal.
Huntress wrapped a metal line around the android's neck, pulling it to the ground as she felt, while Robin shot a grappling hook at the crane, grabbing her hand as they all fell.

The wind smacked her in the face as she fell, dragging AMAZO down with her. Robin yanked her towards him, swinging to avoid the ground.

AMAZO's eyes glowed, severing the grappling hook line with his laser vision before he hit the ground with a thundering crash.

"Shit," Huntress swore, falling.

Robin yanked his cape, turning it into a parachute.

Unfortunately, she didn't have a cape... Dick had told her they limited agility.

"Robin!" she yelled, trying to sway her body properly, but before Robin could grab her she was swooped up by that guy in blue armour, cradled in his arms like a rescued kitten.

"You okay?" Blue-armour-guy asked, concerned.

She craned her neck to check Robin was okay, he'd landed on the ground in one piece, but AMAZO was staggering back to his feet. "I'm fine," she said quickly, looking back at him. "Touchback down, quickly!"

His eyes widened. "Okay, Senora," he muttered, a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

They landed on the ground ungracefully when Blue-armoured-guy tripped over, falling on top of her. She stared at him in disbelief, shoving him off. "Do you even know what you're doing?" she exclaimed. How long had this guy had powers. "And who the hell are you?"

His eyes narrowed, scrambling to his feet. "I just started today, give me a break!" he snapped. "And my name's..." He faltered, backtracking. "Blue Beetle...I think."

I think? Was this guy brain damaged?

Blue Beetle... Ted Kord Blue Beetle?

"Guys, focus!" Robin yelled from up ahead, busy trying to hold his own against the robot killing machine.

Huntress tried to think quickly, glancing back at the Blue Beetle. "We need to blast AMAZO's – that thing's – head off," she told him. "You think you can shoot it?"

"Uh," Blue Beetle looked over at the robot that had just smashed Robin into the ground. Huntress winced. "Yeah, I can do that."

She narrowed her eyes, scrutinising him. He didn't sound confident, but they didn't have many options here. "I'll distract him," she replied, rushing over to Robin.

She threw a Birdarang at AMAZO before he could connect his fist with Robin's body. The Birdarang wedged into the robot's shoulder. She clicked the trigger, setting it off.

The explosion dislodged the android's right arm, he looked up, narrowing his eyes at her. She swallowed thickly and threw a smoke pellet to cover her tracks.
AMAZO raised his left arm, morphing it into a cannon like Blue Beetle's. She dived out of the way when she saw a bright blue light build up, and took cover behind one of the crates. Her gaze fell on Robin who was weakly trying to get back to his feet.

Blue Beetle had conjured up a force-field to protect himself and was now flying towards AMAZO. Problem was, the android had now fully learned the superhero's powers.

Huntress touched her com-link. "Oracle, we can't hold this up for much-" she was cut off by the distinct sound of the Batwing up ahead. She felt a swell of relief, hurrying to her feet.

Blue Beetle was body-slammed into the ground. AMAZO's held the cannon to the teenager's head.

Nightwing and Batman jumped down from the Batwing, swinging from a rope. He swung down and hit AMAZO in the head with his escrima sticks, fore-handing the robot backwards. Batman swung down from the opposite direction and delivered a hard kick to the android's back.

AMAZO rolled onto the floor, the circuits at the back of his head fizzing. Blue Beetle rushed to his feet and pointed his cannon at the robot's head and emitted a powerful laser, incinerating the machine's head, leaving behind a dark burn patch where the head had been.

Huntress rushed over to Robin. "You okay, shrimp?" she asked, her brow creased.

The boy groaned, easing his eyes fully open, clutching his head. "Yeah, just a-a few bruised bones," he wheezed, coughing. "I'll be healed in a week," he muttered, stumbling to his feet.

Her stomach churned, supporting him onto his feet, as Batman and Nightwing approached her. "What took you so long?" she snapped.

Nightwing grimaced and opened his mouth to speak, but her dad beat him to it. "I only beamed back to earth ten minutes ago," her dad told her, stepping closer, raking his eyes over the both of them. "Get Robin back to the cave and patch him up, we'll handle things from here."

She tightened her grip on Robin. "What about him?" Huntress looked over at Blue Beetle.

Batman and Nightwing followed her line of vision. Blue Beetle squirmed, touching the back of his neck. "Uh...hey... name's Blue Beetle." The teenager waved nervously, as the four of them stared at him blankly. "I just moved here and uh..." He looked around shiftily before scowling. "Will you shut up," he snapped, looking behind him. "Sorry about that," he said quickly, glancing back at them. "He's kind of aggressive."

Who the hell was he talking about?

Her dad looked at him for a moment, probably wondering if he should call Arkham now or wait until the police picked up AMAZO's remains. "Don't move," Batman ordered sternly, looking away dismissively. She frowned. "Where are the drivers?"

"Over there," Robin answered, pointing at the two tied up men by the edge of the docks.

Batman walked over to them, while Huntress summoned her motorcycle. Robin leant away from her, insistent he could stand on his own two feet.

"Who sent you to intercept Black Mask's shipment," Batman asked calmly, towering over both the men.
The two goons were trembling. "We weren't hired by no one," the first guy said. "T-this was all us, right, Zack?"

Zack nodded vigorously. "Yeah, all us."

Nightwing and her dad exchanged a look. Batman stepped forward and grabbed Zack by the scruff of his neck, dragging him right to the edge of the harbour, and dunked him underwater while Nightwing checked the time on his wrist computer.

"Mierda," Blue Beetle muttered some Spanish, watching her dad and brother with wide eyes.

Huntress arched and eyebrow at him. "I take it you've never seen an interrogation?"

Blue Beetle eyed her warily. Robin cracked his shoulder back into place. "Relax, he won't do anything too bad," the Boy Wonder reassured quietly, grimacing when his bone clicked.

Batman pulled Zack back to the surface, dangling him in the air. "My arm's getting tired," her dad said coldly while the criminal spluttered.

"Okay, okay!" Zack scrunched up his face.

"Zack, don't!" the other guy yelled.

"We got hired by the Red Hood!" Zack confessed, eyes wide with fear. "He's fucking crazy-" The man's body jerked and went limp when a bullet landed in the back of his skull.

The Sniper hit the second man with a clean shot. "Sniper!" Batman dropped the dead man and pushed Huntress and Robin to the ground, shielding them with his body. Her heartbeat quickened, feeling a familiar rush of adrenaline. Blue Beetle was shoved out of the way by Nightwing, the two taking cover behind a crate.

"It came from the rooftop," Nightwing said, looking towards the city where a line of high-rises was.

Batman stiffened and rose to his feet, taking out some high-tech binoculars. "I see him." There was an audible beep when he summoned the Batwing.

Huntress helped Robin to her feet, a gush of wind blew her hair over her face. The Batwing flew up ahead and with one swift movement, her dad released his grappling to hitch a ride, zooming off across the lake.

"Hey wait..." Nightwing trailed off, making a move to stop him but instead let it go, sighing. "Right, sure, I'll just deal with this."

"Ditched again," Huntress remarked dryly, her brow creased.

Typical.

"Jesucristo," Blue Beetle was shaking, gazing at the two corpses in shock, clutching his stomach like he'd be ill.

She felt a pang of concern, death wasn't an easy thing to see. "Hey, it'll be okay," her voice grew gentler as she approached him. "These things... happen."

Blue Beetle stiffened. "I know, I just..." His eyes flickered to the two bodies as Nightwing removed the handcuffs. "Is it always like this?"
Huntress paused. "Sometimes, yeah," she answered, feeling uncomfortable. She could hear her motorcycle coming, the purple vehicle coming to a stop nearby. "Hey, Nightwing, you mind taking Robin back to the base? I'll handle things from here."

Her older brother raised an eyebrow, glancing at Blue Beetle. "And him?"

"I'll handle it," she repeated.

Nightwing shrugged. "Okay, then, he's all yours," he said, walking over to Robin. "Come on, squirt."

Robin winced, walking towards the motorcycle. "I need a wax bath."

"I think we might have some cookies in the pantry as well," Nightwing smiled reassuringly, making Robin smile a little.

Huntress smiled fondly at them before turning to Blue Beetle, her smile faded. "So, you wanna tell me how you got here and what's that on your back?" In the distance, Nightwing and Robin rode off on her bike.

"I… shut up I'm not going to lie," he snapped, glaring behind his shoulder. Her brow rose, and her hand subconsciously touched her utility belt. "Listen, I didn't know what it was when I found it. I thought it was a meteor or something." He turned around, gesturing to the beetle shaped stone on his back.

She frowned. "The last Blue Beetle was Ted Kord," she told him. His face brightened. "He died six years ago."

"Oh." The smile faded. "So, this is his?"

"I assume so." She eyes him curiously. "Where did you find it?"

"El Paso, Texas, my family just moved from there," he answered, turning around. "I barely know how to control it…" He stared at his hands worriedly.

She hummed lowly, taking a step closer. "What's your real name?" she asked. He stepped back, affronted. "Batman will find out either way." She shrugged.

He hesitated, looking away. "She's right," he muttered. "There's no point hiding it… do you even know who you're dealing with?" His eyes narrowed at his armoured shoes.

"Excuse me?" She raised an eyebrow.

His head snapped up. "Sorry, it's the Scarab…" he said quickly. She gave him a blank look. So what, the thing, scarab, talked to him? "My name's Jaime Reyes."

Jaime Reyes, with the J, pronounced as an H… hm, nice name.

"Alright, well, you should know Batman doesn't like Metahuman's patrolling his city without his permission, nothing personal," she informed, smiling crookedly. "He's kind of a control freak, but he means well."

Jaime frowned. "So, you're saying I'm not allowed to help people?" he sounded angry, defiant.

"I never said that," she replied, smiling in amusement. "It's just advisable you get Batman's permission, or… well, you wouldn't wanna get on his bad side, believe me." She stepped back.
"Anyway, we'll be in touch so try and stay out of trouble, okay?"

His mouth was set in a thin displeased line."...Okay, I'll try," Blue Beetle replied nodding. "Now do I get your name?" He held himself up higher, which wasn't much seeing how he only was a little taller than her.

"It's Huntress." She smiled pleasantly, noticing the flash of irritation that appeared in his gaze. She looked over her shoulder at the two corpses. "Anyway, I need to call the police. You should head home."

He remained silent as she walked over to the bodies. "Are you sure, that sniper-"

"It could have taken me out anytime, but it didn't," she interrupted, calling the police from her computer. "And, unless you want to deal with the police, I suggest you leave." She turned her head slightly, waiting for him to fly off.

Blue Beetle didn't move at first, but after a moment of silence, she heard the buzz of his wings as he flew away. His shadow briefly passing her when he flew over the lake.

She sighed her posture loosening, staring at the corpses. Huntress stood up and rubbed her eyes tiredly.

The poor guy was greener than kryptonite and he probably wouldn't last a month in this city.

She frowned, gazing at the two dead men. Then again maybe she was being too harsh, everyone needed a little time to develop a thick skin, and seeing someone getting killed in front of you never was easy…

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**Gotham City**

**11/09/2014**

**12:45**

Helena's body shook, as Jason's fingers dug into her shoulders, the two of them standing among hundreds of people. Dad had disappeared again, but Jason insisted her dad would be okay.

You'd think a garden party in broad daylight would be safe, but criminals didn't always work like that. That was the first lesson she learned that day, safety was an illusion.

The Joker shot the host of the party, Mr Sam Crowne, in the head right in front of her and Jason. Blood sprayed across her face and on Jason's new suit.

"Oopsie daisy!" The Joker's voice carried across the yard. "Looks like my finger slipped." He laughed, except he didn't laugh like a normal person.

Helena grew paler, trembling. "It's gonna be okay," Jason whispered in her ear, squeezing her shoulder so hard it hurt. "Am not gonna let anyone hurt you," his voice darkened, sounding older than thirteen.

Then Batman swooped in like a shadow, attacking the Joker and beating him to a pulp, saving them all.

Except Mr Crowne was still dead and she still had blood on her face… so she didn't feel very
relieved. The second lesson she learned that day was that people die pointlessly for no reason at all.
Alfred’s face appeared on her computer screen, his brow furrowed in concern.

“We’re all fine, Alfred, just a few bruises,” she reassured, smiling.

Helena munched on a cookie, sitting next to Tim on the medical table. He was bandaged up, dressed down in his gym gear, as he ate his plate of cookies.

“Hm, be that as it may, make sure you don’t tear your stitches,” Alfred replied, curtly. Then his gaze wandered towards Tim. “And, try not to eat too much sugar.”

Tim grinned, devouring the biscuit. “We’ll keep that in mind.”

Their caretaker sighed, shaking his head. “Make sure Master Bruce doesn’t overwork himself,” he drawled. “Take care.” Alfred waved them goodbye before ending the call.

She switched the screen off and wiped some crumbs from her chin. “So, what’d you think of the new kid?” she asked.

Tim shrugged, drinking some water. “He seemed okay, just a little green.”

She raised an eyebrow. “A little?” she repeated.

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, maybe a lot, but he did okay for a rookie.” Then he frowned. “Besides, we’ve only been doing this for two years, we’re not exactly pros.”

“Correction, we’ve been out on the field for two years,” she said. “I spent three years training before Dad let me do this,” she pointed out, grimacing.

Three years of begging to be taken on as his partner, only to be denied for the thousandth time.

Tim shrugged. “Fair enough. I’m just saying he needs a little time,” he replied.

“I guess…” She pursed her lips, wondering what Blue Beetle looked like under his mask. She’d have to research him, find out his address, number, photo ID. Just so she knew if he was trustworthy or not.

She glanced up when she heard the Batwing land. “You wanna bet he’s gonna give us a lecture?” she said, looking over at Tim.
He grimaced. “Most likely,” Tim muttered, ducking his head when he saw Batman exit the Batwing. “Is it too early to say I told you so?”

She arched an eyebrow. “You could wait until afterwards, at the least,” she mumbled, folding her arms. Her dad wandered towards them, looking angrier than before. “So, how’d it go?”

Dad pulled his cowl down, revealing the scowl on his face. “You read the files, didn’t you?”

Straight to the point as always.

She tensed, exchanging a glance with Tim. “It was more like a peak really…” Tim said, smiling nervously, the smile faded when Batman folded his arms and levelled him with a stern look. “I was curious…”

Helena got off the table and onto her feet. “Look, we only did it because you’ve been keeping things from us,” she said, quickly. “And, I know it’s just your way of protecting us, but whatever it is, it’s clearly a lot bigger than you thought.” She placed her hands on her hips and tried to appear taller. “So, just tell us, we can handle it.”

Her dad’s scowl deepened, he looked away for a moment, which was around about when Dick decided to reappear, slipping his costume back on, his hair still wet from the shower he’d taken. “Oh, hey, you’re back,” Nightwing said, evenly, coming over to them. “You get a good look at our shooter?”

Helena and Tim looked at Batman pointedly. Her dad grimaced, glaring at them. “Yes,” he replied, tightly, walking over to the monitor. “I recorded a video feed.”

Helena followed Tim and Dick towards the computer, standing behind Batman when he took a seat.

Her brow creased, watching the footage play out. The chase was chaotic like most were, but the thing that threw her off was the way the shooter moved, it was familiar. Dick must have noticed too because he leant in closer, scrutinising the footage closely.

“He’s good,” Tim commented, as they watched the car chase. “You think he’s from the League of Assassins?”

“He isn’t,” her dad replied, coldly, glaring at the screen.

The car chase ended when Batman landed in the chemical plant, the warehouse illuminated in an orange glow from the toxins. The blue car that the shooter had escaped in had crashed into one of the containers, chemicals leaking out. The camera rested on the rusted railing.

The cave seemed to grow colder. _Ah, bad memories._ She glanced at Batman from the corner of her eye.

“Hard to forget that night, huh?” Someone else was speaking.

The camera shifted to the shooter, a man, who she assumed was the Red Hood, dressed in a biker getup with a red metal mask hiding his face, pointing a gun at her dad.

“I guess in a way it was one of your greatest failures, but not your last,” his voice had a mocking lilt to it. Her eyes narrowed. The gun clicked. “Ah, memories.” The Red Hood shot the car, igniting an explosion.
Batman stopped the footage when the screen was illuminated by fire. “He’s one of a number of criminals who’s used the Red Hood alias,” he said evenly, bringing up some old files.

“One in particular.” Nightwing grimaced. “Think he has anything to do with it?”

“He’s locked up,” Helena input, leaning on her dad’s chair. “And, this new guy seems a little too cocky for the Joker to put up with,” she reasoned, looking back at Batman. “What do you think, dad?”

Batman stared at the frozen image of the Red hood. “…I need to be sure,” he replied, standing up.

“I’m coming too,” she said, quickly, blocking his path.

“No.” Her dad narrowed his eyes. “You’re staying here with Tim.” He moved passed her. “None negotiable.”

She jumped in front of him again. “Let’s cut the crap, dad,” she said firmly.

“Helena,” his voice rose warningly.

“There’s something about this you’re keeping from us.” She crossed her arms stubbornly. His jaw tightened. “And, we’ll find out what it is anyway so you might as well tell us.”

Nightwing looked at her and Batman curiously. “I agree, we’re a team, family, right?” Dick said, raising an eyebrow at him. “And, you always said we shouldn’t keep secrets from each other…so?”

She hid a smile, looking at her dad expectantly. “If not, me and Tim are just gonna get in more trouble trying-“

"Okay," Batman growled in irritation, looking away. He sighed, glancing back at them pensively. "I already said the situation was personal." He walked over to the cave wall next to the computer, and pressed a hidden button, triggering a square section of the rock to come out like a drawer. “I found this planted at a drug bust I intercepted last week,” he told them, taking out a dark green, practically black, domino mask.

Her stomach plummeted.

Dick moved to take the mask, but Helena got their first, taking it from her dad’s outstretched hand. The mask was more pointed than Nightwing’s had been and this one was thicker.

Green had always been Jason’s colour, it had matched his eyes.

Tim came to her side, his brow creased. “You guys mind filling me in?” he asked warily.

She bit down on her tongue. “…It was Jason’s mask,” she replied, quietly, feeling numb. She felt Nightwing hesitantly place a hand on her shoulder.

Robin tensed. “Oh…” He glanced at Batman uncertainly. “So, this does involve the Joker…?”

Her dad grimaced, stepping closer. “I didn’t want you both emotionally compromised.”

She felt a flare of anger, her head snapping up to glare at him. “I’m the emotionally compromise one?” she repeated, incredulously. “Oh, come on, you’re the one who’ll put a low time crook in the hospital for just mentioning what happened to Jason,” she muttered, shoving the mask in Nightwing’s hand. “I’m fine.”

Nightwing nodded. “So, let’s pay him a visit,” he replied, glancing over at her and Tim. “You two should stay here; the Joker will just get under your skin.” Dick squeezed her shoulder.

Helena clenched her hands tightly. He had a point, and she’d probably just end up trying to kill the clown if she saw him. She needed to clear her head. “Okay, fine, go,” she said, shrugging his hand off.

“We’ll be back soon,” Batman told her, staring at her thoughtfully. “…It’ll be okay,” he added, frigidly, placing a hand on the top of her head.

She leant into the touch. Her dad may not be the warmest of people, but he tried. He was so emotionally stunted it was a miracle to get rare I love you out of him. “Thanks…”

He removed his hand and nodded at Tim, squeezing the boy’s shoulder. “You two performed well today, holding your own against AMAZO,” Batman praised, making Tim smile.

“Yeah, good work.” Nightwing ruffled Helena’s hair.

She scowled, shoving him away. “Watch it,” she snapped, smoothing her hair back. Her brother just grinned.

“What about Blue Beetle?” Tim interjected as Batman made his way over to the Batmobile.

“For now, we’ll just keep an eye on him,” her dad replied, not turning around, as he climbed into the car.

Nightwing placed the mask on the medical table. “Don’t stay up too late,” he chimed, jumping into the car just as Batman started the engine.

Helena stared at Jason’s mask, reaching out to touch the corner of it.

How deeply did this concern, Jason? It felt like a ghost story…

“Are you okay?” Tim asked, uncertainly, frowning.

She retracted her hand and looked away. “I’m fine, Tim….”

“No, you’re not,” he stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

She chuckled quietly. “Don’t worry about me,” she replied, placing an arm around him. “Come on, let’s go get some hot cocoa.”

“We’re going to have to do extra gym time to work all this sugar off,” he said, grinning as they walked towards the stairs.

The Cathedral, Gotham

09/10/2023

12:30
Jaime didn’t really consider himself a good/devout catholic, but he liked the community of it, and he’d been going to church for as long as he could remember so it kind of was a way of life…

He stared at the stained glass portrait of the Holy Mary while his parents talked with the church welcoming committee, his little sister was still in Sunday school. The cathedral really was beautiful, that was something he always had liked about mass, the grandness of the building.

The cathedral was crowded with people, a mix of the well-off and not-so-well-off all jumbled together, with security at the door.

He felt safe… made him *almost* forget what had happened a couple of days ago, like it had just been a bad dream.

‘*What is the point of this religious imagery?’* The scarab spoke.

*Almost* able to forget.

Jaime gritted his teeth, trying to ignore it. Every time he closed his eye she kept envisioning those two men getting shot in the head. How did people just deal with that? Did they just choose to forget and move on with their lives…?

“You should see the tombs below,” a light-hearted voice spoke from behind him.

He looked over his shoulder in surprise and then did a double take when he saw a pretty girl staring at him. "Uh…"

She looked around his age, maybe older, wearing a black dress that outlined the curve of her hips. She had white skin and had black hair, which was tied up in a bun. Some wooden rosemary beads wrapped around her wrist.

“It has beautiful statues and the tiles are so detailed,” she continued to speak, standing next to him, hugging her clutch bag to her chest. “Are you into art?”

Speak you idiot!

“Oh…yeah,” he finally said, smiling. “Kinda. You?”

She turned to him fully, staring at him with sharp blue eyes… those eyes seemed familiar. “Not that much, but I can appreciate it,” she replied. “My name’s Helena Wayne,” she added, raising her hand for him to shake.

Helena Wayne? His eyes widened. The girl was a billionaire.

“Wayne?” he repeated, looking sheepish. “What are you doing talking to me?” Shit, that sounded obnoxious. Damn it!

She didn’t look offended. “Well, I do mix with the common folk at least once a week,” she replied, dryly, smirking. “Makes me feel better about my life.”

It took him a second to realise she was joking. “Hehe, sorry.” He laughed anxiously, rubbing the back of his neck, blushing. “That came out wrong.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She looked amused. “I saw you were new here and I thought I’d say hi.”

‘*The female lies, do not engage!’* the scarab snapped.
Jaime flinched, scratching the back of his neck. “Shut up,” he hissed. Helena’s eyes widened. “Oh, not you!” he said quickly. “I uh…my name’s Jaime Reyes, we moved here a few days ago.” He hastily shook her hand.

Helena tilted her head slightly. “Well, it’s nice to see a young face for a change,” she told him. “Most people our age switch to the less traditional churches.”

“But, not you?” He looked around curiously; most of the people in the congregation were adults, the youngest being in their twenties.

She shrugged. "I prefer the slower pace, the young churches tend to be too…happy-clappy.” She smiled crookedly. “I like the more reserved approach.”

“Cool.” He nodded, trying not to stare at her legs, those smooth legs…

“Will I see you back here next week?” she asked.

His gaze snapped back up to her face. “Yeah, definitely.” Jaime nodded. “You too?”

“Yeah, I like it here.” She smiled somewhat coyly.

He smiled, nodding. “Great.”

Helena moved passed him. “Well, my ride’s waiting outside, so see you next week.” She turned her back to him and walked away.

He watched her legs as she retreated towards the door. They didn’t make girl’s like that in El Paso…

‘You are an idiot,’ the scarab said scathingly.

Jaime scowled. “What’s your problem?” he hissed. “What am I not allowed to talk to girls now?”

‘I detected deceit when analysing the female, she could be a threat to this vessel’s-‘

“I’m not a vessel,” he snarled, glaring at the stone floor.

“Jaime?” It was his mom.

He whipped around, forcing a smile. “Hey, mom.”

His mom frowned slightly, the crows feet around her eyes creasing. “We’re going home, is everything okay?” She eyed him warily. “Are you still sick?” She touched his forehead with the back of her hand.

“I’m fine, mom. Honestly,” he reassured her, backing away.

Her lips pursed. “Hm, fine.” She clearly didn’t believe him. “Well, come on then, let’s go collect your sister.”

Jaime held back a sigh and followed her, glancing back at the exit where Helena had disappeared through.
Helena watched Jaime step out of the church through the limousine windows.

“A good Mass, I assume, Miss Helena?” Alfred asked from the front seat.

She smiled a little. “I zoned out for a good half of it,” she confessed, fiddling with the rosemary cross in her hand. “But, I enjoyed most of it.” Helena rested her forehead against the glass as Alfred pulled out of the car park.

“And, how was Mr Reyes?” Alfred inquired, turning a corner onto a busy road.

“Exactly as I imagined,” she replied, sighing. “He’s kind of… cute.” Her smile softened.

In the rear-view mirror, she saw Alfred arch an eyebrow. “Cute?” he repeated.

Her smile faded, straightening up. “In an innocent kind of way, like a little kid in a candy store.”

“Ah, of course.” A shadow of a smile on his face, facing the road.

She grew silent, looking back out of the window. “…Did Dad tell you about last night?”

Alfred’s face grew grimmer. “In passing, which would explain why his mood is lower than usual,” he answered, sighing. “And, yourself, ma’am?” His eyes flickered to her reflection in the mirror. “How are you?”

Helena held the beads tighter, closing her eyes. “I’m more concerned about the identity of the Red Hood, his mannerisms are familiar.” She swallowed a bad taste in her mouth.

“How so?” he said, apprehensively.

"Why send me a birthday card?" She opened her eyes. "It wasn’t meant to be a threat, I don't think so at least." Her brow creased. “It was meant to aggravate Batman but not me,” she theorised. “It was more like a reassurance, that he hadn’t forgotten me…”

“I’m not following, ma’am,” Alfred replied evenly, lying. He knew what she meant, he just didn’t want to admit it, because then it made it more real. The same went for her dad.

There was one problem with her theory and that was that Jason was dead (even though that wasn’t always a permanent destination), there were too many missing pieces that didn’t add up.

“It doesn’t matter.” She needed hard evidence before drawing a conclusion, but if Jason was alive then well… she’d deal with that when it came around.

She found her dad in the training room, working out his aggression by lifting some weights. “Hey,” she greeted, walking over to him.

His body was caked in sweat and his jaw was tight, teeth gritted. "How was Church?" he grunted, pushing the weights back in the holder so he could sit up.

Helena shrugged, glancing at the shelf of smaller weights. “Same old, really, it was somewhat more insightful than last week.” She folded her arms, watching him glug down a bottle of water. “I talked with Jaime.”

Bruce’s eyes shifted back to her, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “What was he like?”
“Just your average teenager,” she answered, dismissively, pointedly not meeting his gaze. “He seemed sweet.”

Her dad hummed lowly, standing up. “It could be an act.”

She discreetly rolled her eyes. “Or he could be a decent human being,” she retorted, raising an eyebrow at him. “Not everyone’s a sociopath, dad.”

He frowned. “People aren’t always what they seem, you know that,” he sounded reprimanding. “He has a lot of untapped power so we have to be cautious.”

Helena narrowed her eyes at him, holding his gaze for a moment before looking away. “Yeah, I know, but I just think we’re wasting our time with him,” she argued. “We have bigger things to worry about, remember?”

Bruce’s frown deepened. “You let me worry about the main problem, right now I just want you to keep an eye on Blue Beetle,” he told her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

She hummed, non-committed. Spying didn’t usually bother her, hell, she’d even ratted out a few of her own classmates, but Jaime was different. He seemed like a nice guy who had the potential to be a great hero, if properly refined of course. “Right sure. So, anything new about the Red Hood?”

Her dad’s frown faded into a cold look. “The Joker isn’t involved with him, that much is certain,” he told her. “I think he’ll be laying low for a while, now that he has my attention,” he said, bitterly.

“Well, at least we know he doesn’t wanna kill us, or he would have tried something,” she commented.

“Unless, he’s waiting for the right moment.” Her dad looked angry, glaring at the wall behind her. She stared at him with concern, noticing the dark bags under his eyes. Had he been having nightmares again? “It’s clear he hates me.”

“Maybe, or maybe not,” she said, carefully. “Besides, he talked a lot of crap, talks big but doesn’t mean half of what he says…”

“No, he meant what he said,” Bruce replied with finality, his expression darkening.

Helena watched her dad apprehensively, noticing how tired her look. The wrinkles on his skin seemed more pronounced as well as the streaks of grey in his hair. She embraced him, making him tense a little at first.

“Well, I don’t hate you, so there,” she muttered, hugging him tightly, burying her face against his chest. “And, Tim adores you so that’s another, and I’m pretty sure Dick would donate his kidney to you without a second thought so unfortunately you’re surrounded by people who don’t hate you, irritating as it is.”

His hand stroked her hair back. “I noticed.” He kissed the top of her head, making her smile. “Even though I take it for granted.”

Her smile became crooked, looking up at him. “Well, you are a bit of an ass, but no one’s perfect,” she said leisurely, pulling away from him. “Also Tim and I were wondering what the situation with dinner was?”

The corner of her dad’s lip twitched upwards. “Take-out again?” he proposed.
She grinned. “I was thinking sushi, this time, Dick found a nice place online.” She stepped to the side as he placed a hand on her back. “25% off if we spend over twenty,” she said, as the two of them walked out of the gym.
It had taken him ten years to acquire enough money and power to take over Gotham, the first man to do so in twenty years. And now some cocky little shit, who thought he was the big game just because he could shoot, had come in and challenged him.

Unacceptable.

"...And, then he goes and gives me Bat trouble, with those damn brats blowing up my AMAZO!" the mobster yelled, his fists clenched. His whole body was shaking from anger. "I lost money. My money. Mine!"

Black Mask threw the table across the room while six of his men stood on the sidelines, their faces set in stone, except for the blond kid who was shaking like a leaf. The same went for his secretary, Deborah, her expression cold and shut down, something he liked about her. She wasn't irritating either, and always got the job done.

"Yes, they tend to get in the way," Deborah replied, flatly, adjusting her glasses, appearing well primed as usual.

He growled, slamming his fist against the wall. Black Mask stared out of the window at the view of the city below. "This score was a game changer. AMAZO was going buy my way up into high-end international trafficking." He pushed himself away from the window. "Now I'm forced to keep rooting around in this local leg-breaking garbage!" His throat hurt from all the yelling.

"We already have people tracking his whereabouts," she told him coolly.

Black Mask was breathing heavily, as he turned his back to her. "Look, this circus act, this Red Foot."

"Red Hood," Deborah interrupted breezily. The woman had balls the size of a bull's, another thing he could respect about her. Most men would be afraid to look him in the eye, nevermind dare interrupt him mid-command.

The guy looked like he'd piss his pants. "Sir."

"Don't be nervous, kid," Black Mark said lightly, standing in front of the guy. The guy's face was glistened with sweat, his skin a pasty white. "But if you keep staring at me like that, I'm gonna cut your eyes out."

He punched the kid, knocking him to the ground with one clean hit. It made him feel better.

Black Mask turned around and walked back over to the window. "Give me the specs on tonight's shipment."

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New York City

09/10/2023

23:45

Her apartment stunk of sweaty socks, cheap air-freshener, and cigarettes. Rose drained the can of beer before crushing it in her hand, tossing the can in the overflowing bin.

Her white hair was tied up, and the grey gym gear she was wearing was already sweaty and had grease stains on it. There was an eyepatch covering her left eye. She clenched her hands to stop them from trembling.

Rose subconsciously brushing her fingers over her eye-patch when she pushed back her fringe. Her gaze trailed to her medication on the nightstand, there were four pills left, and those pills weren't easy to steal. She needed fast money.

She sat down on the bed and opened up her laptop, she needed a new job, one that didn't have her accidentally run into her dad while running a sword through the target's back.

She adjusted the proxy settings and accessed the dark web, heading to the page that posted new hits online. She checked her coins and scowled when she saw how low they were, keeping a low profile had successfully decreased her bank account.

"Tsk, great," she muttered, scrolling through the list of hits, trying to find one nearby to save a long trip.

Her fingers froze when she saw the latest job in Gotham. That was a lot of digits for one freak in a red mask.

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Wayne Manor, Gotham

03/15/2014

23:00

Jason trudged his way up the giant stairs (seriously, this place needed a fucking elevator) towards his bedroom. His body stilled ached from his fight with the Riddler, which was why Bruce had sent him home early so he could rest.

"Or get me out of the way," Jason muttered, bitterly, to himself, finally reaching the top of the stairs. He tensed when he heard the faint sound of crying, it was muffled but still loud enough to
hear from a distance.

He stopped in front of the bedroom door listening. She was crying again, no doubt curled up in her bed drowning in her own misery like she usually did every night.

He may sound harsh, but the kid needed to grow a backbone. It wasn't even like she had it that bad, her dad was still alive last time he checked, and she was freaking rich. And, her mother was only presumed dead, so her life wasn't a tragic story.

Bruce had told him to be gentle with Helena, saying she was fragile. That they were supposed to treat her like some damn fairy princess! How was the kid going to survive if everyone treated her like a baby?

Well, he'd had enough of this bullshit.

Jason pushed the door open and stepped inside the girly looking room. Helena was curled up in her massive bed, clutching her stuffed cat. "Why are you crying?" he said impatiently, shutting the door behind him as he stepped into the room.

Helena's head jerked up from her pillow. The pink nightlight illuminated her tear stained face. "J-Jason?"

His brow furrowed, crossing his arms, as he stood in front of her. "Why are you crying?" he repeated the question, more firmly this time.

She sat up, hugging her toy close for comfort. "...I...I miss my mama," she mumbled, feebly.

"And, is crying meant to bring her back?" He grimaced, shaking his head. "Only babies cry."

Helena's face scrunched up, but no more tears fell. "But, I miss 'er."

His stomach twisted uncomfortably. He could empathise, and he even felt a little sorry for her, but she couldn't spend the rest of her life weeping over something she couldn't change. "Yeah, well, I miss my parents, but they're dead and there ain't nothing I can do to change that," he told her, looming over her. "You're in Gotham now. People don't care about people who cry like babies."

He wanted her to get mad and yell at him, igniting a fire inside of her, but instead he got the opposite...

Her eyes welled up with fresh tears, her face scrunched up miserably. She started crying again, louder this time.

Jason blinked in surprise, watching her. "Hey, come on, stop it," his voice wavered, feeling a little helpless. He looked over his shoulder at the door. Should he get Alfred? Ah, shit...

"I want my mama," she sobbed brokenly, her voice high and hitched. "I want my mama!" she repeated more hysterically.

If Bruce found out he'd be dead, and if Alfred found out he'd semi-kill him and then let Bruce finish the job.

Jason quickly wrapped his arm around her, sitting on the bed, pressing her face against his chest, trying to muffle the sound of her sobs. "Hey, come on, stop it," he said, hastily. "I was just trying to toughen you up."
…She was only a little kid, though; even he'd been a little wimpy at that age.

She dug her nails into his shoulder, nuzzling her face against his chest as she cried. "Y-you're mean," she choked. "You're a-always s-so mean!" she accused.

He rubbed her back soothingly, feeling guilty and also a tiny bit stupid. "Yeah, I know…" he grumbled. He knew he could be a jerk but why should he change for other people? It wasn't his fault they were so easily offended.

"I don't like crying." She rubbed her eyes with her fists. "But I can't help it," Helena said, shakily, trying to wipe away her tears. "I miss my mama and I don't know why she went away." She covered her face with her stuffed toy. "And, daddy's always away."

Jason grimaced, holding her tighter. "He's a busy guy, Helena," he said, sighing. "But he does care about you," he divulged, scowling. Bruce may not be the warmest guy but he did care about his own kid, that much was for sure. Bruce just didn't know how to be a good father, that kind of shit was confusing.

"…I just wish he'd be here at night, then I wouldn't be scared," she mumbled, sniffling. "I don't like both'ring Alfred."

His guilt grew. Jason chewed his tongue, frowning. "Why are you scared?"

Helena remained quiet, burying her face against his chest. He nudged her, trying to draw out a response. "…I don't wanna sleep," she answered faintly.

He knew the feeling. His chest constricted when he remembered when he'd had nightmares after seeing Two-Face bust a cap in his dad's head a few years back.

…Now he felt like a piece of shit for telling her to pipe down.

Jason held back a groan and loosened his grip around her. "…Move over," he told her. Her brow creased in confusion. "You deaf or something? Move."

Helena quickly made room for him on the bed, staring at him in surprise. He sighed and pulled his sweatpants off, leaving him in his boxers and t-shirt. She hiccupped, hugging her stuffed cat closer as Jason lay down under the covers.

They lay in silence for a while until she peaked up at him shyly. "…Will you tell me a story?" she whispered.

His eyes narrowed at her. "Don't push it." He stared at her thoughtfully, seeing her duck her face at the rejection. Jason rolled his eyes. "Okay, fine," he groaned, making her smile. "I'll tell you about the time I stole your dad's car wheels…"

He retold the story, with a few minor tweaks to hide Batman's identity. Helena listened with rapt attention like he was some all-knowing guy or something. It was endearing and made a nice change like she respected him.

By the end of the story, she had fallen asleep on his shoulder. The corner of Jason's lip curved upwards. He supposed having a little sister wasn't that bad.

Wayne Manor, Gotham
Helena was sat down on her bed, while her black cat, Benny, lay curled up next to her. The bedroom was decorated in a mixture of light blues and greys, with a walk-in wardrobe on the side, a balcony window on the left side of the room, and a king sized bed opposite.

She scrolled through some old photos of her and Jason on her phone, there weren't that many. He'd never liked taking photos with her, complaining about her generation being too Selfie obsessed.

Her scrolling stopped on the last image she had of him when it had been her tenth birthday. His arm was wrapped around her shoulder, smiling crookedly.

Helena exited her photos and tossed her phone on her pillow, before running a hand through her hair. Her make-up was wiped off and her hair was loose, ready for patrol. She stood up and bent down to look under her bed where she hid her knives.

If she was going to confront the Red Hood, she needed to prepare for the worst case scenario. She took the weapons, folding them up in their protective pouch.

So, if the Red Hood was Jason then she needed to reach out to him, even if he'd reject her, she needed to understand the type of person he'd become. She might even be the only one he'd listen to…

Helena walked out of her room and headed towards Tim's. She'd need to confront the Red Hood alone, so Tim would need to steer clear and distract Batman for a while. She knocked on her brother's door. "Oi, Tim, open up," she called.

She could hear some distorted gunfire coming from inside the room. "Alright, come in," Tim replied.

When she opened the door the lights in the room were turned off and the only other source of light was from the widescreen TV that was mounted on the wall. Tim was sitting on the floor playing a loud sci-fi video game.

"I need a favour," she said, closing the door.

He paused the game and glanced over his shoulder, arching an eyebrow. "What kind of favour?"

Helena grimaced walking over to him. "One you have to promise to keep a secret," he told him, presenting her right pinkie finger. "Pinkie swear it."

His eyes widened. "That serious, huh?" Tim placed the controller down and stood up. "I don't like lying to Bruce."

"Why do you assume I'm asking you to lie?" she snapped, scowling.

"Was that meant to be rhetorical?"

"Just pinkie promise." Helena thrust her hand in his face.

Tim pursed his lips, staring at the presented finger uncertainly. "…Alright, fine," he grumbled, entwining his pinkie with hers. "Now, what is it?"
She smiled, releasing his finger. "I just need you to keep Dad busy while on patrol," she said.

Tim stared at her suspiciously for a moment, crossing his arms. "You're going after the Red Hood, aren't you?"

Her smile dropped. "No."

"Yeah, I thought so." His eyes narrowed. "You're going to get yourself killed."

"I know what I'm doing," she replied, firmly. "If Jason's alive-"

"You should wait until we have hard evidence," Tim interrupted. "For all you know this guy could just be using Jason's death to play mind games with you." He scowled up at her.

Helena inhaled a deep breath, remaining calm. "Tim, I understand where you're coming from, but the logical route isn't always the best," she tried to explain, placing her hands on his shoulders. "I have to consider Jason being alive because it's a real possibility. Sometimes you have to trust your instincts and take a risk."

Tim's frown faded a little, pausing for a few seconds. "I still think you should bring back-up," he insisted.

She sighed. "If Dad finds out what I'm doing he'll lock me up and bury the key," she commented, dryly. "Which is why I need you to keep Batman busy, okay? Please."

He grimaced, shrugging her hands off his shoulders. "...How long would it take?"

"An hour tops," she said. "And, if I go MIA for too long then you can come get me." She was pretty sure her dad had put a tracer in her tooth since her last dental appointment.

"What about Nightwing and Oracle?" Tim glared at the ground. "She's looking out for the Red Hood and if she sees you with him-"

"The city still has blind spots Oracle can't get around, so that's where he'll be," she reasoned. Tim still didn't look reassured. "I know the risks, Tim," she interjected, smiling softly. "And, I'm still working my way around them, but either way I'm still going to do this one way or another." Helena shot him a pointed look. "So, you can either help me or try squeal to Batman and make me tie you up in the closet."

Tim rolled his eyes. "You know that never works," he muttered, sighing. "Okay, I'll help... but I still think it's a bad idea."

She smiled, ruffling his hair. "And, I have noted your disapproval and chosen to ignore it." She lightly pushed him towards the door. "Come on, let's get to work."

"Huh, cute." He smirked, surveying the city from the roof of a casino.

Black Mask had finally made a move. Right now, the club opposite was being ruffed up, a few of Black Mask's men were causing trouble, trying to send a message to him.

The Red Hood faintly shook his head, tapping his gun against his thigh, standing up. His smirk grew as he watched one of his foot soldiers get surrounded by Black Mask's men.

"Enjoying the show?"
He froze, recognising the voice. His smirk faded. He hadn't planned to see her yet, things were still heating up and he was busy making sure his plans were carried out correctly, and he was tempted to take off before she pinned him but… he'd be lying if he said he didn't miss her.

He heard her land near him, soft on her feet like always.

Red Hood smiled fondly, glancing over his shoulder. "I'm surprised the Bat let you stray so far," he called, facing her. "Won't be long until he comes looking for you."

"I'll take my chances." She stepped further into the light, allowing him to soak in her appearance.

His chest constricted when he saw how much she'd grown up, no longer that short little shrimp he could carry on his shoulders. Her hair was longer, reaching passed her shoulders, and her costume revealed the effects of puberty.

He stared at her costume critically, his eyes zeroing in on the white cross. He arched an eyebrow, wondering when she'd started taking religion seriously. Maybe his death had left a bigger impact than he'd thought.

She was calling herself Huntress these days, wasn't she? Not original but still a decent codename. "Huntress right?" he smiled teasingly under his mask. She remained stone-faced. "What do you want?" he said, looking back at her.

She tossed his old mask on the floor.

"To confirm my suspicions," she replied evenly, moving in closer. "You weren't exactly subtle you know."

They were only an arm's length apart. His smile grew. "You think Bats has figured it out or is he still in denial?" his said, taking a step closer.

Her shoulder's tensed, staring at the gun in his hand. "I came to talk, so you can put the gun away," her voice lowered.

He frowned, glancing down at the weapon. She didn't think he'd hurt her did she? His eyes narrowed. "You think I'd use it on you?" he said, tightly.

She glowered at him. "Maybe, in all honesty, I don't know what you're capable of anymore," she replied, coldly.

Huh,… that statement hurt more than he expected. The pain scratched at his chest

His jaw stiffened. "Nice to see Bruce has rubbed off on you." He stuffed his gun back in its holster as he eyed her scornfully. "There, happy?"

Helena gave him a dry look and faintly shook her head. "How'd you come back?" she asked the million dollar question.

If it were anyone else he would have lied, maybe strung them around, but he owed her an explanation. "Took a dip in one of Ra's pits," he answered levelly, wincing a little when he hurried to block out the memories.

Being reborn fucked you up in the head in more ways than one. Sometimes his thoughts would get jumbled up when he'd panic, making his head burn up.
Her brow furrowed. "When?" Her fists tightened, stretching the leather of the purple gloves.

He bit down on his tongue. "...Six years ago," he told her, uneasily.

There was a tense silence, as her eyes grew even colder. "You let me think you were dead for six years," she replied, frostily, making him back up. "Six years."

He quickly raised his hands in defence. "If I could have come back sooner I would have, Sis, I swear," he said, quickly. "The pit messed up my head. I had amnesia for two years! I didn't even know how to add up two plus two."

She grabbed him by the collar and flung him against the ventilation shaft. He didn't try to defend himself. "And, what about the other four, were you too busy fucking around on a beach of something!?" she shouted.

His eyes widened in alarm when he heard her swear, inching back. "Whoa, whoa, just calm down, okay!" He got back up on his feet before she could inflict any serious damage. He caught her fist when she tried to punch him. "I'm sorry, alright."

She landed a hard kick in his shin. He winced, his face scrunched up in pain. "You're a fucking idiot," she swore.

He flinched. "Aren't you meant to be Catholic?" The Red Hood inched away. "Jesus Christ, Sis, calm down."

"Bite me." She growled lowly. "I can still kick your ass and then write it off in confessional," she said, bitingly. She turned her back to him, running a hand over her face. "I placed flowers at your grave every year, did you know that?" Helena sneered, shaking her head.

That small speck of guilt grew bigger, hurting. "...I'm a fuck-up, okay, I'm sorry," he apologised, inching closer, wanting to embrace her, but didn't. "This is between me and Bats. I didn't want you to get hurt."

Helena looked over her shoulder, disgusted. "Well, it's six years too late." She turned to him fully.

He sighed deeply, averting his gaze. "I had to keep you in the dark. I got plans, Sis, important ones," he told her.

Her eyes narrowed. "Tsk..." She sighed. "I'm still mad..." Helena said sternly. "But, I understand why you felt like you couldn't come home," she added, meeting his gaze. "But what you're doing, this war with Black Mask, it's insane. You're gonna get yourself killed, Jay," her voice lowered.

His heart tugged a little when she said his old nickname. His jaw tightened and he hastily tried to shake the sentiment. "I'm taking control of this city," he argued, firmly. "Batman's way doesn't work, H. It's just a cycle." He wanted to grab her and shake some sense into her. "He puts them in a body cast for six months and then they go out and start causing chaos all over again. It doesn't work." She may not understand now, but she would eventually, once he'd proven Batman's way didn't work. "You'll understand-

"Don't talk down to me," she interrupted coldly, narrowing her eyes. "I don't want to hear you justify what you're doing, so cut the spiel." Helena shoved his shoulder. He glowered down at her. "This isn't about you making this city a better place. You just want the Joker to pay and your mad Batman didn't finish him off after what he did," she ground out. "Or do you think you're the only one who wants the clown dead?"
He felt an icy feeling wrap around his chest. "He's still alive, though," he said, coldly.

Her expression became closed off. "We don't get to be judge and executioner… even if we want to."

She sounded just like Bruce. He ground his teeth together. "Spoken like a good little soldier," he mocked. Helena pursed her lips tightly. "Did he make you recite that vow when you took up the cowl?" He glared down at her. "Oh, please, you honestly think those cockroaches would be missed?" he snarled, getting up in her face.

Her gaze darkened. "So, all criminals are cockroaches, right? Completely unredeemable?" she said, frigidly.

His jaw stiffened, realising what she was getting at. The Red Hood backed off a little, looking away. "Don't use your mom as leverage, H. Things aren't-" He saw a glimmer of movement from the corner of his eyes.

The small bullet clinked his helmet when it skimmed passed, hitting Helena above her chest with a loud crunch, harshly jerking her body.

His entire body froze when the blood hit his mask, his hands automatically reaching out to grab her.

He looked around quickly, trying to find the shooter. His gaze zeroed in on a retreating silhouette. He raised his gun to shoot but Helena's redirected his attention. She was the main concern; he could (slowly) kill the fucker who shot her after she was stable.
"Sionis can go die in a hole for all I care."

Helena's eyes snapped open when she heard Mama talking in the other room. She rubbed her eyes and listened, sitting up in bed.

"...Don't fuck me around, Silky," Mama hissed.

Helena tensed a little, frowning. Her mama hardly ever swore, no matter how angry she got with people. She bit her lip and hesitated for a moment before her feet landed on the carpet as she made her way over to the door.

She pressed her ear against the door and listened. It sounded like her mama was on the phone since there was this loud distorted voice filling the silence.

"...I already told you I was in. Go near my daughter again and I'll cut your nuts off," Mama snarled and then slammed the phone down, making Helena flinch and run back into bed.

Gotham City

09/11/2023

22:30

She winced when the sharp pain in her chest hit her. "Ah, crap," she wheezed. It hurt to breathe.

There was a thick sterile smell in the air, mixed with blood. Helena rolled her head to the side, she was laid down on a sofa with a pillow supporting her neck. Her mask was still on but her costume was zipped open, a thick bandage covered her chest and her sports bra was stained brown from the blood.

There was a rustle of movement. "Take it easy, kid." Jason was by her side, with his helmet removed. He wore a domino mask underneath, looking more like his old self. "You're lucky my first aid is top notch." He cracked a small smile. "You'll need more painkillers, though."

"Thanks..." She stared at his face, taking in every detail. There was a white streak at the front of his black hair and his face was more square.

"Did you meet God?" Jason said, smirking.
She felt a swell of amusement, mixed in with nostalgia, rolling her eyes. "Purgatory comes first, so no, you pulled me back before I got the chance," she replied dryly, her voice quiet and hoarse.

He raised an eyebrow. "Tsk. Right, sure."

She briefly considered asking him about the afterlife, it wasn't every day you met a person who came back from the dead, but she thought better of it, spoiled endings weren't satisfactory.

Her gaze shifted back to her chest. "Who shot me?"

"I don't know," he replied quietly, narrowing his eyes. "But I'll find out."

She shook her head, trying to sit up. "Don't."

Jason sighed irritably, rolling his eyes. "Once you're stable enough I'll take you back to the cave," he said, standing up to full height. "So, don't waste your energy trying to talk me out of it."

She tried to ball her hands into fists but she didn't have the strength. Helena gritted her teeth, banging her head against the pillow in frustration. She closed her eyes and tried to calm down again. There had to be some way to reason with him, a pressure point.

Her eyes snapped opened, staring up at the ceiling. "What...do you think...?" She swallowed some mucus, pacing herself as she spoke. "Is going...to happen...with you and me....after this?" she said, quietly, coughing.

Jason grew quiet, averting his gaze. Not answering her.

She ground her teeth together, narrowing her eyes at the water stained ceiling. "I'll never...forgive you if you hurt him," she forced the words out, coldly.

His eyes narrowed, finally looking at her. "I'm sorry, but his way doesn't work."

"And, pushing him...over..." She forced herself to sit up. "The edge...w-will?" Helena scrutinised him.

His shoulders tensed. "Do you know how many people would be alive if he'd just put a bullet in the clown's head?" he snapped. "The Joker's been destroying our family for years, and it's time to end it," he stressed.

She faintly shook her head, trying to ignore the pain in her chest. "Batman's already unstable...do you really...wanna see him go over...the edge?"

"He..." The corner of his lip twitched down, a glimmer of uncertainty flashing cross his face. He looked away.

Helena reached out to grab his hand. "I'm sorry. The Joker...I'm sorry... he took you away from...us," her voice softened. "I know...I know dad isn't always right...but we're still a family, Jason."

She sighed and managed to grab his hand. "Please, just stop."

He stared at their clasped hands intently. "You know I can't. I'm in too deep." He let go of her hand. She bit down on her tongue to stop herself from swearing. "If being a hero means I have to let animals like the Joker live, then fuck it."

"But, you don't have to drag Dad into this!" she finally snapped, causing a sharp pain in her chest. Helena started coughing violently, her face scrunching up. "You don't...urk!" she spat on the floor,
breathing shallowly.

The scowl disappeared from his face and was replaced with worry. "Come on, I'll get you back home," he said, lifting her up.

Ravager banged her head against the wall in frustration, her hands still faintly shaking. "Shit," she hissed, ripping off her black bandana mask. She buried her face in her hands and crouched down on the alley ground.

She needed more pills or her body would go into full withdrawal.

...Or she could get more serum...

Rose growled and jumped back to her feet, trying to shove the thought away. The Serum her dad used to give her may have heightened her Meta abilities, but it had royally messed up her mental health and now her body suffered from constant withdrawal, even though she'd been off the stuff for three months now.

With a trembling hand, she reached into her bra and took out the small bottle of pills. The two white pills remaining clattered against the plastic when she screwed off the lid and swallowed the last two pills. They were the only thing that subdued the withdrawal and got her mind and body back on track.

Ravager tossed the empty canister onto the street when she felt another headache coming on. "Gotta finish the job," she muttered to herself, as her brow wrinkled. "Gotta finish the job," she repeated fiercely, picking up her swords. If she couldn't shoot straight then she'd have to get rid of him the old fashioned way.

She reached into her pocket, taking out her phone and opened up the tracker. The tracker in the bullet would only be active for another thirty minutes before the chemicals surrounding the bullet were absorbed into the body, thinning out. Her eyes narrowed at the screen, hopefully, the Red Hood as smart enough not to take the bullet out, or she'd just end up looking for a dead corpse.

Robin stared at the time on his holographic scene like he was a prisoner on death row. An hour had already passed and Huntress hadn't checked in. He glanced over his shoulder at Batman who was tying up an unconscious Killer Croc in the alleyway.

"Damn it," Robin whispered, scanning the city cameras for any sign of her.


Robin held back a groan. "Roger," he replied feebly, touching his com-link.

"Robin?" Batman was behind him.

The boy swerved around. "Yes?" he replied quickly, looking up.

"Meet up with Huntress and sort out the Blackgators," he ordered. "I'll deal with the East Side Dragons" Robin gulped, remaining frozen on the spot. Batman's eyes narrowed. "Is there a problem?"

He should have seen this coming. Robin's shoulders slumped. He had enough computer knowledge
to crash the Pentagon's security system (not that it was hard, the Altered Strain organisation had left a massive backdoor open), but he wasn't smart enough to realise Helena's plans normally got them both into more trouble than it was worth. And, now she could be dead or worse because he just couldn't say no to her…

Robin gritted his teeth, while his boss grew even more agitated. "Robin…" Batman warned, crossing his arms.

The boy wonder winced, recognising that tone of voice, which was all it took. "…Huntress went to go confront the Red Hood," he finally blurted out.

He'd never seen Batman's expression change so fast, the glare replaced with alarmed wide eyes. "What?" he snapped, uncrossing his arms?

"She was meant to check in every hour but she's gone off the grid," Robin said quickly. "Her last location was near the Pots of Gold Casino-"

Batman brushed past him and touched his com-link. "Oracle, Huntress went looking for the Red Hood, have Nightwing sort out the Dragons, Robin will sort out the Blackgators," he said sharply.

"Understood," Oracle's voice wavered slightly, a hint of concern revealed.

Robin swallowed a bad taste in his mouth. "Boss, I'm s-"

"Didn't you hear my orders?" Batman interrupted evenly. "We'll discuss this at home." He half-glared at him from over his shoulder. Robin grimaced; he was not looking forward to that lecture.

Batman removed his grappling hook and unleashed it, zooming upwards. Robin sighed, watching him disappear into the jungle of high-rises. If anything happened to Huntress… he quickly shook his head and took out his grappling hook. Huntress wasn't helpless, she could hold her own… but she may be emotionally compromised which would cloud her judgment.

"Damn it," he hissed, quickly jumping onto a dumpster, and then onto the roof.

He was never letting her talk him into something reckless ever again.

Jason carried her into the car, slipping her in the backseat. "Just try to keep still," he told her.

Helena winced, curling up in on herself, muttering something about his bad driving. He rolled his eyes and shut the door, walking towards the driver's seat. He put his helmet back on, locking it in place.

The car door was stiff when he opened it and the original owner hadn't done the best job in maintaining it, but it was the nearest car he could steal. He took out the keys and ignited the engine, driving down the narrow road. He kept his gun on the passenger seat, looking at his sister through the rear-view mirror. She still seemed in pain, but she looked less like a corpse.

Jason looked ahead, blending the car in with the others on the road. He sighed, glancing at the rear-view mirror again when Helena went quiet. She was still awake, but her face was scrunched up unpleasantly.

He chewed the inside of his cheek, looking back at the road. She'd made some uncomfortable points earlier, ones he'd rather not think about. Bruce was full of shit, as was his no-kill rule, but… did this entire thing have to be so personal?
Jason gritted his teeth. No, he needed to do this. It was all he'd thought about for the last four years. He couldn't move on until this business with the Joker and Bruce was settled… and as for Helena, she was better off without him. There was too much of a clash of philosophies, and she didn't need him anyway, his new replacement had seen to that.

Was it Tim or Tom? Some generic lame-ass name beginning with a T.

He'd seen the new Robin follow Batman around like a lost puppy. The perfect partner. "Tsk, figures," Jason muttered darkly, turning a corner.

And, besides, wasn't it better to be hated than forgotten? From what he'd seen the only person who actually still cared about him was Helena. Dick couldn't give two shits, Bruce had seen him more as a rebound than a real son, Barbara had never liked him much anyway, and Alfred had moved on.

He dug his nails into the steering wheel. His death hadn't traumatised them or left a fucking impact, they'd just replaced him to fill the space.

Then out of nowhere something hit the car roof, causing Jason to jerk the steering wheel. Helena stirred in the back, straining her neck to look out the window.

Batman, it had to be. Jason growled, grabbing his gun. "Well, look who's late to the reunion!" he yelled, smashing the window open while his other hand rested on the steering wheel.

A sword cut through the roof, ripping the material.

Unless Bruce had a sudden change of weapon choice, Jason was going to take a wild guess and assume this wasn't Batman. "Hold on, kid." Jason hit the brakes, swerving onto the pavement. Then he jumped out of the car, turning around to aim his gun at the room once outside.

It was a girl, maybe the same age as Helena, with silver hair and some black and grey assassin getup, and a mask that only had one eye-hole.

He pulled the trigger, but she avoided the bullet and pulled her sword out of the roof, lunging at him as she held the katana blades up. She seemed familiar…unpleasantly familiar. Jason's eyes narrowed and he felt his temper flare. Okay, another wild guess; she was the bitch who'd nearly killed his sister.

The Red Hood grinned. He liked it when things came together like this.

She avoided his bullets like they were barely moving, curving her hot little body out of the way like a blur.

He drew out his knife to block her sword, tensing his arm as the blade scratched his helmet. "Pleasure to meet you," he chimed, smiling wryly under his helmet.

"Likewise." She kicked him in the stomach, pushing him back with her sword.

He tossed some micro-bombs in the air near her face, pressing the trigger attached to his wrist. The bombs exploded, and would have left permanent damage if she hadn't flipped backwards to avoid the shatnel.

He came down with a knife and a fist, punching her in the face and then swiping a knife across to slit her throat, but she blocked the blade with her arm, cutting a deep gash into her wrist guard. She cut through his biker jacket, cutting his shoulder.
He gritted his teeth, smothering a wince. That hurt. The cut was deep enough that it was bleeding badly, and he was pretty sure she'd scraped the bone, or maybe he was just exaggerating. The point was it hurt.

From behind, Helena had wound down the window and threw a Birdarang at the assassin, the sharp trinket got stuck in the silver-haired girl's shoulder.

The assassin growled and pulled out the Birdarang and threw it back at Helena, which would have hit her in the eye if she hadn't dodged in time.

He squeezed the handle of his knife, as he felt his anger build up to boiling point. "Where you going, sweetie?" he taunted, moving faster to keep up with her.

He grabbed his second gun from his back jacket pocket and started shooting her. She reacted instinctively and tried to get out of the way. A bullet skimmed passed her neck, right below the chin.

She locked her eyes back on him and sharpened off her blades in a swift motion, the swords scraping together.

He now had her full attention again.

The Red Hood leant back when her katanas came a little too close for comfort, grazing his chin with a small cut. Jason kicked her in the face when she tried to cut his head off, breaking her nose. The bone made a satisfying cracking noise as her head was forced back.

He flipped backwards onto his feet, straining his back a little with the improved move. His body wasn't built like it used to be and his frame was too bulky to do the fluid acrobatics of his youth.

The Red Hood let out a low whistle when he was back on his feet. "You're fast." He ducked before she could drive her swords into his stomach. "Can I at least get a name? Or should I just call you Cyclops?" He grabbed her arm and twisted it hard.

"Fuck!" she hissed, dropping her sword, he drove the knife into her stomach and then head butted her.

She side-kicked him in the ribs to escape his grasp, falling back. She was visibly sweating now, but she wasn't out of breath just yet. Her one eye narrowed into a slit, while blood leaked from her nose, and her teeth were exposed in a snarl. "I go by Ravager." She manoeuvred around to attack.

He twisted his body around to keep up with her. "You a Star Wars fan?" He laughed at his own joke.

"What, is that the stuff you jerk off to?" she said scathingly. Her lips twisted in a way that indicated she didn't get the joke.

Christ, how young was she to not get that reference?

Jason frowned, brandishing his knife, striking her across the arm, the knife couldn't penetrate the armour on her shoulder odd enough, which meant her costume had to be a mix of different metals. He grabbed the back of her hair and slammed her face against the wall. "You have watched Star Wars, though, right?" he asked.

"Fuck no." Ravager twisted her body around and broken loose, getting onto his back. She wrapped her hands around his head to break his neck, but he bent down and body slammed her onto the
ground.

His frown deepened, catching her fist. "Not even a clip?"

"Why the fuck…?" She kneed him in the ribs. "Would I watch that space shit?" She landed an uppercut on his chin.

Never watched Star Wars? He could get her not being a fan, but she'd not even watched the odd clip online? What the fuck was wrong with his sister's generation? His eyes narrowed, clicking his jaw back into place. Jason ducked to the side and hit a pressure point under her arm.

She tried to pick up her Katana's but he kicked them to the side. He never could see the appeal of hulking around a pair of big swords like that. A gun and knife made a quicker kill. "Nice blades, your daddy buy them for you?"

Her teeth were gritted so tight she just might crack them. Daddy issues? Not much of a surprise.

"How about when I give Black Mask your head…?" she replied, sweetly, smiling harshly, avoiding his knife and gun when he switched between the two weapons. "So he can use that pretty mouth of yours as a cumwiper." She found an opening and dug her fingers into the exposed gash in his shoulder.

"Urgh!" His arm slacked, loosening his grip on the knife.

The girl gave him a nasty grin, her teeth pinkish from the blood, but the smile disappeared when her body was hit with a bolt of electricity, the tiny hooks lodging into her back like leeches. Ravager screamed as her body convulsed.

He quickly looked behind her. Helena was leaning against the car for support, holding a taser gun in her hand.

Ravager growled, managing to rip out the chords before the electricity did its work, something that struck him as off, any normal person would have been knocked out by that amount of electricity. He aimed his gun at her, but hesitated, what if he shot Helena. Jason growled and flipped his knife instead.

Ravager ripped the wired out and pulled the taser out of Helena's grip, stepping forward to attack her.

Jason's eyes narrowed, and he quickly tightened his grip on the knife, slicing the blade across Ravager's cheek.

A deep cut lined the right side of her face. It would scar, *oh what a shame.*

The blow knocked her head back, disorientating her for a fraction of a second. He punched her in the face, breaking more than her nose this time.

She hit the ground, twitching unnaturally as she lay their semi-unconscious.

Jason raised his gun to shoot.

Helena threw a blunt Birdarang at his wrist. He hissed and recoiled his hand inwards. "Oh, come on," he groaned out, glaring at her.

She looked barely conscious, leaning against the car to keep her standing. She levelled him with a
stern glower. "No," she told him firmly.

He was going to shoot Ravager anyway. "Sorry, sis." He raised his gun again but stopped when he saw something black from the corner of his eyes.

Bad fucking timing.

Jason looked to the right, Batman had found them and was swinging towards them through the maze of buildings. He looked back at Ravager and debated killing her anyway, but... well, Helena was glaring at him darkly, and who knew how long the girl could hold a grudge.

"Ah, fuck it," he muttered, putting his gun back in the holster. Batman landed on the ground, looking angrier than usual. The Red Hood took out a smoke bomb. "Sorry, can't stay," he called, taking a step back. "We'll catch up later."

He quickly threw the pellet on the ground before Bruce could get near enough to throttle him.
Batman narrowed his eyes when the smoke cleared and the Red Hood was nowhere to be seen. He hurried over to Helena, who was leaning against the car to stay upright. Her costume was partly unzipped, revealing soiled bandage underneath. His protectiveness rose up and coiled around his stomach, making it churn uncomfortably.

Her brow furrowed, squinting at him. “Dad?” she muttered.

Batman gathered her in his arms. “I’m here,” he said quietly, helping her stand up. He examined the bandages. A bullet wound. He gritted his teeth.

Had the Red Hood shot her? A strong anger grew inside of him, temporarily clouding his judgment. “Was this him?”

Helena looked at him like he was crazy, jerking her head away. “No,” her voice sounded faint. She started coughing.

His temper simmered, shaking his head. Batman glanced over at Ravager warily, if she was involved as well then he couldn’t jump to conclusions, he needed to hear Helena’s side of the story first.

His daughter's forehead creased looking up at him, grimacing. “Jason’s back,” she replied hoarsely, appearing sickly. “He’s a-alive.” She buried her head in his chest, closing her eyes tightly.

*Jason’s alive.*

He didn’t want to believe it.

He gripped her more tightly, his skin prickling unpleasantly. “Shh, take it easy.” He lifted her up and clicked the switch on his wrist, summoning the Batmobile. His gaze wandered over to Rose Wilson, the teenager was unconscious.

“Oracle,” Batman touched his com-link.

“Did you find her?” Oracle responded quickly.

“Yes, but she needs medical attention,” he answered. His gaze strayed to the blood on the Katana swords on the ground. “There was a fight between Ravager and the Red Hood. Ms Wilson is in need of medical attention as well.”

“I’m on it,” Barbara said. “Just get Huntress stable. Robin handled the Blackgators situations and Nightwing’s back on patrol.”
Batman bit down on his tongue, imagining Robin out on patrol alone. “Tell Robin to return to the cave.”

“Alright then. I’ll check in later.”

“Roger,” he replied, ending the call.

Batman held Helena closer to his chest, walking over to the swords. He scanned his daughter over but couldn’t see any cuts which meant the blood was most likely the Red Hood’s... his lips pursed. If Helena was telling the truth about Jason then... well, he needed to be sure. He gently placed her on the ground and pulled out a handkerchief, using it to sample the blood.

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**Bosnia**

**09/11/2023**

**23:30**

Artemis, or Tigress as she was better referred to these days, had been spying on the Light for nearly five years and had come to realise three constants. The Light’s headquarters rotated over the years, never lingering in one place for more than two years.

She walked down the hallway, her costume was a dark orange, with a thinly armoured mask hiding the upper part of her face and her long hair was loose. The enchanted necklace hidden under her collar had turned her blonde hair pitch black and her skin a pale ivory, porcelain almost.

The main agenda had not altered, even after over a decade of trials and errors. The Light’s main goal was to evolve Earth’s population, get them under control, and create some kind of empire, ranking Earth among the highly advanced planets in the cosmos. She inwardly sighed, rolling her eyes. Artemis made her way to the training room, walking passed some of Black Manta’s soldiers.

The final constant was this, they always had a continuance plan, so many that Artemis, Kaldur, and Nightwing had barely made it half-way down the list.

Artemis placed her hand on the palm reader, opening the doors to the gym. Her chest tightened when she saw Deathstroke was already training inside. The assassin’s mask was off, revealing his white hair and beard, his one good eye focused on the training robot he was fighting.

She hid her grimace, debating whether to leave or not. Slade sometimes liked to spar with her when he got bored of the training robots, and she liked spending as little time as possible with the man. Her hands balled into fists.

Too late, his grey eyes flicked towards her like a rat sensing movement. “Tigress,” he greeted, evenly, breaking the robot’s neck in a swift movement, something he probably could have done ages ago but chose to delay.

She nodded, stepping into the gym. “Deathstroke,” she replied, lightly, taking off her mask. Artemis took out a bobble to tie her hair up into a ponytail. “Bored with the training dummies already?” She glanced over her shoulder at him, raising an eyebrow.

He smiled crookedly. That kind of smile made her stomach twist unpleasantly as if re-igniting the old hatred she had for him. Deathstroke dropped the robot the floor like it was for the trash heap. “I
enjoy our sparring sessions, Tigress,” he said lightly, cracking his knuckles. “Would you oblige?”

She narrowed her eyes, selecting one of the swords from the rack. “Sure, I have time to kill.” She kept her back to him, listening closely for the slightest tremor of movement.

The thing is, Slade had a nasty way of being quieter than a mouse. She drew her sword just in time for it to hit his, the metal clashing together with a piercing scrape. The two of them duelled around the gym like blurs, fast and precise.

Artemis tried to keep up, keeping calm. She’d had enough sparring sessions with Deathstroke to learn when he was playing with her and when he was trying to actually kill her. Though, she assumed the actual trying to kill her action was more of a mind game tactic. The man enjoyed testing people, sizing them up to see if they were worth his time, that much she was sure of.

"Did I ever tell you the first person I killed?" he drawled, landing a kick on her stomach.

She jerked back, quickly trying to regain her balance. Artemis struck back with a swerve kick, but he moved out of the way, trying to kick her back while bringing his sword down. Her eyes widened when the sword came too close to her head.

So, this was another test, was it?

Her eyes narrowed in irritation, doing a flip in the air, hitting his shoulder. He was pushed back and easily blocked it with his sword. “No,” she ground out, as their swords met. “But, can’t say I care much.”

He smirked, throwing her back with his sword, giving her space. Deathstroke kept his weapon by his side as he circled her. “I only ask because I wondered what your first kill was like, how it felt.” He shrugged, still circling her.

Artemis narrowed her eyes, striking first. He blocked her attack, his hand shaking slightly. “You’re asking a lot of personal questions, Deathstroke,” she replied, tightly, ducking to avoid the tip of his sword. “It makes a girl feel a little suspicious.”

His crooked smile remained, clearly enjoying whatever mind game he was playing on her. "I'm curious," he said softly, moving forward at an alarming rate. She got hit in the ribs and was put in a headlock before she had the chance to realise what was going on. "Whenever you kill, there's always a hesitation," he spoke lowly in her ear.

She clenched her teeth, keeping still. He could break her neck in one twist if he felt like it. One snap and she’d be dead like her father, just a rotten corpse for the landfill. “It’s called humanity,” she growled. “But, I still have the balls to get the job done.”

“Yet you reek of guilt.”

That sparked something her, something blood-thirsty. She twisted her leg around his and used her other leg to knee him in the face.

He grunted, nose bleeding from the hit. That smile didn't disappear, though if anything it grew. Artemis felt her frustration mount, wanting to beat the smile off his face.

Deathstroke wiped the blood from his nose, eyeing it amusingly. “I’m only trying to offer some advice. Hesitate to kill and you’ll wind up dead,” he remarked evenly.

She scoffed. “I bet that’d tear you up real bad, right?”
He chuckled quietly, shrugging. “Put it down to my paternal instincts.”

She felt a flash of rage, tensing her jaw. “Says the man who used his daughter as a test subject,” she retorted cruelly, wanting to strike a nerve.

Rose was the one button that hit Slade right in his old shrivelled up heart.

Deathstroke’s expression changed at the mention of his less-than-stable child. The smile finally wiping off his face. She felt a small swell of satisfaction and braced herself for the incoming blow, but the blow never came.

Slade’s eye narrowed, walking towards her slowly, as he placed his sword back in its holster. “Careful, little girl,” he warned coldly, making Artemis freeze. She held her weapon tighter and watched him closely. “You should know of all people family’s a sensitive topic.” It sounded like a threat.

Despite her best efforts, she felt fear for the first time in years. Something wasn’t right and the uneasy feeling settled in her stomach like a spider had laid its eggs. She tried to read his face but it was a mask of indifference.

Deathstroke stared at her for a moment longer before walking passed her and out of the gym. Only when he was gone did she let out the breath she’d been holding in.

Wayne Manor, Gotham

09/11/2023

23:59

Robin tried to be as quiet as possible when he entered the Batcave. He chewed his tongue, perching on the rafter, as he stared down at the main floor. Helena was laid out on the medical table being tended to by Dr Tompkins and Batman was on the computer running a DNA test.

He grimaced, feeling queasy. Tim swooped down onto the ground, his cape billowing behind him. "Is she gonna be okay?” he asked, hurrying over to Helena.

Batman stopped typing and looked over his shoulder, while Leslie gave the boy a grim smile. “She just needs time to recover,” she replied, looking down at the sedated vigilante. “She’s passed the worse of it.”

Robin’s brow creased together, standing in front of the table. He scrutinised the wound, a thick bandage covering her chest. “What happened?”

“She got shot.” Batman rose up from the chair, while the computer carried out the DNA test. Robin briefly glanced at the screen anxiously before looking back at his boss. “She was with the Red Hood,” Bruce said coldly, narrowing his eyes.

Robin tensed, looking away as a thick heap of guilt washed over him. “She said she needed my help,” he replied, forcing himself to look up. “I told her it was a bad idea. I tried to get her to back out… but you know what she’s like,” he quickly tried to explain himself while Batman remained silent.
Tim clenched his hands into fists and waited for the inevitable lecture. Batman’s lips thinned and his eyes narrowed more as he glanced over at Helena. “She’s always been too much of a risk taker,” the older man said disapprovingly, shaking his head. “Did she make you pinkie promise not to tell me?” Batman asked, dryly, looking back at the boy.

A small blush crept onto Tim’s cheeks, biting down on his tongue. “Uhh, yeah.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

Bruce sighed, pulling down his cowl. “You two are unbelievable…” he trailed off, frowning. “You’re grounded. No computer.” He held out his hand expectantly.

Robin scowled, glaring at the ground as he unstrapped the computer equipment from his wrist. What was he supposed to do in his free time? Read a book!?

The Batcomputer beeped, signalling the DNA test was complete. Tim froze when he looked behind Batman at the screen. Tim felt his insides shrivel up in dread, while the strap falling into Bruce’s outstretched hand. Batman saw the look on his face and turned around, stiffening.

The Red Hood and Jason’s DNA were matched.

“What?” Leslie whispered from behind them, eyes wide when she looked at the screen. The shock faded away after another second as her gaze narrowed at Batman. “What the hell is going on, Bruce?”

Batman stepped closer the computer, balling his hands into fists as Robin’s apprehension grew. “… Bruce?” the boy said cautiously, walking closer to him.

His mentor sharply turned away and headed towards the stairs. Bruce more or less ripped off his cape, throwing it to the side along with Robin’s computer. Tim was tempted to follow him but thought better of it, grimacing.

“How is this even possible?” Leslie muttered, coming up behind him.

His thoughts exactly. He’d heard of people being brought back from the brink of death, even seen it once or twice, but he’d never seen or heard of someone being fully resurrected after so long. Jason had literally been blown up, chunks of his body ripped out like a piece of meat.

Robin’s brow furrowed. “Death isn’t always a permanent destination…” he voiced quietly, glancing up at the doctor. “Either way this complicates things, especially with Bruce.” Tim chewed the inside of his mouth. Hell, this complicated this for all of them. Jason was an enemy who knew their entire operation inside out.

Bruce’s costume had been dumped on the way upstairs, leaving him in his thin gym gear to protect him from the rain. He used the digger to remove the last chunk of soil, revealing Jason’s casket. Bruce’s face was set in a permanent scowl, as he got out of the vehicle and stepped down into the grave, his feet sinking into the mud.

Bruce gripped the crowbar too tight when he opened up the coffin. There was a bad taste in his mouth when he saw the body inside. He tossed the crowbar onto the ground and stared at Jason’s face, perfectly preserved.

His eyes narrowed, and he roughly grabbed the body by the neck, causing the hair to fall off. He
slammed the dummy back down into the coffin.

He was an idiot. Any moron would have checked the body first, but apparently, the supposed world's greatest detective couldn't spot a switch even if it punched him in the face.

Bruce closed the coffin and got out of the grave. His clothes were stained with mud and wet from the rain. He ground his teeth together, heading back into the house. He couldn't even think straight, all he could think about was Jason’s corpse in his arms, flashes of the memory resurfacing like a cockroach.

His shoulders were tense as he entered the cave, and his eyes locked immediately on his daughter. Her mask was resting on the side, along with her belt, boots, and gloves.

Robin stood to attention when Bruce came nearer. “Hey Boss,” he greeted, twisting his hands anxiously; a bad habit he couldn’t seem to shake. “Everything okay?”

Bruce’s lips thinned, his brow furrowed, looking back at Helena who was asleep. “Would you be able to monitor, Leslie?”

Leslie wiped her hands with a cloth, frowning “I wouldn’t be a good doctor if I didn’t,” she replied curtly, eyeing Bruce up and down. Her lips thinned. “…The body?”

Bruce swallowed. “It was a fake.”

The cave felt emptier than usual, the words faintly echoing. Leslie closed her eyes and dug her nails into the cloth, her jaw tight. “…So, what happens now, Bruce?”

The inside of his mouth tasted like ash but he kept his expression passive. “I need answers,” he replied.

“And, where are you going to find those?” Leslie crossed her arms, frowning.

Bruce didn’t answer and moved to Helena’s side, stroking some hair out of her face. He bit down on the inside of his mouth out of frustration. She was too much like her mother in the way she took risks, letting her emotions rule her actions and too damn stubborn to realise when she was wrong.

He placed a hand on the top of her head and kissed her forehead, giving her one last glance before pulling away. “Make sure she stays put,” Batman ordered, his gaze flickering to Robin pointedly. “Neither of you are to go on patrol until I get back.”

Bruce felt a swell of protectiveness in his chest when he looked at Tim, unable to shake the image of Jason’s corpse. He wasn’t sure if he’d be able to handle losing another one of his kids again...

Robin’s brow creased, clearly not happy, but thankfully he didn’t argue and just crossed his arms stubbornly. Batman made his way over to the changing rooms, leaving the others behind.

On the subject of resurrection, one specific method seemed the most obvious, that and the fact Jason had died in Bosnia, a country that was still very much under The Lights control. The main question was why, though. Why had Jason been resurrected in the first place?

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for the kudos and comments, it was very much appreciated :)
Helena stirred awake when she heard snoring near her ear. She scrunched up her face, opening her eyes. The pain in her chest had subsided a little and felt slightly numb, probably from the painkillers, but her body still felt sore.

When she looked around Tim was sleeping in a chair next to her, with his arms crossed and his head lolling to the side, drooling. His mask was gone but he was still dressed in his Robin costume. She smiled and slowly reached out to poke him, prodding his cheek.

He frowned, grumbling lowly as she continued to poke his cheek. Tim scowled; eye still closed, and slapped her hand away. She laughed quietly and lightly punched his shoulder. "Wake up, squirt," Helena said hoarsely.

Tim stirred for a final time before his eyes snapped open, looking around quickly. "Wha…?" A smile stretched across his face. "You're awake." He wiped the drool from his mouth.

"How are you feeling?" Leslie walked over to them, cleaning her glasses with the hem of her jumper. Her grey hair was tied up in her bun, a smile on her pale, wrinkled, face.

Helena bit down on her tongue and forced herself to sit up. "Fine enough." She smiled brightly, burying a wince. "Thanks for patching me up. Hope I didn't ruin your night."

Leslie smirked, pocketing her glasses. "It was either this or Family Feud reruns," she replied, shrugging. She stopped in front of Helena and scrutinised the bandages. "Make sure you take it easy for the next two weeks." Dr Tompkins narrowed her eyes warningly. "That means no training, understand?"

"Just don't tear your stitches, that's all I ask." She picked up her bag from off the chair opposite. "I'll trust you to change your own bandages, but just be careful with the wound. The bullet's still stuck in there."

Helena frowned and lightly traced her chest. "How bad is the scar gonna be?" She frowned. It was already a hassle trying to hide the scars on her back, and tomorrow she was meant to attend the Charity event her dad had arranged.

"Not as bad as it could be," Leslie replied, smiling half-heartedly. "Give it six months and we can look into treatments to get it faded." She checked her watch. "I'll come by tomorrow afternoon to see how things are," the doctor said, turning to leave. "And, if I find out you've been training I'll
bust your knee cap," she muttered, a glimmer of a smile on her face.

Helena smirked. "I wouldn't expect anything less," she chimed, fighting back a cough. She watched Leslie leave through the Zeta-Tube. The smirk faded when she sensed Tim's glare. "So, I take it Dad wasn't happy with what I did?" she said lightly, forcing herself to look at him.

He was on his feet with his arms crossed. "I told you it was a bad idea."

"I needed to see Jason, to talk to him." She sighed, narrowing her eyes. "He isn't just some thug on the street, he's family. He needs to be dealt with differently."

Tim's glare softened, as the tension in his shoulders lessened. "I know that…" he trailed off, frowning. "The fact he's even alive is surreal." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I just think you shouldn't have snuck behind Bruce's back," Tim added.

"Dad would have-"

"Just hear me out," Tim interrupted, raising his hands up. She silence, grimacing. "You getting shot didn't exactly create the best circumstances for Bruce finding out Jason's alive," he reasoned. "And you're right, Jason's family so he should be dealt with differently which is why we should deal with it together."

Helena pursed her lips stubbornly, looking away. Her nails dug into her palms. "Okay…point taken," she divulged, glancing back at him. "But since I'm the closest to Jason I'm the one he's most likely to listen to," she argued. "He's hell-bent on driving dad passed breaking point and he's never been that close to Dick or Barbara. Sometimes a big family intervention isn't the best option."

"She sighed again. "The minute Jason feels cornered he'll attack."

Tim's brow furrowed, sitting back down, getting that inquisitive look on his face. "Did you manage to talk him down?"

"…No," she admitted, resting her body weight on her elbows. "He's more set in his ways than Batman." Helena shook her head, exasperated. "I need more time. Problem is, the longer he takes to see sense, the bigger the body count gets."

He glanced at the thick bandages around her chest. "…So, who shot you?"

She frowned. "Not sure, I assume it was Rose since she attacked us out of nowhere." Helena scowled. "In which case, I'm glad Jason beat her ass," she grumbled.

The corner of Tim's lip twitched upward, but their conversation was cut short when the sound of a motorbike echoed throughout the cave. "Looks like Nightwing's back," Tim commented, watching the vigilante pull up next to the other vehicles.

"Did Dad run him ragged again?" Helena said dryly, raising an eyebrow.

Robin smiled crookedly. "No more so than usual."

Nightwing parked up and got off the bike. "You two mind explaining what the hell is going on?" He removed his helmet and took out a plastic bag from the boot of the motorbike. "How did you get shot?"

She felt a wave of dread, biting down on her lower lip. Her gaze trailed to the bag. "What's in the bag?"
He raised an eyebrow at her for a second before reaching into the bag. "Doughnuts," he answered, handing the pack of six over to Tim. "Now, what happened?" Nightwing repeated, sternly.

Helena sighed. "Jason's alive."

Nightwing's body stiffened, barely noticeable at first, as he walked over to them. "Okay," he replied, uncertainly. "Keep talking."

Helena and Tim exchanged a look. "Jason's the Red Hood, Dick," she said, somewhat quietly. "He was resurrected by the Lazarus pit."

Nightwing's expression remained passive. The telltale signs to tell he was upset was the way he avoided her gaze and how his jaw tightened. "You talked to him?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes, he's been alive for six years," she added, hunching her shoulders. "He isn't right in the head."

"I gathered." Nightwing ran a hand through his hair, digging his nails into his scalp for a moment. "How'd Bruce take it?"

Helena looked over at Tim. The young boy appeared grim. "...He dug up Jason's grave and took off to go find answers," he answered.

Nightwing sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Not the best reaction."

Helena swallowed some guilt. "I probably didn't help matters." Maybe she could have handled the situation better, but Dad wasn't the type of person to talk about his issues, sending him to talk Jason down would have been a train wreck despite her playing mediator. "Any predictions on how dad's going to take care of Jason?" she said grimly.

"Well, it isn't going to be a family movie night," Nightwing remarked, shaking his head. "But at least we know who we're dealing with." He rubbed his chin. "Do you know what his overall plan is?"

"His whole plan is to prove a point," she replied, scowling. She sat up straighter, wincing a little when she crossed her legs.

"How does the Black Mask fit into all of this?" Tim voiced, taking out a glazed doughnut from the box.

"He could want power or be using Black Mask to get something," Dick commented and then sighed. "Jason's good at figuring out what makes people tick and getting a reaction."

"So, he's pushing Black Mask over the edge because…?" Helena arched an eyebrow and took out a sprinkled doughnut from the box. "What, he wants Gotham to explode in on itself? He's singlehandedly caused another gang war that's getting worse every day."

"Maybe that's how he's going to push Bruce over the edge," Tim said, chewing his food.

Her forehead creased. "Maybe…" she trailed off and sighed, taking a bite of the doughnut.

There was a long pause, the three of them deep in thought until Tim let out a loud yawn. "Excuse me," the boy mumbled, rubbing his eyes. He ate the rest of the doughnut in one bite.

Nightwing smiled warmly, looking at them both. "Why don't you two head to bed? We can figure this stuff out when Bruce gets back." He picked up the bag. "It looks like I'll need to call in for
another vacation day at work again." A flash of worry appeared on his face.

Her frown deepened. "Do you even have any vacation days left?"

"Just about…" Dick trailed off and smiled sheepishly. Tim and Helena both exchanged concerned looks. Nightwing flashed them a grin. "Relax, guys, it'll be fine. Besides, you guys need me here."

She hummed warily, deciding not to push. Helena finished off her doughnut and wiped her mouth. "You know, Alfred's gonna cause a fuss when he finds out how much take-out we've been having," she remarked, dryly.

Dick's grin became more genuine. "We better hide the packaging then." He took one of the doughnuts from the box and ate it.

She shared a smile with Tim as the three of them devoured the rest of the box, because for a brief moment they were just siblings enjoying some doughnuts. These were the kind of moments were the ones she valued most at times like this.

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**Bosnia**

**09/12/2023**

**08:43**

Artemis was often rotated around the Light bases, most of the time she spent was with Deathstroke at the main HQ, but occasionally she was called to sub-bases depending on which region they were in. Since she was in Bosnia she was assigned to Ra's al Ghul for the next week. The enchanted necklace pressed against her skin when she swallowed thickly, the collar of her costume hiding it from view.

She stood a fair distance behind him while the leader looked out of the window with a full wine glass in his hand.

Her shoulders tensed when she heard the flutter of a cape behind her. She withdrew her sword and whipped around.

Batman touched down from the ceiling and landed on the floor. Her eyes narrowed, hesitating to attack.

Ra's al Ghul sighed. "Stand down, Tigress," he drawled, setting his glass down on the desk nearby.

Artemis stepped back and eyed the two warily. "Sir?" Playing it a little clueless.

"Call off security" Ra's al Ghul ordered, staring out of the window, as Batman straightened up.

She resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow and touched the radio on her wrist. "Alpha team, stand down." Her gaze stayed focussed on Batman, anticipating his next move. Why was he here in the first place?

"I want to know why?" The Dark Knight's voice thundered like an incoming monsoon.

Ra's al Ghul remained calm. "The boy's death was not part of the plan," he said, evenly, with a tinge of regret in his voice. Artemis grew cold when she realised they were referring to Jason. "The Joker was intended to be a distraction. When your paths crossed in Bosnia, it was to appear as if
you had stumbled upon him." he continued, grimacing. "He was paid extremely well for something that was intended to be nothing more than a wild goose chase… However, I underestimated the clown's madness…"

Batman's expression darkened, taking a step closer. "And, you thought you could control him?" His voice laced in contempt.

Ra's al Ghul's eyes narrowed a fraction, half turning to the caped crusader. "Your partner's death was not part of the plan," his voice shifted from calm to scornful.

"You never had issues taking lives before," Batman accused.

"Yes, but always with purpose. Always with greater goals," he replied, firmly. "This was simply an unnecessary casualty." Ra's al Ghul, regret appeared on his face before it flickered away. "So, I attempted to rectify the disservice…"

Batman's eyes widened a fraction. "Rectify?" His fists clenched tighter.

"Yes," the other man continued, nonplussed. "I had hoped to return to you what you had lost." Ra's al Ghul turned to him fully. "I have walked this world for nearly six centuries. As you know I achieve this by bathing in the rejuvenating waters of the Lazarus Pit," he said, moving towards his desk, picking up the glass of wine. "Along with its healing abilities, it has long been rumoured that it is capable of an even greater feat...to raise the dead." He grimaced, drinking the liquid with a larger gulp than necessary.

Artemis frowned, painting the picture in her mind. She hadn't infiltrated the Light until a year after Jason's death, but had Kaldur noticed anything off about the Al Ghul's? Whispers, anything that at the time might have seemed non-essential…

"…You even concocted the cover story that young Jason had died in a bombing in Sarajevo." Ra's al Ghul had resumed speaking when she zoned back in. "This made it easy for me. All it took was a few payoffs to replace his body. I felt confident that you would not perform an autopsy."

She eyed Batman cautiously. His jaw was clenched tighter than his fists, teeth gritted so hard they might just crack. She tried to imagine what was going on in his head.

The Leader of the League of Assassins polished his glass clean and sighed. "…Even if you had, we still would have bought enough time. But my plan, it had unfortunate results." Ra's al Ghul's told him grimly. "He returned to this world, but returned damaged."

"There's a reason the dead stay dead." Batman more or less grounded out. "I thought even you were smart enough to realise that," his voice grew frostier. "I came here because I want you to tell me why you did it."

Ra's al Ghul's brow creased. "I just-"

"You told me one of the reasons, not the second," he demanded.

Artemis tried not to tense, keeping her face blank. While the gears in her mind ticked away, something about the reason for Jason's resurrection that didn't quite click.

There was a long silence, causing her to grip her sword handle tighter.
The tiny fragment of a smile slid onto Ra's al Ghul's face, faint but still visible. "Well, my associates had other ideas for the boy," he finally spoke. "To unravel him for secrets, and use him as a weapon against you. A little too tasteless if I say so myself." He stared out of the window, eyeing the detail of the mountains in the distance. "But they never got the chance, when the boy was revived he escaped and plunged over the mountain. My army searched for months but we were never able to find a body or pick up a trail. I thought him dead yet again until recently."

Batman eyed the man suspiciously before glancing over at Artemis pointedly. She maintained his glare, narrowing her eyes. A look of understanding passed between them both, and he turned his head away. She'd need to meet with Nightwing and Kaldur. The fact they hadn't known about this was a bad indication they had only scraped away the outer crust of the Light's secrets. Their plan needed to be elevated and Kaldur needed to be let into the inner circle, quickly.

She looked back at Ra's al Ghul when the man began to speak again. "I have returned your son to you as a blight upon your house. He burns the very kingdom you-" He turned around, as did she, but Batman was gone. "…protect."

Artemis morphed her face back into its blank mask. "Shall I alert the guards to pursue him?"

Ra's scoffed quietly, turning away from her. "Don't be foolish, child." He shook his head. "They would never catch him. Besides, I have done enough," his voice grew quiet towards the end, as his brow furrowed.

The metal of the crowbar hit his face, tearing some skin from his cheek. Jason hit the concrete. It was hard to see with his left eye swollen up behind his mask.

"Wow, that looked like it really hurt." Mud stained green shoes appeared in his poor line of vision.

It hurt to breathe and the pain in his ribs felt like a persistent burn.

He got hit again, harder this time, like the first had been a warm up. The hilt of the crowbar dug in-between his ribs making him gasp

"Whoa, now, hang on." The shoes walked around him. "That looked like it hurt a lot more."

Jason's breathing grew shallower like the air was being sucked out of the room. He could hear the man above him tapping the crowbar against his palm, ready for the next hit. "So let's try and clear this up, okay, pumpkin?."

Jason scrunched up his eyes, trying to block everything out. Pretend the pain wasn't there; mind over matter of some shit. He hunched his shoulders up. His mouth was filled with blood, the smell and taste overpowering.

"What hurts more? A?"

He couldn't block any of this out, and Bruce wasn't… Bruce wasn't-Jason yelled when he got hit again, twisting his legs as his body jerked.

"Or B?"

"Uhh," Jason spat blood.

"Forehand."
The crowbar bar hit his stomach, making him lurch, as vomit burned up in his throat, threatening to come out.

"Or Backhand."

Saliva mixed with blood dripped out of his mouth, making him choke. Jason groaned and curled inwards. He coughed and looked up, feeling a rise of hatred splurge up like a typhoon.

The Joker stood above him, dressed in his trademark bright purple suit, with a few bloodstains on his green shirt.

Jason blinked and the image of the Joker fizzled like a bad television reception, a loud buzzing noise filling the room. His brow creased as The Joker flashed to Batman.

No.

His insides shrivelled up.

Batman changed back into the Joker. "What's wrong lamb chop?" the clown asked silkily.

Jason's started sweating, vision blurry, while his skin felt like it was on fire.

Joker, Batman, Joker, Batman, JokerBatmanJokerBatmanJoker.

The room exploded.

...

Jason woke up screaming into his pillow.

Nightmare, just a nightmare. Not real, not real…

He opened his eyes. He was still in his crappy apartment with a cockroach crawling up the wall.

Slowly, he got up, wiping the sweat from his brow. Jason buried his face in his hands, breathing harshly. "Christ," he whispered, running a hand over his face. "Fuck."

He got out of bed and shakily headed to the bathroom. His legs felt like jello, turning on the light. This whole shit with Batman was messing with his head, making his nightmares more twisted than usual.

Jason twisted the knobs of the sink and washed his face, trying to calm down. He sighed and looked up at his reflection, narrowing his eyes. "Keep it together, asshole."

He just needed to keep it together for a couple more weeks and then he could finish what he started. Just a couple more weeks. He bit down on his tongue and wiped his face with a towel, walking into the living room to grab a beer. There was no use trying to sleep.

Wayne Manor, Gotham

09/12/2023

20:00

The east wing of Wayne Manor was alive with party guest and a full security team guarding all
exits and entrances.

Helena took a sip of her grape juice as she eyed the guests through her glass. Her chest still hurt but it was a pain she could deal with, God knew she's had worse. The dress she wore was a turtleneck, hiding the bandages from view, and she'd forgone the high heels for some flats.

Her dad was still noticeably absent so it was up to Dick to play host while she and Tim lingered in the background.

"Helena Wayne is that you?" a bright voice called from behind her.

Helena quickly forced a smile and turned around, recognising the voice. "Ms Corbett," she greeted, turning around. "So, nice to see you again."

Madolyn Corbett was dressed a little too…provocative, not that Helena wanted to judge or anything, but she couldn't help but judge when Madolyn was showing a lot of skin to the point Helena could now imagine the woman-

"Do you know where your father's run off to?" Madolyn interrupted her train of thought.

Helena's gaze snapped back to the woman's face, her cheeks growing hot. "He had to go pick up my birthday present," she lied quickly. "It's long overdue."

Madolyn frowned, adjusting her thick brown hair. "He left town to get you a birthday present?"

She nodded, smiling. "I wanted a new car, but unfortunately the one I wanted needed to be picked up. It was a last minute kind of thing," Helena explained. "And I've been waiting weeks for this so he went to pick it up himself." Damn, she sounded like a brat.

The older woman stared at her passively before smiling. "Oh, how cute. You're so lucky to have him." Her smile stretched further looking almost painful. "Very lucky."

Helena tried not to feel uncomfortable. "That's nice of you to say."

Madolyn stared at her for a moment. "…Well, I was hoping to catch him and take him up on his offer for a second date."

Not on your life. "Oh, wonderful," Helena replied, nodding. "He'll love that." It was becoming harder to keep smiling.

The other woman's eyes narrowed a fraction like she sensed the contempt. "Excuse me for my bluntness, but I have to ask…Have I offended you?" she asked, softly, her face falling.

Oh for goodness sake. "What? No, of course not," Helena replied quickly, looking aghast. "I'm sorry if it seemed like I was-"

"No, it's okay." Madolyn was smiling again, taking a step closer. "He's your father, you get territorial, I get it," her voice wavered. "Maybe I've come on too strong but it's just because your father's the first person who actually made me feel like I'm…well, worth something."

Madolyn needed to learn that sometimes honesty was not the best policy.

But, despite how uncomfortable the woman's bluntness made her feel, Helena felt a tiny fraction of guilt. Madolyn may be annoying, but her dad shouldn't have led her on. It was sometimes easy to shrug off the way he used women like Madolyn to play up his playboy persona, without
considering where it left them.

"Oh, I see..." Helena replied, shifting uneasily. She needed to exit this conversation quickly before Madolyn used her as a shoulder to cry on. "You don't need his validation, though," she added quickly. "You're beautiful."

Please let her accept that self-esteem booster and just go.

"Thank you," Madolyn said, faintly, smiling a watery looking smile.

Sweet Mary, what if she tried to hug her?

"Shrimp, ma'am?" Alfred appeared at her side with a platter of fresh finger foods in his hand.

"Alfred!" Helena smiled and wrapped her arm around his. "I was just about to look for you; I think the ice sculpture is melting." Then she quickly looked back at Madolyn like she'd only just remembered she was there. "I'm sorry, but this will just take a minute."

Madolyn smiled tightly, unfortunately not buying the excuse for a second. "Of course."


"A smooth exit, ma'am," he remarked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

Her lips twitched upwards, stopping when the two of them were a safe distance away from Madolyn. "Not to be cruel or anything, but that lady gives me the creeps," she murmured, letting him go.

Alfred straightened his suit jacket, tidying up the shrimp on the platter. "And, how lovely to see you remain as tactful as ever," he commented. "Shrimp?"

"Thanks." She took one and popped it in her mouth and chewed. "You know, Dad did say you should keep safe," she reminded, smiling crookedly.

Alfred eyed her blankly. "And, leave the catering team to fend for themselves?" he replied, lightly. "They can barely fold a napkin properly," he remarked, glancing over at the team of hired waiters. "Besides, Master Dick told me the news," his voice became quieter.

Helena gripped her glass tighter. "It's funny, I don't know whether to be happy or scared," she replied, looking around the ballroom. "I don't wanna fight him but I just might have to..." She stared at the window, half-afraid Jason would burst through the window. "There aren't many options."

"Are you sure about that?" Alfred's voice lowered. "I've found there always is a third option, it's just much harder to figure out."

Her brow creased for a moment. "I already tried reasoning with him," she murmured, trying to look at the situation from a different angle. The biggest issue was trying to get the others to think the same.

"Uh, Mr Pennyworth, sir," a young waiter interrupted them.

Alfred turned around, raising an eyebrow. "Yes?"

The waiter fidgeted under the older man's gaze. "The wine needs restocking, and you're the only
one who has the key, sir."

"I'll be back shortly," said Alfred curtly, passing the platter to the waiter who blinked in surprise. "Thank you."

Helena threw the waiter a smile and placed her glass on the platter, stealing a shrimp before walking off. She took a deep breath, trying not to scratch her bandages. If Dad didn't show up soon then they should start worrying, especially if he wasn't answering his calls. She spied Dick schmoozing with Bette Kane, the two of them laughing about something.

Helena cocked an eyebrow and walked over to them. "Hey," she greeted, smiling pleasantly.

Dick glanced up and smiled. "Hey, sis. How are you feeling?"


The blonde smiled. "Hi, long time no see. How's school?" she asked.

"Same old really, though our squad may make nationals this year, fingers crossed," she replied brightly, crossing her fingers. "How's the company?"

Bette sighed. "Stressful," she answered, shaking her head. "Enjoy being a teenager while it lasts, that's all I can say."

Helena laughed. "Thanks." Her gaze trailed over to Dick. "Can we talk?"

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and smiled. "Sure. I'll catch you later, Bette." He gave her a quick wink.

Bette's smile grew, waving. Helena discreetly rolled her eyes when she turned away, her brother following behind her. The two of them wandered to the edge of the hall near the Black Horse plant.

"You okay?" His face shifted to concern. "You know you can call it an early night anytime."

"And, have the press spread rumours like last time?" she retorted, frowning, crossing her arms, trying to ignore the mounting pain in her chest. "I'm fine," she instead, earning a wary look. "Honestly." She flashed him a quick smile. "But anyway, have you heard any more news about dad?"

Dick shook his head. "No, he's gone awol," he replied, sighing. "Listen, he'll turn up eventually. He just needs to process all of... this, okay?" he reassured, smiling again. "It's all going to be fine."

She held back a sigh. "I appreciate the reassurance, but I think we should start planning on a third option on how to deal with you-know-who," she murmured, looking around self-consciously, but all the guests were too far away to hear. "Locking him up is just gonna slow him down, not make him better."

His face grew grave. "I know he needs help, but we need to get him in our custody first," he said, leaning in closer. "Before he ends up taking more lives."

She nodded faintly, looking away. "Dad's still gonna be a problem," she argued, digging her nails into her arms. "This whole thing is about them, and unless Dad finally communicates his emotions properly, nothing's gonna change."

Dick scoffed quietly. "Like that'll happen," he muttered.
She felt a flare of irritation. "I'm serious, Dick," she told him, firmly. "Something's gotta change." The pain in her chest intensified.

He raised his hands up. "Don't you think I know that?" He sighed and placed a hand on her shoulder. "It took ten years for him to say he was proud of me," he whispered. "Look, I get it okay." Dick met her glare. "But, you have to be patient. You can't force this kind of stuff."

There was a pause. She looked back at him searchingly, biting down on her tongue. "And, if they end up killing each other?"

Dick stilled, removing his hand. "Well, we need to make sure that doesn't happen," he replied, evenly.

"Like it's that easy." She stared at him for a moment longer before she sighed. "I need to go change my bandages," she said quietly, brushing passed him.

Helena sat down on the medical table in the cave, wrapping a fresh load of bandages around her chest, while she kept an eye on the time. She grabbed the soiled bandages and put them in the bin, and then pulled her dress back on.

She tensed when she heard the Batwing enter the cave, the sound of mechanics reverberating around the cave. Her eyes narrowed, taking a deep breath. She wasn't going to argue, just talk to him and see how he was. He was hurting too, so she needed to take that into account.

Helena folded her arms and waited for him to exit the jet, putting a cap on her temper. "Hey," she spoke when she saw him get out. "I was starting to get worried."

Batman looked up from the lower level, staring at her for a long moment. She shifted uneasily and looked away, hearing him make his way upstairs. "How's your injury?" he asked, walking up the stairs.

She shrugged. "It's healing fine."

He came to a stop next to her. "Is the party still going on?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, glancing at him. He had five O'clock shadow and his cape had mud on the hemline. "People have been wondering where you've been."

"I needed to find answers," he told her unapologetically. His eyes narrowed. "You shouldn't have gone after the Red Hood alone."

"Dad, don't." She sighed, running a hand over her face. "I already got a lecture from Tim," she said, shooting him a withering look. "I'm more concerned about what we do next, okay."

Her dad remained silent for a few seconds, glancing away briefly before he looked at her again. "I'm going to stop him, I have to."

"I know." Helena nodded, swallowing a bad taste. "But what about afterwards, we're just gonna chuck him in Blackgate?" she asked, shaking her head. "Like that'll even hold him." She chewed her tongue. "Dad, he needs us. I'm not saying he can be properly reformed, but he needs to know we love him. That's why I had to go confront him."

"And, did he listen to you?" Batman countered, coldly.
"No." She felt her temper flare. "Because this whole thing is about you and him," she snapped. "And his insecurity and... I don't know how to get through to him.'

Her dad pulled down his cowl. "He's not the same person, Helena," his voice softened.

"Yes, I know," she said, bitterly. "But, he's still family." She scrutinised him, daring him to disagree.

He balled his hands into fists. "I need to get ready for the party." He took a step to the right, but she grabbed his arm to stop him.

"Don't do that." She eyed him coldly. "You can't avoid this, Dad, not now we know he's really back."

"I'm not avoiding anything," he argued. "If we have this conversation, Dick should be present."

"Right, of course," she retorted flatly, removing her hand. "Just like last time." She smiled tightly. "Same exact words, in fact, remember?"

"I understand you're upset, but not we're discussing this right now," his tone rose.

Her smile disappeared. "When Jason died and I tried to talk about it, you shut me out," her voice wavered. "It was like I wasn't even allowed to mention his name, another thing we're just not allowed to talk about."

"I never intended it to be like that," he told her, defensive.

Then why had he removed all the pictures of Jason and put them at the back, always out of sight? If anyone said Jason's name his expression would darken and the room would feel colder. People grieved in different ways, she'd always tried to understand that but she couldn't just keep pretending it was healthy, that not discussing the big elephant in the room made things easier.

"Well it did, I'm sorry but that's how it always feels like with you," she said, coldly. "Jason...or Mom, it's like we're not allowed to r-remember them," her voice shook, feeling queasy. "That we're meant to be ashamed of them." She couldn't look him in the eye. "Because maybe you are."

 Damn it, she'd made it too personal.

She closed her eyes and covered her face with her hand.

"How could you think that?" her dad said softly. "Do you honestly think I'm ashamed of your mother?"

Her chest tightened. "Well, yeah. It kind of comes off like that," she forced herself to speak. "I mean I get it, she belonged in prison, why wouldn't anyone be ashamed...?"

Did he think she didn't know what people said about her behind her back? That she was a little mistake, a misjudgement that he was stuck with. She didn't believe most of it but she could believe he regretted ever meeting her mother.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her in closer. "I'm not ashamed of your mother, how can I be when she gave me you," he said lightly. "And, I'm sorry I made you feel like that."

Helena took a deep breath and looked up. His expression was calmer and less harsh like Batman's but more sincere than Bruce Wayne's. He was just her dad in that moment, the middle ground. It was easier to forgive him when he was like this.
"Well, you're not exactly easy to read," she replied faintly. "But, what about Jason?"

He faltered, holding in a breath. "It's complicated and I'm still trying to work that out myself."

So, he was ashamed in some ways, which was understandable to a degree. He felt guilt, that much had always been obvious. Greatest failure.

She stared at him intently, trying to understand, but she didn't think he'd ever be properly open with her. She wasn't his friend or mentor. Maybe there were just some things he couldn't tell her. Helena sighed quietly and leant in closer, resting her head on his chest.

"Please, just try to talk to him, that's all I'm asking, Dad."

He placed a hand on top of her head. "…If it doesn't work, I'm going to have to stop him the hard way."

"I know," she replied. "But, I need you to try."

"Only if you'll stay away from Jason," he said, sternly.

Helena hid a scowl. "…If you mess this up the deal's off."

"Deal," he replied, kissing her forehead.

She pulled away, sighing. "I need to get back to the party before someone thinks I'm screwing a waiter." Helena slipped her shoes back on, rubbing her neck.

Her dad placed his hand on her shoulder again. "You know I meant what I said about your mother, don't you?"

She paused and considered him for a moment, chewing on the inside of her mouth. "Yeah, I know, Dad." It still didn't mean they'd be talking about her much, knowing him.

His eyes narrowed a fraction. "Your mother was amazing, don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise." His lips formed a half-smile.

He was trying, she had to remind herself. "Thanks." She smiled and kissed his cheek. "I'll see you upstairs."
Dick cracked his neck as he made his way upstairs from the cave, trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes. The hallway was dark and deserted, besides the cat running across into another room. He smiled a little when he saw the cat head towards the kitchen, while Dick followed behind.

The cat brushed past his leg. "You hungry, Benny?" he whispered as he made his way to the kitchen. His smile dimmed a fraction when he saw the kitchen light already on. His smile returned, it was probably Tim trying to sneak in a late night snack again, so it came as a surprise when he saw Bruce sitting at the table drinking some steaming hot cocoa.

Bruce's eyes flickered up, looking disgruntled. There were some bags under his eyes and his hair was dishevelled, and there were a number of creases in his clothes. He definitely hadn't showered since he stunk of sweat.

Dick grinned. "Morning." He followed the cat into the kitchen and headed to the fridge to grab some milk. "Is the kettle still warm?" He took out the milk.

"Just boiled," Bruce replied, drinking from the steaming mug. "Cocoa's in the usual place."

He nodded and opened the cupboard next to fridge where the hot chocolate rested, along with two boxes of coffee, and a small box of Herbal tea. "So, you just got back from patrol?" Dick asked as he poured the boiling water into the mug.

Bruce hummed, setting the cup down. "Firefly started a riot near the Narrows."

"Any casualties?" Dick said, frowning. He stirred his hot cocoa and then added some milk.

"Two," Bruce replied curtly, scrutinising the steaming hot liquid in front of him. "How did the talk
with your captain go?"

He sighed, putting the milk back in the fridge. "Well, I may or not get fired from the force if I keep skipping work," he said, picking up his mug. Bruce frowned while Dick just shrugged, sitting down opposite him.

"I don't want you to lose your job," his mentor said sternly.

"Well neither do I," Dick replied. "But, you guys need me here, so..." He shrugged, drinking as his eyes flickered back to his mentor whose frown remained. Dick sighed, lowering his mug. "Bludhaven needs me but I can't just leave you guys when things are so... you know?" He leant back in his seat.

Perhaps he was being irrational, but this whole business with Jason involved all of them. It was like the city had anchored him here.

Bruce looked away for a moment, finishing off his hot cocoa and then slid his mug to the side. "Helena and I had an argument," he told him, glancing up.

"Ah." Dick grimaced, looking at his mentor sympathetically. "That bad huh?" Why else would he be up this hour drinking a sugar filled treat?

He sighed. "She thinks I'm ashamed of her mother and Jason."

The acrobat's stomach curdled like bad milk. "And, what did you say?" he said, narrowing his eyes.

"I told her I wasn't ashamed of her mother, but with Jason... well..." Bruce trailed off, as his lips twisted into a scowl. "I couldn't exactly tell her the truth."

Dick crossed his arms and leant on the table. "You can't keep blaming yourself, Bruce. You loved Jason...you tried to save him," he tried to argue, rubbing the back of his neck. "It wasn't-"

"Making him Robin was my greatest failure," Bruce interrupted, as his expression darkened. Dick's chest tightened. "He was so much like you but so different at the same time. He was damaged in ways I didn't know how to handle. And, then I got him killed," he said bitterly, clenching his fists. "I failed him in every aspect and I refuse to accept anything otherwise." Dick gritted his teeth as he swallowed, the back of his throat burned. "Living in the past won't help him, Bruce." He shifted his weight in the chair. "Look, me and Jason may not have had the best relationship," he admitted, burying a lump of guilt. "But, I know he felt like he'd found a family with us, okay, no matter messed up it may have been, we gave him home. We can't give up on him, we're all he's got," his voice softened.

Bruce grew quiet, staring at him pointedly. "I'll talk to him, but one way or another he has to be stopped, and I need to be the one to do it." He pushed back against the table, his chair scraped against the floor. "Go back to Bludhaven, Dick."

A rise of anger lurched in Dick's stomach, as his mentor started to walk away. "Bruce-"

"It wasn't a request," Bruce interrupted, pausing at the doorway. "Your city needs you, you can't shirk that responsibility," he said gravely, walking away.

Dick stared at the empty doorway, digging his nails into his palms. "Meow." The cat jumped onto the table, watching him with big green eyes.
His temper simmered, looking over at the cat. He sighed, stroking the feline's black fur. "I know, he's asshole," he muttered. "But, he does have a point…"

The Cathedral, Gotham

09/17/2023

12:30

The sermon was coming to an end. The priest, Father Don, a skinny man in his late sixties with tanned skin. "…our city is a war zone, because when you go out there, there's a possibility you won't come home."

'How can you withstand these nonsensical preachings?' the Scarab hissed in his head.

Jaime closed his eyes and sighed, wanting to bash his head against the church walls. He forced himself to remain in his pew while the rest of the congregation listened with rapt attention.

"And, some of you can hide behind your high-security systems, and I don't blame you," the old man continued, while a few people shifted uncomfortably. "But here's the thing, when our lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, he didn't do it so you could hide behind walls while evil ran amuck," his voice lowered. "Now, don't misquote me, I'm not saying you should put on a mask and go join the Batman." The priest's lips quirked upwards.

A few people laughed and Jaime smiled slightly.

"I want you to ask yourself how you can make a difference," the priest continued. "Satan has a hold of this city, and I believe we need to get it back."

"Amen," Jaime's mom murmured next to him.

He frowned a little, staring at his hands. The sermon came to a close soon after, but Jaime had zoned out by that point, focussing his attention on the pink hat belonging to the old woman in front of him. A sliver of the pink silk was worn away and frayed.

'This preacher's words are being met with complacency. Useless,' the Scarab kept ranting, giving Jaime a headache.

Jaime rubbed his head and scowled. Did the thing have to comment on every little thing? If being a crazy alien tech wasn't enough the Scarab had a bad tendency of being a royal Pendejo.

'You are aware I can translate over a thousand languages. I know what that word means,' the Scarab spoke darkly.

"Beso mi culo," Jaime muttered.

His mom kicked him in the shin. "Jaime," she hissed warningly, eyes narrowed.

He coughed. "I was clearing my throat," he whispered quickly. His mom looked at him oddly before she sighed, but before she could speak the rest of the congregation closed with a prayer.

"Father, we ask for your protection…” Father Don began to speak.

'Your behaviour continues to aggravate me, Jaime Reyes.'
Jaime closed his eyes, holding back a groan, deciding to pray.

"God, please, I'm begging you, get rid of it. I understand, I get it, you're punishing me for masturbating, but listen, I couldn't help it okay, I'm sorry. I'm sixteen, I have needs, and, yeah, okay the porn may have been a step too far, but again... sixteen. I need something to work with when I'm jacking-

'Please, stop, even if there was an invisible man in the sky, I doubt he would want to listen to this nauseating plea,' the Scarab interrupted, dryly.

"...We pray, amen," Father Don closed the prayer.

"Amen," the congregation chanted in unison.

Jaime scowled and folded his arms while his mom stood up. "I'm going to go bring the car around," she said, glancing at his dad. "Can you pick up, Milagro?"

"Yeah, sure," his dad replied, stepping passed Mom. "You coming, Jaime?"

Jaime opened his mouth.

'Say no, we still have to patrol the city this afternoon.'

He closed his mouth and his eyes flickered between them both. "...I was going to go meet some friends at the park, later."

Dad frowned. "Are you sure that's safe?" he said cautiously.

Jaime forced a smile. "Dad, come on. Don't live in fear, remember? I'll be fine," he told them. Mom shared a concerned look with his dad. "It'll only be a couple of hours tops, I'll text you."

Mom sighed, picking her bag up. "Okay fine, but come home before dark."

"Or you're grounded," Dad added, following Mom out of the pews.

Jaime kept his smile fixed in place, watching them leave, and then he sighed when they were out of sight.

'Well done.'

He scowled. "Shut it, I didn't do it for you," he hissed, glaring at the stone floor.

"That sounds like an interesting prayer."

Jaime jerked his head around in surprise but relaxed when he saw it was Helena. "Oh, I wasn't... um...uh." Maybe it was best to just say he was telling God to shut up, it made him sound less crazy. "Please, don't tell my parents," he finished feebly, smiling sheepishly.

She smirked. "It's okay, I get it, everyone has one of those days," she said, shrugging.

His smile grew, standing up. "So, how was your week?"

"Nothing too exciting, though I was sick for the most of it," she replied. "I hope I don't pass a bug on."

"Well, I wouldn't mind a few days off school," he tried to joke.
Her smile became warmer like she thought he was funny, which he thought was a good sign…

'It is not a good sign.'

Jaime scowled, biting down on his tongue. "Anyway," he said quickly, looking back at her. Helena arched an eyebrow. Shit, she probably thought he was being weird. "That sermon, right?" He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "The guy knows how to preach."

"Well, he knows how to keep people awake," she replied, smiling. "I was actually wondering if you wanted to hang out for a little while."

He thought he'd misheard. "You wanna hang out with me?"

Her smile grew mischievously. "If that's okay with you?" she asked, playfully.

Jaime opened his mouth.

'Need I remind you of the patrol?'

He frowned, thinking it over. To be fair, there were other heroes in Gotham, so it wasn't like his appearance was vital… and how often did he get asked out by a pretty girl?

Jaime grinned. "Well, I do kind of need a tour guide." He walked out from behind the pew. "I haven't had a chance to see much of the city."

"Then I'm glad I can be of service," she said, giving him a warm smile. "Come on, I'm parked around back."

Jaime felt light on his feet as he followed her.

'How many times must I tell you she is not to be trusted?' the Scarab chastised.

He gritted his teeth, trying to ignore the device. The more the Scarab said not to the more he wanted to defy it just to prove a point. Not to mention the Scarab hadn't specifically said why he shouldn't trust her, just that he detected some deceit about her.

'She is hiding something.'

What teenager wasn't? He followed her outside of the cathedral towards the parking lot.

'How many teenagers smile as much as her?'

That made him falter, making him frown. Helena's mannerisms did have an element of fakeness to them, not obnoxiously fake, but more *I'm floating on cloud nine and by golly aren't I such a cool down to earth girl to be around* kind of pretentious.

But, weren't most rich people like that anyway?

Jaime shook his head and hurried to catch up with her. "So, no limo today?" he said, walking by her side.

She smiled crookedly. "I decided to drive, helps clear my head," she answered, reaching into her handbag as they wandered through the car park. "I just got my licence so I'm still getting the hang of it."

"Should I be worried?" He gave her a toothy grin.
The corner of Helena's lip lifted upwards as her mouth opened in preparation for a laugh that never came. "Well, can I see your driving license?" she asked, lightly. Jaime's grin faded into a pout. She smirked. "Yeah, didn't think so." She took out some car keys and clicked the button.

He froze when he saw the red, Classic car, a Corvette by the looks of it. The car had a raisin colour coating that shined in the light and the surface was as smooth as melted chocolate. "...That's your car?" he said in disbelief. That thing was definitely worth the combination of his parent's yearly salary.

She opened the door, smiling. "Yeah, it was a late birthday present. You like?" Helena leant on the doorframe. "It got a makeover last year, and works like a beauty," she said silkily, stroking the roof.

Jaime swallowed some drool as he stared at the vehicle. "Nice." His eyes stayed glued to the car as he walked around it. His face twitched when he felt a glimmer of envy, he supposed some people were born lucky. He opened the passenger seat and got in, and not pondering on the curious look Helena was giving him. "So, where to?"

She sat down in the driver's seat, closing the door. "I was thinking lunch," she said, smiling again. Helena buckled her seatbelt. "I know this great dessert place."

Would he be able to afford it? He tried to relax. Maybe this wasn't the best idea; he didn't even know her that well…

"Hey, are you okay?" Helena asked, tilting her head towards him.

He forced a laugh. "Yeah, I was just thinking. Dessert sounds awesome, let's go."

She smiled, starting the engine. "Great. Buckle up," she chimed.

The car gave a sudden jerk backwards and Jaime hastily held onto the edge of his seat.

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**Bosnia**

09/17/2023

13:00

The room was four brown square walls and dank, with a lingering smell of blood in the air, but as unpleasant as that seemed it was clean of all surveillance, whether that be magic or modern technology. Kaldur removed his helmet, sitting on a chair that had seen better days.

"My father has put my position forward to the Light," he spoke.

Tigress leant against the wall, arms folded to guard herself against the cold. "Like last time?" she said, irritably. "We need to make a bold move before it's too late," she argued. "Jason's been alive for six years and we had no clue."

His face scrunched up in frustration. "I agree, but if I push too hard it'll cause suspicion." He stood up, as his mind linger back to his father. "I have a plan."

Artemis scowled. "What like last time?" she bit out. He stiffened, as his eyes narrowed. She caught the look, wiping the scowl off her face. "Sorry, that was a low blow," she said more quietly, guilt clouding her features. "I know that wasn't your fault."
Kaldur half wanted to laugh but held back. "But it was my failure." They both grew silent.

The plan had been straightforward and would have gotten him into the inner circle, proving his loyalty. He frowned. The attack on Mount Justice had gone relatively to Nightwing's plan, even Artemis' death had been performed perfectly.

The team had been outnumbered by Black Manta's forces and had been separated accordingly. Nightwing, Rocket, and Artemis took on Kaldur head on while Miss Martian, Beast Boy, and Superboy defended the mountain.

Then Tempest had shown up with half the army of Atlantis in tow and that's when it had all fallen apart.

"Kaldur," Artemis snapped him back to the present.

He glanced back at her. "I apologise… that failure may have set us back, but we can make up lost time," he said, feeling a bad taste form in his mouth.

Artemis took a step closer. "Why do you look like you swallowed one of Megan's bad cookies?" she asked warily.

His mouth nearly formed a smile. "You won't like what I'm proposing."

Her eyes narrowed while he sighed and walked over to the ratty beige rug on the floor. "He approached me two days ago," he began to explain, removing the rug, revealing a trap door.

Artemis pursed her lips, eyeing him cautiously. "I already don't like where this is going."

Kaldur opened the trap door, resting on one knee. "I only ask you keep an open mind, Artemis," he said evenly, sighing as he made his way down the ladder.

A warm orange glow lit up the basement, a thick smell of dust and tobacco filling his nostrils as he went further down, Artemis following after him. His feet touched down on the cracked wood panelling, already aware of the third occupant who was smoking a cigarette.

His face scrunched up at the smell. "It is not wise to smoke in confined spaces," he growled out, glancing up at the assassin.

"I'll take my chances," was the reply he got.

Artemis touched down next to him and did a back-track when she saw the third person. "What the hell?" she snapped, reaching for her sword.

"Hello, little girl." Slade Wilson smirked, taking a long drag of his cigarette.

"Kaldur?" she growled out.

"He needs our help," he replied, raising his arm to block her from attacking. "We share a mutual enemy."

She took a step back, glaring. "I wouldn't trust this bag of shit for a second," she snarled.

Slade shrugged towards them, stubbing his cigarette out against the wall. "And, yet I haven't outed you both to the Light."

"Or so you say," she argued.
The assassin's crooked smile grew. "I have more to gain playing clueless," he countered. "Did you really think I wouldn't recognise you?" He chuckled. "I've known you since your mom was changing your diapers."

"Go fuck yourself." She got up in his face.

"Enough," Kaldur commanded, intersecting the incoming fight. "Slade needs our help protecting his daughter."

Artemis hesitated, moving back a fraction, yet maintained her standoff against Deathstroke. "Artemis, please," Kaldur said, giving her a look. "Trust my judgement."

Her lips thinned, as she moved back, distancing herself. She faced her friend, looking wary. "I'm finding it pretty hard to keep an open mind, Kaldur," she ground out.

"We all swore we'd do what was necessary," he reminded her. "This is necessary."

Her eyes narrowed. "Fine." She turned away, crossing her arms. "We play it your way."

"Thank you." Kaldur nodded in respect.

Slade eyed her like a cat would a toy. "Rose is being transferred to Belle Reve in a few weeks. That can't be allowed to happen," he said, turning away, walking over to the wooden table in the centre of the room. "The prison's under the Light's control if you didn't already know."

Artemis' hands clenched into fists. "And?"

Slade glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "They want Rose back," his voice lowered, and his lips twitched into a grimace. "They want to continue the experiment."

"The serum was their concoction?" Kaldur assumed.

The assassin nodded. "They're running similar experiments on other teenagers, special cases."

Artemis' eyes widened, exchanging a look with Kaldur. "Where?" she demanded to know.

Slade gave her a condescending smile. "You get my daughter to safety first, and then we can discuss details."

"And, our cover?" Artemis spoke up, looking pointedly at Kaldur.

Kaldur eyed Slade coldly. "Mr Wilson will honour the agreement or suffer the consequences," he warned.

Deathstroke's smile disappeared. "So, long as you keep your side."

The Atlantean held out his hand. "We will."

Slade's eyes flashed to the hand, a hint of amusement on his face, while Artemis watched from the shadows.

Deathstroke crushed his hand in his webbed one, while Kaldur remained stone-faced.

Gotham City
The Diner wasn't packed that much on a Sunday afternoon which was the way she liked it. That and its decorations, the owner had a jazz obsession so the whole place was covered with autographed photographs and memorabilia.

Helena took a bite from her chocolate cake and then drank some vanilla milkshake while Jaime tucked into his brownie. He had some chocolate sauce on the edge of his mouth and some on his fingertips. They'd taken a table near the window, giving them a good view of the park across the street.

She smiled a little, it was a nice change hanging out with someone who was so… not intense.

"So," Jaime spoke, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "How often do you come here?"

"Every couple of months," she replied, using her fork to chop off some more cake. "I'd come more often but my dad doesn't like me eating too much sugar." She rolled her eyes, popping the cake into her mouth, licking the fork clean. She smiled at him, cupping her chin in her palm as she rested her elbow on the table. "So, what do you do for fun?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, an anxious habit of his. "Well, I don't really know anyone around here that well, so I've just been playing video games, skateboarding, watching some movies. You know normal stuff." Jaime laughed uncomfortably.

So, he spent most of his free time patrolling the city? Not a surprise. "That's cool. My brother Tim plays video games all the time," she said, shrugging. "I don't really have that much time to play, though."

"How do you spend your time?" he asked, taking a bite of his brownie.

"Well, I have cheerleading practice," she began to say.

Jaime gulped down his brownie. "You're a cheerleader?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Uh…yeah, and?"

He quickly cleared his throat. "No, that's just cool," he said quickly, staring at his dessert intently. "You being a cheerleader." He hastily stuck another spoonful of brownie in his mouth.

Okay, he was a little weird, but it was kind of adorable. Like he was a teddy bear…still very weird, though. "Right, okay. Well, I also sometimes do volunteer work and uh…I like reading. Not much else to it really," she said, shrugging.

Jaime hummed, glancing briefly out of the window before looking back at her. "So, what kind of volunteer work do you do?"

Her brow creased slightly, no one ever really asked her. "Mostly with the homeless; soup kitchens, good will drives," she answered, leaning back in her chair while her eyes stayed focussed on him.

He stared at her for a moment, like he didn't quite get it. "Why'd you do it?"

Her smile wavered. Was he testing her? "Because I wanna make a difference, why wouldn't I?" she replied, digging her nails into the table, feeling an overwhelming need to say more. "Some would
say it's called being a decent human being," she let slip, pausing afterwards.

Did that come out too sarcastic? That wasn't the type of persona she was meant to have.

Jaime blinked, and then a curious smile slid onto his face. "Okay, fair point, sorry."

Her smile became sheepish. "Sorry, that came across as rude," she said, quickly, clicking some hair out of her face.

"No, it's okay go on. I'm officially intrigued," he exclaimed, watching her with some newfound interest.

Helena hesitated, her lips parting momentarily before closing again. "Well… my dad convinced me to do it, he always thinks it's important to give back to the city in some way," she explained, shrugging again. "And, I like helping people, makes me feel…" her eyes scrutinised the chocolate sponge on her plate. "Less helpless or less guilty I guess… I don't want them to feel like nobody cares, that their life doesn't mean anything," she continued, glancing outside.

There was a long silence when he didn't say anything for a while, with the two of them finishing their desserts in silence. Jaime's face ticked occasionally, and his jaw clenched, a faint growl slipped out as well. He seemed to be arguing with himself, internally at least. She wondered what it must feel like having a piece of sentient technology attached to you? Two people in one body.

"…I saw two guys get shot a week ago," Jaime said quietly, surprising her. "I didn't know them."

Her head snapped up. "What?" Was the appropriate reaction, which was followed by, "did you call the police?"

He shook his head. "Someone else did," he replied, meeting her gaze, a flash of uneasiness appeared for a second. "I'm sorry, but I needed to tell someone or anyone who wasn't my parents… Have you ever…?"

Helena thought her answer over carefully. "Yes," she answered stiffly, fisting the material of her woollen skirt. "Sometimes people die, for no real reason at all."

Jaime nodded, biting down on his lower lip, hunching his shoulders. "So, how do you live with that?"

Her expression remained blank like she was lost. Disconnected. She crossed her arms tightly. "You just get used to it and it gets easier," her voice sounded far away. She didn't like the memories he was stirring up. "It's just something that comes with the territory." That's what Dick and Jason always used to say.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Her gaze snapped upwards, focused again. "Huh?"

"I'm sorry I brought it up," he apologised, frowning. "It isn't an exactly nice conversation."

She quickly smiled. "Oh no, it's fine," she said, straightening up. "You needed someone to talk to, I get it." Her bag started vibrating, causing her to look down. "Hold on a sec."

"No, problem," he replied, checking the time on his phone.

Her smile flickered when she saw it was her dad calling. "Hi," she greeted, drumming her fingers
"I thought you said you'd only be a couple of hours," her dad spoke.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm out with a friend." Helena shifted her weight in the chair. "Why, what's wrong?"

"Tim found out where he's living," her dad replied.

Damn it.

Helena closed her eyes and sighed. "$I'm on my way.$"

"Bye," Dad said before hanging up.

She lowered her phone and glanced over at Jaime. "$My dad needs me back home.$"

Jaime nodded, standing up. "$Right, no problem.$"

"I can give you a lift," she said, getting out of the seat. "$It'll save you a bus fare.$"

He gave her a slanted smile. "$Thanks, but I was going to stick around a bit longer, you know, see more of the city," he replied.

More like patrol. "$You sure?$" she asked, putting on her jacket.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." He zipped up his hoodie.

"Well, just be safe, okay?" She smiled and flung her bag over shoulder, walking passed him. "$I'll catch you later.$"

"Yeah." His smile grew and then faded for a second before it reappeared a millisecond later.

"Actually there's this movie premier I was thinking about going to on Friday," he said, moving closer. "$And, since you're kind of the only person I know around here…you wanna go with me?$"

That sounded uncomfortably like a date. She paused, already half turned away from him. "$Oh, like just to hang out?" She gripped her bag strap tightly.

"Well, yeah," he replied, flatly. "$If you want.$"

Did she want to? Guys had asked her to hang about before but she'd never given them the time of day, she just didn't have time for that type of commitment, and she was pretty sure Jaime didn't either.

But, maybe she'd enjoy herself for once, hanging out with someone who wasn't angsty.

"Oh…yeah, I'd love to," Helena answered apprehensively. "$This wasn't a date, she reminded herself. It was just two people enjoying a movie together. She smiled, slowly walking backwards towards the door. "$Sounds great, I'll text you.$"

He cocked an eyebrow. "$Don't you need my number first?" He took out his phone.

And, now she was giving him her number, Dad's gonna love that. She moved back towards him and took his phone, typing her number into the keypad. "$Here," she said once she'd saved it, handing the phone back over. He smiled. "$I'll see you Friday." Her smile became warmer. "$Bye.$"

"Adios." He gave her a two fingered salute as she turned to leave.
She closed the door behind her, frowning. Her stomach felt…weird.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the comments and reviews, and I'm glad everyone's in character.
Thick Stench of Guilt

Issue #8

Thick Stench of Guilt

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Batcave, Gotham

09/17/2023

14:00

Tim and Bruce were hovering over the computer in the cave. "I mean, you have to admit this is impressive work," Tim said, warily, as his eyes flashed to his mentor.

Bruce's scowl didn't let up as he stared at the findings. "He hacked all our listening devices and we didn't have a clue," he more or less growled out.

"…Like I said, impressive." Tim smiled sheepishly, trying to lighten the mood, but Bruce already was too far deep in a bad mood. "But, think about it, if he knows what we know, then we know what he knows."

Bruce paused. "…Good point," he murmured, rubbing his chin. "But, that could be what he wants."

Tim frowned, drumming his fingers against the dashboard. Finding the back door Jason had hacked his way through had been difficult and easily missed by anyone else, but well… Tim was just a better hacker, plain and simple. Jason was careful but he wasn't as good at cleaning up his tracks like he thought he was.

"He may have been aware he was going to get discovered, but maybe he thought it wouldn't be this soon," he reasoned, glancing up at Bruce. "I know when someone's leaving me bread crumbs or not, so I don't think he planned for us to uncover this."

"Are you sure?" Bruce eyed him intently.

Tim paused as his frown grew. "Yeah," he said after a moment, nodding, looking back up. "I'm sure."

After a moment, Bruce nodded. "Okay," sounding like he trusted his judgment. Tim hid a smile, feeling a swell of satisfaction. He was distracted when he heard someone coming down the stairs, which was most likely Helena judging from the sound of the footsteps.

"Sorry, I'm late." She appeared a second later, still dressed in her civilian clothes. "This thing with my friend lasted longer than expected," Helena said, smiling somewhat nervously. He raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. She hurried over to them, crossing her arms when she came to a stop in front of the computer. "Fire away."

Robin pulled up the data findings. "Jason hacked into the listening device we put in Black Mask's office."

She sighed. "And, we only just noticed this because…?" Her comment rubbed him up the wrong
"The last time I tried to hack him he nearly crashed my computer, so excuse me for being more careful this time," he said, defensive. He'd had to carefully disable each booby-trap, tiptoeing around the system while he investigated.

Helena frowned, raising her hands up. "Okay, sorry for asking," she apologised, exchanging a look with her dad. "You said you found his address."

Tim's cheeks felt hot while Bruce cleared his throat. "Oracle's been following him," their mentor replied. "He kept disappearing near the same blind spot so she ran a check on any apartments that have been recently rented."

"He rents a place on the outskirts of the Narrows," Tim interjected, pulling up a screenshot of the building. "Under the name Henry Norton, a guy who died three years ago."

She rubbed her chin, glancing back at Bruce. "So, a course of action?" Her gaze held sternness. Tim looked over at him, waiting.

Bruce sighed, staring at the apartment complex. "Black Mask had another shipment on the tenth," he said, frowning.

Robin nodded, chewing the inside of his mouth as he caught on. "Yeah, but it got cancelled." He was already keeping an eye on Black Mask's shipment logs. Tim grabbed the mouse and scrolled through some files, bringing up the data for the shipment logs. "But, if Jason…" He noticed Bruce's jaw tense and Helena sigh. "…Hacked in and cancelled it, Black Mask would have destroyed all the records to block him out, so-

"Jason wouldn't have done it like that," she interrupted, moving closer to the computer. "He's better at getting people to do what he wants," she told him, scrutinising the screen. "Black Mask had the shipment cancelled last minute; the question we should be asking is why the Mask wasn't suspicious?"

Tim opened his mouth to answer but Bruce beat him to it. "Because it was the seller who cancelled the order," Batman answered. "Which prompts the question on whether the seller pulled out because they got cold feet or because they found a better offer?"

"If Jason has those weapons then it means he plans to attack Black Mask," she concluded, folding her arms. The Red Hood could be trying to take Black Mask's spot as the head boss of Gotham, but that kind of move wasn't easily achieved. Even if he took out Black Mask, there'd still be a power vacuum and Jason still hadn't united all of the crime families.

"What's he waiting for, though?" Tim spoke up, leaning against the dashboard. "He should have attacked by now." He frowned and turned back to the computer, typing in the search engine. "Are there any events coming up? Maybe he's trying to draw Black Mask out."

Bruce's brow creased, starting to pace back and forth. "This isn't just about Black Mask…" he muttered, something flickering across his eyes as he looked up and stopped pacing. "Check the Joker's security detail."

Tim's fingers drummed against the keyboard, biting down on the inside of his mouth. A list of the guard rota came up, and Helena was the first to spot the error. "Only three guards are on duty on Thursday night," she said, frowning. "Who on earth approved that?"

The Joker was to be guarded by a minimum of six guards at all times, even with budget cuts. "No
one probably even checked," Robin replied, narrowing his eyes. "So, Jason's waiting for the opportunity to break the Joker out."

Bruce placed a hand on the back of the chair, glowering at the computer. "Why break him out himself when he can get someone else to do it?"

Tim's brow furrowed, looking up. "So, he's just doing all this to break the Joker out?" he said, unsurely, trying to read their expressions. Helena's lips were set in a grim line and Bruce looked like he wanted to smash the dashboard.

"That's what it all comes down to," Helena sighed, glaring at her dad. "And, he'll destroy half the city to prove a point."

"I know." Bruce grimaced, taking a step back. "This is how we're going to play this," he began, addressing the two of them. "We leave the guard schedule as it is and let him think he's got one up on us." He folded his hands behind his back. "And intercept the breakout before they have the chance to get passed the front door."

The cogs in Tim's brain ticked away, trying to piece it all together. "At least we know why he's pushing Black Mask over the edge, but we still don't know when he's going to trigger the last push," he voiced, mainly talking to himself. "We need to bug his apartment."

She rubbed her eyes, sighing. "Which is where we hit a bump in the road. He'll know if his apartment's been bugged or not, it's in our training."

"Not necessarily," Bruce said, clenching his hand into a fist as he brought it up to his mouth, contemplating. "I have a call to make," he told them. "Robin, go to the clocktower and help Oracle update the security."

Tim nodded, slipping out of the chair. "On it, boss."

"I'll come with," Helena interjected.

Bruce's gaze snapped towards her. "You're still recuperating," he argued, narrowing his eyes when she scowled. "I want you to stay here and keep watch from the cave."

She gritted her teeth. "But, you'll need someone to keep an eye on Black Mask." Helena snapped, placing her hands on her hips stubbornly.

"I said, no," Bruce said firmly, raising his hand up when she opened her mouth. "And, if you say another word I'll put you on lockdown. Do I make myself clear?" his voice grew cold.

Helena crossed her arms, glowering. Tim looked at them both curiously, wondering which one would go off in a huff this time. That's usually how most of these fights ended anyway, with some more yelling. Her lips remained tightly shut like a child in a sulk; it was kind of funny.

"Helena." And, here came the voice, that slow stretch of the name in a warning tone.

Tim almost sighed, he'd seen this all play out over a dozen of times in the last two years.

Her face twisted into a scowl, which meant the battle was lost, and with one defeated groan threw her hands in the air. "Fine!" she snapped, turning on her heel to leave.

Tim watched her storm off back upstairs, most likely off to her room to cool down. Bruce sighed loudly, drawing back his attention. "...So, I better go see Oracle," Tim said, forcing a smile.
His mentor glanced at him. "We'll go on patrol afterwards," he promised.

Tim smiled a little and nodded, walking towards him. "And, hey, if you want, I can talk to her," he offered.

The corner of Bruce's lip twitched upwards. "She just needs an hour to cool off, it's fine," he reassured, ruffling the boy's hair. Tim's face scrunch up at the gesture. "It's just how teenagers are."

Well, that was something to look forward to.

There was something about a new gun, the way it felt in his hands. Jason squeezed the handle of his gun, a small glimmer of comfort shooting from the tips of his fingers. The coffee table was covered in spare bullets and guns, with an M320 grenade launcher on the ground nearby. He had to admit, dealing with Intergang had its perks.

His phone started ringing.

"Speak of the devil," he muttered to himself, putting his gun down. He removed the phone from his pocket, it was a basic black phone that was a good ten years behind the times and looked like it'd been bashed around a few times. "Why hello there," Jason greeted brightly. "You'll have to be quick, I'm a little behind schedule."

The person on the other line took a while to respond, triggering him to drum his fingers against his thigh impatiently. "You still haven't fulfilled your side of the deal," the voice on the other line ground out.

Jason rolled his eyes, standing up. "A rushed job is a sloppy job, even a hooker knows that." He walked over to the window, peeking through the blinds at the street below. "I'll get it done."

Don't think about it.

There was a long pause with some faint muttering in the background. He listened closely, trying to decipher what they were saying, the only thing he could properly make out was 'time' and 'email'.

"You have 24 hours." The line cut off.

Jason blinked at the sudden end to the call, narrowing his eyes at the phone. Dealing with Intergang wasn't ideal, but they had the right contacts, and if he was going to get to the bottom of this hidden agenda the Light was cooking up, and then he needed to get his hands dirtier... a little too much lately.

He looked back at his guns. 24 hours... that would be enough time to just get it over with. Jason glanced back outside; the sun would be setting soon. His lips pursed, feeling a small smidge of reluctance when he picked up the gun, it felt heavier than before.

Gotham City

09/17/2023

18:00

The armoured black car came to a stop in front of the red light. Black Mask scratched at the rings
that decorated his fingers, a few specks of blood staining the gold.

"...And, you're saying they've blocked us," he spoke calmly, looking outside at the passersby. The neon lights lit up the city.

His secretary was nodded, sitting down next to him while she scrolled through the iPad in her hand. "They aren't returning our calls," she drawled.

He clenched his hands tightly, making his two bodyguards, sitting opposite him, tense in anticipation. Black Mask closed his eyes, the mask irritating his skin. "Shame," he said coldly, keeping his temper in check.

He couldn't even retaliate effectively, Intergang had too many friends in high places, so going to war with them would drain his resources. "They sold the weapons to a foreign buyer," she added lightly, readjusting her glasses.

"Tsk, bastards," he hissed, glaring through the window, looking up at the high rises as the car drove passed the lights. "...Any ID on the buyer?"

She shook her head, keeping her gaze locked on the screen. "We linked one of the accounts back to Dubai, but nothing else."

His anger boiled and grew. "If it's the Hood..." he let the threat hang in the air and was met by silence, which was all the confirmation he needed. His hand balled into a fist, smashing it against the door. "Why isn't he dead?" he snarled, turning to Deborah.

She looked back at him blankly. "Unfortunately, a majority of the hired assassins have been found dead near the docks," she said, putting the iPad away. "A normal assassination attempt is ineffective."

"You don't say," he hissed, gritting his teeth.

"Which brings me to my point," she continued like she hadn't heard him. "The only logical option is an unpredictable killer."

Black Mask grew still, his charred skin creasing into a frown. Was she suggesting what he thought she was? He looked at her like she'd smiled. "You want me to get that maniac involved?"

"Well, he did kill a Robin, how many can say that?"

Not many had ever gotten close to permanently scarring one of those little shits, and the Joker had an impressive kill count. "...I'm not that desperate," he replied, looking back out of the window.

"...Very well." She turned back to her iPad.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

**04/09/2014**

**03:30**

Bruce cracked his neck when he stretched, walking do the hallway towards the bed. He'd acquired a few more stitches on his ribs and his left arm was bandaged up, with a bruise marking his neck. He rubbed his eyes, the coffee finally starting to wear off.
As he made his way past Helena's room he saw a flicker of light peak out from the crack of the
door. He frowned, wondering why she was up so late. Quietly, he opened the door and looked in.
She was laid down in bed watching a video on the new cell phone he'd got her. His frown
depended.

"Helena," he whispered, irritably, stepping into the room.

Her head whipped to his direction, hastily burying the phone under the covers like it made an
ounce of difference. "Um I…" she trailed off. Her shoulders hunched like a retreating turtle.

He walked into the room and turned the night light on. "It's past three in the morning." Bruce sat
down on the bed, taking the phone from her. She'd been watching a My Little Pony cartoon, he
turned it off. "Why are you still awake?" he chided, putting the phone in his pocket.

Helena's brow furrowed, averting her gaze. "I, I don't like sleeping," she mumbled quietly, making
it hard for him to hear.

His frown faded when the realisation hit. The glow of the light illuminated the dark bags under her
eyes. How much sleep was she actually getting? He hadn't been around that often to notice the
subtle changes. He felt a sharp stab of guilt that hurt worse than the stitches. "Are you having
nightmares?" he asked softly, stroking some hair out of her face.

She shrugged, still looking at the covers instead of his face. "Kinda… but I don't think it's a
nightmare," she replied, digging her nails into the covers. "I think it's real."

His eyes scrutinised her for a second, inquisitive. "What happens in it?"

A frown flashed across her face, as she chewed her bottom lip, appearing frustrated. "There's this
man and there's talking, but it's all muffled," she started to say. "And he grabs me from behind and
sticks a needle in my neck." She pointed to a spot on her neck. Bruce tensed, resting his hand
behind her head. "And, he strokes my cheek and holds me, and then everything goes dark but
there's people talking still," her voice hitched.

He removed his hand, even though he wasn't quite sure why. "Do you know what he looks like?"
he asked, trying to keep his voice warm.

She shook her head. "No." Her lips twisted into a scowl. "It makes my head feel jumbled." Helena
finally looked up when he didn't respond. "You believe me, right?"

He moved further onto the bed, wrapping an arm around her. "Of course I do," he reassured,
already trying to figure it out in his mind. "Is there anything else you remember?" he pressed
further. "Maybe about your mom?"

The last time anyone had tried to question her about it the little girl had closed up and wouldn't say
a word, but this time was different, there was an illusion of no consequence and honesty, and he
needed to get answers before reality reared its head.

Her face scrunched up in confusion, shaking her head. "No…" Then she glanced away, second
guessing. "But she was acting weird before she left," she replied hesitantly.

"Like what?" he kept his voice neutral.

"She cursed at someone on the phone a few days before," she told him, hugging her stuffed cat
close to her chest.
"Did she say any names?"

He just needed a hint, some kind of clue. "Yeah, weird names," she replied, frowning. "Silky and Si-Sionis."

The second name registered immediately. "Sionis?" he repeated, stiffly.

She nodded. "She, she said, Sionis can go die in a hole," her voice rose, mimicking her mother.

Bruce exhaled slowly, focusing his gaze on the door. Roman Sionis, in other words, Black Mask. If Selina had gotten on the wrong side of him, then well, there might be a real possibility she was dead.

"…And, what did she say to Silky?" he said, turning back to her.

She hung her head. "It's got a bad word in it," she mumbled.

He forced a smile. "You can say it just this once," he encouraged. "Come on, sweetheart, I need to know, it's important."

She looked up, conflicted. "But, cursing's a sin, that's what the nuns said."

He blinked in surprise, caught off guard. "Uh…well, it's okay if a grown up gives permission," he lied through his teeth. "As long as it's just once."

"Really?" she said shrewdly.

He nodded, straining a smile. "Yes. Now, it's important you tell me everything you remember, Helena," he said firmly.

She paused, humming to herself. "Can I whisper it?" she asked, looking around self-consciously.

His fake smile almost became real. "Yes." He leant in closer when she moved to speak in his ear.

"She said, Don't fuck me around, Silky," Helena whispered quickly, making him inwardly cringe. "And, that if he went near me again she'd cut his nuts off…” Her brow knitted in confusion. "Which I think is a bad thing."

Bruce barely paid attention to the last sentence, looking grave. "Did she sound scared?" he asked darkly, feeling his temper simmer. Someone had threatened Selina, and worse, messed with his kid.

Helena shook her head. "No, just angry," she replied, hugging her stuffed animal like a comforter. He hummed, thinking. The name Silky rang the faintest bell, but he couldn't pin down the man straight from memory, so he'd have to do some research. "…Is my mama really dead?" she asked faintly, her voice sounded unnervingly empty.

He froze, weighing his words carefully. He didn't want to give her false hope but he couldn't just crush any glimmer of hope she had, it was hard enough transitioning into a whole new life. "It's hard to tell," he answered carefully, pulling her in closer, almost hugging. "There still isn't a body so we just don't know."

Her eyes lowered. "Well, if she isn't dead, then where is she?"

He sighed, kissing the top of her head. "I wish I knew, kiddo," he murmured, meeting her gaze. "But, you need to get some sleep," he told her. Her face broke out in fear. "I'll stay here," he added, placing a hand on her shoulder.
The fear faded into uncertainty, as she nodded. "Okay," she mumbled, lying back down. He moved off the bed to pull the covers up to her chin before he sat back down, waiting for her to fall asleep. "…Daddy?" she said after a moment.

He glanced back at her. "Yes?"

Her forehead creased, looking at him suspiciously. "Why do you look all beaten up?" she asked innocently.

Bruce blinked as he stared at her before he forced another smile. "Well, Daddy got a little beaten up outside a nightclub," he lied quickly.

"Oh." Her frown stayed put, and she sat up more in bed, holding the covers up to her chin. "Why did you get beaten up?"

"Because drunk people do stupid things," he replied, lightly. "Now, come on, try to sleep."

Thankfully, she lay back down and snuggled into bed, keeping her questions at bay.

S.T.A.R labs, Detroit

09/17/2023

21:00

Jason saw his target walking through the parking lot, the dark skinned man was tense and fidgety. Silas Stone, a renowned scientist and widowed five years ago, and a single father to an athlete. This wasn't the type of person who ended up on Jason's hit list and it left an unpleasant feeling in his stomach, raw guilt nestled in like a lump of chewing gum.

Jason narrowed his eyes behind the mask, positioning his sniper. The cameras were already taken out, everything was set.

...Mr Stone didn't deserve to die, but he had gotten involved with the wrong people. Life had consequences, shit happened. *Yeah, shit happened, that was life…*

He hesitated to shoot. This wasn't some scumbag on the street, it was *different*. This was a *civilian*, something/someone that wasn't a part of the plan. He stopped, his gut twisting inwards like a knife was held to his throat. His hands were trembling, clammy.

The window of opportunity was closing.

This wasn't right, there was no fucking justifying what he was doing so he might as well cut the pretences. Jason was tempted to just pack up and leave, flip the Intergang a big old bird and fuck the consequences… but if he didn't find out what Intergang were planning, wouldn't more people die?

He felt like a child holding a gun for the first time.

Silas unlocked his car at the same moment Jason's finger touched the trigger and pulled. The bullet hit the scientist on the side of his skull, the body collapsed against the car.

Jason stared at the body, frozen, while his finger tremor against the trigger. The guilt mixed with shame and grew like a parasite, burning and gnawing at his insides like a parasite eating its way up
from the inside.

The gun fell limp in his arms.

Ah, crap, Jason's going a bit further off the rails D:
The apartment was silent but he could hear his heart persistently pumping against his chest, while the water ran down the drain of the sink.

Jason must have washed his hands for a solid hour, the fingertips wrinkled from the prolonged exposure to water. The entire process was pointless since his hands hadn't a speck of blood on them, to begin with.

He gritted his teeth, his hands practically numb from the ice cold water. He turned the tap off and dried his hands with a towel off the floor, avoiding his own reflection. "Can't take it back," he said to himself, wandering into the kitchen, still feeling numb.

He grabbed a beer out of the fridge, a lingering smell of gone off milk filling his nostrils. Jason grabbed the bottle and used his teeth to open it, the metal cap clinked onto the floor while he made his way over to the coach.

He slugged down half the liquid before he'd even sat down on the coach. He definitely needed something stronger, straight vodka or whiskey, something to make him feel less…whatever the hell this was.

The bottle was empty in mere seconds, the alcohol chugged down his throat so fast it leaked down his chin. He dug his nails into the glass as his eyes flicked to the rifle on the floor.

Fuck, he was a piece of shit. He was a fucking piece of cum stained shit out of a bitch's ass.

He threw the bottle against the wall, it smashed against the brick.

Jason stood up and turned the table over, kicking it against the wall, sending it flying. He started to pace, running a hand over his face like he was trying to wake up from a nightmare. Shit, he wished this was just a bad dream. Fuck.
He kicked the table again, the wood already cracked in two.

Jason stood in the middle of the room, in silence, breathing heavily. He needed a drink or stronger smokes, yeah, that's what he needed. Or else he'd probably end up shooting himself… he almost laughed, wouldn't that be a waste of a second life.

He grabbed the keys from off the floor and walked out of the apartment, feeling like his feet were moving on their own.

Tim swirled around in the chair as he waited for the computer to finish updating, sighing while Barbara made herself a cup of herbal tea in the kitchen.

"Don't break the chair," she called from the kitchen.

He frowned, coming to a stop. "...But you don't use..." he trailed off when he realised that might have come out wrong. "Uh... okay." He slumped in the leather lined chair.

She came wheeling out of the kitchen a few seconds later, with the cup resting on a tray on her lap. Barbara raised an eyebrow, smirking. "I still paid for it," she replied, rolling over to him. Her glasses perched on her head, while her red hair messily hung loose. "Besides, I keep it around for guests." She sipped her tea. "It'd be rude to make them stand. I have a reputation you know."

A smile played on his lips. "Right, of course." He turned back to the computer when he heard a loud ping, indicating the update was finished. "And, we are now fully protected," he chimed, pressing the enter button.

"Thanks for the help," she said, wheeling in front of the system when Tim scooted out of the way. Barbara slipped her glassed down, as her eyes flickered to each of the individual seven holographic screens. "So, how're things with Bruce?"

Tim shrugged, curling his legs up to his chin as he lightly twirled the chair back and forth. "Well, put it this way, if he could put us on leashes, he would," he answered, sighing.

She glanced at him, arching an eyebrow. "I don't know, I think he's pretty lenient to let you jump off rooftops every night."

"But, only if I finish my homework on time." He gave her a half-smile. "The thing is, our job's to help him, and we can't exactly do that if he keeps trying to keep us at arms length... I mean he isn't exactly getting any younger," Tim said. Even athletes knew when to start slowing down when age caught up with them.

Barbara snorted quietly into her mug. "Don't let him hear you say that."

Tim smiled crookedly, as his gaze slid back to the screens, amusing when one of the city cams showed Huntress jumping from the rooftops. His smile faded, sighing. "Typical," he muttered.

Oracle followed his line of sight. "Let me guess, Bats benched her again?"

"Yep. Like I said, leashes," he retorted, sitting up in his chair. "To be fair, though, she did get shot a week ago."

"Try telling her that," Barbara said, dryly.

Tim hummed, watching the footage thoughtfully. "Any sign of Jason?"
"No." Her brow furrowed, scratching her chin. "He was on the edge of Gotham last time I checked. He keeps slipping by me."

"Figures." He chewed his tongue for a moment, a question itching to get out. "…So, Helena and Jason were really close?"

Barbara smiled, sipping her tea. "He was practically her designated babysitter," she answered, getting comfortable in her wheelchair. "They even went trick or treating; he made a pretty decent Peter Pan."

His brow creased, resting his chin on his fist. "So, was he… nice?" He wasn't sure what word he was looking for, just something that wasn't homicidal-insane-zombie.

She paused, setting her cup down on the tray, clicking her tongue. "Nice isn't exactly the right word," she said, slowly. "He was kind of… well, a bit of a jerk, but he meant well," she tried to answer, frowning. "Jason is kind of difficult to get to know. I mean, his and Helena's relationship was more like hero worship to a degree, so I don't think she could understand him on a deep level."

Robin chewed the inside of his mouth, mulling her words over. "Actually I think she does," he replied, shrugging. Barbara looked at him curiously. "I've been trying to understand how Jason thinks for a while now, and I can connect intellectually but not emotionally," he began to explain. "But with Helena, it's like she gets in his head and sees what's going on, and I'm not sure how she does it."

Barbara was quiet for a moment, her gaze sweeping over the line of screens, contemplating. "Maybe it just comes easy for her."

Tim still frowned. He still didn't really get it, sure he could empathise with people to a degree but he tried to keep some distance at least, or else it became too personal and…well, kind of messy. It was something he'd put into practice when his parents had died, it had helped a lot to ease the guilt.

*My fault.*

He tensed, scratching the armrest in agitation. "Anyway, we should leave her to it, our main concern is keeping an eye on Jason," he said, evenly, using the mouse to switch the camera view.

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**S.T.A.R labs, Central city**

**09/17/2023**

**23:34**

The lab was so clean it almost sparkled and there was a distinct smell of air freshener; the Spring Aura brand? Knowing Ray, most likely.

Ray Palmer was humming to himself as he placed the equipment in the small metal briefcase, while his assistant, Karen Beecher (still a close associate of M'gann last time he updated his files) carefully handed him the controller.

"It's still in the works but you shouldn't have any problems with it," Ray said brightly when he finished packing everything up. He held the briefcase out. "And, technically I'm not meant to loan this stuff out, so…" Ray trailed off, fingers holding onto the case longer than necessary. "Please, don't break or lose it."
"Yes, please don't," Karen reaffirmed. "Or that's the entire staff's paycheck down the drain."

Batman just nodded, taking the case from the man. "I'll have it back to you in one piece. Thank you."

Ray grinned and the gratitude while Karen frowned in confusion. The Dark Night turned to leave out of the window. "Just remember to cover my Watchtower duty and we're square," Ray yelled after him.

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**Gotham City**

**09/17/2023**

**23:40**

Huntress came to a stop on the rooftop when she reached a supermarket parking lot. There were three guys and two girls wearing blue coloured clothing, teenagers, carrying makeshift weapons. They appeared to be cornering a boy, also in his teens, who was wearing mainly grey colours.

Her eyes narrowed, cracking the muscles in her neck before she swooped down. "Hey, Team Mystic!" she yelled, striding towards them. The blue gang whipped around to face her. Normally a simple warning would drive them off so she wouldn't have to get physical. "Beat it," she snapped.

The blonde girl with a leopard print scarf was the first to recover from the shock. "F-fuck you!" she slurred. Her hands shaking as she gripped her hammer tighter.

The other two gang members had the sense to look petrified. "Oh fuck no, I'm outta here," the guy with mousy hair exclaimed, dropping the weapon when he ran off towards the alleyway.

The blond sneered. "Fuck you, shit-head!" she screamed after him.

Huntress was in front of the girl in seconds. "Miss, please calm-"

The girl took a swing at her, or at least tried to. Huntress grabbed her wrist before the hammer could be raised passed her head.

The teenager in grey ran off while the gang was distracted, leaving Huntress to deal with them. Before she could try to calm the girl down, the other gang member-boy with a pre-pubescent beard-came lunging at her with a knife.

Huntress let go of the girl and blocked the boy's attack, elbowing him in the face. The knife fell out of his hand, as she pulled his sweatshirt over his head, trapping his arms before she kicked him to the ground.

The second girl came hurtling towards her waving a sledgehammer dangerously. Huntress ducked away from the blow and quickly kicked the girl in the face, breaking her nose as she landed on her butt.

By this point the blond girl's bravado had depleted, her skin paler and more ashen from fright, with wide eyes. She tried to run. Huntress threw a rope at her, the mechanism binding the girl tightly as she hit the pavement.
Huntress sighed, shaking her head while she gathered them all up, handcuffing them together. "You know, you guys should get a hobby," she said, binding them all to a pole when they started struggling. "Ever considered soccer?"

"Guau, nice!" It was Jaime.

She frowned, straightened up to look over her shoulder; he was hovering in the air, a big smile on his face. "Surprised you didn't try to help," she replied, evenly, walking over to him as he softly landed on the ground.

He shrugged. "You already had it covered, besides, I didn't want to be on the receiving end of those kicks," he answered, glancing over her shoulder at the teens. "Huh…I think they go to my school," he said quietly.

Well, it wasn't uncommon for kids to join gangs, or in this case, start one of their own. There were so many in Gotham it was hard to keep track of them all.

Her gaze flicked back to him when she noticed him staring at her. Despite the armor, his expression was easy to read, inquisitiveness mixed in with confusion.

She frowned, stepping back. "What?"

He blinked, head jutting back. "Nothing, you just…" Confusion clouded his features, like there a puzzle piece that just wouldn't fit. "Are we the same age?"

Her eyes narrowed. "What's it to you?" She crossed her arms, looking him up and down.

There was silence after that, as his expression became less confused and more contemplative. Not a good sign. He shrugged. "Forget it," he said, smiling again.

"Right…" Her eyes snapped towards the teens that were starting to struggle more against the cuffs. "Well, could you do me a favor and take them to the station," she asked, smiling disarmingly.

"Uh…" His lips pursed, looking back and forth from the gang members and her. "I guess so…"

Her smile grew. "Thanks." She walked passed him, already taking out her grappling hook.

"Hey, wait up," he called after her.

She stopped, partly turning to him. "What's wrong?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "I just thought, maybe, we could go on patrol together afterward." Blue Beetle grinned sheepishly.

She frowned. "Why?" She gave him her full attention, curious.

His smile dimmed. "…Uh, because two's better than one," he answered, shrugging. "It could be fun."

Huntress tilted her head, eyeing him guardedly. It wasn't wise to allow her vigilante persona to get too friendly with him, personal life and work were to remain separate. "Maybe another time," she said coolly.

He looked put out. "Oh, well, okay that's… fine," he replied, gripping the back of his neck, slumping.
"Right, thanks." She quickly unleashed her hook. "Good luck." She escaped into the air and onto the supermarket roof as Blue Beetle shrank from view.

She looked over her shoulder back down at him, feeling a little guilty.

One of the teens, Sledgehammer girl, let out a hoarse laugh. "Heh, you totally just got rejected," the gang member wheezed, coughing.

Blue Beetle just glared at her while the Scarab made a loud beeping noise repeatedly like it was laughing.

The apartment looked empty when he peered through the cracks of the blinds. He magnified his microphone on his pointed ear, pressing the side of his face against the window to hear. There was no sound of movement, just the noise from the pipes.

Batman ran his fingers against the windowsill, knowing Jason there would be an alarm system in place. His eyes narrowed when he noticed the line of string running along the wall of the window from inside. He'd have to find another way in. He climbed back onto the roof and turned his ear piece down when he heard the white noise from a TV in the apartment next door, this window was open.

Silently, he sneaked in, creeping passed the unconscious man in the armchair. Batman softly closed the door behind him when he stepped into the hallway, walking over to Jason's apartment. The whole building smelt of cannabis and the white patterned wallpaper was yellowed, peeling off at the corners.

He came to a stop in front of the door, number 24. The alarm would be electronic, but it didn't matter, though, the crack at the bottom of the door would give enough room for the devices.

Batman opened the suitcase and took out a handful of the robots, it looked like a handful of grey sand. He placed them on the floor next to the gap. Then, he picked up the controller, which was the size of a watch, and activated them. The sand-like machinery stiffened. He tapped the touch screen of the controller, driving the robots through the crack into the apartment, trailing them up the wall.

**Batcave, Gotham City**

09/18/2023

02:45

The tiny robots relayed a live video of the apartment, the robots had separated into three different areas, the living room/kitchen, bedroom, and the bathroom.

Batman watched the screens from the computer, taking in the broken table and the smashed bottle in the living room. Jason had always had something of a temper, but he'd never lost control like this, destroying furniture. His mental health was clearly deteriorating faster than anticipated.

His eyes narrowed back at the living room when he heard the apartment door open with a loud rustle of keys. It was immediately clear Jason was drunk when the young man stumbled into the room, slamming the door shut behind him, making the walls and robots shake.

Jason collapsed on the sofa, his shoulder shaking as a faint, sob came out, muffled by the cushions.
Bruce's stomach twisted, grimacing when he heard the quiet sobs.

"I've never heard him cry before," Helena's voice was soft from behind him. He'd been so distracted he hadn't even heard her.

He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Neither have I…"

She placed a hand on his shoulder. He glanced up. Her hair was wet from the shower, with a towel draped around her neck. She was dressed in some loose gym gear, a few fresh bruises on her arms. "So, I gather you disobeyed me again," he said, evenly, turning back to the screen.

She moved over and leaned against the dashboard, folding her arms. "Would it help if I apologised?" she asked, without conviction.

He rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "No."

She shrugged. "Alright then," she replied, looking back at the screen. Her face fell as she stared at Jason, growing upset, it was an expression he liked to avoid seeing.

Batman closed the view of the cameras. "You should head to bed," he told her. "School's tomorrow."

She didn't appear to be listening, lost in thought. "He always told me only babies cry." Helena smiled bitterly. "Guess the jokes on him." She sighed quietly, staring at the ground.

He didn't say anything, the two of them sitting in silence. She was screaming for comfort but it still didn't feel natural to give it. Even a pat on the shoulder or a family kiss on the cheek still felt artificial, like he was babying or embarrassing them.

Tim was a little easier to deal with, he didn't really like being babied and only hugged on rare occasions, and in the past, trying to hug Jason was like trying to embrace a stray cat. Dick and Helena were the most affectionate, Dick less now since he was older, but his daughter was more demanding for affection.

Batman patted his knee. "Come here." He was half-afraid she'd reject him.

The corner of her lip curled upwards a tiny bit as she made her way over, sitting on his lap, which was a little uncomfortable since she wasn't a child anymore, but she was still light enough to fit, resting her head against his chest.

And, Bruce would admit hugging his kids was nice despite the awkwardness. It made him feel a nostalgic love, it was strange and peculiar. He still couldn't wrap his head around it most of the time. All in all, he thought he was getting better at it, recognising when affection or praise was needed.

"...I need to ask you something," she said after a moment of silence.

"Okay." He glanced down at her.

She sighed. "When Jason died, did you ever, or even think about, killing the Joker?" she asked.

She had a bad habit of asking the kind of questions he didn't want to answer. Batman inhaled deeply, thinking his response over. He had come close to strangling the Joker after Jason's death, that year had been a bad one, and if it wasn't for the League, Alfred, Dick, or Jim, he probably would have gone off the rails and lost everything.
The worst thing was that the feeling hadn't gone away, he still had to restrain himself.

"…I think about killing him every day," he answered, softly, cradling the back of her head.

"I think he deserves to die," she said, narrowing her eyes at her hands. "And, if the justice system wasn't so messed up, he would have a long time ago. Other criminals have died for less…"

His chest tightened, stroking her damp hair. "There was a point in the beginning when he paralysed Barbara, I asked him if there was any chance to save him," he told her. Her gaze snapped up to him. "And, for a brief moment when he looked at me, I saw sanity. Do you know what he said to me?" he continued. Her face softened to curiosity. "He said, it's too late." Batman smiled bitterly. "And, I think by that point it was. We both understood there was only one way it was ever going to end."

She clung to him tighter, opening her mouth to speak but hesitating. "…I don't ever wanna lose you, Dad." She sat up, her brow creased with worry.

He gave her a small sad smile. The truth was he couldn't imagine himself surviving passed fifty, it was a miracle he'd made it passed forty. "I'm not going anywhere, for now, kiddo." He ruffled her hair.

Helena cracked a smile. "Good, because I don't think Dick could handle looking after me and Tim," she said, with forced cheerfulness. "We'd drive him crazy."

"You would." He smiled dimly, staring at her thoughtfully. His face quickly faded back into a stoic look after a moment. "But, you know this job has its risks," he said, solemnly. She wasn't seven anymore, if she was serious about this line of work, she had to accept the risks. "One day, I might not be around."

Her smile faded, nodding. "Yeah, I understand, Dad," she replied faintly, digging her nails into his chest. Then she gave him a strained smile. "But, we still have a lot of work left to do, never-ending war, remember?"

He nodded. "The mission isn't over." It'd probably never be over.

The strained smile dimmed in acceptance. She kissed his cheek and then scooted off his lap. "Goodnight, Daddy."

"Goodnight."

She turned walked over to the stairs but paused when she reached the foot of it. "Dad, are you… are you proud of us?" she asked, hesitantly, not looking at him.

His chest tightened. "Of course I am," his voice came out quieter than intended. He may not be able to say the same for Jason, but the rest of his kids were something to be proud of.

"…You should say it more," she muttered, walking up the stairs.

The comment made him flinch. He dug his nails into the armrest, closing his eyes for a moment before he sighed. His thoughts trailed back to Jason while Helena's footsteps faded away as she disappeared upstairs. Batman brought the cameras back to Jason's apartment. His former partner was passed out on the coach.

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**Gotham City**
The helmet was clicked into place. Jason readjusted the bazooka around his chest, tightening the strap to make sure it didn't move too much.

He jumped onto another roof; a new factory with steam pipes slapped down like tiny chimneys, steam flew up making the air damp.

The Red Hood stopped, smiling under his mask. "Long time no see, Bats." He looked over his shoulder.

And, not one to underwhelm expectations, Batman was there behind him on the rooftop, a safe distance away. Jason turned around fully, bracing himself for an attack.

"I wanted to talk," Batman said, his cape rustling in the breeze.

"Huh, Huntress put you up to this?" he replied, his smile tightened. His former mentor remained silent. "She just doesn't know when to quit, does she?"

"I want to help," Batman spoke in a strained voice. "Let me… please."

Please. That was a rare word ever used. It ignited his temper like a flame, growing by the second.

Jason's smile turned into a snarl. "Don't, don't fucking beg," his voice grew cold. Batman's eyes narrowed. "Not when that monster is still alive. No that's not how it works, Bats."

The Dark Knight took a step closer, the Red Hood reached for his gun, scrutinising his former mentor's each movement. "There are two ways this is going to end and I'd prefer for it to not end the way I know it will," Batman said coldly.

He always has to be in control. "And, what if it doesn't end?" Jason removed a gun, pointing it at him. The Bat's face remained stoic, unaffected. "What're you gonna do? Because prison can't hold me, you know that. I guess you could put me in a body cast or worse, but what if I just keep coming back, then what?" his tone took on a mocking lilt as he cocked the gun.

Batman's gaze grew darker. "I keep trying."

His eyes widened a fraction before narrowing again. His frustration grew, smothering his contempt, but at the same time, he felt a tingle of affection, hope. Bruce still cared in some twisted way, and that mattered. "Fuck you," he snarled, shooting the pipe next to him, releasing a harsh blast of steam.

Batman lifted his cape up on instinct while Jason leaped onto another rooftop, running as fast as his feet could carry him. His former mentor raced after him.

Jason twisted his waist around as he ran and raised his gun to shoot at Batman while in mid-air, jumping onto another building. The Dark Knight shielded his body from the bullets with his cape, throwing a Batarang.

The Batarang hit the barrel of the gun, exploding, scorching Jason's hand. "Fuck," The Red Hood hissed, dropping the remaining shards of the guns. He rolled onto a car park and whipped out two more guns, firing at the Bat.
Batman dodged and ducked from the bullets, diving behind a car as the bullets sprayed through the windows, smashing the glass.

A smoke pellet hit the floor, engulfing the scene in a thick grey smoke. Jason quickly turned on his helmet's heat-sensor vision. A metal chord from behind him wrapped around his left ankle, with a hard tug he was pulled to the ground.

Jason dropped one of his guns to reach for his knife, but the Bat appeared from the air, launching down to punch him in the face, making a large crack in his helmet. The Red Hood tried to stab him but his wrist was grabbed midway while the hand holding his gun was shoved above his head. He tried to break the iron grip, glaring at the vigilante who pinned him in place.

He headbutted Batman, cracking his helmet further, and pushed him off by kneeing him in the stomach. The Red Hood flipped him around and punched him in the face, a trickle of blood escaped the Bat's jaw.

Batman slipped a tiny explosive onto Jason's jacket, igniting a flame. Red Hood jumped to his feet, quickly taking the bazooka off so he could remove his burning jacket. The jacket was thrown over the building and Jason barely had time to avoid Batman's next punch.

There was the sound of gunfire outside the block of flats.

"How's everything your end, Huntress?" Oracle asked.

Huntress dived out of the way of the incoming gunfire. "Terrific," she hissed, taking cover behind a white van. The Blackgators and the Silversmith gang were fighting for more territory. "What about Robin." She threw a tear gas bomb at the Blackgators across the streets.

"He's on his way to meet Batman," she answered.

"Roger that," Huntress signed off. The gunfire shattered the van's windows, as bullets ricocheted against the metal. She closed her eyes and crouched lower when the glass hit her face like spit, a few fragments leaving scratches on her right cheek.

Huntress ducked and ran down the sidewalk as the guns kept firing. The gunmen were taking cover behind their car underneath a pharmacy and her gaze wandered to the fire hydrant next to them. She took out her crossbow and loaded it, aiming to fire, but she never got the chance to even pull the trigger.

Blue energy beams shot down near the shooters, making the gang scatter. Huntress looked up, where Blue Beetle was hovering in the air.

Blue Beetle swooped down and released massive staples. She frowned, blinking in disbelief. Those were massive blue staples, that was the only way to them describe them. Five guys on the Silversmith side were nailed to the wall while the rest ran off.

Huntress stood up to full height when all the gang member had cleared off. Blue Beetle grinned when he saw her, landing on the ground. "You looked like you needed a hand," he said, brightly.

Her brow furrowed. "Uh, thanks," she said, coming to stand in front of him. "Not to sound ungrateful, but how did you find me?" She crossed her arms.

The grin wavered. "I was just flying around and I saw you." The Scarab beeped loudly. Jaime scowled and shushed it. She narrowed her eyes. He saw the look she was giving him and sighed.
"Okay, so maybe I was keeping an eye out for you… maybe."

"Because that isn't creepy at all," she replied, dryly.

He stiffened, raising his hands up quickly. "What? No, it isn't like that!" he exclaimed, getting frazzled. She hid a smile, looking to the side. "I was just trying to look out for you. Not that you can't take care of yourself. You can and I completely respect that," he said quickly, his words jumbling together.

A laugh bubbled up in her chest, as a smirk crept on her face. "Relax, I'm joking."

Blue Beetle stopped, blinking a few times before glaring. "Not funny," he chided, folding his arms.

Her smirk grew. "Not even a little?"

His glare didn't hold any anger and it softened after a few seconds, replaced with a crooked smile. "…Okay, maybe a little." His gaze zeroed in on her face, frowning. "You have a piece of glass in your cheek," he said, pointing.

She could barely feel it. Scowling, Huntress pinched her cheek, popping some fragments out. "Damn it…" She glanced up when she felt him move closer. "What?" she said, warily. He was eyeing her face closely, making her spine prickle.

"No names," he murmured, as his eyes widened.

She quickly took a step back. "Okay, now you're being creepy," she snapped.

He jerked his head back, still scrutinizing her. Her stomach twisted in dread, if he found out then she needed to execute plan B-

"Huntress, come in!" Oracle's voice invaded her eardrum.

She quickly turned her back to Jaime. "I'm here, what's up?"

"Batman is fighting the Red Hood and Robin's already on the scene."

Huntress tensed. "Copy that, I'm on my way." She quickly took out her grappling hook.

"Are you okay?" Blue Beetle touched her shoulder.

She shifted away from him, making the teenager recoil his hand back. "I've got it handled. Just do clean up here," she ordered, backing away from him.

"No, wait a second," he tried to argue, taking a step forward. His eyes narrowed, angry. "Are you-?"

"Just don't get involved!" she interrupted, fearing for what he had to say. He silenced, flinching back. She caught a glimpse of the frustration on his face as she turned around, escaping into the sky as the grappling hook lifted her up.

Jason leaped from building to building, trying to outrun Batman. There were fresh bruises on his body and face but it didn't slow down his speed, he had youth on his side after all, and Bruce just wasn't as young as he used to be.

Black Mask's building was up ahead, he could see it-
A Birdarang cut through the air and hit the ground, exploding. The Red Hood was pushed back by the force of the blast. Bile rose up in his throat when he saw the Replacement land onto the roof. "Well, what do we have here?" the Red Hood said coldly, getting to his feet.

Robin – the bad taste in his mouth intensified – had his bow staff drawn. He was young and short, fucking fun sized. The boy wonder rushed forward and attacked.

Jason blocked the blows, grabbing the staff with one hand while he kicked the boy in the stomach. Robin winced but recovered quickly and raised his fist. The Red Hood prepared to block the punch but was caught off guard when the boy kicked him in the groin instead.

"Fuck!" he wheezed, his feet falling like a shelf under a ton of bricks.

Then the little shit punched him, knocking him to the ground. The bazooka rolled along the roof, hitting the curb.

The pain in his nuts made it hard to move but he forced himself to get up before the brat had the chance to land another blow. He ducked in time when he heard a swoosh noise, a pair of ropes flew passed him and wrapped against the ventilation shaft instead.

Jason removed his remaining gun out from his back pocket and fired it at Batman. He whipped around and Robin with the back of his gun, backhanding the boy onto the floor. A Batarang lodged into his shoulder. He grunted in pain, pulling it out, spraying speck of blood. The Batarang was thrown to the ground.

Robin slid against the roof, but held his balance, leaping back up to kick him. The Red hood parried the attacks while avoiding Batman's assault as the two of them tried to disarm him.

Batman grabbed him by the back of the head and smashed his head against the ground, cracking the helmet in two. Batman twisted Jason's wrist behind his back, making him drop the gun, while Robin whipped out some handcuffs. They had him pinned.

The Red Hood gritted his teeth, and his eyes locked onto the Batarang on the ground, the sharp edge stained with blood. He grabbed it with his free hand and stabbed Batman in the thigh.

Batman winced loudly, weakening his grip. The Red Hood swung and hit his former mentor's jaw, breaking it. Batman hit the ground, dazed from the concussion. Jason grabbed his gun and jumped to his feet, avoiding Robin's net and fired at the boy's feet, making him dance back.

The Red Hood looked over at the bazooka that was behind Robin, his eyes narrowed, charging forward. He punched and kicked, but the Replacement used his small stature to his advantage, easily dodging Jason's kicks.

Jason pulled the boy's cape over his face and punched him repeatedly in the stomach before slamming him into the ground. The Red Hood ran over to the Bazooka, picking it up (he heard the boy groan and stagger to his feet). He could still shoot from this distance; the aim might be a little off but fuck it he was out of time.

He pressed his finger against the trigger.

A Birdarang hit the back of his thigh. "Shit," Jason swore, lurching forward as the trigger clicked.

The bazooka fired and hit the fourth floor of the tower, missing the penthouse.

Oh, fuck.
There was an explosion as the fourth floor started to collapse, with the rest of the building giving away beneath it.

Chapter End Notes

Family angst! (Hands it out to the Batfam)
You get some! You, you, and you too Brucie!
Family drama for everyone!
Extra angst for you Jay-bird.
He was in the middle of drinking his martini (something to settle his nerves) when the sound hit his ears and the ground shook, and the windows shattered.

Black Mask's eyes widened, clenching the glass too tight before the ground beneath him started shaking more violently. He grabbed onto the table to stop himself from falling over. Survival instincts kicked in and he ran, stumbling in the process.

Three of his men were already running/launching themselves towards the exit and Deborah was struggling to run.

The mob boss made a run for it as the ground started to crumble beneath him. The rumbling grew until finally the ceiling on the floor beneath gave way. Black Mask's eyes widened as the floor swallowed him up whole, leaving him falling down into the chaos below.

The tower was crumbling right in front of him with Black Mask still in it.

Jason's temper was at boiling point, the pain from the Birdarang stinging his leg. The pain reminded him of who was responsible for the mistake. He turned around and pointed his gun at his replacement as the boy struggled to prop himself up when Jason walked over with a fierce hatred in his gaze.

Robin looked up and froze when he saw the gun pointed at his forehead, the barrel pressed against the child's forehead.

…Child. That made the Red Hood stop, hesitate, and stare at the kid whose eyes were wide with
Jason's face scrunched up tightly, grinding his teeth. He growled and backhanded the boy across the face with his gun, knocking out a tooth.

The replacement hit the ground, coughing out blood as some dribbled down his chin.

The Red Hood glanced at Batman who was unconscious, narrowing his eyes. He looked away when he heard a noise from up ahead, a figure cloaked in dark colours approaching, flipping from one rooftop to another.

"Damn it, Sis," he growled, recognising her. He touched the wound on his leg. "Tt." He made a run for it slipping over the edge. His gaze strayed to the collapsing building as he climbed down the building, balancing his feet on the windowsill.

There could be a chance Black Mask was still alive and unless he wanted what little remnants of his plan to completely shatter he needed that sleazy bastard…

Her stomach dropped when she saw the building start to collapse. "Huntress, emergency services have been dispatched," Oracle's voice drummed in her ear. "But, we need crowd control."

"I'm on it." Huntress jumped onto the roof where her dad and Tim were, the both of them in bad shape. Her insides shrivelled up when she saw her dad's still form, hurrying over she checked his pulse and let out a sigh of relief when she realised he was just unconscious.

Her gaze strayed over to Robin who was groaning on the ground. "Robin?" she called, rushing over to him.

Robin spat some blood onto the gravel, his gums and teeth caked crimson. "I'm fine," he mumbled, wiping his mouth. "How's Batman?" He looked up, worried.

She forced a smile. "He'll be fine," she reassured, helping him to his feet. She flinched when she heard a scream from below. "I need to do crowd control. You look after dad," she ordered, wiping some blood from his face. "Can you do that for me?"

He nodded, straightening up. "Yeah, I got this."

Her smile softened, nodding. Huntress glanced over her shoulder at her dad, smothering the impulse to stay with him. Quickly, she withdrew her grappling hook and slid down the building, the rope burning the material of her gloves.

The top floors had collapsed leaving the fourth floor and downwards the only thing holding it all together as the fire grew. The debris had spread onto the street and a few people were caught up in it, some unconscious or trapped.

"Robin's looking after Dad. I'm in the building; you see me?" Huntress touched her ear pieces when she touched down onto the second floor of the apartment complex, resting her weight on the window sill. "The Fire's spreading."

"I see you. Try not to get burned this time."

"I barely even got burned last time." She rolled her eyes. "Besides, you'd think Firefly would invest smoke alarms in his hideout," Huntress retorted, swooping down onto the street.
"Yeah, yeah—focus. There's a guy injured on your right," Oracle said.

There was one man whose leg was trapped underneath a large block of cement, he was knocked out and losing a lot of blood.

Damn it, she needed more help.

"Is there any sign of Blue Beetle?" Huntress asked, weakly, regretting her earlier outburst. "I could really use him right now…"

Sirens could be heard up ahead, getting closer. Huntress got the man free, shifting his weight to pick him up. The smoke was choking the air and there were people screaming as they escaped the building.

"I've found him, he's not too far away," Oracle answered.

Huntress smiled in relief. "Thank god." She dragged the man to safety, propping him up against the wall. "Any way of contacting him?"

"Wait… ugh, I can't access his armour," Oracle replied, irritably. "Just hang in there he should be able to see the fire from over a mile away."

Huntress helped another civilian to their feet, as the Fire Fighters and ambulance services arrived, followed after by the police. "I'm gonna search the building for survivors while the police deal with crowd control," she said, handing the civilian over to an ambulance worker while the Fire Fighters rushed into action. "Can you find survivors with thermal vision?"

"Just about, the flames are getting worse. Be careful."

Huntress felt a swirl of dread but masked it with a smirk. "When aren't I?" she chimed, heading into the burning building.

"Do me a favour and leave the jokes to Nightwing," Oracle retorted dryly.

She clicked her glass rebreather mask into place, the thin metal joining onto her purple mask. "Why? He makes enough bad ones as it is," Huntress muttered, skimming over the flames when she jumped through the hollow window. The room was wrecked, resembling something of an office. "How'd this happen anyway? Jay's a good shot."

"It's partly his and Robin's fault, from how the CCTV looks," Barbara answered. "Two survivors down the corridor on your left."

Huntress followed the direction, avoiding the chunk of ceiling that nearly hit her. "It'll be a miracle if Black Masks even survives this."

"Can't say he'll be missed," Oracle muttered.

"I can't argue there." She smiled grimly, closing in on the two survivors, two maids who were struggling to breathe. "Make sure the Fire Fighters are in position."

A sliver of fear trailed down his spine when he saw the blaze of fire. Blue Beetle flew through the air, eyes wide in shock. "Okay, you were right, she definitely doesn't have the situation under control," his voice hitched.

'Unsurprising,' the Scarab replied. 'Her skills of deception were mediocre, which is a sad revelation
considering she still fooled you,' the machine chastised.

Jaime frowned; he really didn't need to be reminded of Helena's lies when people were dying and there were a bazillion questions racing around in his head. He needed to focus. "Can we please focus on the burning building?" Shit, this looked bad. Was Helena okay?

'I'm sure this isn't the first-'

"Cállate!" Jaime snapped, shutting the Scarab up. His frown faded when he saw Robin struggling to lift Batman up. "Hey! You guys okay?" He zoomed down onto the roof.

Robin looked up, looking in worse shape than his mentor. "We're fine. Just go help Huntress." The boy pointed to the burning building.

Blue Beetle looked at the two worriedly for a second before nodding, flying off towards the building. Fire trucks were positioned with their ladders drawn up to rescue survivors through the windows. Jaime concentrated and materialised a mask to filter out the smoke, it covered the lower part of his face.

He dived into the upper floor where most of the injured would be and started searching, wincing when a flame came too near his face. Blue Beetle lifted up some rubble as he searched. "Keep an eye on our body temperature…uh…amigo." He didn't even know what to call this thing and it had been over a week.

'I do have a name,' the Scarab said coldly.

Jaime winced, feeling a little bad. "Sorry, you never said."

'You never asked.'

Blue Beetle held back a sigh, did Scarab really have to pick a fight now of all places? "Right, sorry. Anyway, can you do a scan for any injured?" he asked, scrutinising the destroyed room as the flames devoured the furniture.

'Scanning.'

The ground shook beneath his feet, making Jaime hover in the air. He really wasn't sure this place was going to last another ten minutes. His stomach flipped, making him feel sick.

'Down the hallway to your right.'

Jaime blinked and quickly shook his head. Focus. He rushed down the hallway, the corridor falling apart as pieces of the ceiling cracked and fell, which is when he saw a man run past. "Hey, I'm here to help!" Blue Beetle yelled, chasing after him. "I can get you out through -"

The man turned around, mid-run, and shot at him. Jaime skirted out of the way in time as the bullet skimmed passed. He only caught a glimpse of the shooter, who had dark hair with a white streak at the fringe, with a domino mask over his eyes. Then he disappeared down a literal hole in the floor.

It made him wonder what this building was used for. Blue Beetle flinched back when a large chunk of the ceiling came down.

'Other life forms detected down the right-hand corridor,' the Scarab said, unfazed.

"Hopefully they won't shoot," Jaime muttered, flying down the hallway.
The Fire engine's ladder couldn't reach the destroyed upper floors, so Huntress had resorted to hanging out of the window as she handed the people over.

The two top floors of the tower were completely destroyed and had given way, adding more pressure to the already unstable foundation. Her costume clung to her skin as she sweated, and her hair was sticking to her mask and cheeks.

Huntress ran down the hallway which was flooded from the burst pipes, twelve inches of water submerging her ankles.

"Huntress, Blue Beetle's entered the premise," Oracle told her.

Helena felt a swell of relief, as her lips curved into a smile. "He never disappoints," she murmured, running down the hallway. "Anyone else on this floor?"

"The thermal readings are getting blurred by the flames, but I think I can make someone out further down the hall," she replied. "Take a left."

Huntress jumped over a small hole in the floor where water was flowing down like a makeshift waterfall. "Any news on Robin and Batman?"

"They're heading back to the cave, but Batman's still unconscious," Oracle answered. "You need to be quick, the building isn't going to hold for much longer."

"I know, don't worry." she promised, it wasn't like this was the first time she'd been in this situation, the only difference being that Batman had been with her. "Which way?"

"Second right —avoid the hole—and it looks like they're trapped under some concrete," Oracle instructed.

Huntress slid into the room, looking around. The water had diminished most of the flames, looking six inches high, leaving the room dark and devastated by the fallen ceiling, with leaking busted pipes poking out of the walls, and furniture was thrown everywhere. There were still some flames on the furniture but that was the only other source of light.

"Far right of the room," Oracle said, her voice rising. "You have ten minutes, and then you need to pull out."

"Copy that." Huntress hurried over to the pile of concrete, she could hear a noise/groan coming from it. "Just hold on." She started moving pieces of brick, revealing the ankle of bloodstained trousers.

"Fffftenth!" shouted an unintelligible voice.

She threw the concrete over her shoulder, straining a muscle until she managed to get a majority of the rubble off the person. The floor creaked loudly like a tree branch starting to break.

"Fucking hurry it up!" Now she recognised the voice.

Black Mask's body looked broken and twisted, with his leg snapped back under a pipe, clearly broken. His white suit was now brown and the physical mask that was burned on his face was badly cracked in places.

He didn't look happy to see her. "Hurry up!"
"Huntress, get your ass out of there right now," Oracle snapped, her voice vibrated against Helena's ear.

"I am." Huntress narrowed her eyes, swallowing a bad taste in her mouth. "Hold on," she replied, moving to lift him up. He grabbed onto her when she pulled him up onto his knees, his fingers digging into her waist. "I need you to work with me here."

He gritted his teeth and glared at her, pushing nearly all his weight on her. "I fell through two floors, kid, you're lucky I'm still conscious," he growled, managing to find his footing as she wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

She wrinkled her nose when his breath touched her skin, wanting to recoil. "Come on," she snapped, dragging him with her, but she froze when her foot hit a weak spot in the wood panelling, a loud crack erupted when the combined weight landed on the spot.

The floor gave way beneath them like a chasm, bringing a waterfall of water and brick down with them.

Black Mask yanked on her arm while she grabbed her grappling hook, shooting upwards on instinct, not paying much mind where she was aiming, only focusing on upwards as they fell down and dirty water hit her face.

"Huntress?!" Oracle was yelling through the earpiece.

The hook lodged into the ceiling on the upper floor, creating larger cracks in the plaster. It stopped the fall for a second, leaving them hanging on for dear life, but the hook wasn't holding and started to loosen.

"Huntress, come in."

Huntress hastily clicked the retractor to pull herself up while Black Mask wrapped his arms around her neck.

The ceiling gave way as she was pulled up and the hook fell. She grabbed onto the side of the flooring, scraping her arm against the split wood in an effort to grab something. Her salvation came in the form of a metal pipe that was spraying water; the grappling hook fell from her hand as she grabbed the pipe to stop herself from slipping off into the gaping chasm.

The water splattered her face and got in through the filters of the glass mask. Black Mask coughed and spluttered when the water hit him, grabbing her waist. "Hold on," she snapped at him, breaking her other arm free. Her gaze landed back on the grappling hook while she tried to grab the pipe with her free hand.

"Huntress, you better answer or I swear to god—"

"Copy!" Huntress spluttered, as the sharp edges of the wood panelling dug into her ribs. "Save the threats for when I'm not in a deadly situation!" She grabbed the pipe with her other arm, feeling the Black Mask's weight slip to her thighs.

"Someone's coming down the hallway," Barbara warned. "I called Robin, he's on his way."

Huntress gritted her teeth "Great," it was hard to speak and she wasn't sure what kind of answer Oracle was wanting, right now Barbara was a viewer watching on a screen. Even if Robin hadn't made it to the cave and was close by, he still wouldn't get here in time.
The water made her costume too slippery and Black Mask lost his grip. She felt him claw to grab her belt, so her free hand—instinctively—whipped out to grab his wrist before he fell. The sudden jerk had a domino effect.

The floor she was holding onto cracked and the sound felt like a punch in the gut as the pipe bent and the floor gave way, pulling her and Black Mask down with it.

A hand wrapped around her wrist.

Jason was above her, flat on his stomach, with his arm stretched out just far enough. "God damn it!" he snarled, trying to pull her up, but the combined weight of her and Black Mask was too heavy. Her gloves were soaked from the water.

Black Mask crushed her hand as his other hand grabbed onto her arm, straining Jason's grip further.

"Let go," The Red Hood hissed.

The building was coming down around them and her fingers were breaking from the mobster's vice grip. Huntress met Jason's gaze and bit down on her tongue so hard it bled, subconsciously her hold around Black Mask's hand loosened.

The mob boss held her hand so tight it felt like the bones would break.

A large chunk of the ceiling nearly hit Jason, which triggered an expression which was panic with a mix of fear as his face scrunched up tight. "Oh fuck you," he snarled, his right hand let go of hers while his left held on.

He grabbed his gun from his belt and shot Black Mask in the forehead.

She flinched at the sound and the heat of the bullet grazing her cheek. The iron grip that had crushed her fingers broke as Black Mask's dead weight fell down into the hole.

Jason dragged her up and across the floor, away from the edge as the room crumbled in on itself. Huntress was thrown against the wall.

"Next time when I say let go, you fucking let go!" he shouted, spit hitting her face. "That piece of shit was not worth dying for, do you understand me?" He roughly grabbed her face in his hands, glowering at her.

She tensed, pressing her body against the wall, the rage on his face was frightening. She nodded quickly. "Yes," her voice was hoarse.

His glare softened a fraction while his hands tightened. He pulled her into a bone-crushing hug, bruising her ribs, smothering her face against his shoulder. "I can't lose you," his voice was hushed against her neck.

He pushed her away when they both heard a loud crash as the walls cracked. "Come on," She shoved him away, grabbing his hand.

"Huntress, Blue Beetle's two floors below, on your second left," Oracle's voice had a hard edge to it, concerned and anxiousness mixed into one. "Get the hell out. Him too."

Jason held her hand as they ran through the collapsing hallway. Huntress tried to regain her focus, pushing Black Mask out of her head. **Focus on those consequences later. Get out.**
"Take a left," she snapped, dragging Jason in the right direction. "I got a friend. Two floors down."

"He better know how to fly," he growled. They reached a massive hole in the ground. "Shortcut." He jumped down, pulling her with him. She landed ungracefully. "Keep up, sis," he quipped.

She glared at him. "Stop dragging me like a rag doll then," she snapped, heading for the stairs which were partly destroyed with a few mangled dead bodies torn apart on the steps.

"Right turn," Oracle instructed when they landed on the right floor.

"Right turn," Huntress repeated to Jason. She saw Blue Beetle through the door archway, handing a civilian over to a Fire Fighter. "Blue!" she shouted, gaining the teen's attention. "Get us out of here."

Blue Beetle looked over his shoulder, eyes wide when his gaze shifted to Jason. "Wait a sec he—"

Huntress body slammed into the armoured boy when the walls collapsed, the building finally fell.

Jason wrapped himself around her while she grabbed onto Jaime's neck as a burst of blue light surrounded them, another person was pulled into the embrace as smoke and ash consumed them all.

The noise roared in her ears as she scrunched her eyes closed, afraid she'd be blinded by the ashes or some form of debris. She only opened them when the temperature around her changed from hot to freezing.

They were outside, surrounded by some kind of blue force field and hovering twenty feet in the air. The Fire Fighter was holding onto the civilian, a dark haired woman in torn clothing, and was gripping onto Blue Beetle's arm. Jason was still wrapped around her back, latched on tight.

The building behind them was completely destroyed, nothing but a giant mess of bricks and concrete. The ash covered the entire area like a thick fog, the lights from the ambulances, Fire engines, and police cars blurred together.

"Relax guys, we're safe," Blue Beetle reassured, lowering them to the ground. The force field disappeared like a bad aerial reception.

She loosened her grip and slid her hands from around his neck when her feet touched the ground. "Thanks," she said, stepping back when Jason let her go. It was only when she made eye-contact with Jaime she remembered their earlier confrontation. Huntress opened her mouth to speak but stopped short when she heard Jason take a hurried step back. He was going to escape.

She grabbed her handcuffs and whipped around to fling them on him. Jason was ready for her and grabbed her wrist, using his foot to knock her off balance. He handcuffed her to Blue Beetle and then kicked the boy to the ground, her along with him.

Jason smiled down at her apologetically. "Sorry, Sis," he whispered, and then turned on his heel, disappearing into the thick brown smoke as it started to spread.

"Oracle?" Huntress growled in frustration, yanking Jaime up with her when she got her feet.

"Don't worry I've got a lock on him. Head back to the cave," Barbara told her, sounding calmer. "Arkham's said they moved the Joker to a secured location."

Huntress nodded. "Copy that..." She sighed. Her thoughts flashed back to Black Mask, with him
dead this unveiled a whole new set of consequences and the gang war was already getting worse, and the last thing they needed was a power vacuum. At least it meant Jason would need to revise his plans, though—

"Please tell me you have the key?" Blue Beetle said, raising his cuffed wrist.

And, then there was Jaime. She hesitated for second before turning around to face him. "It'd be stupid not to," she replied, trying to smile but didn't quite manage it.

Blue Beetle stared at her for a moment, his mouth setting into a thin line and leant forward. "Helena," he whispered, making the hairs on her neck prickle. "I know."

Of course, you do. She wanted to bash her head against the tarmac. This is why it wasn't wise to get close to people, hadn't her dad taught her that already? In their line of work, the detachment was key and this was a perfect example of why.

"How did you figure it out?" she addressed the metaphorical elephant.

"The Scarab never trusted you and well, the hair, voice, and eyes were kind of a clue, but it's also the way you speak."

Huntress chewed the inside of her mouth, she'd worked hard to try to make Helena Wayne sound posher than Huntress but it looked like she'd let her guard down. Stupid and careless. Her dad was so going to be pissed off with her, and God help Jaime.

"So, did you just pretend to like me?" Blue Beetle asked, uncharacteristically cold.

The comment actually stung. "No," she answered, as her brow creased. "I liked spending time with you, and I rarely do with other people," she told him stiffly, swallowing a bad taste. He frowned. "Unsurprisingly, I don't have many friends..."

His frown deepened, the two of them staring at each other as other people rushed around them. She stopped looking when a red motorcycle came through the fog with Robin at the wheel.

The boy quickly dismounted and took his helmet off, smiling in relief. "You're okay," he said, stuffing his helmet underneath his arms. Then his gaze wandered to the handcuffs and he frowned. "Why are you two handcuffed?"

"Not the time, Robin." Huntress sighed, glancing at Blue Beetle from the corner of her eye. "We need to get back to the cave and tell Batman what's happened." She looked pointedly at Jaime. "Come on."

His eyes bulged in surprise. "Wait what?"

She dragged him with her over to Robin who looked just as confused. "We can't bring him?" the boy wonder argued. "And, what about the cops, they kind of need to know what happened."

"He knows, Robin," she said sternly, walking over to the R-cycle. "You can send the Commish a report when we get back."

Realisation dawned on the young boy's face. "Oh..." He grimaced when he looked at Blue Beetle. "Well, the boss won't be happy." He put his helmet back on and sat back down on the leather seat.

"He's already in a bad mood," she murmured, sliding onto the seat behind Robin, jerking Jaime forward. "Come on."
"I can fly," Blue Beetle said, stumbling when she yanked him forward. "Yo sé, permítanme tratar este," he hissed, irritated. He better have been talking to the scarab.

Robin passed her a helmet. "You don't know where we're going," she replied, putting her helmet on. "Get on."

Jaime pursed his lips stubbornly but got on the motorcycle, barely fitting on the end. He wrapped his arms around her waist to stop himself from falling off. The grip was a lot less painful than Black Mask's, which was appreciated.

Robin started the engine and reversed out of the area. Blue Beetle held on tightly, his armour pressed against her back. Her lips dropped, as guilt and frustration swam around in her stomach. "Hey listen…" she muttered, half turning her head to him. "If it makes any difference, I'm sorry for lying. It's kind of part of the job but…yeah, I'm still sorry," she apologised uncomfortably, looking away.

Blue Beetle remained silent while the Scarab beeped loudly like a low whine. "…Did you really like spending time with me?" he asked quietly.

She felt a tiny warmth light up in her chest as the corner of her lip tugged upwards. "Well, you make a nice change from all the usual doom and gloom, I guess." She swallowed thickly, biting down on her bottom lip.

His hold loosened and was almost tender. She frowned. Strange. Her stomach was doing that weird thing again like she'd jumped too fast off a skyscraper.

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**05/21/2014**

**22:45**

Jason peeled his mask off as he walked over to Batman. His Robin costume was soiled with mud and he had some dirt on the side of his face. "One of these days I'm gonna kill Beast Boy," the teenager snarled.

Batman was staring at the computer, looking through some hospital files. "You'd have to get through M'gann first," his mentor replied evenly. "I heard the mission was still a success."

Robin rolled his eyes and leant against the big leather chair. "By the skin of our teeth, so Nightwing wasn't happy," he replied. "But we still pissed off the Light, so I consider that a win."

"Hm, good." Batman hummed, still staring at the screen. He was looking at a recent John Doe that had turned up in the city morgue.

Jason scrutinised the screen. "Who's the dead guy?" The body was a bald white guy with a heavy tonne of muscles, he had a number of bad looking bruises on his face and body, and a big old bullet hole in his forehead.

"Judging from the fingerprints, Silky Cernak," Batman answered, grimacing.

Robin tensed, narrowing his eyes. His lips formed a snarl, so this was the shit-head who Helena had been having nightmares about. "Who bumped him off then?" he asked, frigidly.
His mentor's lips grew thinner. "There's a rumour he stole from Black Mask."

"Pfft, idiot more or less signed his own death certificate."

"Selina led the operation," Batman said, coolly.

The teenager's shoulders stiffened. "Oh…" Ah, fuck. "Is she…?" He was already imagining Helena's heartbroken expression, it made his chest tighten uncomfortably.

"We still don't have a body," Batman answered, detached.

Shit, this was uncomfortable. Robin scratched the back of his neck uneasily, averting his gaze. "She fell from a bridge three months ago, whatever's left could be long gone," Jason said softly, inwardly wincing. "And the blood they found-"

Batman's jaw clenched. "Selina is not the type to commit suicide," He stood up from his seat, making Jason stiffen. "Not when she has Helena to think about," there was an edge of steel in the vigilante's voice.

Robin's throat was dry, nodding quickly. "Okay, my bad… sorry, boss," he replied, as his brow furrowed. "You're the one always telling me not to rule things out."

His mentor scrutinised him like an ant under a microscope. "Until I find a body, Selina is MIA, understood?" Batman's voice remained cold.

Jason bit down on his tongue, not trusting himself to speak, so he just nodded instead, crossing his arms.

Behind them both a small box in the corner of the screen flashed red, distracting Batman's attention. It would be one of the movement sensors upstairs. When the cameras were brought up they saw Helena, dressed in her pink onesie with white polka dots, wandering around on the ground floor, looking lost as she hugged her stuffed animal close to her chest.

Robin's shoulders slumped, unfolding his arms. "She must have had another nightmare," he stated, scowling. "I'll deal with it."

"No, it's fine," Batman lowered his cowl, frowning at the screen. "I'll go talk to her."

But, Bruce wasn't good at comforting; he'd just make a mess of it. Jason's scowl grew. "No, I got this," he said, starting to take off his costume as he walked away. "She likes it when I comfort her."

His mentor's brow furrowed, arching an eyebrow, but he ignored him and wandered off. She didn't climb into Bruce, Alfred's, or Dick's bed when she was upset, she preferred Jason, and he liked that. He liked that quite a lot because, well… it was nice to be appreciated.

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**09/19/2023**

**22:34**

His head was hammering and he could hear the squeaks from the bats, the sound echoing around the cave. There were also voices, a fourth which he didn't recognise at fist.
Bruce groggily opened his eyes and was blinded by a surgical light, a thick bandage wrapped around his crown.

"Ah, welcome back to the land of the living, Master Bruce," Alfred spoke.

He sat up quickly, wincing from aches and pains in his back. His thigh was sore and bandaged up. The stab wound, he remembered, clutching his head.

"Hey, Dad…" Helena stepped into view of the light, clapping her hands anxiously. Her mask was off and a pair of handcuffs were dangling from her utility belt. "You had a concussion."

Bruce's face scrunched up, as his vision became less fuzzy, looking around. Robin was hanging back in the shadows next to… his eyes widened.

Blue Beetle was in the cave, the armour around his head pulled back to reveal his face. The teenager gulped and held up a hand. "It's nice to meet you, Mr Wayne."

The cave was silent as Bruce felt his muscles tense and his eyes narrow. He got out of the bed, despite the soreness and hint of pain. His bare feet hit the cold stone, putting pressure on his injured leg. "Start explaining," he growled, taking a threatening step forward despite the pain throbbing from his thigh.

Jaime Reyes took a step back while Helena quickly pushed herself in front of the boy. "He figured out my identity which is why I brought him here so you could…well, you know, lay down some ground rules," she said hastily, raising her hands up.

Bruce ground his teeth together. "How did he find out your identity," he kept his voice calm.

She lowered her gaze, fiddling with her hands. "Helena Wayne may have hung out with him longer than necessary…and lowered her guard."

"Why are you speaking in third person?" Blue Beetle frowned.

"Shush," she snapped, shooting him a glare from behind her shoulder. The glare disappeared when she looked back at her dad. "I know I should have listened to you, I'm sorry," she apologised quietly.

Bruce folded his arms as he glowered at her. Then Alfred cleared his throat. "It's not a crime wanting to spend time with someone your own age, Ma'am," the elder man said firmly, narrowing his eyes at Bruce. "And, it'd be hypocritical of your father to hold it against you."

His butler had an amazing talent of making him feel ten years old again. Bruce's glare faded, glancing away to avoid the elder gentleman's ire. "I'm not holding anything against anyone," he muttered, pursing his lips for a second. Bruce sighed and looked back at his daughter and then his scowl returned when his gaze shifted to Blue Beetle. "Well, it can't be taken back, what's done is done." Besides, a mind wipe probably wouldn't work with that machine on his back.

Helena glanced up. "So, you won't drive him out of town?" she asked hopefully.

Blue Beetle squirmed under his glare. "I'm not letting him out of my sight," Bruce replied coldly, moving towards the young hero as he gently nudged Helena to the side. "And if you do ever betray our trust I will make it my mission to take away every joy, hope, and dream you have," he growled, towering over Jaime as the kid's eyes widened like saucers. "Do I make myself clear?"

The teenager's shoulders hunched up as he shrank away. "A-absolutely, Sir," he stammered, his
head bobbing up and down frantically. "I'm never going to tell anyone, I swear to God."

"Okay!" Helena pushed herself in-between them. "That's enough threats for today." She pushed them apart. "We need to talk about Jason."

Bruce glanced away from Blue Beetle and nodded grimly. "What did I miss?" he asked, absently touching the bandage on his head when it itched.

"I messed up." Robin's gaze was glued to the ground when he stepped forward. Bruce frowned, turning to him. "I wasn't paying attention when I shot a Birdarang at Jason," Tim explained, looking up. "He got off balance and shot the middle floor of Black Mask's tower. The whole place came down."

"And, Jason killed Black Mask trying to save me," she added, clasping her hands behind her back, tense. Robin looked at her in alarm while Alfred sighed. Blue Beetle was struggling to understand the ramifications of this.

Bruce looked at them both with a tight expression, not sure where to start. "Black Mask is dead?" he repeated, staring at Helena who nodded. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "We need to prepare for the fallout…" A bad taste formed in his mouth. "I'm executing contingency plan #23."

"23?" Jaime commented, frowning. Bruce threw him a sharp look, making the teenager wince. "Right, none of my business."

Tim's forehead creased for a second before he nodded. "I'll update Oracle."

"Is the Joker still secure?" Bruce asked.

"Locked up tight," Robin answered.

"She contacted us earlier," Helena said. "Jason didn't return to his apartment and he's on the move again."

Bruce's face grew cold and more closed off. "Where?"

"He's taken cover in Chinatown," she answered, looking him over. "You're not in good condition to fight him, dad."

"Finally someone with sense," Alfred drawled, standing at Bruce's side. "You won't be jumping from rooftops with that limp, Master Bruce."

Bruce felt a rise of frustration, turning to the elder man. "I need to bring him in."

"You'll need our help next time," Helena argued, folding her arms, exchanging a glance with Tim. "No offence, dad, but you aren't exactly a spring chicken."

"Watch your tone," he warned. He was still capable enough to fight, it wasn't like he was fifty. Bruce ignored the blood that was trickling down his leg, the wound had reopened.

She raised an eyebrow while Robin tried to hide a smile. "I'm just saying, you'll need a hand… maybe Jaime could even help," she proposed, uncertain, fiddling with her hair.

Blue Beetle looked at her in surprise. "Really?"

"Absolutely not," Bruce shut down the idea.
Her eyes narrowed, resting her hands on her hips. "Don't be stubborn. He's powerful."

Jaime smiled, holding himself up a little higher. "And untrained," Bruce countered.

Blue Beetle's shoulders lowered and the smile vanished. "And, I'm still standing here by the way," he remarked, scowling. "A little courtesy please."

"Sorry." Helena smiled at him sympathetically. "Anyway." She glanced back at her dad. "Jaime was great helping rescue people when the tower came down."

Bruce crossed his arms and looked pointedly at Blue Beetle. "I'm well aware you're powerful, Blue Beetle, but this is a personal matter that I'd prefer you'd stay out of," he said sternly. "Anything involving the Red Hood or the Joker is business you keep away from."

The teenager's scowl was replaced with concern. "I hear you loud and clear, Mr Wayne, Batman… sir." Then Jaime glared at the thin air. "Will you shut up for five minutes," he hissed, groaning.

Bruce arched an eyebrow in Helena's direction, she smiled warily in response. "What? The scarab on his back talks to him," she replied, shrugging.

From the corner of his eyes Jaime cringed. "I'm going to find Jason," Bruce stated, taking a step past his daughter.

"Master Bruce," Alfred's voice lowered threateningly, he was in front of him in an instant.

Bruce grimaced, his forehead wrinkling. "I don't have-"

Alfred's eyes narrowed. "You are not leaving this cave until you have a minimum of five hours sleep, food, and the wound on your leg stops bleeding on all over my floor," he chided briskly, while his eyes flicked to the bandage which was soaked with fresh blood.

"Your floor?" He almost sighed.

The butler's passive expression remained unchanged. "I cleaned it earlier, sparkling almost." He maintained Bruce's hard stare. "Shall I draw you a bath while Miss Helena changes your bandages?"

Bruce let out a long sigh, knowing the battle was lost. "The minute he acts up…" he warned, turning around to head upstairs.

"I'll have your tights ironed, just in case, sir." Alfred followed behind him.

Tim and Helena failed to hide their smiles when he walked passed, and Blue Beetle looked like he'd witnessed some kind of worldwide phenomenon. Bruce gritted his teeth and tried not to limp, favouring his better leg.

When he reached the foot of the stairs he heard Blue Beetle (the words carrying across the cave despite the hushed tone). "Your butler's awesome," the teen whispered to Helena.

*Don't encourage him.* Bruce's lips curved into a grimace. "Go home, Reyes," he ordered over his shoulder, making the teenager jump and Helena laugh.
Jaime gulped as Mr. Wayne disappeared upstairs and out of the cave. Helena was grinning like his suffering was the best thing on TV.

"Give him a few months and he'll warm up," she said, making him frown. "He really isn't as bad as you'd think." She shrugged, smirking.

Jaime held back his retort in case Batman was still in hearing range. "I'll just take your word for it."

Tim crossed his arms. "As long as you keep your mouth shut you'll be fine," he told him. "Though I do recommend leaving, Bruce can be a bit territorial with newbies in the cave without his say so."

Helena rolled her eyes while Jaime's brow creased further. "Yeah, he can be a real ass about it," she said dryly. "Besides, I need to head upstairs and play nurse, so you should probably go home," she added, turning to him fully. Her face softened. "And, listen I'll understand if you wanna keep your distance…"

'Most definitely,' the Scarab remarked snidely.

Jaime scowled. What was this thing's damn problem? Sure, it was pretty two-faced that she'd tried to spy on him, but her dad was Batman, and from what he'd got from both first and second impressions of the guy, he seemed like the type to do that sort of thing on a weekly basis.

She even said it herself she didn't have many friends, which was kind of, well… sad. She probably didn't even know how to make real friends having been raised by a man who hates everyone's and runs around at night dressed as a bat; that stuff just didn't result in a healthy childhood.

'She still deceived you and yet you still wish to remain by her side like a dismal canine!' the machine hissed, raising its voice.

He flinched in alarm, glaring at the ground. "Jeez, calm down," he whispered fugitively.

"…Are you arguing with it?" Tim asked hesitantly. Jaime's head jerked up to look at them both. Helena had her head tilted to the side curiously while Robin's was closer now and frowning at the scarab like one would eye a test subject. "How sentient is it?"

Jaime quickly moved out of the way. "Sentient enough to get easily pissed off so don't get too
"I know, not cool. " She grimaced, raising her hands defensively. "But, can we start over?"

"Not really," he replied bluntly, making her wince. "But, I do still need someone to go to that movie premiere with, so…" He smiled crookedly. "Let's just let bygones be bygones."

She smiled, a soft kind of smile he hadn't seen before. "Okay then." Helena rubbed her arm self-consciously. "Thanks."

'She can't be trusted,' the Scarab insisted.

'Yeah, well too bad!' Jaime resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was willing to give her a second chance so the piece of tech on his back would just have to deal with it. He glanced over at Robin who was watching them both curiously, a little too curiously. Why was the boy smiling?

"What?" Jaime said, frowning.

Tim continued to smile, which was a little creepy. "Nothing," he said, lightly, shrugging back. "Bruce will need that first aid kit," the boy reminded Helena.

"Right, duty calls," she replied, sighing. "I'll see you later, Jaime." She started to turn away.

He nodded, frowning still, feeling like he'd missed something. "Uh, yeah, right," he muttered, staring at Tim warily, wondering if the kid was planning something.

With a first aid kit in her hand, Helena wandered upstairs towards her dad's bedroom. She could still hear Alfred and Tim bustling about downstairs, which meant Jaime must have left the cave already. She let out a sigh, trudging up the stairs.

She dragged her feet as she approached the door, knocking twice. "You decent, Dad?"

"Yes."

Helena opened the door and stepped into the room. Dad was sat down on the bed with some shorts on and a towel draped over his shoulders. Her gaze scanned over the injuries, categorising them.

"He better be gone," Dad said gruffly, his brow furrowed.

She gave him an irritated glare, closing the door behind her. "Leave him alone, Dad. He's a nice guy," she argued, walking over to the bed. His eyes narrowed. Helena sighed quietly and opened up the kit, setting to work. "We can trust him."

"You've barely known him a few weeks," her dad chided.

She grew silent, feeling a sting in her stomach, as she took out some fresh bandages. "I'm not being naïve I just…" She held the bandages tightly, briefly glancing over at him. The hard lines on his face were prominent. "The first thing he did when he got his powers was help Robin and me fight a killer android." Helena began to carefully peel off the soiled bandages. "Not everyone has an ulterior motive, Dad. Some people are just… nice."

He made a doubtful sound that got stuck in his throat, coming out as a grunt. "I agree that Reyes
seems like a good person, but it's the scarab I'm concerned about," he replied, removing the towel from around his neck, letting it drop onto his lap. "Ted Kord may have invented it, but we barely know anything about it."

She bit down on her tongue, placing the stained bandages in a pile on the floor. "It does have a mind of its own, but so far Jaime has control." Her shoulders tensed, frowning, feeling a trickle of doubt wrap around her chest. The paranoia which had been ingrained in her from an early age started to take hold. "I'll take precautions."

Her dad nodded in agreement, while his gaze stayed focussed on the wall opposite. He seemed to be thinking or planning the next steps they all had to take, a usual ritual he did when she patched him up.

After six years of tending to his injuries, her hands moved mechanically as her muscle memory practically did all the work for her without her even thinking about what she was doing. She cleaned the dried blood away with a sterile wipe, the smell of it making her nauseous.

Her dad shifted his shoulder back, glancing up like he'd just remembered she was still there. There was a suspicious glint in his eyes. "Why are you friends with him?"

She frowned, pausing from her work. "Why wouldn't I be?" She shrugged dismissively. "He's a-"

"Nice guy," her dad interjected, evenly, meeting her gaze.

Her frown deepened, looking away. She may sound repetitive but the answer was simple like that. Jaime was a nice, genuine, guy, and she didn't meet many people like that. Gotham had a bad habit of turning nice people into cynical, paranoid asses. Truth be told, she was surprised Jaime's personality remained intact.

"It may come as a shock to you, but I like being around someone positive," she replied, lightly, resuming her work as she applied a fresh bandage around his upper arm. "He's good, but not obnoxiously good and he cares, maybe a little too easily."

"Wait..."Her dad eyed her intently in his annoying analytical way like she was a crossword puzzle. He shifted around, moving his arm out of her reach for a second.

She scowled, placing a hand on her hip. "You're gonna get blood all over the bed unless you let me finish."

He didn't seem bothered, as his eyes narrowed with an unnerving amount of scrutiny. "Are you attracted to him?"

She balked, a heat rising to her cheeks while her eyes widened like tennis balls. "What?" Her face scrunched up in disbelief. Then her stomach did that weird twisty thing when she realised what her dad was implying. "For the love of god, Dad, it isn't like that," she exclaimed in exasperation. "I've only known the guy for a few weeks." She wrinkled her nose. "I ain't got any rose tinted glasses on."

His mouth was set in a thin line. "I'm just—"

"Concerned, yes, I know," she interrupted, sighing after a moment, as her shoulders slumped. "I know I should have kept my distance, okay, that's on me, but I don't have a crush on him," she said, uncomfortably, rubbing her arm.

Her dad raised an eyebrow. "But, are you attracted to him?" he repeated the question, trying to trap
She gritted her teeth, biting down on her tongue like she didn't trust herself to speak while her dad stared at her, not even blinking. Helena remained silent for six seconds, counting the time in her head as she gulped, her mouth felt dry, twisting the bandage in her hand.

Okay, so Jaime was a good looking boy, nice skin with soft hair. He had those brown eyes which were like a warm wood and they just popped out when he stared at her. And, he always smelled of that cheap deodorant, but it was a nice smell—

Oh, damn it.

Wait, was that what that weird feeling in her stomach was? So, that's what happened when you were attracted to someone, indigestion?

From the corner of her eye, her dad was staring at her expectantly. "Helena?"

She blinked a few times and looked back at her dad who was looking at her like she'd just gone brain dead for a few seconds.

Helena grimaced. "Okay, so maybe I do find him attractive," she confessed, trying to shrug it off. It wasn't a big deal. "He seems attracted to me as well so we're on even ground. It's not like it means anything."

Her dad didn't look convince by this but it was true, Jaime may be attractive and funny but it wasn't like she'd ever get in a serious relationship with him, she wouldn't even know where do start. She'd barely salvaged their poor excuse of a friendship.

Her dad's eyes narrowed. "If it was just nothing we wouldn't be having this conversation," he said, sternly, gaining a glare from her. "If it were any other boy I wouldn't be as concerned." Now, that was a blatant lie. "But we're dealing with a meta-human who doesn't know the full extent of his powers and could possibly be controlled by the AI attached to his spine."

Helena's glare faded after a second or two, letting out a sigh. Okay, so maybe she was letting her feelings cloud her judgment, but was that really all that of a bad thing? Did her dad really expect her to spend her whole life keeping up her guard and alienating people who could be potential threats? Yes, he most likely did. It was his misguided way of protecting them.

"What do you want me to do, Dad, not be attracted to him?" she asked, coldly. "If you're worried about him hurting me, don't bother, I'll take precautions," a hint of bitterness found its way into her voice. Her dad probably already had a contingency plan in the works for Jaime.

His face remained passive like each bit of her outrage had already been anticipated and analysed. She gritted her teeth in frustration, smothering a scream, biting down on her tongue.

Then his face softened a fraction, as he reached out and held her hand. "Just be careful."

Her brow knitted together as she stared at their clasped hands when he squeezed it in a show of reassurance. She cast him a wary look but didn't pull away, squeezing his hand back despite her better judgement. "I think we should take another look at that concussion," she said, crisply.

He arched an eyebrow and let go of her hand. "And, people say I'm cold," he remarked in an even dryer tone.

The comment lightened the mood slightly, easing the tension away like a fine comb. She pushed
her anger to the side because why was she getting so worked up in the first place? This was how her dad always acted and it wasn't going to change anytime soon… and was that a good or bad thing?

Helena smiled thinly and swallowed the resentment like it was cold medicine.

The corner of her lip twitched upwards. "Well, anyway, as for Jaime I'll be cautious but at the same time scaring him with threats isn't exactly going to make him trust us," she replied and resumed tending to his injuries. "He already knows our secret so we should try to make him feel welcome."

"He has to earn that trust first," her dad said, stubbornly. She sighed in exasperation. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and grunted. "...But, we do need to keep an eye on him."

She smiled crookedly. "Good, because he invited me to a movie premier this Friday – the new Godzilla movie or something—and I said yes," she told him lightly, while she took out some tape to tackle the large cut on his leg.

She felt his shoulders tense at the news and his forehead crease. "You're going to see a movie with him?" he repeated levelly, looking back at her.

Her smile grew, tilting her head to the side innocently. "Is that a problem, Daddy?"

His jaw clenched, and his lips parted slightly to reveal gritted teeth, looking like he had a string of reasons why that would be a problem. Then his jaw loosened and his mouth set into a thin disapproving line. "Just don't stay out too late," he replied, tightly, and then he just turned away as if that was the final say on the matter, which she supposed it was.

Her smile became less sharp and became content as she tended to his injuries in silence, settling back into the usual routine.

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**Chinatown, Gotham**

**09/20/2023**

**01:30**

The hideout was an apartment above a Laundromat; the light bulbs were all broken minus a single one in the living room. Jason finished bandaging up his leg, a half bottle of vodka by his side, partly used for sterilising the wound but mainly because he needed the drink to get him through the night.

Jason took a swig of alcohol and scrunched his eyes closed, groaning. "Fuck sake," he muttered, burying his face in his hands.

This was twice now Helena had gotten in the way of his plans, only this time she'd fucked them up so royally that the shit was in the blender. He dug his nails into his palms, taking another large gulp of vodka to numb his anger, some of the drink dribbled down his chin when he drank too fast.

He slammed the bottle back down onto the floor (it was a miracle it didn't smash) and spat onto the floor. Jason wiped his mouth, feeling like he'd drunk rotten milk, the sick sensation in his stomach got worse as it all started to sink in.

_What the fuck was he meant to do now?_
The plan had taken months to organise even if it hadn't been perfect… he could still salvage it, though, right? If he just broke the Joker out himself, he still had the gangs on his side, maybe more now that Black Mask was out of the picture.

Jason chewed his tongue, thinking sluggishly as the vodka started to kick in a little. His body felt warm and his mind buzzed pleasantly. He closed his eyes for a moment, wanting his mind to go blank so he could think clearly but all he kept seeing was his fight with his Replacement, Batman, and Helena nearly dying again.

He scrunched up his face into a grimace when he opened his eyes. Helena shouldn't have been dragged into this life, at least with him and Dick they'd made the choice themselves, with Helena she'd probably been pushed into it by Bruce since the guy didn't know shit about raising kids.

His temper bubbled just below the surface. "Piece of shit," he mumbled to himself, his voice clumsy from the alcohol. He wiped some saliva from his lips.

And, don't even get him started on the Replacement, that little tiny-shitface. It was the kid's fault the building had gone down, hell, it was practically the kid's fault Black Mask was dead and his whole plan had fucked itself over around the bend.

However, despite all that, Jason couldn't shake the uncomfortable sting when he remembered backhanding the boy, it stirred up a few unwanted memories…

"…It's the kid's own fault," he told himself, frowning.

Hesitantly he reached for the vodka again. In all honesty, his hate towards the new Robin was entirely childish and showed just how insecure and petty he was but after being beaten to death in a previous life he'd ran out of fucks to give. If he wanted to be petty he'd be as petty as he wanted to because he didn't owe this new Bird-boy a shit of respect.

He finished off the vodka down to the last drop as the vodka burned the back of his throat. Jason dropped the empty bottle and struggled to his feet, leaning against the wall. First thing first, he needed to break the Joker out to get this plan back on track.

Arkham Asylum, Gotham

09/20/2023

07:59

In a padded cell, a song could be heard from just outside the door, twenty guards situated outside.

"Two little dickie birds, Sitting on a wall," The Joker sang softly, staring up at the ceiling. "One named Peter, one named Paul." He smiled to himself, chuckling at his own joke. "Fly away Peter, fly away Paul."

The sound of his voice was drowned out by the sudden noise of gunfire from outside the cell.

*Hehe.*

His pale red lips widened into a grin that bared his yellowed teeth. "Come back Peter." He pushed himself off the wall and got to his feet quickly, despite being bound in two straight jackets, and stared at the door. "Come back Paul."
Underneath the jacket he started to remove it, you'd think after all these years they'd find better ways to restrain a guy. Now chains, they were a little harder to get out of if you didn't have the right tools. The Joker's forehead creased. Body casts were difficult, though, thick and bulky and restricted the body so much there wasn't any way of doing any fun.

The Joker tapped his foot and hummed to himself. This was taking longer than expected, even with the alarm disarmed, more guards would come down to the lower level in the next five minutes.

The straightjacket loosened and fell at his feet, and the Joker stretched his arms and cracked his neck.

A distinct sound of a body hit the metal door, followed by gunfire until finally the door was pushed open with his little Miss Harley Quinn standing on the threshold with a full armada strapped around her body.

Her white painted face broke out into a smile. "Puddin!" She ran towards him like a loyal pup greeting its master.

A quivering guard was stood behind her, covered in blood. "Please."

The Joker ignored him and let Harley give him a hug. "Hello there, Poobear," he cooed, patting her on the head.

She looked up and beamed like a shining sun. "Everything's set to go Mr J, and I got ya suit specially pressed for the occasion," she exclaimed, pulling away.

The clown gave her a razor-sharp smile. "That's my girl." He stepped past her and towards the guard—what was his name again?- who was holding a gun up. "And, thanks for the help Jonny-boy."

"My girlfriend, you won't touch her, right?" the guard whispered, looking like he'd cry. "Just leave them alone. I did what you wanted."

The guard's hands were shaking so bad he couldn't shoot straight even if he wanted too, which he didn't need to because Harley-kins was quicker.

The Joker gave an exasperated yawn. "Oh, don't be a bore, Jonny." He clicked his fingers.

Harley shot the man in the chest, which was a bit on the anti-climatic side, but the Joker had a schedule, a Bat to irritate, and a Copycat in bad biker gear to kill.

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**Gotham Academy, Gotham**

**09/20/2023**

**12:10**

The sun was surprisingly bright in the early afternoon, with a number of students having lunch outside despite the slight chill.

The second youngest Wayne's knees felt some of the cold while she was sitting down on a bench facing the grass area, with her friends Anada and Lydia on her right and left, both of them occupied.
Helena ate the lunch Alfred had meticulously prepared; gourmet sandwich, yoghurt, and an apple, more or less the same thing he made her every time. She chewed the sandwich slowly while Anada texted on her phone and Lydia obsessed over their latest revision. It was a pleasant dose of normalcy that normally distracted her on any usual day just not today specifically.

She couldn't stop thinking about Jason or what he was doing and how they'd go about exiting Contingency Plan 23. Her throat was dry when she swallowed her food, gulping it down loudly like it was a piece of hard candy.

*What about Jason?* Her dad still hadn't explained to them his next move concerning the wayward son; in fact, she was surprised he hadn't rounded Jason up already.

The Joker was locked up in the darkest depths of Arkham but that didn't mean Jason wouldn't find a way to get to him, all her brother needed was time to plan which was what Batman seemed to be giving him. Her nails dug into the bread, leaving marks.

*Batman always has a plan,* she reminded herself quickly when she felt her worry rear its ugly head like an incurable itch. *Her dad was always in control.*

Her phone vibrated in her blazer pocket, making her pause from her meal. Helena got out her phone and looked at the message, which was from Jaime.

/Hi, tickets are $20. Need to book online./

The girl on her left, Lydia, suddenly let out a growl. "Ugh, Spanish is killing me," the girl groaned, burying her face in her hands, a pile of revision papers resting on her lap. She was a round-faced girl with large thighs and a flat chest, brown hair, and freckled bronze skin. "Can I copy your notes?" she asked quietly, glancing up at Helena hopefully.

Helena forced a smile, swallowing the last crumbs of her sandwich. "Sure why not," she replied lightly, running her tongue over the back of her teeth to get rid of any food. She reached into her school bag and removed her notebook. "I don't know why you're stressing, you have plenty of time."

Lydia scoffed, taking the notes. "Easy for you to say, you don't have a scholarship riding on this test." Her shoulders hunched up uncomfortably. "And, I'm already lagging behind with soccer."

Anada rolled her eyes, looking up from her phone. "Okay, cool it with the charity case gig, Lydia," she said. She was a thin-faced Thai girl with dark brown hair pulled up into two twin buns while she stared at Lydia with irritated brown eyes. "You're just going to work yourself into a mental breakdown."

Lydia's eyes narrowed. "I'm just asking for a little sympathy, Anada."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Anada dismissed rudely, looking back at her phone.

Helena placed her phone on her lap and observed the two of them coolly, having seen this all play out over a dozen of times. Lydia stressed over her grades because she feared failure and ruining her family's chances of a better life, while Anada behaved as her usual self-absorbed self with little patience for others. They were a predictable pair and sometimes they rubbed her up the wrong way, but they were dependable, entertaining, and she enjoyed their company enough to consider them friends.

"So, how was the party on Saturday?" Helena asked, changing the subject, as she peeled the lid off her yoghurt.
Lydia's scowl changed to a smile, as did Anada's sneer. "Two words," Anada chimed.

"Crashing it," Lydia exclaimed, grinning. "The Football team went shirtless and ate cheese puffs off their stomachs."

"I died and went to heaven." Anada laughed, smiling mischievously. "I recorded it, close up."

"Text me," Helena said, smirking.

"As if I wouldn't, Babe."

"You need to come to the next party." Lydia grabbed her arm enthusiastically. "Screw being the good Catholic."

Helena's smile became tighter. "I would, but Daddy is really strict about parties," she lied, her dad probably wouldn't care that much if she went to a party as long as she didn't drink or smoke. "No wild parties until I'm 21."

Anada scoffed. "He's such a hypocrite, my sister sees him at the clubs all the time," she sneered, wrinkling her nose in disdain. "And no offence, but he's slept with nearly half of Gotham." The insult registered instantly making Helena's eyes narrow warningly. Anada straightened up quickly and smiled apologetically. "No offence," she repeated, giving a strained laugh.

Her gaze softened as she smiled. "It's okay, I know what he's like," she replied, shrugging. "But, he's still my dad, so rules are rules."

Lydia huffed, shifting away. "It's still not fair."

The two girls grew silent while Helena ate her yoghurt. Anada returning to whatever fascinating content was on her phone while Lydia stressed over her Spanish revision again.

Helena glanced at Lydia who was looking through her notes, and then absently she wondered if Jaime studied a third foreign language at his school. The public school's curriculum had been improved in the last five years thanks to her dad so he should be able to take one if he chose to.

Maybe she should even speak Spanish to him when he thought she couldn't understand, now that would be funny, she liked that kind of reactions the best. Helena smiled to herself as she ate.

Her phone vibrated again, making her glance down at her lap.

/??/

Oh, yeah, she hadn't texted back.

She picked up her phone and replied.

/Got it. I'll book tonight./

Anada glanced up and peered over her shoulder, Helena frowned and shifted away from her a little when she felt the girl get in too close. "Who's Jamey?" her friend asked, curiously.

Lydia looked up and peered over Helena's shoulder before she could hide her phone. "You're going to see a movie?"

Helena hid her irritation, putting her phone back in her pocket. "A little privacy guys," she remarked. "He's just this boy I met at church. His name's Jaime."
"Jaime?" Anada's eyes lit up, shoving her phone to the side. "Sounds promising already. Is he cute?"

Helena shrugged. "So, so."

"You got any pictures?" Lydia asked.

"No," she replied, patiently, holding back a sigh.

"Oh, come on, Helena," Anada groaned, shaking her arm lightly. "Give us the dirt."

Helena chewed her tongue thoughtfully. The two of her friends were always good for a nice gossip session. "Well we're just friends," she said, feeling her phone vibrate again and was tempted to look at the text but decided against it, she didn't want these two reading her business. "But, he is pretty cute…" She smiled despite herself, twirling a strand of hair around her finger to add fuel to the fire. "And he's funny, like in a slapstick kind of way."

Anada snorted into her hand. "He sounds like a dork—not that that's a bad thing," she said, smiling crookedly. "But he is hot right?" Like everything depended on that one detail.

Helena's eyes glinted with amusement. "Yeah, he is," she admitted.

"Do we know him?" Lydia asked, absently biting her nails.

"No, he goes to public school," she answered curtly, expecting some backlash.

However, the two of them surprised her somewhat. Anada grinned and Lydia looked pleased. "Ooh, rebellious," Anada purred, nudging her playfully. "We have to meet him."

"Yeah, and we promise we won't scare him away." Lydia smiled brightly, poking her pointedly. "Well, I won't at least." She cast Anada a knowing look.

The other girl rolled her eyes. "If they can't hack it they shouldn't serve it. Simple."

Helena raised an eyebrow, recalling what incident they were referring to. "You threatened to shove a test tube up his butt."

"He shouldn't have made fun of my mothers then." Anada folded her arms stubbornly. "It isn't my fault most of the boys in this school are self-entitled jerks."

Helena's smile grew as her shoulders relaxed, folding away her lunch back into the plastic box. "They're not all bad," she said, putting the lunchbox back in her bag.

Anada snorted and picked up her cell phone, seemingly having lost interest in the conversation, scrolling her thumb down the screen.

The silence resumed when her friends became reabsorbed with themselves she used the opportunity to look at her phone.

/Ok see ya Friday./

She bit down on the inside of her mouth, feeling that fluttery feeling in her stomach—she frowned, lowering her cell phone. "This is getting weird," she murmured.

"Oh shit," Anada exclaimed, her brow furrowed. "The Joker escaped Arkham again."
Helena stiffened, clenching her phone tightly.

"I thought the place got a security upgrade?" Lydia scrunched up her face. "What, did all the guards break for lunch or something?"

Anada groaned. "Wouldn't be surprised, this happens like all the time."

Helena swallowed a bad taste in her mouth and quickly reigned in her emotions, forcing a smile. "Yeah, pretty shoddy security," she commented lightly, as her fingers twitched and the fluttery feeling in her stomach turned to cold dread.

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**Bludhaven**

**09/20/2023**

**12:23**

The city almost looked peaceful in the daytime. Officer Grayson leant against the wall of the alleyway with his paper bag lunch in hand; salami sandwiches and a can of Dr Pepper.

He took out the sandwich and started to eat, waiting patiently in the dim alley while a few rats scuttled by. The sound faded away when a new set of footsteps came near.

"Long trip?" Dick asked, glancing over at his old friend.

Artemis leant against the wall next to him. She was dressed in her street clothes, a large hooded jacket and some jeans, with a short red wig on along with sunglasses. "Had to land in the sea off the coast," she replied. "It was cold."

Dick held out his sandwich. "Hungry?"

Her eyes flickered to the food and arched an eyebrow at him. "Not a fan of leftovers," she replied, dryly, looking away. "Our girl's going to be transported in a decoy van in two months time where they'll take her t the facility where the other kidnapped meta-humans are," she told him. "She's going to have heavy security." She shot him a pointed look while his brow creased thoughtfully. "Meta-humans and heavy guns. She's an investment and you know how hard they hang onto those these days."

He swallowed his food and nodded. "I'll get a team sorted. What about Kaldure's position with the Light?"

She sighed, crossing her arms. "He still needs that push or we're not going to get anywhere."

Artemis shifted uncomfortably. "If this plan with the new team-

"I won't let anything happen to them," he interrupted, meeting her gaze.

She stared back at him searchingly, standing up straighter. "You can't control everything, Dick."

His chest tightened as he forced a smile. "We'll see about that," he replied brightly. His smile dimmed when he heard his cell phone chimed. "Hold on a sec." He took out his phone.

The corner of Artemis' lips twitched upwards. "Is it Zatanna?"

He smirked and threw her a look. "You wish," he muttered, looking at his screen.
It was from Helena. The Joker's loose

"Damn," he hissed under his breath, narrowing his eyes at the screen. "I gotta go," he said, looking back at Artemis who was frowning. "Family stuff." Dick stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

"Is it Jason?" she asked warily.

Officer Grayson shoved his lunch bag back into his jacket. "Not yet." He smiled painfully and turned on his heel. "Be careful," he reminded her, glancing over his shoulder before he ran off.

Artemis hugged herself tightly like she was shielding herself from the cold. "Yeah… you too."

Springfield, Oregon

09/20/2023

17:35

The small house was decorated with cream walls and a blue carpet, looking like something from the late 90's or early 2000's, outdated and plain, but it was warm and isolated and right now that was the one thing she craved most of all.

The room had hardly anything in it, just a small table in the corner next to the kitchen which was cluttered with empty bottles and Chinese food, a TV, her large suitcase, and a couch being it. Technically she was squatting since the place had been foreclosed and she didn't own it, but she wasn't planning on staying here all that long. The electricity and water bills would be enough to alert the bank that someone was occupying the property illegally.

For now though, she just wanted somewhere to rest that wasn't her car in someone else's driveway.

The TV was on while she rested on the couch and her baby Terry nursed from her breast. She sighed and snuggled into the cushions, smiling a little when she saw her little boy stir. His blue eyes peeked open to look up at her. She stroked the small tuft of dark brown hair on his head.

She looked back at the television and used the remote to surf the channels, looking for something to distract her.

"—a meteor has been—"

"—Charles I love you!—"

"—well, it's sort of like and ongoing—"

She sighed, trying to find something that wasn't depressing or trash.

"—don't f***ing touch—"

"—has a beautiful icing—"

Vicki Vale's face appeared on the screen, making her hesitate from clicking onto the next channel.

"—Authorities have confirmed the number of fatalities in the building collapse," Vicki Vale reported, as a video feed appeared behind her showing cam footage of a large building on fire and collapsing. The high rises of Gotham could be seen in the distance. "Roman Sionis, or better known as Black Mask, was confirmed dead by GCPD."
Her whole body felt like a bucket of ice cold water had been poured over her, unable to hear what the rest of the report was saying.

*Black Mask was dead.*

She held Terry closer to her chest when he squirmed in her grip. For a moment she just stared into space, not quite believing the news, and then after a few seconds her mind refocused on what she wanted and gradually fitted together a modified plan. She needed to get to Powers still, and before she'd been unable to set foot in the city but now well, now the hit on her head was gone.

She reached for her burner phone on the armrest and clicked on her meagre amount of contacts, ringing the only one that mattered.

The phone rang while she remained completely silent, turning down the volume of the TV, waiting (begging) for the phone to be picked up.

"Hello?" Holly spoke, sounding older with the squeak in her voice long faded away.

She almost smiled when she heard the young woman's voice. "Holly, it's me," her voice cracked in the middle. "I need your help again."

There was silence from the other side of the line for maybe five seconds.

"Fuck, Selina, is that really you?"

Chapter End Notes

Tadaa! Selina's alive and look, baby Terry. (Hugs Batfam) I love these guys.
Jason scrunched up his face when the harsh taste of whisky burned the back of his throat. The bar he was in buzzed with noise, the place had bright neon signs decorating the walls like a memorabilia collection, with a pool table and set of speakers at the back of the room.

"You don't look so good," the barmaid was in front him, arms crossed over her cleavage.

"No shit," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. He grimaced, looking at her face, she was a blonde, and she didn't look old enough to be allowed to legally work here, so fourteen or fifteen? Guess he better not stare at that cleavage then.

"Yeah, well don't be sick, I just cleaned the counter," she said, watching him warily. "You want some water?"

"Nah." He waved his hand dismissively, trying to recompose himself.

She placed a fresh glass of water in front of him, making him frown. "Come on, you look like a mess." She slid the water closer to him.

Jason's head felt like a bad retirement party with Vodka shots and rum thrown in the mix. "What are you my sister?" he slurred. The corner of his lip curved upwards when he imagined Helena being here to drag him home after a booze night, now that'd be funny, and then she'd nag him all the way home.

"Just drink the water, smartass."
He made a disgruntled sound, taking the glass he downed the full glass of water, some of it spilling
down his chin; it tasted slightly minty. He put the glass down and wiped his mouth with the back
of his sleeve. "There cured," he announced, smiling at the barmaid.

The girl frowned, shaking her head. "Right, sure." She picked up the empty glass.

Jason rubbed his eyes tiredly, yawning. He tensed when he heard some noise coming from outside
followed by a scream. He straightened up and looked at the door, tempted to touch the gun inside
his jacket pocket.

The girl visibly stiffened and grew paler. "The whole city's gonna go crazy," she muttered,
glancing at him when she caught him staring. "With what happened to… well, you know."

His stomach twisted, grimacing. "Yeah, I heard." He glared at the counter, a faint wine stain on the
wood.

"I even heard the Joker got out as if things weren't going to hell already."

Jason's head snapped up, alert. "When did he get out?" he asked, sharply, already half-off the bar
stool.

She stepped back in alarm, narrowing her eyes. "This morning from what I heard…"

Fucking hell! He mentally swore, heading towards the door without giving the girl a second glance
as he rushed out of the door.

Robin hid in the shadows on top of the roof, overlooking the bar when Jason ran out of it and down
the street. Robin's eyes followed the man as he stumbled to walk, clearly still intoxicated.

"How much has he been drinking?" he muttered, frowning.

"He's been to six different bars throughout the day," Oracle's voice drummed in his ear. "Frankly,
I'm surprised his liver hasn't given out by now," she added dryly. He smiled crookedly. "Did he
swallow the tracker?"

Robin checked his computer, a blue map appeared with a bright yellow light moving along the
street. "Yeah, I paid the barmaid to slip it in. She was nice." Kind of good looking too if you were
into that type of thing.

"Sneaky," she praised, making his smirk grow. "Nightwing's at the cave-" She stopped and let out a
loud yawn. ".Uh, sorry," she grumbled, groaning quietly. "I haven't slept in…uh, 36 hours I think,
ugh…" There was another yawn. Tim raised an eyebrow while he listened. "Just go."

"Aye, aye, Sleepyhead." He closed his computer and took out his grappling gun. "Try not to pass
out on the keyboard, again." Robin chuckled, remembering last time.

"At least I don't drool over mine."

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Batcave, Gotham

09/20/2023

20:30
Nightwing, Robin, and Huntress faced the large computer while Batman briefed them. "The breakout was orchestrated over the course of a week," Batman said, pressing a button on the keyboard, bringing up one of the asylum guard's bios. "A guard got Harley into the asylum."

The bio showed a weedy thirty-year-old man with ash blond hair by the name of Xander Stockton, now deceased as of today.

"How did he make contact with Harley?" Huntress asked, folding her arms.

"Through Andrew Lou, he was one of two inmates released a week ago," Batman answered. "He was committed three years ago after he killed his grandfather because he claimed an angel told him to."

She sighed deeply, rolling her eyes. "There's always one."

Nightwing nudged her disapprovingly before glancing back at the Bat. "So Andrew told Harley the Joker wanted out, and I'm guessing she was the one who roped Xander into the deal. Did they threaten him?"

"Xander's wife is pregnant with their second child," Batman replied, curtly.

"Ah." Nightwing grimaced, nodding. "So, the big question is what is the Joker planning?"

Batman's mouth was drawn in a thin line. "The Joker has always shown a disdain for criminals donning the Red Hood, or copycats in general."

"He hasn't killed any of them, though," Tim said, frowning. "Why this specific Red Hood?"

Batman grimaced and briefly glanced away before looking back at them. "The Joker sees himself as my main enemy and enjoys targeting me mentally, my theory is that he doesn't like the competition Jason presents."

"So, like a psycho ex-girlfriend?" Nightwing commented dryly, earning a glare from his mentor.

Batman let out a low growl. "The Red Hood is the Joker's target, but killing him won't be enough he'll make a show out of it," he told them, looking behind his shoulder at the screen. "While at the same time, Jason will be hunting the Joker down."

Batman brought up the tracking device which showed Jason near Gotham Harbour.

"Has he not gone back to his apartment?" she asked, chewing her tongue anxiously.

"No, he has another safe house on the outskirts of Gotham," Batman replied, looking back at her. "The police have Andrew in custody but so far he hasn't said anything useful. Huntress, Robin, you two have the task of finding the Joker, once you have, contact me."

Her brow furrowed, exchanging an uneasy look with Robin. "And, Jason?" she said, cautiously, already knowing the answer more or less.

Batman seemed to grow colder. "I'm done negotiating. Nightwing and I will bring him in before he causes any more damage."

The cave became silent, with Nightwing's sad sigh echoing around the large space. Huntress nodded stiffly, knowing there was no use arguing. Her dad had already warned her if the first attempt at negotiating went sour, but she just wished they had more time to sway Jason.
"What if Blue Beetle tries to get involved?" Robin broke the silence.

Huntress dug her fingers into her arms while her dad narrowed his eyes. "We order him to stand down," he replied, shooting his daughter a sharp look which made her scowl since she hadn't even brought it up in the first place.

Robin's forehead creased, glancing at them all hesitantly. "He'd be a good asset, though, I mean I know he's a rookie but--"

"Robin," Batman chided, making the boy silence. "It's too much of a risk."

Huntress pursed her lips tightly and glowered at Batman, while Robin's eyes narrowed in annoyance but otherwise held his tongue obediently. "Jaime will try to help regardless of what we order him to do," she argued, meeting her dad's hard gaze. She jutted her chin out defiantly. "Yes, he's untrained and I am wary of that but he would provide an advantage for us," Huntress continued.

Batman opened his mouth to speak but Nightwing beat him to it. "The kid's powers could be useful helping us find the Joker," their older brother argued, shrugging. "And, it would be a good way to keep an eye on him."

"And, he'd be more perceptible to orders if we made him feel a part of a team," Robin added, quickly.

Huntress arched an eyebrow at the youngest member curiously. Why was Tim suddenly so eager to let Jaime into the fold? Still, though, she wasn't complaining about the extra support. "Exactly, he can be on the sidelines in case things get too overwhelming," she agreed, nodding.

Batman's jaw was tight, but after a moment or two of glaring at them, he sighed. "Fine, make the call," he more or less growled out.

Huntress smiled, satisfied, while Robin grinned like he'd been allowed a new gadget. "I'm sure Jaime will be thrilled," she chimed.

Her dad made a faint scoffing noise that seemed stuck in his throat. "You both have your missions. Debrief Blue Beetle when he arrives." Batman closed the screen, revealing the computer desktop. "Nightwing, with me." He started walking towards the Batmobile.

Nightwing shot them a smile, ruffling Robin's hair. "Good luck." He ran over to the car.

Huntress watched them both get in and rev up the engine. Her gaze shifted to Robin—who was smoothing back his messy hair—and frowned. "You seemed eager to get Jaime on our team?"

Robin's eyes flickered towards her, smiling mischievously. "What, I thought you liked him?"

She cocked an eyebrow, placing a hand on her hip. "What are you up to, Timmy?" Her lips twitched upwards into a smirk.

The boy shrugged with that still mischievous smile on his face. "Okay, so maybe I want to study his Scarab more closely… maybe even run some tests," he answered lightly.

Her smirk faded into a scowl. "He isn't a test subject," she reprimanded in exasperation.

"Oh, come on, are you telling me you aren't going to try to find out his weaknesses?" he said, evenly, folding his arms. "At least my observation will be for science."
Her face scrunched up in displeasure, looking away. "I'm just going to take precautions, it's not like I see him as the enemy or anything…"

Robin didn't look like he believed her, but for some reason, he smiled slyly. "Yeah, I noticed." He stepped back, shooting her that smarmy little smile as he walked down the steps to the lower level.

Her eyes narrowed, following after him. "You're such a weirdo!" she retorted sharply, scowling as she hurried down the steps.

Milagro pushed her smelly foot in Jaime's face, the two of them sitting on the sofa while Mom went through some paperwork; still in her creased nurse uniform. Dad was sitting in the armchair, drinking some water with his pain medication for his leg, the walking stick leaning against the armrest.

An old reality show was playing on the television, a blurry background noise while Jaime tried to push his little sister off the sofa. "Quit it, Mil!" he snapped, while she giggled.

Mom glanced up from her paperwork. "Milagro, stop messing around."

The seven year old scowled, her brown eyes narrowing in displeasure. Her black hair was tied up in pigtails, while her pink dress was a mess of wrinkles and some dirt from playing at the park after school. "Fine," she grumbled, sitting up properly (accidentally giving Jaime one last kick) as she settled on the edge of the sofa.

Jaime shot her a glare, glancing back at the TV. His phone vibrated in his jean's pocket, making him frown and quickly grab his phone. He had a text message from Helena which may be a bad thing since he'd heard the Joker had broken out of that asylum.

/We need your help. Meet at the Kane building/, said the text.

Jaime's gaze flickered between his family before resting on his phone again to read the time. "…Uh, well I better get started on my homework," he announced, smiling brightly as he stood up.

As if sensing something was amiss, they all looked up at him. His mom frowned, staring at him thoughtfully. "I thought you said you finished it yesterday?" she said, warily, folding her arms.

"She's onto you, fool!" the Scarab remained ever the pinnacle of encouragement

"Yeah, but I forgot I had more." His smile wavered, rubbing the back of his neck. "So…noche." He quickly turned to leave.

"Esperar," his mom spoke, making him freeze. He had his back to them when his face fell. "What are you hiding?"

Jaime tried not to groan, glancing over his shoulder. "What, can't a kid have some alone time?"

His mom was stood up, and his dad was in the process of getting to his feet, gripping the cane tightly to remain balanced. Milagro's face was peeking up from behind the sofa.

Mom pursed her lips, jutting her hips slightly to the side with her arms crossed. "Do I look like an idiot, honey?"

"What? No, Mom, honestly I just wanna hang in my room," he argued, turning around to face them. His phone vibrated loudly in his pocket. "What's with you guys."
"Hijo," his dad spoke firmly. "Last night, you locked your door and for six hours there was not a single sound coming from your room."

'We need to leave,' the scarab demanded, getting jumpy. Jaime could feel the machinery itch irritably on his back as it grew more agitated.

"Okay, let's all just chill, okay." Jaime raised his hands.

His mom sighed. "Jaime, are you sneaking out at night?"

'Let me stun them.' The scarab beeped loudly, making Jaime freeze and turn paler.

"No!" he shouted quickly, backing away.

His dad's eyes widened in alarm, and his mom's face shifted to concern when she took a step closer. Milagro was frowning, confused.

Jaime looked at them frantically, as his hands shook, afraid they might just turn into guns. "I gotta go." Before they could say another word, he rushed towards the door and lifted the latch.

"Jaime, wait!" His mom moved to go after him while his dad stumbled, but Jaime had already opened the door and was out of it in seconds, slamming the door behind him.

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**12/08/2017**

**13:40**

The blue light from the computer illuminated the cave and cast dark shadows on Batman's face. His suit lay crumbled on the floor, having been discarded almost immediately once he'd entered the cave, it had felt like it was choking him throughout the whole funeral proceedings.

Nightwing quietly approached him, having entered the cave from below. "I figured you'd be down here," he said, softly. The faint patter of his shoes indicated he was still in his suit.

"The Joker returned to Gotham two days ago," Batman replied, flatly, as his gaze scanned across the screen; his eyes drooped ever so slightly from tiredness. "He's been keeping a low—"

"Helena wants to come stay with me for a couple of days," Dick interrupted, firmly, like he'd put his foot down.

Batman tensed, mouth clamping shut as his gaze slid to the keyboard. His chest constricted painfully."...Why?" his voice was empty.

Nightwing made a faint noise that sounded almost like a painful laugh. "You've ignored her for two weeks, Bruce."

Batman paused, trying to remember the last few weeks since Jason's death, the days seemed to merge together and focus entirely on revenge and mourning, but he couldn't remember much of his daughter in it, she'd been—he started to feel sick—neglected.

Had she even been properly fed? Batman felt a rush of worry, trying to remember. No, no, Alfred would have made sure she ate, just like he had forced Bruce to stop and eat at least once a day. The
butler would have made sure Helena's clothes were washed and she got to school on time.

Batman let out a quiet sigh of relief. Extremely grateful he had Alfred in the first place, especially in these last few weeks. The butler had organised the entire funeral while Bruce had been busy tracking down the Joker.

His former partner came and stood by his side, placing a hand on his shoulder. "She shouldn't see you when you're like this," Dick told him quietly.

Batman narrowed his eyes and jerked his shoulder away, standing up. "Then take her." He gave Nightwing a cold look. "I need to find the Joker and she'll just distract me."

He felt oddly angry like she was being taken away from him because he was deemed an unfit father. Bruce's gut twisted, feeling ill. It was true, though, wasn't it? He was a bad father, Jason's death was solid proof of that. It would only be a matter of time before he ended up getting Helena killed as well.

Dick's eyes widened like he'd been slapped in the face. "Distraction?" he repeated faintly, shocked. Then his gaze grew harsh. "She's your daughter."

Bruce felt a wave of guilt try to grow like a weed pushing up against the cracks in the concrete, but he pushed the feeling down. "I need to find the Joker," he repeated, clenching his hands into fists. "It's better if she stays with you." Batman walked passed Nightwing towards the railing that overlooked the training mats below.

There was a loud sigh from behind him."...You can't kill him, Bruce."

Batman took in a deep breath, glancing over at Jason's spare costume in the cases that lined the wall of the cave. "It isn't about can't anymore, it's about needing to," he replied, levelly. His hatred and anger stirred together like poison. "He needs to pay."

"You're not the only one who wants revenge, Bruce," Dick's voice became cold. "I want it just as much as you do, but you know why we have rules."

Batman gritted his teeth, the reminder felt as stifling as the suit had been. "He needs to suffer," he said, frigidly. He swallowed a lump caught in his throat. "And, when he does, I'll hand myself into the police. It'll be over."

"You know it isn't that simple." Nightwing started to walk over, taking deliberately measured steps. "One of two things will happen if you kill the Joker."

Batman looked away from Jason's uniform and stared at the training equipment below, trying not to focus on Nightwing who was slowly approaching. "I've already explored those outcomes."

Dick continued anyway. "If you kill him and hand yourself in our identities are exposed," he said, coolly. "Is that the kind of life you want for Helena?"

As hard as he tried the guilt rose up and made Batman's shoulders hunch. His anger tried to block out his concern and any paternal instincts he had left but it was useless. He felt an overwhelming wave of shame.

"Or maybe," Nightwing continued, standing next to him. "The other option happens and you go rogue and Helena's the one who needs protection from you."

That triggered his temper. "I'd never hurt her!" Batman finally snapped, whipping his head around
to look at Dick. The anger faded as quickly as it came when he saw Dick's pitying look. "I'd never…hurt her," his voice grew softer.

"Then go upstairs and comfort your daughter." Nightwing hesitantly reached out and placed a hand on his mentor's upper arm. "I'll search for the Joker," he reassured. "But, I'm not letting you near him until you decide what's more important."

There was a long pause as Batman felt his emotions try to fight their way to the surface. His hatred simmered when he thought about Helena. He'd never hurt her but hadn't he already? She was grieving and he hadn't so much as acknowledged her these last few weeks. His posture slouched. He'd always been blind to a lot of things but this was something that was unforgivable and he'd be surprised if she didn't hate him.

Slowly, Bruce nodded lowering his cowl as he gradually came to his sense. "Okay."

Dick smiled a little and nodded, shifting back. "She's in her room."

The thank you got caught in Bruce's throat, making him swallow thickly and just nod curtly. He walked passed Nightwing and headed to where his black suit was crumpled on the floor.

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**Gotham City**

**09/20/2023**

**21:17**

The sky was clear tonight, but the light pollution blinded most of the stars. Batman found himself looking up, while a bundle of dread nestled in his chest.

"Batman." Nightwing put a hand on his shoulder.

Batman looked away from the sky and back at his partner, keeping his expression blank. "Is the tranquiliser ready?"

Nightwing's posture tensed, removing his hand. "I still think this a bad idea, Boss."

"It's the only way to contain him," Batman replied, stiffly, and held his hand out.

The younger man's lips pursed tightly, handing the clear liquid over to him. "It's still ten different levels of messed up, Batman."

Batman loaded the liquid into the small metal tranquiliser gun. "We'll attack him from both ends. I'll take the window." He hooked the gun to the back of his belt, hidden by his cape.

Nightwing gave him a sour look (Batman gritted his teeth) and disappeared over the roof.

They were in the middle of a residential estate near The Bowery where Jason was restocking his arsenal in one of the apartments on the right-hand corner. Batman made his way over, hiding in the large shadows of the buildings. The whole estate was to be demolished in less than a month, with broken windows boarded up with wood and scraps of thick cardboard, making the street look more like the aftermath of a war zone rather than bad infrastructure.

Batman landed on the ground and checked Jason's position on his wrist computer, the tracker showed that the young man was on level three of the four-story building in front of him, in the
room on the corner which was one of the few that had a good vantage point and a non-boarded up window.

He turned the screen off and narrowed his eyes at the window before running across the street. He'd have to climb up the traditional way if he wanted to avoid making too much noise. His movements were careful and steady as he grabbed onto the loose bricks and windowsills, one wrong move and he'd slip or lose his grip and plummet to the unforgiving pavement.

When he reached the edge of the third level he stopped and listened, hearing the clink of metal from inside the apartment with the only other living occupant inside. Batman placed his breather on and removed a smoke bomb from his belt and threw it through the window when he moved in close enough.

The smoke filled the entire room as he jumped in through the window, turning his thermal vision on to see through the thick smoke. Jason grabbed his helmet from off the floor and fumbled to shove it on before the smoke knocked him out, coughing loudly but otherwise still on his feet, as he picked up his gun while Batman advanced on him.

The door burst open and Nightwing came through, attacking from behind he knocked Jason to the ground.

The Red Hood fired at Nightwing who dodged the bullets and kept running towards him while Batman hit Jason from behind in the back, striking the pressure points.

"Ah, f-fuck—ugh—you!" Jason choked on his words, fighting back as he tried to block the blows. The gas must have had some effect since Jason's movements were more sluggish. It gave Batman the advantage he needed.

Batman twisted Jason's wrist when the young man tried to shoot, the bullet hitting the wall opposite. The gun was torn out of Jason's hold by Batman and thrown out of the window.

Batman slammed Jason against the fridge, landing five hard blows to his ribs while the smoke started to escape out of the window and clear.

The Red Hood grabbed a beer bottle off the counter and smashed it into the side of Batman's head before he grabbed it and brought his knee up to hit his face.

Batman intercepted the hit and elbowed Jason in the throat, wounding him, and then he grabbed the back of Jason's neck and threw him towards Nightwing who punched him in the stomach repeatedly before throwing him back to Batman who slammed him back onto the ground, twisting his arm behind his back.

Batman spat the breather out of his mouth when the last of the smoke had cleared. He restrained Jason on the floor, feeling his guilt grow. "I don't want to fight you, Jason." He removed the sedative from the back of his belt while he kept Jason restrained. The young man was growling and squirming to get free. "I'm trying to help." Batman pressed the small tranquillizer gun to a bare patch of skin on Jason's neck.

Jason let out a loud scream of frustration as the sedative was injected into his veins.

Batman held the former Robin down until the squirming and fighting stopped and Jason grew still, breathing more calmly.

There was a long silence that seemed to stretch on as Batman's hands trembled when he released his iron grip on Jason's wrists.
The room was chilly and damp with a thick spell of chemicals and dirt in the air. Weeds and all manner of strange leaves covered the cracked walls and crumbling ceiling.

Five people were tied up and gagged in the middle of the room, they were a mixture of men and woman, tall, fat, skinny, but all at least in their thirties or no older than fifty at the most.

The Joker came in whistling a distorted sound, with a gas mask covering his face while he carried the storage tank of gas he'd extracted from the main chamber. "Cindy, did you remember to bring the gingersnaps?" he sang, coming to a stop in front of them. "Can't have a party without them."

The five of them started screaming through their gags, wriggling around frantically. It grew boring pretty fast and he often wondered why their reactions were always the same, predictable.

With a great big sigh, the Joker pulled out the spray of liquidated pollen and generously sprayed himself. He tucked the spray back into his purple suit jacket and turned back to the first woman—overweight with blonde hair and pale skin—removing her gag.

"HELP!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, trying to bite the Joker's hand off.

The clown chuckled quietly and grabbed the back of her head, shoving the mask that was linked to the gas onto her face. "Ssshh, breathe in, Moonpie," he chimed, turning the valve to release the chemical.

The woman's pupils dilated suddenly as she breathed in the gas, her face draining of colour as hints of red appeared in the white sclera of her eye. Then her lips stretched into a grin that appeared pinned on, while a large amount of drool gather in her mouth and dripped down her chin.

The Joker stood back and admired the changes while the other hostages tried to crawl away from the woman.

Then foam appeared at the edges of the woman's mouth, and that's when the real entertainment began.

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Gotham City

09/20/2023

22:00

Blue Beetle watched Huntress drag a man called Carter onto the roof of the arcade building. Carter was a tall man with a pudgy face, and dark hair. His nose was crooked like it'd been broken too many times and had never set quite right, with second-hand clothes on that had seen better days.

Huntress threw Carter onto the ground, placing her boot on his windpipe while Blue Beetle and Robin stood behind her. Jaime grimaced and felt an uneasy feeling grow in his stomach.

"I swear I'm shooting straight!" Carter exclaimed, raising his hands up desperately. "I'm done with the Joker."

Huntress bent down, a dark look flashed across her face when she grabbed the man's jaw, putting more pressure on Carter's throat, making him choke.

Blue Beetle took a step forward but Robin held up a hand, shaking his head solemnly. The Scarab
was oddly silent.

"Funny, because rumour has it you got approached a few days before he escaped Arkham," she said, coldly, narrowing her eyes as she squeezed his jaw tightly."I don't have time to play games, Carter."

A fresh layer of sweat had gathered on Carter's brow. "I-I just…" he could barely speak. She made him choke again. "Okay! Talk. I. Talk!" he wheezed.

She removed her foot and stood up, towering over him like a dark shadow. "Spit it out," she snapped harshly, making Jaime frown and take a step back.

It was times like this he saw the ugly side of Gotham reflected in its vigilante's and it was kind of worrying seeing it personified in Helena.

"Harley tried to recruit me back," Carter hurriedly answered, inching away. "I said no," he added, frantic. "Barely got out of there alive. Crazy bitch tried to blow me up with a Jack-in-the-box."

Huntress took a step forward. "What has she been up to?"

"I don't, I don't know. I ain't in the loop anymore," he stumbled over his words. "I told ya already."

"Carter," she said, icily, making the man seize up. Blue Beetle's eyes widened and he looked at Robin for any sort of hint this was all normal, but the boy wonder was just watching the scene unfold with a serious expression. "What has Harley been up to?"

"I…I…" Carter's gaze flickered back and forth. "I think—wait, yeah, she's been hanging around Ivy's old hideouts a lot these last few days."

Robin's brow creased. Huntress scowled, picking the man up by the collar. "Do you know why?" she asked in a measured tone.

"No, I swear," Carter insisted, shaking his head. "Please." He flinched, shutting his eyes.

Huntress scrutinised him closely for a long moment and then sighed. "Thanks for the help." She let him go, dropping him on the ground. She turned her back to him and walked over to Blue Beetle and Robin. "So?"

Carter struggled to his feet and made a run for it, escaping down the fire escape and out of sight. Robin rubbed his chin thoughtfully while Blue Beetle's frown grew. "Ivy's hideouts are mostly toxic so Harley would have needed to take vaccines beforehand," the boy wonder spoke.

"And, the question is where did she get the vaccines from?" Blue Beetle said, uncertainly, staring at the two of them for answers, while also not being able to fully look Huntress in the eye.

"No," Huntress replied. "We already know Ivy gave Harley a stash of them in the past since the two of them are so, well, close." She flicked some hair out of her face. "What's odd about the whole thing is that Harley hates needles, and always complains when the doctors give her a flu jab."

Blue Beetle shrugged. "Maybe she's desperate for a place to hide."

Huntress faintly shook her head. "Hm, nah, her mind doesn't work like that."

"If she's at Ivy's old hideouts it's because she's there reluctantly," Robin stated, crossing his arms. "I
say we go to Arkham and interrogate Ivy."

"Uh, are we allowed to?" Jaime raised an eyebrow. "I mean, you guys aren't exactly gentle…"

Huntress folded her arms. "Interrogation differs from criminal to criminal."

"And, I know just how to get under Ivy's skin." Robin's lips curved into a somewhat frightening smirk.

Blue Beetle's eyes widened. "Okay, because that isn't creepy at all…" he mutter. They looked at him like he'd just stated the obvious. "Anyway, didn't Batman want you guys to hunt down the Joker, I mean what if this leads a waste of time?"

'You're missing the point,' the Scarab finally broke its silence.

"That's kinda the point of detective work." Huntress cocked an eyebrow at him.

"We can split up," Robin proposed. "You two do the ground work while I investigate this lead."

Blue Beetle's brow furrowed. Was this kid even allowed to go to Arkham on his own? He looked towards Huntress but she didn't seem worried.

"You sure you can handle Ivy?" she asked, a flash of concern appearing on her face for a second.

"Yeah, I got this." Robin smiled crookedly.

She ruffled the boy's hair, smiling. "Sounds like a plan then."

The corner of Jaime's lips curved upwards. Robin moved back and took out his grappling gun. "Catch you later," he said, stepping over the edge of the roof as he released the grappling hook. Jaime's stomach lurched when he saw the boy disappear over the edge for a second before swinging back into the air to go to the next building.

"He'll be okay," Huntress said, standing next to Jaime. Blue Beetle glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. "What?" Her forehead wrinkled. "What's wrong?"

Blue Beetle chewed his tongue and sighed. "You were kind of a little…scary back there," he admitted, avoiding her gaze. "Not something I'm used to."

'She barely even scarred him, you are overreacting.' Jaime ignored the Scarab's comment.

Her eyes widened for a second before narrowing. "Sometimes criminals need to be roughed up a little, otherwise they don't take you seriously," she argued, grimacing. "It wasn't like I was going to hurt him that bad."

"Yeah, I know," he replied, looking at her. "But, it's just weird seeing that side of you." It was also unnerving seeing her act like her dad.

Her shoulders tensed. "Well, this is who I am, Blue, so…deal with it," she said, defensive, walking away from him.

He frowned, turning around to grab her hand. "I didn't mean to sound-"

Then without warning a loud explosion came from a couple of streets down, emitting a bright light and ear-splitting sound that shook the roof.
Blue Beetle whipped around and quickly brought up his force field to protect them both. Another explosion came after, then another, and another, but it was happening in a line, like a trail. The explosions were contained as well, not powerful enough to bring down an entire building but just enough to shatter a window.

More and more people started screaming on the street.

"Come on!" Huntress quickly took out her grappling gun.

Blue Beetle activated his wings and flew into the air.

His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton as his eyes eased open groggily. The helmet had been removed along with his domino mask and heavy jacket, even his boots as well.

Jason groaned, scrunching up his face while the world around him remained a blurry mess. He could just about make out the dark fuzzy shapes of Batman and Nightwing who were standing in front of him, the blue light from the computer shining against their backs.

"Hi, Jason," Nightwing said, levelly. "You look pretty well for a dead guy."

Always with the fucking jokes, Grayson.

Jason glared at them, his vision clearing up. "I'm surprised you didn't just shoot me with a dart," he snarled, squirming against his bonds. He was handcuffed, or more like chained, against the railing on the floor.

"You didn't leave me much choice," Batman replied, scrutinising him coldly. "It's time to stop, Jason. Black Mask is dead and Gotham is going to suffer the consequences of that."

Jason's glare grew harsher, trying to smother his remorse. "The plan got out of hand, but this would never have happened if you'd killed the Joker, and that's a fact, Bruce."

"Don't shirk responsibility, Jay," Nightwing said, quietly, narrowing his eyes.

"Shouldn't you be polishing the Batmobile, Golden-boy?" Jason's lips twisted into a sneer.

"Jason," Nightwing warned, narrowing his eyes further.

Jason feigned confusion. "Oh, wait, did you get promoted to head bitch already, congratulations!"

"That's enough," Batman reprimanded sharply, making Jason growl.

Dick's eyes became hard like flint, stepping forward. "Do me a favour and get your head out of your ass because I'm trying really hard not to punch you right now," he warned, coming to stand in front of him. Jason gritted his teeth, staring back defiantly. "If you really wanted to kill the Joker you would have done it years ago, Jason, so let's just be honest for once. You're angry at Bruce," Dick announced loudly, agitated. Then he looked over at Batman. "And, Batman you're angry with yourself. That's what it all boils down to, right?"

The cave was silent. Jason bit down on his tongue so hard it bled, while Batman grimaced and shifted on the spot.

Bruce lowered his cowl, revealing his face which looked older and more worn out. There were a few more streaks of grey in his hair and crow's feet under his eyes. He wasn't yet a shrivelled up prune but give it another ten or fifteen years.
"I failed you, Jason, and I understand why you can't forgive me," Bruce said, detached, standing in front of him. "I wasn't there when you needed me most."

Jason felt a spark of rage when he realised what Batman was apologising for. "You think this is all because you didn't save me?" he asked incredulously, baring his teeth. "Are you that fucking clueless!?"

Nightwing shifted back, looking at them both warily. Bruce's jaw tensed, as his stern expression ticked, meaning he was caught off guard. Well, wasn't that a rare occurrence. Fucking self-righteous asshole.

Jason took a deep breath, licking his lips, trying to compose himself enough to speak. "I forgave you for not saving me, Bruce," his voice came out quieter than he'd wanted. There was a lump caught in his throat. "But, I can't forgive you for letting that shit-bag live." Jason's gaze cut into Batman's. "Because if h-he had taken you, Alfred, Helena, or even fucking Dick-shit over here away from me," he snarled at Nightwing. "I would have hunted him down and made him suffer." His eyes stung. "Because that's what you're meant to do for your fam—your partners."

Batman's blank expression just became more closed off.

Nightwing's shoulders slumped, his face softening as he bent down. "Jay, revenge isn't how you prove your love for people," he said, gently. "And, you don't hurt the people you care about like this," he added sternly.

Jason tried not to flinch, trying not to let it register, but he couldn't look at them anymore. He shut his eyes, scowling tightly as his anger continued to boil inside of him. Okay, so maybe, just maybe, he did want to come home, to just be with the only group of people who'd given him a chance to be something special. Maybe, it did hurt having to fight them like this, but he couldn't—

A gloved hand came to rest on Jason's head, making the young man grow rigid, torn between either leaning into it or jerking away. He found himself unable to do either as the hand just stayed there, the thumb soothingly rubbing circles into his scalp. He didn't need to look up to know it was Bruce.

Jason felt his memories resurface like a trigger had been pulled. It was a simple gesture of affection which had taken the place of hugs or hair ruffling (which was patronising as fuck), something that was done in times where he'd needed some kind of support or some sort of reassurance when the whole world came crashing down around him.

"...You still have a home here, Jason," Bruce finally spoke from above him.

Don't say that! Jason wanted to yell, starting to lose the grip on his emotions. The stinging in his eyes was getting worse and his shoulders were shaking. He couldn't go back, not after everything he'd done... killing an innocent man in the process.

"No." Jason shook his head, still not bringing it up to look at them. "No, don't—"

The computer beeped loudly, an incoming call, resulting in the hand retracting from his head. Jason looked up at the computer, Batman and Nightwing's attention was diverted to it as well, but there was apprehension to answer it.

"Accept call," Batman ordered, voice strained.

"Batman." It was Barbara, an image of a lime green logo (some weird head that resembled a less creepy skull diagram). "A series of explosions have gone off leading to the Diamond district," she
reported quickly. "Huntress and Blue Beetle found the Joker on Wayne Tower's roof. Security's been locked out and he has hostages that are infected with a new type of Joker gas. He's holding a trigger to set off another bomb in Wayne Enterprise."

Jason's blood ran cold as his anger transformed into pure rage. "This is what I mean," he growled, narrowing his eyes accusingly at Batman.

Batman grew still, something dark flashing in his eyes for a moment before his expression became blank again. "Nightwing, keep him contained, I'll go help the others," he instructed his Golden-boy. "

Nightwing clenched his hands into fists. "Okay, Boss."

Batman looked down at Jason for a long while, sighing deeply. "Sedate him so he doesn't escape."

Jason's spine grew rigid, feeling a sting of betrayal. What was he, some cheap export?

Nightwing glanced at Bruce in alarm. "That isn't necessary—"

"Yes, it is," Batman interrupted, turning away from them.

The inside of Jason's mouth tasted bitter like ash. Dick didn't say anything further, he still looked pissed off, but he didn't argue, probably afraid of upsetting Daddy.

Arkham was in hindsight when Robin drove along the road on his R-cycle. His comlink beeped, signalling a call. "Robin here," he answered.

"Robin, the Joker's on top of Wayne Tower," Batman spoke gravely. "He's threatening to blow the place up and has already infected five people with a new type of toxin."

Robin's stomach churned. "Is Harley with him?"

"No. Where are you?" Batman's voice became less patient.

Robin turned a corner, nearly at the gates of the asylum. "At Arkham, I have a lead with Poison Ivy," he replied, quickly, gripping the bike handles more.

"Investigate it afterwards, the Joker needs to be taken down first," Batman ordered.

Robin bit down on his lower lip, something didn't feel right about this and there was something they were missing. Huntress said so herself sometimes you needed to have a little bit of faith and told him to trust his instincts, well, right now his instincts were pretty loud. So, maybe it was about time he took a risk.

"No," Robin said, firmly, narrowing his eyes.

"What?" For the first time, Batman actually sounded surprised. "Robin, you need to—"

"I'm sorry, Boss, but I need to investigate this. Bye." He turned off the comlink and came to a stop in front of the gates, letting out a deep sigh. Oh, he was definitely going to get an earful when he got home.

He dismounted his bike and stared up at the foreboding institute, readjusting the brown cotton bag around his chest.
He *really* hoped he hadn't made a mistake.

Blue Beetle was surrounded by these…things/people, who had chalk white skin, wide grins, and looked and acted completely feral.

One came at him from behind, and he struggled to block it, he was struggling to block most of these attacks since he barely knew any hand-to-hand combat. The most effective way he could fight was by stunning them, but even that didn't work as well as he thought.

"Ideas please!" he hissed, managing to stun the one that came at him from behind.

The other four came at him at once while Huntress was busy fighting the Joker. She swerved passed him when she avoided the Joker's acid attack.

"Try using that staple-thing!" she yelled, flipping in the air to get behind the Joker to grab him by the back of the head and punch him in the face.

Blue Beetle was dog piled by the four attackers while the fifth went after Huntress. His vision was blocked out when they all surrounded him, biting at his armour like attack dogs while he tried to un-trap his arms from their hold.

'Emit an energy blast from your body,' the Scarab ordered. 'Focus.'

Jaime shut his eyes tightly and tried to focus, while it was becoming harder to breathe and one of the creatures was clawing at his face.

"Urgh!" he grunted, letting loose a mass of blue energy from his body, blasting the four attackers off him and onto the floor.

'Nice job.' Wait was that a compliment? 'Look out!'

The fifth one came hurdling towards Blue Beetle, tied up in a thick metal coil. He quickly jumped out of the way before he got hit by the man.

He looked back over at Huntress who had the Joker in a headlock and was kneeing him repeatedly in the face. Then the clown laughed and suddenly attached a bomb to her utility belt. Huntress kicked him in the face, causing him to hit the ground with a painful thud, and then quickly undid her belt and threw it in the air, shielding her face with her arm and ducked, just before the belt exploded.

Shards of metal flew everywhere and a few melted knives nearly stabbed Blue Beetle.

'Those things are getting back up.'

Jaime's eyes bulged, as he quickly whipped around to see the four people he'd stunned were indeed getting back up. "How much of a hit can these guys take?"

Huntress was behind him with her back against his. "Clearly more than a lot."

Blue Beetle shot a stapler at an incoming attacker, but they were all attacking at once in some kind of frenzy.

The Joker dangled the bomb trigger while he stood on the edge of the building. "Don't tire out yet boys and girls, the party just got started," he exclaimed, laughing.
His laughter was cut short when Batman came out from the ledge below and kicked the Joker back, right in the stomach, putting all his weight in it when the two flew over ten feet in the air before the Joker's body hit the ground with Batman on top of him and black cape billowing in the wind.

"Batsy! G-glad you could make it," the Joker wheezed.

Nightwing inhaled in a steady breath as he prepared the second dose of tranquillizer while Jason's gaze burned into his back.

"Nothing screams normal like a good old drugging to put the kids to bed at night," Jason taunted from behind him. "All these years and you're still his—"

"Careful, your insecurity's showing," Nightwing turned around to face him, the vial in hand. "And, you brought this on yourself."

Jason glowered darkly. "For what, doing what he can't do? You're honestly gonna stand there and tell me I'm not just a little right?"

Nightwing felt his body grow tenser, walking towards him. "No, I'm going to ask you if you're 100% sure you're doing the right thing."

Jason grew silent, hunching his shoulders up. "I don't expect you to understand, Mr Perfect."

Dick sighed to himself, pinching the bridge of his nose. Jason always had been immature, but now he seemed more so since his resurrection. "A man without principles and will is like a ship without a compass; it changes direction with every change of wind," he quoted, drawing in closer. "How long is it going to take until you become like the Joker?"

A feral look flashed across Jason's face, jerking against his bonds. "I will break your fucking spine if you say that again, you piece of shit!" he shouted.

Nightwing's expression was closed off, feeling his chest sting like someone was lightly poking it with a knife. Jason was shaking, breathing heavily, and his skin had turned to a sickly pale colour. He looked like a complete wreck, uncontrolled, and almost feverish.

Hesitantly, Dick moved in closer and drew out the syringe. Jason saw the needle and his domineer changed instantly, looking up at Dick almost desperately. "Don't, Dick…please," he said shakily. Nightwing froze, a thick lump stuck in his throat, making it hard to breathe. "Jason, I have to…"

"Please." And for a moment Jason reverted back into that snot-nosed kid Dick had once considered a little brother.

Dick touched Jason's shoulder as if to steady himself, starting to feel sick—

There was the snap of metal. Nightwing's spine went rigid when he realised what had happened and quickly tried to inject the—

Jason grabbed Dick's hand which was on his shoulder and broke the wrist (Nightwing grunted from the pain) and then punched him in the face when he tried to inject the sedative.

The chains were wrapped around Nightwing's throat when he was knocked back from the punch and choked from behind. "No hard feelings, Dick," Jason hissed in his ear, ripping the syringe from
his grip.

Nightwing elbowed him in the face but by that point, it was too late when the needle pricked his skin and the chemical was injected into his neck.

Dick's body went slack when he hit the floor.

Robin walked towards Poison Ivy's cell while flanked by two of the guards. "You sure you gonna be okay, kid?" the one with freckles, Marcus, said.

Robin smiled reassuringly as they came to a stop at Ivy's cell. The glass was tinted green and there were a number of strange looking plants on the bookshelves. The woman herself was glaring at them from her bed, dressed in a standard patient's gown.

"Don't worry, guys, I've got this," he replied lightly, keeping his gaze locked on Poison Ivy.

The two guards exchanged uneasy glances but shrugged regardless. "She's all yours, kid," Marcus muttered, walking off with the second guard.

Ivy sauntered over from her bed, leaning against the glass. "Well, this is unexpected," she said, silkily, twirling a strand of bright red hair around her finger, smiling coyly. "Aren't you a little too far from home, baby?"

Robin eyed her blankly for a moment before smiling coldly. "Harley's been hanging around your old hideouts, Ivy."

The woman arched an eyebrow. "And, what of it?"

"It's something she doesn't normally do while you're locked up, especially when she's been busy breaking out the Joker."

She sneered, tossing her long hair back. "Haven't a clue why then," she remarked airily.

"So, that's how you want to play this?" Robin narrowed his eyes, pursing his lips. Ivy remained stubbornly silent. Well, it looked like he'd have to do this the hard way. "Have it your way."

He reached into the brown cotton bag and took out a bizarre looking potted plant. Ivy's eyes bulged once she saw it. The plant had purple leaves and a bright blue flower blossomed from it, the pollen was bright yellow, and the petals were tinted orange at the end. It was small, no bigger than his hand, but it was rare and very pricey.

Robin held it up to view like he was examining it. "This is what you got arrested over, two months back, right? When you broke into that collector's home?" he questioned, evenly. Ivy's eyes narrowed dangerously, pressing her hands against the glass. "I heard it's the last of its kind..."

There was silence as the two of them had a long stare off, with Ivy gritting her teeth. Robin kept his gaze focused on her while he removed the lighter from his utility belt.

"Don't you dare," she snarled, with eyes wide like a woman possessed.

"Tell me why Harley and the Joker would be interested in your hideouts," he replied, coolly.

He was met by silence.

Robin let out a deep measure sigh and flicked the lighter on, a bright orange flame appearing, he
brushed it under the plant leaf.

For a second she stood stock still, but then the leaf caught on fire.

"No!" She smashed her fist against the glass, looking animalistic. "I'll kill you, I'll kill you!" she screamed hysterically.

He heard the guards behind him move forward but Robin held up his hand to stop them. "Answer the question, Ivy," Robin ordered, sharply.

The flame around the leaf burnt more. Ivy's green tinted skin grew an ugly grey colour. "O-okay! Okay, just stop!" She was clawing at the glass. "I made a gas, t-this chemical—STOP BURNING IT!"

Robin extinguished the flame with his glove before it reached the stem. Ivy collapsed onto the floor, panting. "What kind of chemical?" Still holding the lighter near the plant. The leaf of the flower was charred black and shrivelled up like a raisin.

She took in a few more laboured breaths, looking at him like she'd want nothing more than to boil him alive. "I was commissioned to create mind control pollen, but it was unstable," her voice was a little hoarse from her earlier screaming. "The chemical numbed sections of the brain, but it was too strong and had side effects."

"What kind of side effects?"

"Foaming at the mouth, mindlessness, and rage," she answered, clenching her hands into a fist. "Unfortunately the results all ended the same, death within 24 hours."

"Can the infected transfer it to others?" Robin asked, narrowing his eyes.

She looked at him like he was stupid. "No, only if you breathe in the gas."

"And, is there a cure?"

A sneer slid onto her face. "No."

Liar

He felt a flare of anger, holding the flame closer to the plant. "What kind of idiot makes a lethal gas without a cure!" he snapped.

The edge of the petals burned. The sneer slid off Ivy's face and was replaced with fear. "Wait! There's a way to pause it before it goes terminal," she shouted.

He removed the flame, eyeing her warningly. "How then?"

"The pollen is activated by heat at 185 degrees which is when it turns into a gas form, but the pollen is kept inactive when below 5-," she answered hastily. "If you freeze the body it'll halt the chemical from mutating further."

Robin held back a sigh of relief. "Despite the side-effects, you still invented a way to control them, right?"

Her face scrunched up in displeasure. "I made another pollen and liquidated it into a perfume, so that if you spray yourself with the scent, then those infected by the chemical will obey you."
Robin absently nodded, thinking quickly. If this whole fiasco on Wayne Tower was just a distraction then the bigger threat was right under their noses. "Where did you store the chemical?"

Her lips thinned into a snarl, to which he shot her a hard glare in warning. "I have a safe house on the edge of Mid-River Island, it'll be in the bunker." She looked blood-thirsty. "Anymore 20 question, brat?"

"No." Robin grimaced, putting away the light. Ivy slumped back in relief. "That's everything I need." He turned on his heel and ran back down the hallway he came, pausing to shove the plant into Marcus' hands. "Hold onto this for me," he said to the puzzled guard, and then disappeared down the corridor.

Chapter End Notes

Man, this took ages to write. Hope everyone has a happy holiday.
Interlude: The Mystery on Selina Kyle

Chapter Notes

Meanwhile, while all that drama is happening in Gotham, let's check in on Selina.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Issue #13

Interlude: The Mystery on Selina Kyle

Stonegate Prison, Gotham

01/31/2007

10:40

The glass separated them, a good thing too. Selina gritted her teeth so hard they'd crack, gripping the phone a little too tightly as she glared at Bruce.

He was dressed impeccably in a suit which was pricey enough to pay off most of Gothamites mortgages. His blue eyes sharp, and his usual carefree expression was stern with a hint of steel.

"Are you honestly going to sit there and say that's it?" she snarled.

Bruce sighed quietly, making her want to punch him. "I can get you out in two to three years if you show good behaviour, but that's it, Selina."

That was too long. She discreetly touched her stomach in dread. "You said you'd help." Her eyes narrowed at him accusingly.

His lips thinned, closing his eyes, as he breathed in deeply for a second. "You committed a crime," he said, levelly, narrowing his eyes at her almost darkly. "I'm sorry, but you need to serve time."

Her insides grew cold. She stared at him for a long while, feeling her lingering affections turn to ash. "And, here I thought you cared," she replied, softly.

Naïve, that's what she was. Gullible enough to allow herself to think Bruce Wayne was more than just a pretentious playboy who actually cared about her. That he'd be the type of man who'd actually, just maybe, be happy that he was going to be a father.

His face softened into something strangely real and… raw? "I do care about you, Selina," his voice was tender, almost sad. "But..." A hard look found its way back into his gaze. "You committed a crime...the law is the law."

Selina grew silent, hand still on her stomach. If she stayed in prison like a good girl (she almost sneered) her baby would be taken away. Worst case, Bruce rejected the baby and it got tossed in the foster system while she rotted in jail. The less worst case, Bruce took the child in and raised it while she rotted in jail.
Either way, she still rots in jail.

And, if she did get out before her child started school, she'd probably only get to see the kid on weekends… who's to say her child wouldn't hate her? Maybe Bruce would turn their kid against her so he had the child all to himself.

She swallowed a lump in her throat as she glared at him. "You're a son of a bitch," she whispered hatefully.

Bruce's expression tightened but remained infuriatingly passive. "I'm sorry."

_Liar_

_Or maybe he's not?_ A small voice broke through her anger. _Tell him about the baby._

Selina bit down on her tongue, afraid it'd speak without her consent. Despite what she may think, Bruce was still her baby's father, he'd helped create it, so didn't he deserve the right to know?

_But, what if he takes the baby away?_

Her thoughts from earlier resurfaced, causing her to ball her hands into fists and look away. "...I don't want you to visit me anymore," she said, coldly.

If she was going to get out of here it sure as hell wouldn't be because of him.

Bruce gripped the phone tightly. "I understand you're angry—"

Her expression darkened. "No, you never understood, that's the problem," she interrupted, softly, placing the phone back on the hook as she stood up.

She looked at him, really looked at him this time, wanting to take in every detail like this was the last time she'd ever see him. His perfect chin, that always caught her attention, was clenched tight and his blue eyes were sharp like shards of ice.

He started saying her name from behind the glass, but it was a muffled hum. Selina narrowed her eyes at him one last time before she turned away towards the prison officer who stood at the ready.

Selina hesitated for a second, partly turning her head sideways, tempted to look back at him again, second guessing herself. She stopped herself, pausing for a couple of seconds before she sighed and turned her head fully away from him so he wasn't even in the rear-view of her sight.

South Dakota

09/20/2023

20:05

Selina had to admit, she was proud Holly had made something of herself in the last sixteen years; she ran her own mechanic shop in the nearest town. The younger woman's home was nice and the type of size Selina liked, with the living room wallpaper decorated a pale blue and full of complimenting furniture.

Terry squirmed in his sleep as Selina settled him down in the car seat, sitting on the sofa next to him. There was a full bag of groceries on the floor by her feet, the food would tie her over for the
next three days until she reached Gotham.

"He still asleep?" Holly came into the room, wearing a pale pink dressing gown, with her blond hair tied up into a ponytail. She was smoking a cigarette leisurely.

Selina narrowed her eyes, conscious of the second-hand smoke affecting Terry. "Isn't smoking illegal?" she said, wryly.

Holly smirked. "Not in South Dakota."

"Yeah, well, I don't want that stuff near my baby. So put it out," Selina reprimanded, sternly.

The younger woman rolled her eyes, irking Selina a little, and then stubbed the cigarette out in some dirt. Holly crossed her arms and stepped further into the room and stared at Terry thoughtfully. "So, was it another broken condom this time?"

Selina glared at her while she fumbled with the car seat buckle. "No," she hissed, looking away for a second to click the buckle into place. "I…" She sighed deeply, grimacing. "I got married."

Holly's eyes bulged. "Are you serious?" She rushed forward, looking at Selina's hands. "Where's the ring?"

Selina sighed, reaching for the chain around her neck to show the gold ring attached to the end. She gripped the chain tightly, feeling her stomach twist when she stared at it. "His name was Warren…" she told her quietly, a dead weight settled in her stomach.

Holly winced back, realising what had happened. "Oh, crap. When did he…you know?" she murmured, twisting her hands uncomfortably.

Selina tucked the chain back under her jumper, leaning forward when she rested her elbows on her knees. She didn't really want to go into too many details considering the circumstances but…well it'd be nice to talk to someone about it.

"A month ago. Car crash." Her teeth gritted towards the end, trying to keep her anger at bay. "Look, Holly, the less you know the better, okay…"

Holly placed a hand on her hip and frowned. "What kind of shit did you get involved in this time, Selina?"

The former thief sighed, running a hand over her face from exhaustion. "Like I said, the less you know the better," she repeated, looking up at her sternly.

Holly's eyes narrowed, looking like she was trying very hard to bite down on her tongue. She folded her arms again, fidgeting, and looked over at the sleeping infant. "So, what's his name?" she asked, straining a smile.

In spite of herself, Selina found her face softening into a smile, glancing over at Terry. "Terry McGinnis," she answered, stroking her son's soft hair. "Warren picked it out."

Selina grew still, sighing quietly. "I have to."
Holly's expression became tight. "Selina-

"Holly, please." Selina got off the sofa and stood up, matching the younger woman's height, which was still jarring considering the woman had been extremely short as a teen. "There's someone…no, people, there that I need to see, okay so, I have to go."

The blonde gave her a long hard stare. "Just because Black Mask is dead, doesn't mean you're safe, and neither is your daughter." Holly hunched her shoulders. "You've already had two chances for a normal life, don't ruin your third."

Selina dug her long nails into her palms, a tight, bitter smile crept onto her face. "I used up all my chances, Holly."

Derek Powers had destroyed any hope of a normal life for her, so it was only fair she returned the favour, right?

She looked back at her baby and closed her eyes for a moment. With Terry she did have options, adoption was the last resort, but if it came to it, he'd be safer away from her like Helena was. But, still… it would be a lot to shove on Helena and maybe even outlandish some might say, but Bruce was another option.

Selina sat back down on the sofa and contemplated. "I want Terry to be safe," she said, mostly to herself. "He should be with his sister…"

Bruce wasn't the same man he was sixteen years ago, that much she'd seen in the News and on Television. Richard Grayson was definitely a surprise when she'd heard about him but what was more surprising were the two other boys that followed.

More importantly, despite her fears, Bruce had taken responsibility for his daughter when she'd been flung on him seven years too late.

So, yeah, maybe Bruce was a self-righteous prick, but he'd proved her wrong on what counted most, and that was taking responsibility as a father.

"So, what?" Holly interrupted her train of thought. "You're just gonna dump him on Wayne's doorstep or someth'n?"

"No," Selina replied, dryly, shaking her head. "Besides, I'm only leaving him if I have too." She bit the inside of her mouth, looking back at Terry. She didn't want to abandon him but… both of her children needed to stay safe, and she'd failed yet again to provide a normal life for her child.

Terry's brow furrowed, squirming in his seat as he started to wake. Selina frowned and caressed his forehead when he let out a low whine, as his eyes blinked open.

She unbuckled his car seat when she sensed the impending tears. "Ssh, baby," Selina murmured, picking him up. That's when the crying really started, he let out a high pitched scream, clumsily kicking his legs.

Selina rocked him in her arms, feeling his diaper, which turned out to be soggy. "Shh, baby, it's okay," she soothed, gently, settling him down on the sofa for a moment so she could change him. "Mama's here."

Holly sighed and rubbed her eyes tiredly. "I'll go get the keys," she mumbled groggily, walking towards the kitchen.
"Thanks," Selina called after her, smiling a little as she took out the small changing mat from his diaper bag and placed it underneath his bottom.

Holly may be rougher around the edges now, but Selina could understand why since it was a sticky situation and Holly didn't like not being in the know. It was necessary, though, the last thing she wanted was for the woman to end up dead.

Her gaze shifted towards the time on her burner phone; she'd need to get Terry back in the car and set off if she wanted to cover more ground before morning. She squeezed her left breast to check how full it was, her feeding schedule with Terry was a mess since she had to sleep in the day and keep moving. It probably wasn't good for his development, but they didn't have much choice right now.

Her baby's cries started to fade once his mess had been attended to, and he settled to lightly kicking the air, making her smile a little. She wiped Terry's bottom clean and changed the diaper, tying the old one in a small plastic bag.

Holly came back into the room with a few cans in her arm. "I thought you could use these as well," she said, placing the drinks in the food bag. "I still think you should stay the night."

Selina sighed and buttoned up Terry's blue footsie pyjamas. "There's less traffic at night," she replied. "And, besides, you know me, I'm nocturnal." She gave the younger woman a slanted smile, picking up her baby when he started to settle.

"I have a storage unit you can dump the car at." Holly chewed her bottom lip and handed over a set of keys and a slip of paper with a name and phone number on it. "Alexia will give you a place to stay, Gotham's usual standards," she said, dryly, sighing. "So nothing too fancy, but it'll be safe for the kid."

Selina slipped the keys and paper into her jean's pocket. "She know who I am?"

"No, all she knows is that you're a friend, and that's all that matters," Holly answered, rubbing her arms like there was a chill. "So listen, try and call, you know, so I don't think you've dropped off the face of the earth again."

Selina balanced Terry in her arms. "I'll call when I'm settled in, promise," she told her, leaning in for a hug.

Holly embraced her, careful not to crush the baby. She rested her chin on Selina's shoulder and rubbed her back. "You're crazy, you know that right?"

"I used to dress up like a cat, Holly." Selina cracked a smile, resting Terry's head on her shoulder when he started to drift off again. "I caught on pretty early that I wasn't normal."

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The Walkers Bar, Boston

02/05/2014

15:35

It was raining outside and you could hear the drops of water splash against the window irritantly. The bar was barely full, while Selina hastily tried to scrub the counter clean.

Helena finished gymnastics at 16:15, which meant she had to finish up here in the next twenty
minutes she could grab the bus to the school to pick her up on time.

Selina sprayed the bar again to try and get rid of the massive sticky stain in the corner. She still had to finish unloading the new delivery since Monica was off sick again with who-the-hell knew what. She barely noticed the door open when someone knew came in, and kept her head down while she tried to scrub the counter clean.

Her face scrunched up into a frown while someone came to sit at the bar. "Be with you in a minute, bud," she drawled, dragging her nail across the thin layer of stick.

"Take your time, Selina."

Her whole body felt like it's been sprayed by Mr Freeze's gun, cold, and partly terrified. Selina, slowly, looked up to look at the guy sitting in front of her, as the protective walls she'd spent the last seven years building up started to crumble and shake.

Silky Cernak stared right back at her, smiling like the snake in the grass he was. "Or is it Irene now?" he asked, quietly, staring at her coldly. He looked the same as he did when she'd last seen him. Still balled, heavily built with muscle, and a sharp chin that you could cut yourself on. "Ya know, for a fugitive you've done pretty okay."

"How'd you find me?" she managed to keep her voice steady because there was no way in hell she'd give him the satisfaction of letting her fear show. Her eyes flickered around the bar, looking for any other unfamiliar faces.

Silky's smile faded and his expression grew darker. "I didn't, someone else did." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a business card which had a few drops of blood stained on it. "Wanna guess who?"

The card was a crisp white with a name and number printed on it in black letters, Roman Sionis. Fuck.

She pulled her shoulders back and swallowed a bad taste in her mouth, refusing to show weakness. "He give you that himself?" she asked, levelly.

"Found it in my house, all the way in Florida." His eyes were hard like stone. "Guess whose blood that is."

The inside of her mouth was dry and her throat hurt. There was only one other person who had helped her steal that money. "Johnson's," she answered, evenly.

"Yeah, the idiot visited his Ma back in Gotham." Silky smiled scornfully. "Didn't take long for them to grab him, who knows how long they had him for.

"I'm surprised he didn't kill you," she said, coldly. "Or maybe it's just a question of when."

He snarled. "Or a question of bargaining who takes the blame?"

Her hands twitched to strangle him, but she restrained herself. "And, you're honestly stupid enough to think he won't kill you afterwards, dumbass?"

Silky grabbed her wrist, making her eyes narrow warningly because he was one move away from getting a glass smashed over his head.

"He wants his money back, all fifty-five grand," he hissed, digging his nails into her wrist.
Her gaze grew sharper. "Get your hand off me, Silky," she whispered dangerously low.

Silky squeezed her wrist, almost defiantly, for a second longer before releasing her and then shifted back in his seat. "He wants you and me to get him double the amount back." He glanced over his shoulder at the door. "Then he says we're square. He leaves you and me alone for good."

Selina swore under her breath, looking around the bar self-consciously, but it was even emptier than before. "How do I know he won't kill me regardless?" she argued, crossing her arms.

"Well, you see, honey." He leant closer in on the bar. "You seem to be under the delusion you have a choice, Irene." Then his eyes flashed to the clock behind the bar, grimacing. "And, you better hurry, Helena needs picking up, remember?"

Her chest tightened, as a shiver ran down her spine. How long had they been watching her?

Despite how vulnerable she may have looked, Selina rushed out of the bar and into the back room, slamming the door behind her. She grabbed her jacket, her arms shaking when she tried to put it on, while her heart raced and her stomach churned like she was going to vomit.

Selina grabbed her bag and rushed out of the back door, not bothering to lock it behind her.

Helena kicked her trainers against the pavement while she waited for her mama underneath the bus stop. Her leotard was folded away in her backpack so she was dressed in a warm red hooded jacket and thick jeans.

Her thoughts were interrupted when a large burly man came to sit next to her, like right next to her with no in-between seat or gap. Helena frowned a little and craned her neck to look up at him; he looked a bit like a pit-bull. He didn't look at her and just faced forward, dressed up in a dark suit with no tie, and he had a lot of rings on his fingers—her frown deepened—his knuckles were scratched and bruised looking.

Her attention was diverted when a similarly dressed, and even bulkier looking man, came to stand near her while he looked at his phone.

Helena looked at them warily, feeling uneasy for some reason, like how she felt when she and Kelly had secretly watched that horror movie of the scary girl in the well.

She looked back at the school which was at the end of the street on the corner, the gymnastics' teacher would still be there and technically Helena was supposed to be waiting with her if Mama was ever late, but her mama would have phoned the school beforehand.

Her ears pricked up when she heard the bus approach, feeling her anxiety melt away. The bus came to a stop and four people got off, the usual four; the lady with red hair, the old man with a walking stick, the young man who always wore headphones, and the fourth person was, Helena tensed, the fourth person wasn't her mama, instead it was a lady in a purple woollen hat.

The two men didn't get on the bus when all the people had got off.

Helena twisted her hands uneasily, feeling cold. Would the gymnastics' teacher even still be in the school? She bit her lip. The woman at the office would still be there, though, and a few teachers as well. It was safe, and Mama had warned her about strange men and women kidnapping kids.

She pulled up her hood and slid off the bench, stiffening when she felt the men's eyes bore into her, but otherwise didn't react, even though her legs felt shaky. Helena gripped the straps of her
backpack and looked both ways before she crossed the road, keeping her head down.

She could hear two other sets of footsteps from behind her, making her stomach drop. Her neck was stiff and she started to walk faster, only shy of breaking out into a run. The footsteps behind her grew fainter. Were they going away?

Swallowing a big lump in her throat, Helena looked behind her and slowed down. The two men were both on their phones.

"...Okay," the one who looked like a pit-bull said, glaring at her from the corner of his eye.

Helena hunched her shoulders up and bit down on her tongue, ready to make a bolt for it.

Then, the two men turned their backs to her and walked away.

She frowned and came to a stop, watching their retreating forms. Her fear faded a little bit but the bad sensation in her stomach stayed put.

A bus drove passed her, making her blink quickly and shake her head. She started to walk to the school entrance when she heard someone running towards her who sounded very out of breath.

Helena squinted, to see who it was, balling her hands into fists just in case it was someone like those two men.

The tension left her shoulders and the bad feeling went away as soon as she saw it was her mama running, drenched from the rain.

Helena grinned and hurried towards her when her mom stopped to lean against the school wall, coughing badly.

"Mama!" Helena practically tackled the woman, wrapping her hands around her mama's waist, protectively.

Mama's chest was heaving. "I had to get, get a-another bus," she wheezed, bending down to Helena's level to cup her face. "Everything okay, Kitten?"

Helena frowned, seeing how worried she looked. The girl looked over her shoulder warily and then back at her mama, hesitating before she spoke. "There were these weird men at the bus stop," she said, quietly, shifting on the spot, her feet felt squishy from the rain.

Her mama's face drained of colour, looking ill, as she rested her hands on Helena's shoulders. "What did they do?"

"Nothing," Helena answered, shrugging, feeling like she was making a big deal out of nothing. "They just didn't seem nice..."

"Oh, God," Mama whispered, voice almost trembling, which isn't something that happens a lot because her mama is as tough as nails and the boldest person Helena's ever known.

*Something isn't right.*

"Mama?" Helena gripped her mom's hand tightly, while her brow creased. "Are you okay?"

A small hesitant smile crawled onto Mama's face, looking painful to produce, as the woman stood up and wrapped an arm around Helena. "I was just worried, there's a lot of bad people in this city, remember?" she replied, as the two of them started to walk down the street. Home was only a
couple of blocks away, but the rain always made the walk seem longer.

"I didn't talk to them," Helena told her, knowing the Stranger Danger rule.

Her mama didn't look at her. "Good, baby, that's good," she murmured, acting more than a little strange, but that's what most moms did when stuff like this happened…

The living room window was open, with Selina sitting on the smoking. It was dark outside and cloudy, already past nine at night, so her daughter was safely tucked in bed.

There was a black car parked outside across the street, which had been there since she brought Helena home. She let the tobacco fill her lungs before she released it, as the smoke escaped through the window and spread out.

Then, the phone started ringing.

Selina tossed the cigarette out of the window and got to her feet, feeling stiff. The ringing was loud and would wake up Helena if she didn't answer it, but she still found herself hesitating. It wasn't until the phone rang for a fifth time did Selina go over and answer it, pressing the cordless phone to her ear.

"Are you in or not?" It was Silky, and he sounded pissed off.

She narrowed her eyes at the wall. "I'm not promising anything until I know my daughter's gonna be safe at the end of this," she more or less hissed, running a hand through her short hair.

There was a bad static noise in the background like he was on a street; payphone? "Sionis wants to make an example outta you, so you play nice and you might make it home with only half a beating," he answered.

She gritted her teeth. "Will my daughter be safe?"

There was silence, and then hushed whispers from the other line, more than two people. "…Okay," Silky was speaking to someone else. "…You cooperate and they'll ignore the kid, she's nothing, as long as she stays out of the way, she's fine," he told her.

Selina scratched her arm, agitated. She looked over at the window where the car was still parked outside, and then at the bedroom door, a cold feeling wash over her.

*How far would she get before they hunted her down again and killed Helena as retribution?*

The room she was in felt small like there wasn't enough air to breathe. She'd burned her bridges when she'd escaped prison and left Gotham, the only ally she had left was Holly but she didn't want to drag the girl into this mess…

"…Okay, I'm in," she said, quietly, pressing her back against the corner of the room. "What do I have to do?"

Silky let out a quite satisfied/relieved hum. "He made it clear that he wants his money back, didn't care how, so I suggested a Jewellery heist, just like the old days," he sounded bitter. "You heard of the Touch of Gold Jewellers?"

She had to rack her brains for a second before nodding. "Yes." It was on the edge of Boston.

"I've organised it for the tenth. We go in, get the stuff and leave, simple," he said.
"And, then I get a bullet popped in my skull, right?" she replied, dryly, wanting to smash the phone against the wall like it was Silky's head. "Meanwhile you get off scot-free."

"Better than the alternative, though," he snarled. "One word from Sionis and they come in there and kill you and the kid right now."

A spark of anger lit up inside of her. "With you dead too," her voice rose. "Sionis can go die in a hole for all I care."

There was a harsh growl from the other end of the line. "You want me to tell him that? Huh?" he snapped. "Get off your fucking high horse, Selina, or your little girl will pay for it," his tone became darker.

Selina's insides shrivelled up as she pushed herself off the wall and walked back over to the window. "Don't fuck me around, Silky," she hissed, digging her long nails into her palm.

"Then don't start playing games, because it ain't just you who's gonna lose, Selina," he shot back coldly. "Now, I need to be sure you're not gonna mess this shit up, okay," his voice lowered. "Because if you step a toe—"

"I already told you I was in," she interrupted, sick of being talked down to. Silky used to be her henchman and now he thought he had the balls to talk to her like she was a tramp on the street? Fuck him, and fuck Sionis. Her anger coiled around her like a fire. "Go near my daughter again and I'll cut your nuts off," was the last thing she said before she slammed the phone back on the hook.

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**South Dakota**

**09/20/2023**

**21:00**

Terry had fallen back to sleep in his car seat in the back while Selina drove through the state with the radio on. She sighed, leaning back in her seat. It'd be another couple of hours until she reached the state border.

The radio was playing another latest pop song with catchy lyrics but it all sort of buzzed together. Her thoughts drifted back to Powers and the information Warren had left her. There wasn't much to go on, just mainly biology info and more interestingly, a list of twenty-two names.

The only thing she understood was that Powers was involved in her husband's murder, even if she still couldn't prove it, and that the project Warren was involved in linked back to his colleagues at STAR labs.

Her gaze flickered to the glove compartment for a second before facing the road again. The car behind her was too close to her bumper and it's lights were too bright, making her squint. Selina's brow furrowed, feeling uneasy as she sped up more to give herself some more distance, glancing at Terry in the wing-mirror.

She gripped the steering wheel tighter, feeling the lights of the car behind her burn her neck. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, opening the glove compartment with her free hand; a gun inside.

A white cleaning van overtook the car behind her and went in front, blocking most of her view since it was so close. She was wedged in between them. Selina's throat was dry, while she tried to think quickly, taking the gun to put it on her lap.
She tried to overtake but there was a line of cars on the left side blocking her chance, which is
due when the car behind hit her bumper and the van in front slowed down.

Fuck. How did they even find her so fast?

Selina looked to her left, there was a small gap between the next car coming. She swerved and
slammed her foot on the exhaust, making the wheels screech at the sudden speed. The car in front
honked loudly as she hastily overtook the van, narrowly avoiding a collision.

She raced ahead, trying to leave the car and van behind, but they zoomed after her. "Shit, shit,
shit," she hissed to herself, squeezing the steering wheel as she drove along the road, trying to find
a side road she could slip through or maybe a neighbourhood or somewhere to hide.

The van was getting closer, but unfortunately for her so was the small silver car in front of which
was driving within the speed limit.

She honked the horn loudly, edging to overtake before the lorry up ahead zeroed in. "God damn it,"
she muttered furiously when the silver car maintained the same speed.

She changed gear and overtook, skimming passed the lorry before it hit, feeling her heart race.
That old mix of fear and thrill resurfacing. She started to feel sick when she recognised it. Was…
was she actually getting a buzz out of this?

The van behind hit her bumper, harder this time. Violently jerking Terry's seat forward, giving
the baby a harsh awakening.

Terry started crying, terrified. Selina felt like she'd vomit, but that fear was soon replaced with a
boiling rage.

Those bastards had hurt her baby.

She clicked the safety off and wound down the car window, licking her lips in anticipation, she did
a U-turn onto the other side of the road, aiming her gun out of the window she shot out the van's
side window. The windows smashed, but the second time she shot she killed the driver.

The van swerved but she was already racing ahead down the road when the black car crashed into
the van.

Terry was balling his eyes out, and Selina's heart was still thundering against her chest. The gun
was dropped back on her lap, trembling hands gripping onto the steering wheel too tightly.

She looked through her wing-mirror, but no cars were following her, the crash had most likely
blocked the entire road. She could see a mass of lights from more cars getting caught in the mix.

Swallowing, she sighed shakily, turning onto one of the lesser used roads. "S-shhh, baby," she tried
to soothe him. "Shhh, it's okay, mama's here," she reassured, wanting to check him over, but scared
to pull over.

Terry continued to cry, growing red, worrying her more. Selina pulled up behind a tree and turned
all her lights off. She clicked the safety back on and slipped the gun into her pocket before she
undid her seatbelt.

"I know, baby, I know," she cooed, leaning over the gap in the two front seats to unbuckle her
baby. She took him out of his seat and cradled him. He wasn't injured from what she could see, just
frightened. "Shh, honey, shhh." She kissed his head and closed her eyes. "Mama's here, don't
Roxbury, Boston

02/10/2014

19:50

Selina scrambled with her keys as she ran out of the elevator.

Rachel hadn't answered any of her texts, not even a damn phone call.

Selina mentally swore at herself, she should have called in sick or told Dave to go fuck himself when he'd made her work late because Monica was in the hospital.

When she reached the door the keys scraped against the keyhole a couple of times before inserting right. Selina unlocked the door and burst into her apartment, expecting blood all over the walls.

There wasn't any blood but there were seven heavy muscled guys in the living room and kitchen. Two were cooking something in the microwave while the others were crowded at the table near the TV.

Her gaze zeroed in on Helena and felt a white hot rage overtake her. Her daughter was asleep on Silky's lap while the man stroked the little girl's hair like he was petting a dog.

"Get away from her!" She lunged forward before the others could grab her, wanting to sink her nails into Silky's eyes.

Silky froze as a flash of fear washed over his face, but the lucky son of a bitch was saved from a royal beating when two of the men nearest him intercepted her and punched her in the stomach.

Selina let out a growl and grabbed the man by the balls—his face twisted painfully and he curved in on himself-crushing them in her grip before the second guy restrained her.

Silky pushed Helena off his lap—the bastard must have drugged her with something because she was out cold. "I didn't hurt her, Selina," he said, quickly, while Helena slumped against the arm of the couch like dead weight. "Boys, come on, let her go. We need her."

Selina elbowed the one behind her in the face, breaking free, shoving the other one away. "Don't touch me," she warned.

The guy gritted his teeth and cracked his knuckles in restrained anger, but stepped back to give her more room while the other nursed a broken nose.

She walked over to her daughter and scooped her up in her arms, cradling her protectively while she glared at Silky. "What. Did. You. Do?" her voice was like ice.

Silky got to his feet meeting her glare head on. "It's just to keep her out of the way, she'll be fine, won't even remember it happening."

Selina snarled, looking around the apartment when suddenly her stomach curdled. "What did you do to Rachel?" Her eyes narrowed at him.

Silky's expression became grim, closed off. "We tried to drug her but…she was making too much
noise." He sighed, running a hand over his face. Selina felt cold, numb, when she realised what they'd done, looking around her apartment for any evidence. "We're on a schedule, okay. The boys took care of it. Just leave it at that," he warned her, harshly.

Selina held her tongue, holding Helena more tightly while she glowered at her former partner. "If you wanted to avoid making a mess you shouldn't have come here."

He shot her scornful smile. "Had to make sure you wouldn't get cold feet, Selina."

She felt the men edge closer, like an ambush. Selina jutted her chin out defiantly, cradling Helena's head against her shoulder. "I never do. Now, are we gonna do this or not?" she asked, levelly.

He stared at her for a moment, the corner of his lip twitching upwards for a second before his mouth set into a thin line. "The place closes in an hour, we leave in twenty minutes." He moved away from her towards the kitchen. "Leave the kid and get dressed."

Selina's gaze flickered to the goons before back at her daughter. She felt like a trapped canary before the mine gave way, no way out. Silently, she walked passed them towards the bedroom, feeling their eyes linger on her.

She shut the door behind her, allowing herself to sigh and slump against the door when she was safely in the room. Selina gently placed Helena on the bed, taking off her My Little Pony trainers, tossing them on the floor while she stared at her daughter's peaceful expression in the dim light.

Selina quickly changed Helena out of her clothes and into the yellow baggy t-shirt she wore like a nightdress. She tucked her under the thick covers and made sure the stuffed toy kitty with the big eyes was nestled under her arm.

Helena didn't even stir awake, which both relieved and worried Selina. At least Helena wouldn't be scared by any of this, but at the same time she was drugged and who the hell knew what else those sick fucks had done to her. It was the gaps in unaccounted time which made her angriest.

Selina stroked some hair out of Helena's face, kissing her forehead. "I'm so sorry, baby," she whispered softly, caressing her dark hair. "I'll find us a way out of this..."

She still could rely on Holly, but the woman had gone underground and it would take weeks to track her down again. She felt like an ant underneath a magnifying glass, every move she tried to make was scrutinised by Black Mask's men and Silky himself.

Double-crossing them was at the forefront of her mind but she couldn't endanger Helena. It was the first time in years Selina felt genuinely isolated.

There was a loud banging at the door. "We ain't got all day!" It was one of Black Mask's men.

Selina rubbed her eyes and started to steel herself, looking at Helena one last time before she kissed her cheek. "I'll find a way out of this, Kitten, promise," she murmured gently.

She slipped off the bed and walked over to her closet, kneeling down on the floor, underneath the bottom of the wardrobe was a fake layer of wood. Selina lifted up the wood slate to reveal her old costume.

South Dakota

09/20/2023
The bus station was mostly empty (minus a family of four and an underfed looking backpacker) when Selina paid at the ticket machine with the money Holly had given her.

Terry was still asleep in his car seat, finally having settled. The bag of food and diaper bag was next to him on the floor. She picked him and the bags up after she took her printed ticket from the holder.

The speakers chimed. "The 702 to Minneapolis is now boarding at gate six."

Selina made her way over to gate six with the car seat in one hand and the tickets, food, and the diaper bag in the other.

She wandered towards the back of the bus and picked a secluded set of seats on the left side, placing the car seat near the window while she sat down on the aisle seat. Her back ached so it was a relief when she was finally able to sit down again, and the bus's seats were actually pretty comfy.

Once she got into Minneapolis she'd need to change onto a bus to Chicago, and then steal a car from there to get to New Jersey. It'd be a long trip. Selina stuffed the bags underneath the seat while she kept her handbag on her lap. She closed her eyes and leaned against the car seat while Terry softly snored.

The bus started moving, the vibrations from the engine were almost soothing as she started to drift off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I've extended the chapter count because I don't think I can keep up writing over 7,000 words every two weeks, it's a lot to cram in. Plus I don't know about you, but when chapters are too long I tend to skim read.

But, anyway, I hope this chapter answered some of the questions about what the hell Selina has been doing these last sixteen years. There's still a lot to explain but I'll try and keep it spread out so it doesn't overload the story.

Oh, and Happy New Year.
22:30

Batman grabbed the Joker by the wrist when the clown pulled out a grey remote control.

Huntress and Blue Beetle were taking care of the infected hostages but they still had a bomb to find, and he needed to get a blood sample of the hostages so Gotham general could make the antidote. It didn't help that Huntress didn't have her utility belt or that Robin had gone AWOL.

The Joker brought a knife down and nearly struck Batman across the chest, but The Dark Knight twisted the clown's wrist around his back, kicking the inside of his leg.

The Joker winced when Batman twisted his wrist too tight and roughly grabbed the clown's other hand. The knife dropped to the ground when the Joker's grip was forced to loosen.

Oracle was scanning the tower for the bomb but there was still no sign of it, which made the uneasy feeling in his stomach grow, something was amiss and he'd been so caught up with Jason that he may have let something slip.

Batman shoved him to the ground and ripped the trigger out of the clown's hand when suddenly something grabbed him from behind and bit into his neck, digging its sharp nails into Batman's face. The Vigilante fought him off, twisting around to punch his attacker, but this meant the Joker's hands broke free.

The hostage literally tried to eat Batman's chin like a rabid dog.

The clown picked up the knife, while still on his stomach, and stabbed Batman in the hip.

It was a sharp pain, and for a second the mind-crazed hostage overwhelmed him which gave the Joker a moment to break free.

"Hands off." Blue Beetle grabbed the foaming man off Batman and punched the civilian in the face (the punch needed to be improved or the boy was going to break his wrist).

The hostage hit the ground while The Joker got out of reach, dancing along the edge of the building. "You're getting old Batsy!" the clown chimed, grinning.

Batman let out a harsh breath and removed the knife from his hip, grunting from the burn of pain. He forced himself to his feet and narrowed his eyes at the hostage, these people were running out of time.
The infected civilian's skin was growing paler than before, like a ghost, and the foaming from the mouth was getting worse.

"Blue Beetle, cover me," he hissed, crouching down to the victim's level.

Blue Beetle's eyes widened for a second before a confident smile slid onto his face. "You got it, Jefe." His smile became crooked when his arms morphed into small cannons when three of the hostages scrambled towards them. "This is probably gonna hurt a little," he warned lightly, sweeping the blast across when the three of them attacked.

The blast knocked the three infected civilian's back while they were in mid-air.

Meanwhile, Batman was crouched down next to the injured man—who was starting to regain his bearings—and took a blood sample.

"Oracle, I'm sending you a sample," Batman said, touching his com-link, ignoring the persistent pain in his hip. "Have Gotham general make the antidote." The needle dug into the man's arm, while Batman held him down in place.

Barbara needed sleep, so...badly. Her eyes drooped while her bruised fingertips typed away, trying to keep her eyes focussed on three different tasks.

She blindly reached for her coffee and scowled when she realised it was kept. "Damn it," she groaned, pushing the mug to the side.

The computer pinged when the blood sample data was sent to her. "Batman, I'm sending the sample over now," she said, quickly forwarding the data. "I've been looking for the bomb, but it's nowhere in the building unless it's underground, but the cameras didn't catch him or anyone suspicious down there."

"And, what about Harley?" Batman's voice sounded strained. Injured?

"Still missing." She checked the camera footage of the roof, rewinding to see the Joker stab him in the hip. "GCPD are waiting to go in and release the security team. Did you disarm the trigger?"

Batman picked up the trigger while Huntress and Blue Beetle fought the hostages and the Joker stood by and watched, waiting...

"Batman?" Oracle was speaking.

The Dark Night's eyes narrowed at the trigger, his stomach cramping. "It's a fake." He crushed the remote in his hands. "There never was a bomb." His eyes wandered up to meet the Joker's and were met by a large vindictive smile. "He just wanted to draw us out."

Then it clicked:

Poison Ivy.

New Toxin.

Harley Quinn missing.

He'd been so focussed on what was in front of him he'd failed to notice what was going on right underneath his nose.
"Find Robin now," he ordered.

"He's turned off his communicator," Oracle replied, hurriedly typing. "I'll access his tracker."

"Find him." Batman's gaze grew harsher as he glared at the Joker, making his way over through the chaos.

The breather mask made his breaths loud and echo around the long dark bunker. The walls were covered in thick vines and there was a flood of old polluted water four inches deep that submerged his black boots.

Robin hurried down the hallway as the air seemed to get hotter, not a good sign considering the obvious circumstances. He slipped down a passageway and tensed when he heard humming echoing from down the dim hallway.

Robin entered a vast space with a lot of light, resembling a control centre which was now bombarded with green, plants growing out from the cracks and rusting the metal like an abandoned car.

He stuck to the shadows and drew closer and then froze, gaping slightly when he saw the ignoramus plant in the centre of the room. It was like some horror film version of a beanstalk except that it was pulsing.

He felt like slapping himself because of course, Poison Ivy wouldn't just use a heating tank like any other normal human being!

"Okay, think," he whispered to himself, walking around the massive plant, careful not to trip over the roots which were submerged in the shallow water.

He kneeled down and touched the roots, feeling the warmth beneath his fingers. The plant must go into hibernation and drop its temperature.

He quickly tried to remember his biology class. Okay, simple stuff. Assuming the plant operated on the same temperature basis as others, for it to deactivate the room temperature needed to be low enough so it could go back down to -5 C. Starch was broken down in the roots and in some cases could be stored there and it requires the consumption of oxygen.

So, this bunker must have a heating system to control the plant's temperature, lower the bunker temperature to freezing before the plant reaches 185 degrees. Okay, simple…

He hastily scanned the temperature of the plant; it was already at 167 degrees.

Oh, okay, that was plenty of time, yeah…plenty of time depending on how fast it'd take for the plant to finish heat up.

Robin opened his computer, hiding further in the shadows when he saw Harley come back into the room wearing a black gas mask, with a few empty boxes of Chinese food. A full arsenal of guns and other dangerous looking devices were strapped around her black and red jumpsuit.

"Once I get you up there, where the air is rarefied," she sang, dumping the packaging in a small muddy area in the far corner of the room. "We'll just glide, starry-eyed!" her voice screeched, making Robin wince.

Harley hummed to herself, leaving the rubbish buried underneath a pile of dirt and water as she
walked off.

Robin narrowed his eyes and glanced back at the plant. He brought up his holographic computer and photographed the plant.

"Are you sure they aren't zombies!?” Blue Beetle yelled, blasting one of the grinning creatures back.

Huntress kicked one of the foaming citizen's in the face, knocking him back before he could bite her head off. "Not his style!” she shouted back.

The roof of Wayne tower was a battleground, with the Joker fighting Batman as well, as her and Blue Beetle trying to subdue the five infected citizens who kept coming back up when they knocked them down.

They still needed to find the bomb, but none of them had barely had the chance to catch their breath from the fighting, let alone slip away and it didn't help they were a man short since Robin hadn't come back.

Huntress cringed when one of the female hostages grabbed the back of her hair and tried to bite into her scalps while its fingers got tangled in her hair. She bent down and grabbed the woman by the back of her head, flipping her over onto the ground.

Blue Beetle restrained one of the infected hostages by stapling him head to toe on the roof until the man was locked down tight.

The woman who'd tried to bite her got up to take a swing at Huntress. "Hey, Blue, heads up!” Huntress yelled, swinging the woman around towards him.

Blue Beetle stunned the woman with his blaster and grinned, giving Huntress a thumbs up. "Nice one—Ah!"

He quickly projected a force field to protect himself when a stray bullet from the Joker's gun nearly hit him. Blue Beetle dodged out of the way of Batman and Joker's fight, landing next to Huntress.

"Better save the thumbs up for later,” she cautioned, as the fifth hostage made a move towards her.

Oracle brought up Robin's tracker and scrutinised the screen, he was on Mid-River Island but the signal was flickering in and out.

There was a loud beep when an incoming message from Robin appeared on her screen. "What the hell are you doing?” she muttered to herself, opening the message.

Her brow rose when she saw the photograph of this mutated monster of a plant and then the caption of the information below.

/Oracle, the Jokers stint is a distraction. The hostages need to be frozen within the next 6 hours or they're dead. This plant is going to release the REAL toxic gas once it reaches 185 C.

Don't worry I'm on it, just get the Joker in custody and freeze the hostages.

- Robin/

"Ah, shit,” she swore under her breath and reached to bring up Batman's com link.
Then, suddenly her phone rang.

She shot it an irritated glare before picking it up to see who was calling, frowning when she saw it was Alfred. Why wasn't he using the coms?

"Alfred?" she answered the phone.

"Ah, Ms Gordon, apologies," Alfred's voice was a little too hurried. "Unfortunately Master Jason has escaped and jammed the computer's communication."

Barbara winced, burying her face in her hand. "God damn it, Jason," she hissed.

"Quite. Master Richard is on his way—he was incapacitated."

She nodded, raising her head. "Thanks, Alfred."

"Good luck, ma'am." He hung up a second later.

Oracle cracked her knuckles and opened up all of the team's com-links.

"I'm surprised it took you so long to notice," Joker said, throwing marbles on the floor, they exploded, forcing Batman back as he shielded himself from the blast with his cape as he reached into his belt. "The kids slowing you down?" a simpering smile was on the clown's face.

Batman threw a round ball of chord that opened out into a claw-like rope, binding the Joker.

Huntress narrowed her eyes when the last remaining two hostages lunged towards Batman. She ran over and tackled one from behind while her dad headed for the Joker.

One of the infected citizens put her in a headlock while she hung onto the others back. The one beneath her was fighting to throw her off while the guy behind tried to drag her back.

Huntress sharply elbowed the one behind her in the ribs and locked her legs around the other one's torso. She moved her shoulder back and punched the creature repeatedly in the face as some drool dripped over her face, making her scrunch up her nose in disgust.

Blue Beetle flew in from behind and grabbed the guy over and lifting him up in the air, so she could take the other one down. Unfortunately, Jaime's grip wasn't as strong as he thought as the infected man struggled and made it hard for the hero to hover/fly straight.

The infected citizen underneath crumbled onto the floor when she'd finally managed to knock him out, a multitude of bruises on the man's face, making it look a red and purple swollen colour.

Blue Beetle threw the struggling man onto the ground and stapled him down, while Huntress moved out of the way to let him tie up the other one. She surveyed the rooftop and let out a small sigh of relief when all the hostages were down for the count.

"So, is now a good time for a thumbs up?" Blue Beetle shot her a smile.

The corner of her lip slowly quirked upwards but the moment was interrupted when she saw Batman grab the Joker by the neck and holstered him up in the air while the clown grinned, making her tense.

"Where's Harley?" her dad demanded, harshly.
The Joker chuckled. "Been eyeing the merchandise, ey, Batsy?"

"Everyone listen up!" Oracle's voice made Huntress jump. "Robin's found the Joker's real toxin at Mid-River Island and it's going to blow once it hits 185 degrees."

Batman froze with the Joker still held in the air, narrowing his eyes at the clown. "Damage control?" he spoke through gritted teeth.

"Robin says he's got it handled, but we need to freeze the hostages or the toxin will kill them within 24 hours of inhaling," Oracle explained quickly. "But we have another problem, it's Jason. He escaped and he'll be on the roof in five minutes."

Batman dropped the Joker onto the ground when a prickling ran down his spine. He thought quickly and looked over at Blue Beetle and Huntress and then at the infected civilians.

"You're hurt," Huntress said, moving closer to touch his arm.

His eyes narrowed. "I've had worse."

She sighed and looked around warily. "Get the Joker out of here," Huntress said, as her hands curled into fists. "Nightwing can help Robin."

Batman nodded, resisting the urge to touch his wound. "You hear that Oracle?"

"Loud and clear, sending instructions to him now."

"Oh, no fun!" the Joker whined, pouting.

They ignored him and put handcuffs around his pale white wrists. "Oracle, send the GCPD up along with emergency services and have the hostages transferred to the freezing unit," Batman ordered, grabbing the Joker by the back of the ropes.

Huntress eyed his wound worriedly. "I'll grab a spare belt and back you up," she said, firmly. "Just go, now."

Batman felt a small swell of pride but didn't let it show and just nodded, taking out his grappling gun. He aimed for the next building and released it, jumping off the roof with the Joker in tow.

"Yahtzee!" The Joker yelled as he and Batman swung down.

Huntress swallowed a lump in her throat, watching her dad disappear behind a skyscraper. There was a faint sound coming from down below, which she presumed was the GCPD storming in.

"You need my help?" Blue Beetle appeared behind her.

The automatic 'no' got stuck behind her tongue. "...No, thanks, you can't," she said, turning around, clicking a button on her wrist computer to summon her motorcycle. "It's personal." She gave him a look, not sure how to properly explain. Jason would be here any moment. "Just... if you see a guy in a Red Helmet, stay away, please."

Jaime looked at her intently for a second or two, frowning. "...Okay." He nodded, taking a step back. "Go kick some ass." He cracked a smile.

Her brow twitched and the corner of her mouth curved upwards, while that funny feeling in her stomach—Mother of God stay focussed!—Her lips drooped in horror.
He was distracting her.

"I gotta go!" she exclaimed, pushing passed him when she felt her cheeks heat up.

Jaime didn't have a clue and just stared at her in alarm.

Robin wiped his forehead when he felt the moisture on his face build up. Harley was oblivious, singing a tune as she adjusted the heat settings. The heating room was further below and overcrowded with thick vines that wrapped around the heating tanks like they were hot water bottles.

He was crawling along the ceiling like a spider on the wall, using the vines to hang on.

"That you are my one and only, no exception to this rule," she chimed, as she messed with the heat settings.

Robin withdrew a smoke bomb and threw it against the wall near Harley, a grey smoke surrounded her making the woman jump in surprise and pull out her gun.

Robin swooped down and attacked, hiding the smoke to sneak up behind her and deliver a firm roundhouse kick to her face.

She was knocked back into the shallow water and blindly shot into the smoke, hitting one of the fat plant vines.

Robin rushed forward, lifting her arm upwards when she tried to shoot him (there was a rustle of movement), and disarmed her, taking the ammo out of the gun and then tossed it to the side. He restrained her hands behind her back.

"Don't touch me, brat," she snarled, as he handcuffed her. "I swear I'll skin your little balls off-"

"Yeah, save it for the police," Robin interrupted, dryly, taking away the weapons strapped to her body.

His ears perked up when he heard a slithering noise from behind him. Robin stood up and braced himself with some Birdarangs in hand, but the smoke hadn't cleared properly, thinning out across the room like smog.

It was only a second later when a thick vine wrapped around his ankle like a whip and yanked hard.

He hit the water, making a small crack in his breather, as water leaked in.

Harley started laughing. "Oh, you're in for it now, Bird-boy!"

Robin slashed the vine with the blade of his Birdarang but it only made a deep cut. His eyes bulged when he saw the torn threads of plant repair itself. "Oh, crap," he said in a strangled voice before a large vine wrapped around his torso and smashed him against the ceiling.

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**Gotham City**

**09/20/2023**

**23:00**
The wound on his hip was bleeding too much, he needed to do a quick patch up or he passed out from blood loss before Jason got the chance to shoot.

Batman landed on the rooftop, they were a fair distance away from Wayne tower, but not far enough. He dropped the Joker on the floor.

"Whoop, what a ride. You should charge," the Joker rambled, resting on his knees, grinning to himself. "You'd be rich."

Batman ignored him and reached into his belt, taking out a thick paste patch to contain the bleeding. It wasn't much but it was better than nothing, and he could always sterilise it later (Alfred would fuss) and Helena could sew it up for him, her stitches were neater than his.

"Batman," Oracle said, making him tense. "Jason's closing in, you need to move."

"Any news on Robin?" he asked, keeping the concern out of his voice, as he narrowed his eyes at the incoming figure approaching.

"No updates, but Nightwing's nearly there," she answered. "Batman, Jason's closing in."

"I know." Batman squared his shoulders and stood straighter as he watched the Red Hood jump and run across the building at a reckless speed.

There was no point running.

Oracle sighed quietly. "Good luck."

He signed off his com, and smoothed his hand over the bandage, standing in front of the Joker.

There was a large girth between the next roof, but Jason jumped anyway. Batman's lips pursed tightly and his eyes narrowed disapprovingly.

Jason barely made the jump and landed on his hands and knees, breathing heavily. Batman didn't give him chance to get up and threw a pair of Batarangs at him.

The Red Hood rolled out of the way and withdrew a set of new guns; which had most likely been raided from the cave's evidence locker.

"Oh!" The Joker squealed. "Red, where you been? You missed the appetisers and the balloons."

His eyes gleamed as his voice lowered to something revoltingly soft and silky, "I missed you."

Jason rose up from the ground, his body shaking with rage when he laid eyes on the Joker and started shooting. Batman shielded the Joker with his cape and launched towards Jason.

Robin choked when he was smashed against the wall. He couldn't breathe properly and his back was sore.

Harley was giggling to herself while she tried to get loose from the handcuffs.

The vine let him go when it flung him across the room in the air. Robin grabbed onto the ends of his cape to billow it out, flipping in the air to land safely. His feet scraped against the ground and tripped over the roots underneath.

He stopped himself from falling flat on his face and quickly dodged and incoming attack from another set of small vines. Robin threw a pair of Birdarangs at the imposing roots, impaling them
into the wall.

Robin ran to the heater, having to dodge and flip to avoid the mutated plant's attacks, while the water splashed beneath his feet.

Harley a writhed on the floor in frustrated, and her eyes widened when a giant vine nearly smacked into her. "Ah! Urk, for Pete's sake," she growled, struggling to her feet to get out of the way.

The boy wonder aimed his grappling gun at the wall above the heating tank and released, the hook dug into the wall. He reeled the hook in, which lifted him off the ground and towards the heating tank at a startling speed.

The vine wrapped around his stomach when his heels hit the metal tank. Robin hung onto the gun as the vine tried to pull, digging into his ribs.

There was a faint sound in the background he couldn't place.

He gritted his teeth and looked down at the controls, they weren't digital seeing how the circuits would probably die from the amount of moisture in the room. He struggled with the dials while the plant tugged harder, making it impossible to breathe.

Robin forced the dial to turn, switching the temperature back to below freezing as his hold on the grappling gun weakened.

He couldn't breathe.

The vine gave one final yank, bruising his ribs and making him feel like he was going to vomit and suffocate both at the same time.

The sound of a motorcycle ripped through the vines and into the room just as Robin was dragged through the air.

With a frighteningly large knife in hand, Nightwing slashed the fat vine holding Robin while he rode on through.

The vine spit in two and Robin fell and was caught by Nightwing as the roots coiled around the motorcycle's wheels.

Nightwing stumbled to catch him properly, as Robin grabbed onto him like a soaked cat escaping a river. "Got you, Squirt," the young man said, warmly from through his helmet.

Robin grinned, but the moment was short-lived when the vines around them started to all move menacingly.

"We need to leave," he said, quickly, wriggling out of Nightwing's arms.

"No shit, Bird-brain," Harley exclaimed, trying to avoid the roots beneath her feet.

Nightwing got off his bike. "What about the gas?"

"I already reset the temperature. Now, come on!" Robin withdrew his bow staff to ward off the incoming vines.

The bike was swallowed by the roots while Nightwing, Robin, and Harley all made a run for it.

Nightwing was pretty much dragging him out of the bunker, the floor turning into some kind of sea
of tentacles.

They made it the main room where the mutated plant was, the room was colder than before and the roots were moving less frantically than before. Problem was that because the plant was going into hibernation it was cocooning itself, the only visible way out was getting covered in thousands of thick vines.

Harley was ahead of them, running towards the exit like a sprite on springs. Robin flipped in the air to avoid the incoming vine which now seemed to thread together like a basket.

"Gonna have to move a little faster, Squirty," Nightwing called, cutting his way through the forest of vines with his knife.

Did he really have to keep up the nicknames at a time like this?

"What do you think I'm doing?" Robin rolled his eyes, wincing when the vine splashed into the water and sprayed his face with the mud contaminated mixture.

They ran through the tunnel leading out as it started to shrink when the plants took over. Robin nearly tripped but Nightwing caught him by his collar and lifted him back up. "Careful," he said, lightly, as if they weren't running for their lives.

Wait, why was he even surprised? The whole city could be burning and Dick would still try to crack a joke.

As the vines closed around them Harley made one last power sprint and jumped over a giant root, escaping to the outside.

Nightwing grabbed Robin by his cape and threw the boy outside the closing hole, making Robin yelp in surprise as he was thrown outside and skidded across the wet mud.

Harley was stumbling to her feet, slipping in the marsh land. She, like him, was coated in mud and she didn't look very pleased. "The l-last time I-I…UH!"

He felt a swell of amusement, but it died when he saw Nightwing hadn't come out yet. Robin held his breath for one painfully long five seconds until Nightwing emerged from the hole and slid into the marsh ground next to him, breathing heavily.

Nightwing let out a deep sigh of relief, looking over his shoulder as he moved to sit next to Robin in the dirt.

And then the sound of rumbling from the ground faded, leaving them in silence. Robin gulped, waiting for something to go wrong or the gas to be released despite their efforts, but there wasn't anything, just silence.

Then, after a second Nightwing smiled and glanced over at Robin who slowly started to smile back in return. "That was pretty asterous," he said, fondly ruffling the younger boy's hair.

Batman grabbed the back of Jason's helmet and smashed it against the concrete. The two of them fought each other like it was a frantic dance with the two of them circling each other trying to land a hard blow.

The guns were grabbed and thrown out of the way while the Joker clapped his handcuffed hands in the background like a child watching a puppet show.
Batman's bandage was stained complete red by this point and stung.

Batman kept his guard up and analysed Jason's attacks, they'd been altered slightly, switched around and modified but it all stayed relatively the same. It was predictable no matter how much he tried to change it since the training was too deeply embedded.

He saw the incoming move when Jason's fingers formed position and readied to block it, but then Jason's gaze shifted to the Joker briefly and the move was altered to a different one at the last second.

The Red Hood switched direction and hit Batman on the injury at his hip, giving him the advantage. Batman was shoved back when Jason managed to land a kick in his face, causing his nose to bleed.

Jason raised his fist but froze, his body convulsed and a loud sizzling noise could be heard.

"Ooh, one of the kids came back," the Joker, slapped his hands together gleefully, smirking.

The Red Hood dropped onto his knees, there were tiny taser chords attached to his back. Huntress was on the edge of the roof holding the taser gun in her hand.

"Fuck sake, Sis!" he yelled, reaching behind to grab the wires.

Batman kicked him in the head, knocking him to the ground, cracking the helmet on the side. Huntress turned the taser off and retracted the wires when Jason grew still on the ground. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, grimacing as she walked over.

There was a faint thud from behind the vigilante. "Oh, don't be so glum, sweetie," The Joker said silkily. "Uncle J needs to have a talk with little Red over here."

Batman felt his skin prickle, sensing something wasn't right, he turned around and threw a Batarang at the—

"NO!" Huntress reached for her Crossbow.

The gun clicked and the bullet was released before the Batarang had left this grip.

Batman covered himself with his cape and slipped out of the way before the bullet hit.

The Joker held up a gun with handcuffed wrists, the ropes lay uselessly on the floor, eroded by acid.

The bullet hit Jason in the ribs.

Batman's eyes grew wide and his stomach lurched when Jason's body jerked from the impact of the bullet.

A low laugh resounded. "Hehehe."

Batman felt a violent rage wash over him as he took a step forwards to the clown but—

Huntress shot an arrow through the Joker's shoulder. The small arrow pierced through the man's purple suit and through a gap in the shoulder blade.

"Hehehe—urk."
The clown's laughter was choked as his body jerked back and the gun was dropped. Batman was already half-way towards him when the arrow hit, the clown's already injured state not registering.

Batman punched him and then broke the clown's wrists, the gun limply fell to the ground. The Dark Knight's hands coiled around the Joker's pale neck, pushing him to the ground as he closed his hands tighter around the bony neck.

The Joker's eyes bulged, bloodshot and shining with excitement, with his wide grin growing bigger. "Come on, you know you want to," he gasped out, an underlined chiming in his voice.

"Batman!" His daughter was yelling at him. "Help."

Batman's hands stayed wrapped around the Joker's throat for a few seconds longer, lingering desperately until he forced himself to let go.

The grin dimmed and a dark look flashed in the Joker's eyes. "Maybe, next time, right?" he whispered, smiling again.

Batman brought his fist down hard and knocked the clown out with one punch before he numbly handcuffed the Joker's hands to his feet for extra measure.

When he turned around Huntress was already kneeling by Jason's side putting pressure on the wound.

He clicked a button on his belt to summon the Batmobile and rushed over to them.

Jason was awake, with a bloody nose, and his body was going into shock. "H-Hel…"

She forced a pained smile. "Shh, it's gonna be okay," she whispered feverishly, keeping the pressure on the wound. "It's gonna be fine." Huntress looked ill and stroked his face with the back of her red-stained hand, kissing his forehead.

Batman took out a set of bandages, putting it on the ground as he got out all the medical supplies.

Chapter End Notes

And, now to move onto the second part of the plot. Fun times ahead.
Well, let me know what you think.
Now what?

Issue #15

Wayne Manor, Gotham

09/21/2023

02:45

Dr Tompkins had left half an hour ago, but Helena hadn't moved from her spot by the bed. Jason was laid down in bed, attached to an IV and still unconscious. They were in his old room, the place was like a museum; even Alfred hadn't moved anything when dusting.

Helena rubbed her eyes and held back a yawn. She'd slung on Dick's old green hoodie and some leggings in a rush when Alfred had told her and dad to change out of their costumes after Leslie had given Jason the all clear.

She gently held Jason's hand, biting down on the inside of her mouth.

The door creaked open, apprehensive. She looked up and saw it was her dad in the doorway, changed into the gym gear he wore under his costume. He had a mug of hot chocolate in his hand.

"I thought you could use this," he said, while he tried to hide his limp when he walked over. His gaze shifted to Jason and then back at her when he approached the foot of the bed.

A small smile flashed across her face but faded when she shrugged, sitting up."Thanks," she said, accepting the steaming mug when he came to stand by her side. "Are the others back?"

Her dad nodded faintly, staring down at Jason passively. "They're having a shower," he replied.

She hummed quietly, resting the cup on her lap. "How's the hip?"

"Fine," he replied, curtly, shifting slightly. "It just hurts when I run…or move at all," his voice stayed serious so she assumed he was trying to make a joke.

She nearly rolled her eyes, but couldn't find the energy. There was a long silence while she kept her gaze focussed on Jason, waiting for some flicker of movement or anything…

Her dad gently rested a hand on top of her head. "He'll be okay."

Helena looked at her lap, gripping the mug handle tighter. "It's afterwards that I'm worried about," she replied, softly.

"…Me too," Bruce admitted, stroking some hair out of her face, causing her to look up. "But, we'll have to deal with it as it comes," he added, glancing down at her. "And, I know it wasn't easy for you to attack him…" She sighed and glanced back at her brother, feeling an unpleasant twist in her stomach. "But, you did the right thing."

The mug was slowly burning her lap but she barely noticed, nodding faintly. "Wish it felt like it
did," she muttered.

Her dad sighed grimly, removing his hand from her head. "You should get some sleep."

"Not gonna happen," she replied, firmly, raising an eyebrow at him. "I need to be here when he wakes up."

Bruce looked at her for a moment, lips pursed until he sighed and nodded. "Okay, but come get me when he does, I'll need to talk to him."

She drank a sip of her drink and nodded. "Promise."

He gave one last look at Jason before shifting back. She took hold of her brother's hand while her dad made his way out of the room, lingering at the doorway longer than necessary.

Bruce was in the middle of making his way down to the Batcave when he saw Jaime Reyes passed out on his couch, thankfully not armoured up. Alfred was busy cleaning, which was a habit the elder man did when he was anxious.

Bruce stopped and frowned, standing in the archway of the living room. "Alfred?" He raised an eyebrow at his butler.

Alfred kept dusting the blue vase in front of him like nothing was amiss. "He came around asking for Miss Helena, but since she was preoccupied I told him to wait down here. He was asleep when I came back with his tea," he drawled, glancing over his shoulder at the teenager. "I was going to move him upstairs but he seemed quite comfortable where he was."

As Bruce walked closer he saw Jaime was drooling on the pillow, with a tartan blanket over him. "Huh, I see," he replied, folding his arms. "What about his parents?"

Alfred tucked the duster under his arm and turned around to face him. "I called them earlier, a rather nice couple," he remarked, walking over to Bruce's side. "I explained that Miss Helena was in a spot of bother and he came to assist."

"His help was appreciated," Bruce admitted, sighing to himself. "He's a quick learner, I'll give him that."

"Yes, he does seem like a good lad." Alfred smiled fondly, glancing at him from the corner of his eye.

Bruce hummed, staring at Jaime thoughtfully. "Yes, he is…” he commented evenly. The new Blue Beetle was exceeding expectations and Ted would have been proud, but that AI was still an issue. Even the previous Blue Beetle hadn't trusted it completely, and none of them had ever been able to hack into it.

"How is Master Jason?" Alfred's tone was less jovial.

"Still asleep," Bruce replied, shifting on the spot when his hip started hurting again. "Helena's with him."

Alfred nodded, humming quietly. "Good." They lapsed into another silence for a moment while Jaime snored loudly. "...Well, the kitchen counter will need cleaning before bed," he broke the silence, nodding curtly to the Wayne patriarch. "Try to get some sleep, Master Bruce."
Bruce nodded faintly, turning away, remembering the Dick and Tim downstairs. "You too, Alfred," he said, scratching his chin.

Alfred left the room while Bruce eyed Jaime curiously, the boy had come all the way here to check if Helena was okay. The boy was either a considerate young man or a stalker.

Bruce paused for a moment before walking off out of the room. He'd better do another background check on the boy, just to be safe.

While down in the Batcave, Tim sat down on the medical table as Dick injected him with the needle. "This should stop your hair from falling out," Dick said, brightly.

Tim used his other hand to dry his ears with the fluffy towel. They'd changed into casual clothes since their uniforms stunk of sewage and manure; Alfred hadn't been very impressed.

The boy winced when the needle was removed, and rubbed his arm while Dick put the syringe back on the thin tray. "So…" Tim glanced at the stairs. "What do you thinks going to happen to Jason?"

Dick's expression grew less light-hearted, as he sighed and placed the tray to one side. "Well, it's a little complicated," he replied, sitting down next to Tim on the table.

Tim placed the towel on his lap and shrugged. "Yeah, I gathered… but what are we going to do, just… keep him?" He wasn't sure on how to say it. "I mean, we can't trust him…can we?" Tim frowned and looked at Dick searchingly.

The young man was quiet for a while, sighing, as his eyes narrowed a fraction. "No, we can't, but he's still family," Dick answered, placing a hand on Tim's shoulder. "He needs us to…" he trailed off, struggling to find the right work. "Take care of him."

Tim twisted his hands uncomfortably, sensing where this was going. "So, what, he'd live with us here?"

Maybe, it was cruel of him to not be sympathetic, but Jason was a criminal who'd killed, maimed, and who knew what else. Jason wasn't mentally stable, so what would happen if he lost control during the middle of the night and tried to attack them (Tim) while they were asleep?

"He doesn't have anywhere else to go, Tim," Dick said, calmly, as his brow creased. "And, we need to monitor him."

He stared at his lap, getting flashes of Jason pointing a gun at his head. "How do you know," Tim muttered, scrunching the towel up in his hands. "How do you know he doesn't have anywhere to go?" he repeated louder this time. "A-and, it's not like he hasn't been living on his own all these years." Tim finally looked at Dick, half-afraid he'd be angry.

But, Dick didn't look angry, he remained calm, undeterred. He squeezed Tim's shoulder reassuringly. "Maybe he's fine physically, but mentally—"

"He's barely holding himself together," Bruce's voice interrupted them.

They both looked over to the stairs where Bruce was, limp evident. Tim tensed and ground his teeth together anxiously, expecting a lecture. He'd probably be grounded until his next birthday, isolated from technology like the Amish.
"How is he?" Dick asked, subdued. "I had a quick look, but Leslie seemed busy so…"

Bruce stood in front of them, gaze sweeping across them both before settling on Dick. "He's in the clear, but he'll be bedridden for a few weeks."

Tim grimaced, digging his thumb into the towel. He started to feel guilt nestle in his stomach. "So, he is staying here?" He looked up meekly, feeling like an outsider on the matter.

Bruce nodded. "Yes, whether he likes it or not," he muttered the last bit, sighing. "Now, we need to discuss what happened tonight," he directed his attention to Tim.

The boy swallowed a lump in his throat and nodded, raising his head higher to meet Bruce's sharp gaze. He wasn't a coward. He could stand up to Bruce… Yeah, he could. "I had to trust my instincts," he said, firmly.

A faint smirk slid onto Dick's face as he removed his hand from the boy's shoulder. "Which is why we should be thanking you," he praised, lightly punching Tim's arm. "You saved the whole of Gotham."

Tim rubbed the back of his neck, feeling like the praise was a bit undeserved. "You were already on your way anyway…"

"No, Dick's right. I owe you an apology, Tim" Bruce interjected, lightly, making Tim frown because that was a sentence that barely happened once in a full moon and it was nearly always directed at Nightwing or Oracle, not Robin.

"What?" Tim looked at them both nervously, feeling like this was a trick. "No, it's fine I—"

"No, it's not fine. You were right and I didn't listen," Bruce said, placing a hand on Tim's shoulder, the gesture had a sort of calming effect. "You remained level headed and trusted your instincts, I was the one who was emotionally compromised, and for that I'm sorry."

Tim's eyes widened in disbelief, and even Dick looked slightly surprised at the admission. "So, I'm…not grounded?" he asked slowly, looking around for verification.

The corner of Bruce's lip curved upwards into an almost-smile, and he patted Tim on the shoulder. "I was actually thinking of buying you that VR console you wanted," Bruce began to say, light-heartedly, "but if you really think you don't deser—"

"I deserve it!" Tim exclaimed quickly, nearly jumping off the table. "I mean, it's like you said, I saved the whole of Gotham." Then he frowned. "You're not joking, right?"

Stupid question, Batman never joked but… was he serious? He'd been wanting to play VR for years, but Bruce had always said no because apparently it'd turn him into a couch potato or turn his brain to mush.

Dick laughed and Bruce smirked. "No, I'm not joking," his mentor replied. "Just so long as you don't spend too much time on it, I don't see any harm."

Tim nodded eagerly and was tempted to hug him but stopped himself because now wasn't one of those special moments when random hugs were allowed—unless you were Dick Grayson since the guy wouldn't take 'no hugs' for an answer.

"Um, well thanks, Bruce," Tim said, smiling shyly.
"You deserve it." Bruce nodded as his smirk faded when he caught Dick's gaze. A silent conversation passed between the two of them.

Dick faintly nodded before grinning a little too brightly at Tim. "You should head upstairs, we can't have you falling asleep in class, Timbo," he told the boy.

Translation = Bruce and I are going to have a very serious talk about Jason and you're not invited even though you saved all of Gotham.

Typical

"Okay, no problem," Tim replied, keeping his smile in place. "Goodnight." He slipped off the table.

Bruce nodded while Dick kept smiling, pretending everything was normal when it definitely wasn't.

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When Tim was gone Bruce allowed himself to let his limp show and sat down next to Dick, letting out a quiet sigh of relief when the pain subsided.

He and his former protégé were silent for a long time, the cave seemed bigger than usual, colder too.

"...So, what are you going to say to Jason?" Dick asked, glancing at him from the corner of his eye.

Bruce let out a deep breath he'd been holding and rubbed his eyes. "Whatever I say won't convince him to stay here."

Dick sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I figured..."

"But, I have to try," Bruce added on after a second.

They lapsed into another silence, while Nightwing chewed his bottom lip and stared off into the distance, thinking. Bruce's expression remained closed off and hard like flint as he glared at a crack located on the cave wall, it was small, but still noticeable.

"Do you want to know what I think you should say to him?" Dick spoke up, recapturing Bruce's attention.

"It can't be worse than what I have in mind," he replied, dryly.

"You should tell him the truth... well, half the truth." Dick scratched the back of his head and sighed. "Tell him you love him, that he's your son..." He trailed off, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Fine some kind of compromise, Bruce."

"I'm already compromising by not sending him to prison," Bruce pointed out. He was by all accounts a hypocrite by allowing Jason's crimes to go unpunished.

"I know," Dick agreed, raising his hands in defence. "But what I mean is, Jason's entire plan up until now has been his drive for the last six years, his reason for living most likely, so we need to give him a new purpose."

"You know I can't condone his methods." Bruce gave him a hard look, to which Dick narrowed his eyes defiantly.
Dick got off the table and stood in front of him, hands on hips, taking the high ground. "Bruce, what is Jason?"

"Family." He assumed that was the answer Dick wanted.

The younger man's eyes narrowed further. "No, Bruce. What is Jason?" he repeated, tightly.

Bruce clenched his teeth, at first not getting it, but a second later the answer flashed in front of him. He let out a deep breath when he realised what Dick was getting at, what he was both implying in general and what he expected Batman to do as a result.

"A necessary evil," Bruce finally answered.

"Exactly and there's the compromise," Dick said, folding his arms. "Contingency plan #23."

It was easier said than done. Bruce leant forward, cradling his chin in his palm. "That's if he agrees to work with us on this," he murmured, shaking his head faintly. "I've already selected the head families I'll need for the meeting."

Nightwing nodded, relaxing his shoulders. "Jason's already united nearly half of them, but he'll need to make his claim if he wants to keep things that way."

"Which he can't do if he's bedridden." Bruce cast Dick a pointed look.

Dick caught the meaning and sighed. "Let's focus on bringing him to our side first," he quickly changed the subject.

_________________________

Batcave, Gotham

11/02/2013

22:15

Robin grinned as he walked along the railing, while Batman lowered his cowl. The cave lights were switched on for a rare change so the place was less dark and more…dare he say it, less depressing.

"Did you see the Riddler's face?" Jason asked, bouncing on the railing. "I thought he was gonna piss his pants."

"Language," Bruce chided, lightly, raising an eyebrow at him when he walked towards the computer.

Jason discreetly rolled his eyes. "Whatever." He jumped back onto the ground, twirling his domino mask in his hands. "You have to admit, though, the marbles were a nice touch."

Batman seemed distracted, pulling out an envelope from one of the drawers, it had already been (very neatly) opened and resealed but the boss man didn't seem surprised.

Either way, Jason didn't like the silence.

Robin frowned, crossing his arms. "What's that?" He moved closer, peering behind Batman's large back.

To his confusion, Bruce turned around and presented the envelope to him. "Why don't you have a
look," he replied.

Jason stood still and stared at the envelope for a moment, silent. "...Uh, okay." he sounded unsure, hesitantly taking the envelope. "Is it your will or something?" he started to joke as he slipped the paper out; it had a fancy border around the edge. "Because if Dick gets the car then—"

He froze when he saw it was a certificate of adoption, unsigned, but... holy fuck.

"You don't have to sign it if you don't want to," Bruce began speaking, failing to sound casual. "Nothing changes between us it's just... I want you to feel secure."

Jason swallowed a lump in his throat as his gloved hand gently traced the name, his name. "Jason Peter Todd-Wayne," he said, softly.

"You can keep your surname as it is if you want," Bruce insisted, sounding a little flustered, or as flustered as Batman could get. "I'll completely understand."

Jason slowly looked up, licking his lips, feeling out of his depth. "W-why do...?" He quickly cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Why do you want to adopt me?" he asked, boldly, squaring his shoulders.

Bruce's brow creased as he looked down at him. "Because I want you to be a part of this family," he answered, plainly, as if it were obvious.

Family

The boy's stomach fluttered. From his experience family had been a drugged up mother and a dad who treated him more like a punching bag than his own son. In comparison to that Bruce was a damn dream, well besides the perfectionist behaviour and being kind of an asshole at times, but all in all, he was alright.

Jason felt a glimmer of happiness, it was warm and...Fuck. He actually felt like smiling. Someone wanted to adopt him.

Batman wanted to keep him around permanently.

"So, I'd be your son?" Jason said apprehensively, regretting the question as soon as he'd said it.

But, then Bruce went and actually smiled, fucking smiled! Like not a large creepy one or that fake one he flashed at the cameras. No, it was a small one, genuine. A real smile directed at him, not Dick, but Jason.

"Yes, you'd be my son," Batman said, warmly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

The happy feeling exploded and spread to his fingertips as he held the document.

Jason chewed his bottom lip and looked at the floor. "Do you have a pen?"

There was a short pause and the hand on his shoulder squeezed gently, while Bruce reached into his utility belt and brought out a pen (Jason nearly laughed) and handed it to him.

Jason used the thick envelope and his hand to rest the paper on when he signed, trying to be as neat as possible and mirror Bruce's fancy script, but he only managed a half-decent effort.

The boy stared at the document for a few seconds before carefully putting it back into the envelope. He rested the pen on top of the envelope and looked up at his mentor who was still
smiling.

Batman was *Happy*. Like actually happy just because Jason had agreed to be his son.

Jason's hands felt shaky for some reason and he took a step back—Bruce's hand retracted—to put the envelope and pen on the keyboard. "I don't have to call you Dad, do I?" he asked seriously, frowning up at the man.

The smile on Bruce's face only grew. "No, you don't."

Jason nodded absently, feeling fidgety. "Good… good, because that'd be weird," he said, uneasily, rubbing the back of his neck. "Just, well yeah…" His shoulders were still tense and he wasn't sure what to do but…

Before common sense could get the better of him, Jason flung his arms around Bruce's waist and hugged him, burying his face in the man's stomach.

Batman was stiff like a rod had been shoved up his ass, but then after a second or maybe it was three, he hesitantly rested a hand on the back of Jason's head.

The cave was quiet, but it was a good kind of quiet.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

**09/21/2023**

**04:35**

Jason's mouth was dry and his throat hurt. His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton, while drool leaked out of his mouth, his whole body felt numb but there was also some pain there as well.

Someone was holding his hand and he could feel some hair against his skin.

Jason opened his eyes and blinked a few times before he groggily looked around. He was attached to an IV that was probably pumping him full of painkillers, and there was a heart monitor as well. Was that a life support machine? Huh, go figure.

He frowned and looked around as his mind started to clear, and he felt dread wash over him when he realised he was back in his old room.

He'd been shot by the Joker, and there'd been a lot of pain and Helena had been there by his side when he'd passed out, Batman too.

Jason moved his left foot and was relieved when he realised he wasn't paralysed, Barbara might think he was trying to upstage her. Ha, ha… Fuck he was in the shitter.

He looked down at his hand and stiffened when he saw it was Helena by his side. She was asleep and had her head on the mattress while she was sitting in a chair. His shoulders relaxed after a few seconds as the corner of his lip twitched upwards as he fondly stroked her knuckles with his thumb.

Jason tried to sit up straight but stopped when he felt a sharp pain near his ribs. "Fuck," he hissed, clutching his stomach and closed his eyes.

"Jason?" Helena was awake, alert.
He sighed and slumped back against his pillow, removing his hand from her grip. "Hey," he said, frowning as he looked underneath the covers; those were a lot of bandages.

She smiled brightly. "I'm glad you're okay."

His frown grew, feeling his chest tightened. "Even though you kinda electrocuted me?" Couldn't she have chosen a less painful method?

Her smile dropped and she had the decency to look guilty. "You and dad were fighting and…I guess I picked a side," she replied, quietly. "I'm sorry."

He narrowed his eyes at her for a moment before looking away. "He's your dad, what else were you meant to do, right?" It was fine if roles were reversed he'd do the same. "We're cool." Well, it wasn't completely alright but there was no use whining about it.

"Dad said he tried to talk to you?"

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Not much talking." Jason glanced at her warily. "Did you know he drugged me?"

Her eyes widened, surprised, but the shock faded to grim acceptance. "No, but it isn't really that surprising," she answered, rubbing her eye. "Resisting sedatives is a part of our training…he must have dosed you up pretty bad."

"No shit, Helena," he grumbled, gritting his teeth when he tried to move. "Ah, crap."

She squeezed his hand. "Don't try to move," she cautioned. "Leslie says you'll need to stay in bed for the next three weeks."

He looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "Oh, fuck that," he snarled, trying to get up. That triggered more pain and made him grind down on his teeth. There was no way in hell he was going to be Batman's prisoner.

"Jason," Helena snapped, standing up, attempting to gently push him back down. "Stop it," she hissed when he struggled against her. "You're gonna start bleeding again."

He felt a bright hot rage overwhelm him. "I don't care!" Jason went to pull out the IV.

Helena yanked his hand back and slammed him against the bed. "Stop it, just stop it!" she shouted in his face, holding him down.

He winced when she shouted and grew still while she held him down with trembling arms. His chest rose and fell, calming down. They stayed like this for a moment until gradually Helena pried her fingers off him and moved back.

She looked tired when she looked down at him, and it wasn't the dark bags under her eyes, it was the way her shoulders hunched and the overall way her face looked sad. She'd grown up a lot and he hadn't been there for any of it.

"I can't stay here," he said, after a moment of staring at her thoughtfully. "This isn't home anymore." His throat hurt.

Helena looked him over considerately, as she picked up his hand again like she wanted to confirm he was real. His hand was larger than hers, but the texture of their palms was the same; rough skin.
"This'll always be your home," she replied, softly. "And, I'll always be here if you need to talk about what happened."

His skin prickled uncomfortably. "I don't wanna talk about that."

"It could help, Jason," she said, almost imploringly. "I mean the last six years must have been hell."

"You don't have a clue about hell," he murmured to himself, even though she could hear him.

Her nails dug in a little too much into his hand. "Would you lie to me?"

Yes.

"No," he answered, eyeing her warily. "Because you wouldn't lie to me either." And that was the truth.

"Then I'll be honest." She let his hand go and sat down on the edge of the bed, sighing. "...The truth is, what you said about the Joker needing to die...I agree," she told him, quietly, looking at him intently.

He felt a burst of satisfaction but he didn't let it show. "What brought you around?"

"Nothing," she answered, shifting to face him better. "Some people deserve to die, they deserve hell," she went on, and Jason anticipated there was a catch. "But that doesn't mean I have the right to do that to them."

He shook his head and looked over at the lamp on the bedside. "Yeah, well sometimes it's about the bigger picture, and having to do what you need to do."

She sighed softly. "Maybe you can sacrifice your principles for the bigger picture, but I can't, Jason, I'm sorry." Helena chewed her bottom lip and tucked a hair behind her ear.

"I never wanted you to," he replied, feeling his satisfaction turn to ash. "I don't want you to be like me, Sis."

"But, you do want Batman to be like you," her voice grew colder, meeting his gaze with less warmth.

Jason swallowed a lump in his throat, looking away as he tried to find his words. "No, not...not just like me...fuck." He rubbed his eyes irritably. "You know what I mean," he said, frustringly, narrowing his eyes at her. "It's just the Joker, I don't care about the rest of it."

"But, it doesn't work like that Jason," she replied, evenly. "Even if it's necessary, Dad doesn't just kill the Joker and then nothing else changes." Her brow furrowed, staring at him thoughtfully. "We're what our principles are," she said, letting go of his hand. He curled it into a fist. "You make him break his principles and you break him. We both know that."

He gently shook his head. "So, now I'm the one being talked down to," he murmured, shooting her a small sharp smile.

Her lips thinned, sighing as she hung her head. "Yeah, well you haven't exactly considered the consequences, have you?" she retorted tightly, narrowing her eyes. "You never do," she added more bitterly.
His lips pursed like he'd swallowed a lemon as his temper started to flare up. "What do you want, Helena?" He stared at her harshly. Her gaze darkened. "For me to come home, watch movies, pretend everything's okay?" his voice was mocking. "Just be a good little soldier again, hm?" his voice rose, digging his nails into the mattress while she just remained ice cold and closed off. "What. Do. You. Want?"

Every single muscle in his body was tense like an elastic band ready to snap.

Helena stared at him passively, making want to scream and lash out to get some kind of reaction. "Well, for a long time I just wanted you to come back to life," her voice was softer than he'd anticipated. "And then you did and I was angry because you came back different…"

"I did die," he pointed out, but his voice lacked bite. "Kinda fucks you up a bit."

Her gaze shifted to his heart monitor. "I gathered that much," she replied. "And, I'm trying to understand, but I can't fully," she added, subdued. "I can't fix things, or make you better. I'm on the outside."

Jason looked at her in confusion. "You're not on the outside," his voice hurt. Sure, he might have pushed her away but it wasn't like that… was it? "Listen, you can't fix whatever the fuck is that's wrong with me," he told her bluntly. "And, I don't—I can't talk about what happened, the six years, the Joker… I don't want you to know because I love you and I wanna protect you.

Helena looked at his face, opening her mouth for a second before closing it again. "It's a little too late to shelter me from the big bad world," she replied fondly, a shadow of a smile on her face. "I'm not ten anymore, Jay,"

"Yeah, well you are to me." His gaze became sterner. "You're my little sister, and you're always gonna be my little sister, whether you like it or not," his voice cracked in the middle. "You understand me?"

Her gaze was warmer. "Yeah."

"Then say Jason, I'm your fucking little sister," he insisted, as the corner of his lips twitched upwards. She smiled, letting out a tiny laugh. "Go on I won't tell nobody. Say it."

Helena breathed in a deep breath and faintly shook her head. "Jason, I'm your fucking little sister," she repeated gently, smiling like it was a secret just between the two of them. "I'm not saying it again."

He gave her his old signature smirk. "Yeah, well, I just wanted to make a catholic swear, so thanks." He cleared his throat gruffly.

She sighed and shook her head despairingly. "You come back from the dead and you're still immature," she muttered, dryly.

His smirk dimmed. "Always."

The both of them grew silent, staring at each other while the sound of machinery hummed in the background.

After a moment, Jason nodded, sitting up more in bed while Helena stood up. He bit down on his tongue and ignored the burst of pain as she carefully embraced him, burying her face in the crook of his neck while his arms slowly wrapped around her back.
It was different than last time where he'd hugged her too tight, afraid she'd disappear. This one was more welcoming and like the ones they used to have when they were kids.
"Wakey, wakey." A voice stirred him from his slumber.

Jaime realised he wasn't in his bed when he rolled over and landed on the floor, a blanket tightly coiled around him like a cocoon.

"Urrr," he groaned, the left side of his face hurt from the impact. "Where…?" His eyes blinked open as he looked up.

Helena was standing over him in a school uniform, with a tray in her hand. "You okay?" She was smirking.

He rolled his eyes and forced himself to get up, fighting to break free of the blanket like it was strangling him. "What time is it?" he asked groggily, rubbing his eyes.

"Seven-fifteen," she answered, sitting down on the couch with the tray on her lap. There was a glass of orange juice, a boiled egg, two slices of toast, and a fat looking sausage. "Alfred made
Jaime clambered to his feet, dusting himself off; he was still in his clothes from the night before. Then his chest tightened. "A la verga," he hissed, slapping his palm over his face. "My parents are going to kill me."

'I did tell you to go home immediately.' Ah, the scarab was awake.

He reached into his phone and swore under his breath when he saw the battery was dead.

"Don't worry, Alfred let them know you were sleeping over," Helena piped up.

Jaime frowned and glanced over at her. "What he say?"

She shrugged. "Just that I needed your help and you came, nothing too specific," Helena answered, placing the tray on the coffee table. "Which gives us more to work with."

He raised an eyebrow, sitting down next to her. "I'm listening."

She passed him the orange juice. "The Joker's attack is all over the news which gives you an alibi."

Jaime drank a large gulp of the juice and licked the inside of his mouth when the flavour hit his taste buds. "So what, are we making it out like I saved you or something?"

Helena nodded, rolling up her jumper sleeves to reveal a fresh set of bruises. Jaime winced and put down his glass and took hold of her wrist to scrutinise the set of blemishes.

"Relax, I've had worse," she said, waving her hand out of his grip. "Besides they'll be good evidence. We say I got bruised up during the chaos, and you came to my aid since my dad was busy looking for Tim and the Police were busy with the Joker."

Jaime frowned. "Okay, but bit of a problem, I'm not good at lying to my parents."

Her shoulders slumped. "Are you telling me you've never gotten away with lying to them?" she asked, dryly, crossing her arms.

He thought for a moment. "... I lied about eating dessert before dinner once and they believed me," he replied, hopefully.

Helena stared at him blankly for a moment. "Are you serious?"

'For once I share her disappointment.'

"Well, I might have confessed afterwards," he added, smiling sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his neck. She blinked at him very slowly like she thought he was a moron. His smile faded into a frown. "Hey, some of us don't like lying to our parents, okay."

She pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. "Okay, well, I really need you to try this time," she said, looking up. "In fact, just leave most of the talking to me."

That didn't sound like a bad idea. "Just don't overact, my mom will be able to tell," he advised, picking up his fork to take a bite of the sausage.

Helena looked slightly offended. "I don't overact." She slumped against the couch. "I mean, I did fool you after all." That smirk was back again, making his stomach flutter.
Jaime quickly swallowed his food. "Yeah, well, even I found it a little weird by how happy you were," he remarked bluntly. "You might wanna tone down the Miss America persona."

Her smirk morphed into a pout for a second or two before she smiled crookedly. "Bet you ten bucks I can make your parents fall in love with me."

Jaime quirked an eyebrow, as his mouth curled playfully. "Only ten?"

She shrugged. "Fine, twenty."

"You're on," he replied.

'And, you just lost twenty dollars,' the Scarab sounded exasperated.

Jaime frowned while he ate. Oh, come on, she isn't that good. Trust me, my mom can spot bullshit a mile away.

'How long do you think this girl has been fooling people?' the Scarab said.

...Okay, point, but it's like you pointed out before. She overacts.

"So, I take it the Scarab is awake?" Helena interrupted their silent conversation.

Jaime blinked a few times, realising he'd been staring into space for a creepily long time while the food stayed in his mouth. "Uh...yeah," he mumbled, gulping down the mixture of egg and toast.

She shifted around in the seat, eyeing his back curiously. "So, it talks in your head, right?"

He sighed and nodded. "Can't shut him up."

"Oh, it's a he?" Her head tilted to the side in interest.

That was a good question actually. "Hey, Scarab, are you male?"

'I have no gender, nor do I care what you refer to me as."

Jaime shrugged and turned back to Helena. "Apparently it doesn't have a gender," he told her. "I mean, it's a machine so I guess that makes sense." He picked up the orange juice and drank, savouring the taste. "Thanks for the breakfast."

She smiled. "Yeah, Alfred's nice like that." Helena tucked a hair behind her ear. "I'm surprised he left you down here, usually he treats guests to the full five-star treatment."

"Well, I did kind of just collapse on your couch," Jaime replied and then felt a twisty feeling in his stomach. "Your dad's not mad about that is he?"

She raised an eyebrow and then faintly shook her head. "I think he has bigger things to be mad about."

He looked at her hesitantly. "...Like that guy in a red helmet?"

Her smile dimmed and her eyes became less bright. "Yeah, like him," she replied, stiffly.

Jaime's brow creased. "You okay?"

He let out a deep breath. "It's a long story." She smiled disarmingly. "And, we're gonna be late for
school." She stood up.

Right school. Damn. "My bag's home," he groaned, running a hand over his face. "And my lunch money..." He cringed, feeling his pride take a blow when he looked at her. "Can I borrow a five?"

"I don't carry fives," she replied, reaching into her skirt pocket regardless. "How about a twenty?" She took out a crisp note.

He sighed and stood up, shifting uneasily on the spot. "Thanks, I'll pay you back," he said, folding the note into his pocket. "I can call a cab if-"

Helena frowned. "Don't be awkward, I'll drive you," she interrupted, flippantly. His brow furrowed. "Relax, it's not a big deal, Jaime," her voice was exasperated, smiling teasingly. "I have to drop Tim off anyway."

He found himself smiling back. "Okay, I'm convinced."

"Jaime," a deep and slightly terrifying voice spoke from behind them.

Jaime tensed while Helena looked unbothered and turned to the archway where Bruce Wayne was leaning against the wall. How long had he been there!?

'Quite a while,' Scarab said breezily.

And, you didn't bother to point it out because...?

The Scarab remained silent.

Pendejo

Helena smiled brightly. "Morning, Dad," her tone was a little too light-hearted.

Mr Wayne grunted, which was apparently a good morning in this household. He had visible bags under his eyes and it didn't look like he'd actually slept in a bed, since the clothes he was wearing didn't look like pyjamas.

Jaime stuffed his hands into his pockets, feeling like the odd one out. "Uh, hey, sorry for crashing on your couch, Mr Wayne," he apologised. "The fight with the Joker-zombies wore me out pretty bad." His gaze flickered to Helena. "I, uh... just wanted to make sure everything was okay with you guys," he added lightly.

Something about her gaze became warmer, like a glow—

'I dislike the effect she is having on your biochemicals,' the machine observed coolly.

Jaime's cheeks grew red. Will you please just shut up!

The older man hummed and walked over to them. "Your concern was appreciated, but unnecessary," Bruce told him evenly. "We have everything handled here."

The warmth left Helena's face and was replaced with irritation. "Seriously, Dad?"

Jaime looked a little taken aback by the bluntness. "Okay, glad to hear it."

Mr Wayne glanced over at Helena. "Helena, why don't you let Jaime finish his breakfast while you finish getting ready for school?" he suggested/ordered.
Her eyes narrowed and Jaime felt he'd stepped right into a minefield. Helena pursed her lips and looked at Jaime and then back at her dad. "Okay, fine," she replied crisply. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

Ten minutes? Batman could have buried him alive in the backyard within that time.

'Don't be so dramatic. It would take a minimum of thirty-four minutes and ten seconds to dig the hole deep enough, and then bury you in it if you put up a struggle,' the Scarab corrected mildly.

'Do you enjoy my suffering?' It was moments like this Jaime wished the Scarab would go back to talking in a curt response instead of unloading a whole tonne of sassy remarks.

And, to his horror Helena promptly left the room, leaving the two of them alone.

The two of them stood in complete silence, it was so quiet they could still hear Helena walking up the stairs and going down the hallway to her room. The worst bit was that Bruce just kept staring at him, intense.

"Helena mentioned you were going to see a movie tonight," Mr Wayne finally spoke.

Jaime forced a strained smile. "Yeah, it's Godzilla."

The emotionless expression on Mr Wayne's face didn't crack. "Her curfew's ten."

"Oh, that's fine the movie ends at nine anyway," Jaime replied, smiling brightly.

"Her curfew's ten," Bruce repeated, sternly.

Jaime's eyes widened, flickering around the room uneasily. "Okay, I'll remember," he agreed, apprehensively, frowning.

Mr Wayne considered him for a moment before reaching into his pocket to pull out a sleek black phone. "When we need you we'll call." He presented the phone. "The line's secure, and if anyone taps it I'll know."

The teenager's eyes bulged in surprise, looking at the phone like Mr Wayne had offered him a million dollars. "Call me?" Jaime took the phone, as a spark lit up in his chest. "Wait, am I in the loop?"

"I did say I wouldn't be letting you out of my sight," Bruce said, levelly, while something like amusement flashed across his face. "And, the others all agreed that you earned it."

Jaime held the phone tightly, grinning. "Thanks, Mr Wayne."

"Just only use it when necessary," the older man said. "It also has a tracer in it, and all your messages will be logged."

Jaime's smile faltered, looking at the phone with less enthusiasm. "Oh...that's great..." He laughed nervously. "Makes me feel really...safe."

Mr Wayne didn't seem to acknowledge the lack of enthusiasm and just nodded. "Enjoy your breakfast." And, then he stepped back and just walked away like he hadn't been creepy as hell.

Jaime eyed his breakfast suspiciously. "Think he's poisoned it?" he muttered, having lost his appetite.
"He'd never be that sloppy.'

Jason stirred awake when he felt a weird prickly feeling against his skin, the kind you get when you feel someone watching you.

His eyes snapped open and he turned to the side where Helena had been sitting, only to find Bruce silently sitting there instead.

Jason gritted his teeth and gave him a hard stare while Bruce looked back unflinchingly. "Jason," his former guardian greeted evenly.

"Bruce," Jason replied in a clipped tone, forcing himself to sit up, despite the pain. "Surprised you didn't come with a chain."

Bruce didn't rise to the bait and just sighed quietly, steepling his fingers together. "The Joker's back in custody—"

"Until next time," Jason muttered bitterly.

"—And, because of your actions there is now a gang war in Gotham because of the power vacuum you caused," Bruce continued, coldly.

The young man's temper flared. "I was rescuing Helena, which you're welcome by the way," he snapped, digging his nails into the bed. "And you can thank my replacement for the whole building coming down."

Bruce's face grew graver, sighing. "Tim is aware of his mistake," he replied, giving him a sharp glare. "I came here because I wanted to talk."

"Oh, great." Jason grimaced and looked away, staring at the door, wishing he could make a run for it. "Remember how well that went last time?" He crossed his arms stubbornly.

"What did you hope to gain from all of this, Jason?" Bruce asked, in an oddly gentle voice.

What did any of that matter anymore? His plan had been royally fucked up, a massive failure that weighed down heavily on six years of obsession. He'd lost and now he was back in Bruce's clutches, unable to leave even if he wanted to.

He closed his eyes as a full load of that failure hit him. He was exhausted, weak, and, his skin was clammy from alcohol withdrawal. But, hey, he could risk it and try to leave anyway, let his wounds open up and bleed out. Die all over again just out of spite…

Jason gritted his teeth, remembering Helena. He couldn't do that to her or Alfred, and he didn't want to die again anyway, that experience had already been nightmarish enough.

"I thought you wouldn't figured that out by now, old man," Jason replied, there was less venom in his voice, feeling tired. "Besides, what's it matter anymore?"

Bruce's eyes narrowed and his jaw tensed, but instead of letting his anger show he just sighed and de-tensed. "We may never agree on the same principles, but I believe we can share a common goal," he said, cordially.

Jason felt his chest tighten, as he started to piece together what Bruce was on about. Contingency plan #23 came to mind. The gangs needed to be united and the Red Hood was part of the key, a
puppet to put it in blunt terms.

"I'm not letting you use me as a mascot, Bruce," he told him, frigidly, glowering at him.

Bruce gave him a hard stare as the two maintained eye-contact for a long time, but eventually, a small glimmer of understanding glinted in Bruce's eyes. "Well, I can't force you," Bruce said, lightly, standing up. "You will need to stay here until you've fully recovered, though."

"Or what, you'll handcuff me to the bedpost?" Jason remarked dryly, raising an eyebrow.

"If I have to." Bruce wasn't joking, but for some reason, Jason felt amused rather than angry. Maybe he was on the verge of another mental breakdown?

"Yeah, well, that doesn't mean I won't try anyway," Jason shot back, frowning.

Bruce cocked an eyebrow. "I'd expect nothing less from you," he said, calmly. "But, no matter what you think, you'll always have a home here."

Jason shifted uneasily, he didn't like this calm attitude Bruce had going on. Call him a masochist but Batman was easier to deal with when he was being harsh, stern, or angry, the calm approach would always feel like he was in the twilight zone.

Helena and he kept insisting he was welcomed here, but realistically they'd be tearing their hair out after a week of living with him.

"...Well, it doesn't feel like home," Jason half-lied, avoiding the older man's gaze.

That was met by silence, tense and uncomfortable until there was a knock at the door.

Jason perked up, recognising who the knock belonged to. "Yeah?" he called.

Helena opened the door, dressed in her school uniform. He frowned when he saw she was wearing make-up. She looked over at her dad for a second before smiling at Jason. "Just wanted to say goodbye," she said, walking over to the bed.

"You have money for lunch?" Bruce asked, nonchalantly.

She nodded, leaning over to give Jason a kiss on the cheek. "Try not to kill each other while I'm gone." There was a hard edge to her smile.

He frowned and rubbed his cheek; it had a red lipstick stain that spread onto his fingers. "I'm not making any promises," Jason replied, dryly.

Helena made a displeased hum but didn't comment, while Bruce took a step back like he was giving him room to breathe. "I'll send Alfred up with your breakfast," his former mentor said, walking around the bed.

Jason crossed his arms and grunted, not feeling very hungry. Helena sighed quietly but still smiled and kissed her dad on the cheek when he walked passed. It was kind of strange on how easily she seemed to pretend this was all normal.

Gotham City

09/21/2023
In the living room, of a cozy house that still had a few unpacked brown boxes littered around. Jaime's parents and his little sister were gathered in the room while he and Helena bullshit their way out of this mess.

"...So, none of my family was picking up," Helena explained, massaging her temples like she was reliving the experiencing. "And, my bag was still back at Wayne Tower, so I didn't know what to do." She smiled uneasily. "So, I called Jaime and...I was kinda surprised you actually came, to be honest."

He frowned, raising an eyebrow. "Is Gotham really that bad?"

She smirked. "You have no idea."

'Strangers on the street would have most likely stolen her phone rather than help her,' the Scarab remarked dryly.

Good point.

Milagro wasn't being discreet as she gawked at the bruises on Helena's exposed arm, frowning. His mom was eyeing her bruised arms worriedly and would have been bandaging her up if she had her way.

"Have you been looked over by a doctor?" his mom asked, itching to get out of her seat.

Helena nodded, shrugging. "Our doctor came around and gave me the all clear," she answered. "Now it's over, I'm okay. I mean, it could have been worse." She twisted her fingers uncomfortably.

Jaime smiled sheepishly and shrugged when his parents looked over at him. "I probably should have explained this to you guys," he said, chewing the inside of his mouth anxiously. "I don't know, I guess I was worried you wouldn't believe me or something..."

His dad and mom exchanged a grim look. "We would have believed you," his mom replied. "And, I could have helped."

"You could have been hurt," his dad said. "Next time, tell us if something's wrong."

Jaime rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the floor. "I guess I wasn't thinking straight."

Helena's brow creased, glancing at his parents uncertainly. "Look, I'm sorry I made a mess of things," she apologised. "I didn't mean—"

"Oye, it's ok." His mom smiled reassuringly, raising a hand up. "You didn't do anything wrong, in fact, you probably handled it better than I would have," she added, giving her a slanted smile.

Helena smiled back and held her shoulders up higher like his mom had just given her a confidence boost.

'You just lost twenty dollars.'

Jaime's brow furrowed, looking between Helena and his mom warily. "So... I'm not grounded?" he asked hopefully.

His dad arched an eyebrow. "Oh no, Higo, you're still grounded."
"Oh, come on!" Jaime exclaimed.

His mom frowned, folding her arms. "You made us worry."

Milagro giggled from the corner, earning a glare from her older brother. Helena's forehead creased as she surveyed them all cautiously. "So, I guess you won't be coming to the movies tonight?" she said, sounding convincingly disappointed.

"Movies?" His dad shot him a sly smile. "Like a date?"

Jaime cringed while Helena stiffened beside him. "What? No, not a date!"

Milagro's eyes bulged. "¿Le pagaste?" she muttered.

Helena glanced at her, frowning. Jaime narrowed his eyes, tempted to smack his sister around the head.

"Milagro," his mom reprimanded sharply. "No seas grosera."

His little sister scowled. "Sólo quería decir que ella era bonita!" she explained hurriedly.

"Well, actually, it sounded more like you were saying I was an escort," Helena interjected, lightly.

Milagro froze, as her cheeks grew redder than a tomato, shrinking back behind the couch. Mom buried her face in her hand and sighed while his dad massaged his temple, while Jaime on the other hand, looked at Helena in surprise.

"Are you telling me you knew Spanish all this time and didn't say anything?" Jaime exclaimed, trying to remember if he'd said anything incriminating in the last few weeks.

To his frustration, she smiled coyly, half-shrugging. "I was gonna mention it eventually."

He gave her a dry look. "Yeah, probably after I said something stupid."

Her eyes glinted with amusement. "Lo siento," she replied cheerfully. "It might have come up in conversation after the movie."

His little sister peered out from her hiding spot. "So, you were going to go on a date with him?" she exclaimed, scrunching up her nose in disgust.

"It's not a date!" Jaime and Helena snapped, while both their cheeks flushed.

Milagro didn't look convinced, while his parents looked like they were enjoying his embarrassment.

"So, I don't have to give you the talk?" his dad asked, teasingly.

Jaime wanted the ground to swallow him whole.

"Alberto," his mom chided, lightly smacking her husband's arm.

His dad grinned, laughter bubbling from his chest.

Helena was trying (what he assumed was) her hardest not to laugh, covering her mouth with her hand as a smile peaked out at the edges of her fingers.
Jaime shot his dad a glare. "This is why I don't bring friends over anymore."

His mom sighed, looking at him thoughtfully. "Are these the movie tickets you can't get refunded?" she asked. He and Helena both nodded. Dad gave Mom a gentle nudge with his walking stick. "Okay, tonight you get a free pass, but you're still grounded over the weekend," she told him.

Jaime grinned. "Did I ever mention how awesome you are?"

His mom tried not to smile. "Just remember your curfew and keep your phone on."

Jaime's grin softened, nodding. "Don't worry, I will," he reassured her.

Helena's leg twitched before she cleared her throat. "I should be getting home," she said, picking her bag off the floor as she stood up. "I can pick you up at half seven for the movie if you want?" she offered, glancing at Jaime.

He nodded and got to his feet. "Yeah, that's cool with me."

"You could stay here if you want," his mom said, standing up. "It'd save you a trip."

Helena smiled, shrugging her school bag over her shoulder. "Thanks, but I need to get changed and my dad's already expecting me back for dinner." She glanced at Jaime. "Maybe I'll come round another time."

His stomach did that fluttery feeling again, and he felt like fidgeting… Jaime gulped and stuffed his hands in his pocket, avoiding her gaze. "Yeah, sure…cool."

Helena half-smiled, glancing him over for a second as walked passed. Dad got back onto his feet as Mom made her way over to the front door, with Milagro watching from her hiding place.

"Well, thanks for letting me explain everything," Helena said when they reached the door. "You guys should come over for dinner sometimes, Alfred loves hosting."

Jaime arched an eyebrow at her from behind his parents. *Okay, now she was definitely laying it on thick.*

*The offer is superficial, regardless.*

His mom and dad looked like they were flattered but also hesitant to say no in case it came across as rude. He supposed having dinner with a billionaire was a little intimidating, but he doubted Mr Wayne's public persona would be anything less than charming while Jaime's family was present.

"Thank you for the invitation," his dad said, smiling politely.

"You're welcomed to come over as well," his mom told her. The corner of her lips twitched upwards as she cast a sidelong glance at Jaime.

Helena opened the door. "Thanks." She beamed at Jaime, a hint of satisfaction in her gaze. "I'll see you at half seven, Jaime."

Jaime held his hand up to wave. "Got it."

"Bye." With one last smile, she left and closed the door behind her.

His mom was the first to speak, turning to Jaime with a mischievous warmth in her gaze. "I like
her," she stated like she was delivering a final verdict.

Jaime sighed. "Of course you do." He pinched the bridge of his nose.

Dad patted him on the back. "You didn't need to keep her a secret, Hijo."

"I…you know what, nevermind," Jaime replied, flatly.

His mom laughed a little and made her way towards the kitchen. "I'll go warm up dinner."

As if on cue, Jaime's phone vibrated in his pocket. He took it out and rolled his eyes when he saw the message.

/You owe me 40 bucks (lunch money included)/

'I tried to warn you,' the Scarab commented.

Batcave, Gotham

09/21/2023

19:35

The cave was mostly quiet, while Batman sat down at the computer with Nightwing leaning against the side of the chair, and Robin sitting behind them on the bannister.

"I've comprised the list of the bosses I need for the sit-down," Batman said, scrolling through the list of bios. "But half of them are already on the Red Hood's payroll."

Nightwing grimaced. "He still not playing ball?"

Batman's eyes narrowed. "No," he replied, stiffly. "But, I still need him to be at that meeting."

There was a brief silence. "…He's going to be pissed off," Dick warned, sighing.

"He'll be annoyed either way," Batman replied, evenly, glancing at the younger man.

"Yeah, but what if he finds out and lashes out badly?" Robin argued.

"The plan is still in effect," Batman replied. "I just need the Red Hood as a transition piece for the next few weeks until Malone takes full control, then he can be cut off," he explained callously. Dick crossed his arms and levelled Batman with a glare. "…But that's only if it's necessary."

Nightwing scoffed. "If you want to have any hope of salvaging some kind of relationship with him, a stab in the back is a big no-no."

"I'd only cut the Red Hood loose if it was absolutely necessary," Batman insisted, as his chest tightened uncomfortably. "The fact that Jason was willing to listen to what I had to say earlier shows some promise."

"Am I allowed to go near him?" Robin asked, hesitantly.

Batman tensed a little, looking over his shoulder at the boy while Nightwing looked on uneasily. Jason was less likely to physical hurt Tim then he was to verbally lash out at him, but that didn't make Jason's violent outbursts any less dangerous and the last thing any of them wanted was for
their youngest member to be caught in the middle of it.

"No, not yet," the older man replied evenly.

Robin kicked his foot against the air and nodded. "Yeah, he'd probably just get angry…" He frowned and glanced over at Dick. "I just wanted to talk, I guess, like explain that I wasn't trying to take his place…you know, clear the air."

Nightwing didn't look enthusiastic. "Jason doesn't always listen to reason, Tim," he replied, gently.

Robin shrugged, with a tight expression on his face. "It's fine I'll just stay out of his way."

"I'll try to talk to him again," Batman offered, swivelling his chair around fully.

"Actually, maybe I should have a go?" Nightwing said, warily. "I've been wanting to have a talk with him for a while now."

Dick might have more luck than him in some areas since a lot of Jason's anger was still focused on Bruce.

"See if you can get through to him," Batman told him. "I know Helena didn't get very far."

Nightwing smiled grimly. "And, yet she convinced him to dress up as Peter Pan."

Robin covered his mouth to hide his laugh, smiling. Even the corner of Bruce's lips twitched upwards in amusement, remembering it fondly.

"Yeah, Oracle mentioned that," the boy wonder commented. "You have a picture?"

Dick's smile became warmer. "I may have one kicking around on my laptop," he replied, slyly. "Think it'll cheer him up?"

"He'll murder you," Batman remarked dryly, slightly convinced Jason would. "Come on we should head out." He stood up, switching the computer screen off.

Nightwing raised an eyebrow. "You sure your hip's up for it?"

"I'll be fine." It still hurt but the bleeding had stopped, though, he did still have a noticeable limp so it would hurt when he ran.

"Is Huntress coming out later?" Robin asked, sliding off the railing, and then smiled coyly. "Or is she spending the night at Jaime's?"

Batman narrowed his eyes, approaching his young protégé. "Don't be rude," he chided sternly. "I already told him her curfew was ten." He started to walk to down the platform while Robin and Nightwing followed behind. "Whether she patrols or not is her decision."

"So, is she dating this Blue Beetle guy or what?" Nightwing asked, glancing at Robin.

Batman gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the conversation.

Robin sounded eager to gossip. "Not yet, but give it a month and they'll be kissing."

Batman walked along the platform towards the Batmobile where the three of them piled in, Robin taking the backseat while Nightwing got Shotgun.
"Nah, two or three tops," Nightwing said, clicking his seatbelt in. "So what's he like anyway?"

Batman clenched the steering wheel too tightly. Robin shrugged, leaning forward in-between the front seats. "I checked his server history and he's okay," the boy answered, smirking. "He does have this weird cheerleading fanta—"

"Robin," Batman interrupted through gritted teeth, narrowing his eyes at him.

Robin's mouth snapped shut while Nightwing arched an eyebrow. "Okay, shutting up now," the boy wonder mumbled, quickly sitting back in his seat.

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Gotham City

09/21/2023

21:15

Helena stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets when she stepped outside of the cinema; the weather was getting colder with Fall finally here. Jaime stuffed the last of his popcorn in his mouth before he crushed the box in his hands.

"You wanna grab a coffee?" she asked him as the two of them stood on the sidewalk. "I know a place around the corner."

He shrugged and looked at his phone. "Yeah, we got time." Jaime zipped his jacket up, shivering a little. "I could use something warm. It's freezing out here."

She raised an eyebrow. "God help you when winter comes around," she remarked as the two of them started to walk down the street.

Jaime smiled wryly. "I think I'm just gonna hibernate all season." Then he frowned. "Do you guys get snow?"

She almost laughed, remembering the last two winters. "Well…" Helena crossed the road with him. "It's more like ice and slush for the most of December, but January's pretty bad," she said, slipping in-between two cars to get onto the sidewalk.

"How bad?" Jaime asked warily.

"Sometimes it's three inches other times it's ten," she replied, lightly, shrugging. He winced. "But it depends on whether there's a blizzard and how quickly the temperatures change."


The two of them neared the Coffee House. "It's not so bad," she said, smiling teasingly. "You should try a winter in Oymyakon, I nearly lost my left foot."

Jaime's eyes widened. "Was that your dad's idea of a family vacation?"

"Sort of." She grinned, opening the café door, a rush of warm air touched her cheeks when she stepped in. "Where's the coldest place you've been?"

"Uh…Indiana," he replied, uncertainly, frowning. "Some of us hate the cold."

Then why move up north? She hadn't peered too deep into his background since that would
borderline on stalker territory.

She raised an eyebrow but didn't comment, leaning against the counter where the cashier was waiting. "Hi, what can I get you," the guy asked, re-adjusting his glasses.

Helena smiled brightly. "Hi, can I get a Breve, please." She glanced at Jaime who was getting out his wallet. "I don't mind paying."

"Nah, it's cool I…" He trailed off when he opened his wallet and found it empty, a flash of confusion appeared on his face but vanished after a second. "…Don't have any money because you took the last of it," Jaime said, blandly, closing his wallet. "So, yeah, looks like you're paying." He sighed and closed his wallet.

She gave him a toothy grin. "You're the one who wanted to bet twenty instead of ten," she reminded him, shrugging.

He narrowed his eyes at her for a second before he turned away and sighed. "Can I get an Americano, please."

The cashier rang it up. "That'll be $6."

Helena paid and then stuffed her purse back in her bag. "So, why'd your folks move up here?" she asked, moving to the side while they waited for the drinks. "I mean, it's a big upheaval."

Jaime's brow creased and was quiet for a few seconds. "My dad used to be a mechanic but he had an accident and lost his job," he said, warily, shifting on the spot. "But, well, it wasn't exactly an accident," he added, looking up when their drinks were placed on the counter.

"Was it a wrong place at the wrong time kinda thing?" she asked, taking her drink.

He hummed, picking up his coffee. "Well, El Paso has a gang problem, and it didn't use to be that bad."They took their drinks and headed to a table. "But it's gotten worse since La Dama took over."

The name rang a bell and made her frown. La Dama was still considered a myth by official records since there were only rumours to go off on but to the people living in El Paso, he or she was a very real threat even if the police claimed the evidence was flawed.

Helena chewed her tongue, eyeing him curiously. "So, did he get on the wrong side of them?"

Jaime sighed, sitting down at a booth with red cushiony chairs. "No, but he had this friend called Luis who had a drug problem." His eyes narrowed, stirring the coffee. "Turned out Luis got involved with the wrong people, owed a lot of money that he couldn't pay, so when they came round to collect my dad tried to intervene and…" He sighed quietly, holding the spoon tighter. "They shot him."

Her stomach twisted. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

He let go of the spoon and looked up. "It's fine," Jaime said, and then smiled a little. "I already know stuff about your family. Only fair." He shrugged. "Besides, he's alive, that's all that matters." Jaime's smile grew. "And since we had to move, Mom's an RN at the private hospital, so we have more money now. Every bad thing for a good, right?"

She ended up smiling back, taking a sip of her coffee. "Yeah, you're right."

"So, what'd you think of the movie?" he asked, blowing on his coffee.
She shrugged. "It was okay. The main actress's wig kinda put me off." The blonde wig had looked faker than Sue Powers' spray tan. "I think all the budget went on the CGI."

"At least Godzilla looked realistic," Jaime commented. "I hear the director for this is also going to direct the new Star Trek movie. I'm thinking of seeing it."

He wrinkled her nose, drinking. "I'm more of a Star Wars fan, blame my brothers," she said, evenly, smiling at the memories.

Jaime's brow creased. "What's wrong with Star Trek?"

She gave him a blank look. "I'm not having this conversation with you." Helena leant back in her chair. "It's just more of a sentimental reason."

He hummed lowly, frowning still. "Well, okay, but I think you're missing out."

She arched an eyebrow, sighing. "I'll take your word for it." Helena drank her coffee and glanced up when she saw a couple of teenagers enter wearing purple clothing; she eyed them warily, recognising the gang colours.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Jaime said, drawing back her attention.

"Yeah, sure, fire away." Her smile flickered slightly when she glanced at the gang members again, but the two of them were just ordering some coffee by the looks of it. One of the guys was chatting with the cashier, casual, which made her relax a little.

"Why are you Catholic?"

Her brow creased, looking back at him. "Hm? Oh, that." She blinked a few times, thinking it over. "Why are you curious?"

He shrugged, glancing down at his coffee. "Well, none of your family goes to church with you, so how come you do?"

She paused, chewing her tongue."Well, ...it's my childhood," How did she explain this? She didn't really want to answer, but she'd already pried too deep in his family life so she supposed she owed him. "My mom was Catholic, not a good one, but she'd grown up as one so I guess it was hard to shake, you know what I mean?" she replied, shrugging.

He nodded, eyeing her thoughtfully. "Yeah, I get it."

She shrugged again, feeling uneasy. "I like feeling close to my mom, so that's why I'm Catholic."

"Oh..." Jaime scraped his thumb against his mug anxiously. "Is she...?"

"She committed suicide," Helena answered coldly, staring at him passively. His expression instantly morphed into remorse. "It's fine, really, it was years ago anyway." She drank her coffee.

The remorse faded into sadness, as he lowered his shoulders. "Right, I guess you don't want to talk about it?"

Was that rhetoric or an actually invitation?

Helena grew silent and looked out of the window. Selina's suicide wasn't really a conversation starter, and no one, not her dad, Alfred, her friends, or any of her siblings ever brought it up. And, honestly, that was okay, it was like any kind of trauma, sometimes people just didn't want to talk
about it because it re-opened the wound…

"…Yeah, I don't want to talk about it," she said, numbly.

Jaime fidgeted in his seat like he was having some kind of inner conflict. "Are you sure?" he asked, sounding like he was hesitant to sound too pushy.

She swallowed a lump in her throat, feeling a heavy weight in her gut. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay," he said, tapping his finger against the mug.

There was a long pause after that. "But, thanks for offering," she added after a moment of silence.

He shrugged, half-smiling. "It's cool. I get that it's kind of complicated."

She hummed into her mug, a smile peeking out from the edges of the cup. Her gaze drifted outside of the window when she saw a banged up red car slow down near the café, which was when she looked back at the two gang members.

Helena felt a shiver run down her spine and the hair at the back of her neck stand on edge when the window was rolled down and a brief flash of a gun appeared.

The mug dropped from her hand when she jumped to her feet to grab Jaime's arm and shouted, "GET DOWN!" before the first bullet hit the glass.

It was like a bolt of electricity had been zapped out as everyone hit the floor as the bullets sprayed through the room like a monsoon.

She and Jaime covered their heads as they lay on the ground. Helena tried to yank him under the table with her as the armour on his back started to appear, the blue metal partly covering the back of his head and shoulder blades.

Helena grew cold with dread when she saw a dark red stain on Jaime's jacket near his shoulder, the red turning brown against the grey material.

All she'd wanted was a stupid coffee.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to Gradis for helping me with the Spanish.
I'm trying to make Helena and Jaime's relationship progress as naturally as possible considering their personalities so lot's of teenage awkwardness.

I also just want to mention how much I love Tim, I've been re-reading his Red Robin run and he's a bloody sass machine.
The nurse secured a bandage around Jaime's injury. "You're lucky it was only a graze," the nurse said; she was a short woman with a mousy hair and a large nose. "I swear this city's getting worse each day. Can't even go out without someone shooting the place up."

Jaime hummed distractingly, grimacing. Helena was sitting in the seat opposite, the only injuries she had were a few scratches on her face, with a big cut on her forehead which was now covered with a plaster. She briefly eyed Jaime's shirtless form for a second before sighing. "I'm gonna go grab some water, you want some?" she asked him.

He shrugged and then winced, earning a reprimanding look from the nurse. "Yeah, sure," he replied, subdued.

Helena nodded and got up, heading down the hall where there were two police officers taking another statement from a man with an arm cast on in the next room. From what she'd been told it was another street gang related incident between the Purple Lamborghinis and the White Tigers.

She made her way over to the water dispenser and grabbed two plastic cups. Helena chewed the inside of her mouth while she pressed the button to fill up one of the cups.

She hummed to herself for a few seconds until something from the corner of her eye caught her attention. Helena tilted her head around a fraction to her right and frowned when she saw a girl, a teenager, with light brown skin, pink eyebrows, and a strange eye colour.

Helena stared at her curiously, eyeing the girl's baggy clothes and the large beanie hat that covered all her hair.

A trickle of water splashed onto Helena's boots.

The cup was overflowing with water, making her step back in surprise when she realised. "Damn," she whispered, looking around anxiously as she lifted her wet foot. "Ugh, great."

Helena carefully picked up the cup and drank a mouthful of water to stop it from overflowing. When she looked to her right again, the girl was gone. She shrugged it off and started to fill up the second cup.

With two cups of water in hand, Helena made her way back to the room, peering round the door when she arrived. A smile tugged its way onto her lips when she saw Mrs Reyes fussing over
Jaime. The nurse was gone and Jaime was quickly trying to reassure his mother he was okay.

"Mom, I'm fine," he insisted as his mom cradled his head and kissed his forehead. "It was just a graze."

"Just a graze?" his mom looked at him incredulously. "You nearly got shot."

He smiled sheepishly. "But, I didn't."

His mom crossed her arms, staring at him sternly. Helena decided now would be a good time to intervene.

"Hey, Mrs Reyes," she greeted, stepping into the room. "I got your water, Jaime."

The two of them looked up. Jaime blushed, burying his face in his hand while his mom smiled when she saw her. "Helena, you're a sweetheart," the woman said, walking over. "Are you okay?"

Helena smiled, somewhat smugly, and handed over the cup of water. "I'm fine, just a few scratches," she replied.

Mrs Reyes nodded and handed the cup to Jaime. "Thanks," he said, pushing his head back to glug down the water in one go.

"So, much for a quiet evening," Helena remarked, smiling thinly.

Mrs Reyes grimaced, sighing as she ran a hand over her face. "I nearly had a heart attack when the hospital called," she muttered, her brow creased. "Did they contact your family?" The woman looked around searchingly.

Helena's smile became tighter. "My dad will be here soon, he just got held up," she answered evenly, taking a sip of her water.

Mrs Reyes frowned, looking back at her apprehensively. "In that case, we'll stay until he comes," she said, smiling warmly.

"Oh, no, it's fine." Helena forced a laugh. "Honestly, he won't be that long."

"Then we won't have to wait long," Jaime input, wincing when he stood up. "I don't mind." He crushed the plastic cup in his hand and then tossed it in the bin.

Helena's brow furrowed, looking at them both curiously. "...Well, okay." Even though it wasn't necessary for them to stay, it wasn't like she was a baby, but she supposed they were just being nice. "Thanks."

"It's fine, honey," Jaime's mom said before she reached into her handbag. "You kids want a mint?"

Jaime sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "No, thanks, Mom." He glanced over at Helena and moved closer.

"I'm good." Helena waved her hand dismissively."I'm kinda still full from the popcorn."

Jaime smiled slightly. "I'm still kind of bummed I didn't get to finish my coffee."

She shrugged, placing her cup on the chair. "It could have been worse," she replied, smiling more gently, shrugging again while Mrs Reyes searched through her bag. "I still had a nice time..."
"Yeah, me too," he said, while his smile dimmed when he looked at his arm. "Nearly getting shot, though, not so much."

Her smile curled into a smirk. "I like to think of them as badges."

He raised an eyebrow. "So, what, I got my Coffee House collateral damage badge?"

She chuckled, covering her mouth. Her gaze slid to Mrs Reyes who was taking an unusual amount of time looking for a pack of mints. "Well, I'm just glad you'll be okay," Helena said, lightly, crossing her arms.

Jaime eyed her shrewdly for a moment before shaking his head. He smiled and briefly glanced at his mom for a second before opening his mouth to speak.

"Helena?" Her dad had finally arrived.

She glanced over at him; he was standing in the doorway, dressed in a t-shirt and jeans instead of his suit (he must have changed in the car), and his shoulders were tensed, while his eyes scanned her over quickly to calculate the damage.

She smiled. "Hey, Dad," she greeted, taking a step forward when he moved towards her. "Don't worry I'm fine."

Her dad's posture relaxed, the concern melting away, which was when the Brucie persona took hold when her dad's gaze shifted to Mrs Reyes. "You had me worried there for a minute, sweetheart," he said, cupping his daughter's face in his hands. "You know I don't like it when you go downtown," he chided, kissing the top of her head. "It's dangerous."

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes and just nodded her head demurely. "I only went to the Coffee House." Helena shrugged, holding his warm hand against her cheek. "I didn't think it'd be that bad..."

Bruce hummed disapprovingly and rested his hands on her shoulders. "We'll discuss this at home," he lied, he probably already knew what had happened. Then, he glanced over at Jaime and his mother. "Are you okay?" he asked Jaime.

Jaime looked a little confused at first. "Uh, yeah. It was just a graze."

Her dad smiled politely. "Good." Then his gaze shifted to Mrs Reyes, and a somewhat mischievous glint flashed in his eyes. "And, you must be Jaime's mother, correct?" he asked, pleasantly, shaking her hand. "Mrs Reyes?"

Mrs Reyes smiled politely. "Yes, it's nice to meet you, Mr Wayne," she replied, evenly.

Her dad smiled slyly, bringing her hand up to his lips for a light kiss. "Please, call me Bruce."

Helena rolled her eyes and sighed, while Jaime looked scandalised.

Mrs Reyes' eyes bulged while a distinct blush grew on her cheeks. He let go of her hand and smiled coyly. "Oh...well, my name's Bianca," she said, less composed as she cleared her throat, pressing her hand against her chest. "We were just keeping her company until you arrived."

"Thank you," Bruce replied, dishing out the usual charm. "I would have come earlier but something came up," he explained, placing an arm on Helena's shoulder when she came to stand next to him.
Mrs Reyes' eyes narrowed a fraction. "It must have been quite serious then."

It did look a little strange that he hadn't rushed over here immediately.

Her dad's grip tightened, catching on quick. "Ah, yes…well, a lady companion of mine may have been distracting me," he confessed, chuckling nervously like he'd been caught in the act.

Helena rolled her eyes and scrunched up her nose. "Ugh, so that's what that smell is."

"Helena," Bruce chided, not sounding like he meant it. "Don't be rude."

Jaime raised an eyebrow while his mom's face tensed as her posture became uncomfortable. "Oh, I see," his mom said, with a strained smile. "Well, we better get going," she added, hastily, like she had just come to her senses.

"Right…" Jaime agreed, before looking back at Helena and then cautiously at her dad. He stepped closer. "Um…listen, thanks for watching my back," he said, quietly, rubbing the back of his neck.

She shrugged. "It's fine, you would have done the same," Helena replied, smiling crookedly, she slipped out of her dad's hold and gave Jaime gentle hug, careful not to press too hard on his injury. "Take care, okay."

He gulped loudly, patting her on the back. "Yeah, sure," he sounded anxious and un-embraced her. She felt her gut twist, feeling the hug had been unwanted. "I'll see you around." He avoided looking at her and turned around.

Her forehead creased while she watched him and his mother leave. Once they were out of sight Helena glanced over her shoulder at her dad. "Call me Bruce," she mimicked sweetly, raising an eyebrow. "Seriously, Dad?"

Her dad smirked, straightening up as he stroked her hair back. "Well, I do have to stay in character," he replied, lightly. His hand left the top of her head when he slipped it back into his pocket."Come on, let's go pick up your car."

Helena followed him out of the room, frowning when she saw he still had a limp. "Tell me you didn't go out like that?" she asked, dryly, looking at his leg.

He tried to hide the slight missteps. "I'm fine," he reassured her quietly as they walked down the hall.

She levelled him with a glare. "If you cause permanent damage…" she let the warning hang in the air.

He gave her a blank look as they approached the elevator. "I don't think you should be one to lecture considering your track record."

Helena pursed her lips, resisting the urge to touch the scar on her chest. "Can't you just call it an early night?" she suggested. "Me, Dick and Tim can take care of the rest."

The lift doors opened, allowing the two of them to step into it. "It's still too early and I don't have any meetings tomorrow," he said, evenly.

She sighed in exasperation, thinking her next words over. "Well, that's a shame…because I was hoping we could watch a movie together."
Her dad pressed the 1st-floor button and cast her a shrewd look. "You already went to the movies."

Helena shrugged, smiling. "Yeah, but I was hoping we could watch the Usual Suspects again, I forgot the middle section." She knew he was a sucker for that movie.

The corner of his lips briefly curved up into a slanted smile for a second, as the lift moved down. He looked away and sighed.

"If something comes up…"

"I know," she said, drolly. "Just humour me for two hours."

To her amusement, he rolled his eyes.

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

09/21/2023

23:15

Tyrell was doing his usual round as security, patrolling the museum corridors like he'd done for the last five years. He scratched his beard and re-adjusted his cap, entering the Ancient Egyptian section where a series of stone artefacts lay displayed in their cases along the walls.

He gripped the flashlight tighter when he felt a breeze skim past his cheek.

The room was dimly lit but Tyrell was sure he did see something for a second, or maybe the silence was just getting to him?

He walked slowly down the room, while his other hand rested on his radio. The last thing he wanted was another caped freak causing trouble, here again, they'd only just updated the new security system—

Oh, shit.

He froze when he came to the newest addition to the exhibit. The case in the middle of the room was meant to host the ancient tablets that had beetle carvings on it.

The case was empty, the glass window opened.

Fuck.

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Gotham City

09/22/2023

11:00

You'd have to be deluded to think Gotham was a pleasant city, but despite most people's grim outlook, the city wasn't that bad. There were always good people willing to make a difference, you just didn't hear about it much unless celebrities made a big PR stunt about it; her dad being one of them.

Helena was in the kitchen cleaning the mass of pots which had piled up over the last ten minutes.
She was wearing her uniform, a bright yellow t-shirt that had a smiley face drawn on it with black permanent ink.

She was in the homeless shelter's kitchen, an old church which was one of the most well-known shelters in the city. It got the most attention and the most funding so a lot more people came here for help. Unfortunately, that meant it was often overcrowded, especially at breakfast time. So, the abundance of dirty pots never seemed to stop. The other kitchen volunteers had finished getting breakfast ready and were now busy sorting out the food donations around back.

Her rubber gloves were worn out from scrubbing and the metal brush she was using was now a muddy brown.

The kitchen door was kicked open. Marco came in with a fresh heap of pots. "Breakfast is done!" he exclaimed, grinning. His yellow t-shirt had a sad face drawn on instead of a happy one, making her roll her eyes. "Here you go, Beverly Hills."

He dumped the dirty pots on the wooden table next to her, adding to the already large pile.

Helena glared at him. "Wow, thanks," she remarked, dryly, placing one of the clean pots on the drying rack. "Any more good news?"

Marco dusted off some grub on his shirt, smoothing back his Mohawk. "Not yet, but I'll keep you posted." Then he left her alone, disappearing out of the kitchen.

She sighed and went back to scrubbing, if she was being honest, she kind of wanted to call it a day and go home. Her t-shirt was practically soaked through.

"Just shut up and do it," she muttered to herself. "You're making a difference," she said it like a mantra. "You're making a difference."

A noise from the backroom interrupted her muttering. Helena frowned and left the pot in the sink, turning the water off, and then removed her gloves.

The back room was where they kept all the clothes donation, it was small but dry and often cluttered with coats, trousers, and all manner of bizarre clothing that had been given.

Helena made her way over as quietly as possible, leaving her gloves on the side. Her training took over from this point. She didn't make a sound when she opened the door and stayed light on her feet. The door was known to creak in places but she'd discovered that if you lifted it up slightly and pulled at a steady pace the creaking disappeared.

When she peered around the door she almost sighed in exasperation when she saw a girl rummaging through some clothes, the window at the back of the room ajar.

The girl had short black hair that was tied up into a messy bun, pieces of hair sticking out. The girl was skinny like a twig, malnourished looking, with ivory skin. What was more alarming was that she was only wearing a grey hoodie and some black leggings, which wasn't really suitable seeing how cold it was outside.

Helena closed the door behind her. "Hey, you need some help?" she said as the girl jumped up in surprise.

The girl took a fighting stance.

Helena quickly raised her hands. "Whoa, it's okay," she reassured, gently. "I'm just trying to help,
honest."

Miraculously, the girl relaxed a little, lowering her fists. Helena eyed her curiously. The girl looked younger than her but older than Tim. Definitely going through puberty. She had brown slanted eyes and looked Chinese or at least a mix of it.

"...You know, we usually give clothes away at seven in the evening," Helena said, taking a step closer.

The girl tensed but didn't take a step back, watching her intently. Silent.

Helena arched an eyebrow, lowering her hands. "Not much of a talker, huh?" No response. It was kind of weird, but who was she to judge. "...You don't have to steal, just come back later when we're handing the stuff out."

The girl paused for a moment, clenching her hands tightly, she shook her head.

Helena chewed the inside of her mouth. "You in some kind of trouble? Don't want to be seen?"

The girl lowered her gaze and nodded.

"Okay..." Helena rubbed her chin, glancing over her shoulder at the closed door. "You wanna tell me what's got you spooked?"

The girl frowned, raising an eyebrow as if not understanding.

Maybe it was the wording. "I mean scared." She subconscious mimicked the expression on her face.

Recognition gleamed in the girl's eyes, nodding, and then shook her head.

Okay, so I take it that was a Yes on scared and a No on telling me what's wrong?

Helena pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed. "Okay, fine, don't tell me," she said, stepping over a bag of clothes. She looked around, biting her bottom lip for a second before she glanced back at the girl. Better start building a bridge. "...Well, you look like you could use a good coat."

The girl eyed her warily, jutting her chin out.

Helena gestured to the clothes at the back of the room. "We keep girl clothes round here." She walked passed her, while the girl continued to eye her with an element of curiosity. "Come on, I think I can guess your size."

The mysterious girl remained silent while Helena searched through clothes, trying to find something that would fit, most of the coats were either too small or too big.

A black raincoat stuck out among the rest, it was pretty dated and looked like it had been sent back from the nineties, but it looked like it'd fit. There was some padding inside so it'd keep her warm and dry.

"Hey, you like this?" Helena asked, holding the coat up to view.

The girl reached for the coat, putting it on without hesitation. It fitted a little loose but looked fine.

"Nice." Helena grinned, earning a smile from the silent girl. "Let's see if we can find you some gloves and a scarf." She pointed to the rack near the far side.
To her surprise, the other girl took the initiative and went to go look for it while Helena watched.

The girl rooted through the heap of scarves until her eyes lit up when she pulled out a long bright yellow one. She wrapped it around her neck, smiling, and then grabbed a pair of grey gloves.

Helena watched her with interest, trying to figure her out. "You all set?" she asked, walking over.

The girl glanced up and shrugged, nodding.

Helena hummed, scrutinising her, the girl definitely needed a big meal. "I can't steal you any food since the others are in the room, so you'll have to come back at six," she told her, concerned.

The girl's smile vanished and she shook her head firmly.

Helena wanted to sigh but held it back, she couldn't force the girl to eat here. If the girl would rather steal than accept hand-outs then Helena assumed she regularly stole food to keep herself alive. "The shelter can still provide a roof over your head if you're desperate, so think about it… please."

The girl chewed her bottom lip for a moment before nodding.

Helena gave her a small smile. "Thanks…now, could I at least get a name?" Could the girl even speak? "Can you tell me?"

The girl took a step back, looking her over with an unusual amount of intenseness. The silence seemed to stretch on for a long time as the silent girl opened and closed her mouth repeatedly until…

"…C-Cassss," her voice was raw, underused, and stammered badly. Then the girl frowned deeply, frustrated. "C…Cassie," she finally said, scowling.

At least it was something. "Nice. I'm Helena."

Cassie's mouth clamped shut tight, shrugging again, which seemed to mean 'okay'. The corner of her lip twitched upwards in a half-smile.

The whole situation was weirder than what she was used to.

"Helena?" Zoe was in the kitchen, her voice sounded mumbled from behind the door.

Helena stiffened and opened her mouth to tell Cassie to leave, but the girl beat her to it. Cassie ran towards the window, stepping on a couple of plastic bags to reach, and pushed it open and crawled outside.

The door opened, Zoe standing in the threshold, she was a middle-aged Irish woman with curly brown hair and a double chin. "Helena, what are you doing in here?"

Helena blinked a few times. "Uh…sorry, Zoe, a cat got in. I was just chasing it out," she answered, pointing at the window.

Zoe glanced at the open window and then back at Helena. "Oh, well, okay then, but those pots still need cleaning." She waved at her to come back into the kitchen. "Close that window and come on." Zoe turned away and walked back into the other room.

Helena smiled tightly and nodded, reaching over to close the window before she followed Zoe back into the kitchen.
"Aw, you look so adorable when you're sleeping," an irritatingly sweet voice cooed.

Jason's face scrunched up, gritting his teeth as he buried his face further into his pillow. He could already feel the sunlight pour in when Mr Perfect opened the curtains.

"Fuck off," he growled.

The mattress dipped. "It's twelve in the afternoon, Sleeping Beauty, you have to open those eyes up sooner or later."

Fucking shit-head.

Jason's eyes snapped open, looking up to glare at Grayson; the young man was smiling and dressed in a casual getup. "You wanna get drugged again?" he said, harshly.

Dick's smile vanished and was replaced with a dark expression. "Careful, Jaybird, I'm still a little upset by that," he warned, raising an eyebrow.

"Pfft, piss off," Jason retorted, lying down on his back. "What do you want, Dick-head?" He probably was only here on Bruce's behalf.

Dick rolled his eyes. "Ah, the penis jokes." He sighed and shook his head. "You really don't change, do you?"

Something about the comment felt bristly but Jason tried to shrug it off. "Don't you have a job?"

"Got my partner to cover for me," Dick answered, shrugging. "I'm due back tonight." Nightwing shrugged, leaning against the bedpost at the end of the bed, propping his feet up (Oh, yeah *sure*, make yourself comfortable, Dip-shit). "I thought now was a good time for us talk," he replied, smiling wryly.

"Whatever," Jason muttered, scowling, looking around the room. "Where's Helena gone off to?" Was she avoiding him or something?

"She volunteers at a homeless shelter, so she won't be back until four," Dick answered.

Jason frowned. "Homeless shelter?" First religion and now this? Was she wanting to be a nun or something? "Nothing wrong with it but ain't she got enough on her plate?"

Dick shrugged. "She says she likes it." He crossed his legs. "Anyway, she'll be back later, so don't worry."

"I wasn't," Jason said, pursing his lips stubbornly.

"Good." Dick smiled slyly. "Because I hear she's got herself a boyfriend."

Jason shot up in bed. "What?" The pain barely registered. Dick's eyes widened in surprise. "What the fuck are you talking about? She's Catholic!"

Weren't there rules against that kind of thing? Fuck.
Dick looked at him like he was acting crazier than usual. "Dude, chill. I mean technically it's not even official yet," he said, calmly. "Plus, religion doesn't mean celibacy, I mean I heard Harley Quinn's Jewish—"

"This is serious, Asshole," Jason snapped. "She's still a kid."

"Jason, you lost your virginity at fifteen," Dick commented, dryly, making the other man recoil (how the fuck had he known that?). "You're in no position to say she can't date at sixteen."

Jason's expression darkened. "I don't care how old she is I'm not letting her heart get broken."

Dick sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "She isn't a pure little snowflake, Jason," he replied, crisply. "Somehow I think she can handle it."

Cocky piece of shit.

Jason gritted his teeth, folding his arms. He felt a twisty feeling in his chest. Okay so maybe Dick had a point but, fuck, why did Helena have to grow up so quickly? Couldn't she slow down a little and wait until she was eighteen or something?

"Fuck this," he muttered, glaring up at the ceiling.

"Aw, don't be like that, Jay," Dick said, cheerfully, making Jason want to punch him. "I'm still here for you."

Jason felt a flare of anger and glowered at him. "Oh, in that case, can you do me a solid and stab yourself in the eye?" he snarled. Dick grimaced. "I know you're only here because of Plan #23, but it ain't gonna work. I'm not doing it, so piss off."

Jason didn't look at him but he could definitely feel the tension in the air. Dick sighed quietly, his cheerful attitude dampened.

"...Listen, Jay, all that stuff that happened in the past, that anger. I can't change it," he said, subdued. Jason shifted uncomfortably. "I know it's partly down to all of us for not being able to change fast enough. Maybe you feel we forgot about you or we never cared, but that isn't true."

Jason dug his nails into his arms, biting down hard on his tongue. He didn't like all these… feelings. Fuck. Why did Dick have to do this? It wasn't like Jason could get up and leave; he could throw the lamp at him but Dick would probably just catch it and smile fondly.

Dick took a deep breath and continued, sitting up straight. "...Okay, so you may not feel the same way, which is fine, but...but, I love you, okay," he admitted, gruffly clearing his throat. "As far as I'm concerned, you're my little brother."

Oh, fuck you! Why did you have to go and say that you golden turd? Just, just go fuck yourself.

God Damn it!

Of course, Grayson had to go say that. Because he couldn't just be normal for once and tell Jason to go screw himself.

There was a lump in Jason's throat, thick like barely chewed meat. He crossed his arms tightly over his chest like he was protecting himself. He didn't know what to do and the silence just seemed to stretch on and on.
Then, finally, Jason remembered how to speak. "...Don't be gay, Dick," he muttered, glaring at the other man.

A slow smile crept onto Dick's face after a second which was then followed by a chuckle. "Just telling the truth, Jay-bird." His smile softened, standing up. "I missed you."

Jason growled, glaring at his lap, but before he could let out another swear, Dick's phone started ringing.

Dick flashed him a grin and took out his phone, but the grin faded and his expression tightened when he looked at who was calling. Jason frowned. "Hello?" Dick answered, lightly, walking towards the door. "Yeah, sure, just a sec." He shot Jason an apologetic look, pressing the phone against his chest. "We'll talk later."

Jason eyed him curiously, watching him leave. Dick seemed tense, and that transition had been way too sudden.

Despite the circumstances, Selina felt oddly at home when she came back to Gotham. The polluted air, towering skyscrapers that almost looked like mountains while above, and the less than friendly people just made her feel strangely at ease.

She looked out of the window, the sun setting, making the city look beautiful before night took over. There was a strange pang in her chest when she realised she'd actually missed all this.

"Home sweet home," she muttered.

Terry whimpered from the bed, drawing back her attention. She sighed softly and walked over to him. The room they were in was alright but damp with some mould growing on the ceiling near the door.

There was a small kitchen on the side with a battered fridge and a small shower room in the far corner. Her bed was parked near the window and was the only other furniture besides the wooden table on the right side of the wall.

Terry was laid down in a large box which did the same thing as a crib, which wasn't ideal, but news reports were always saying it prevented cot death, so he should be fine.

Selina picked him up and checked his diaper, while he started sucking the air. *Must want food.*

"Come on, baby." She sat on the bed and lifted up her t-shirt to nurse, he latched on instantly while she stared at the wall.

She needed more evidence on Powers but the security on Powers Industry was too tight and there would always be counter measures to make searching harder. She didn't have the same resources she used to have back in the day... Home security might be a different story.

Rich peoples wanted the inside of their homes to be cosy and easy to move around, made scavenging a lot easier when they thought their sanctuary was fully protected. Sure, people assumed that if they got the best high-tech security system they'd be safe and sound but there were always cracks and nothing was impenetrable.

There was the problem of them being home, but knowing Derek Powers a party or company function would pop up sooner or later to get them out of the way. It would delay things, but she wasn't on a stopwatch. Her main priority was to keep Terry and herself safe until she got evidence.
She switched Terry onto her second breast when he'd half-drained the left on. Her mind drifted to Helena, making her feel queasy. She still was in two minds about confronting her, sometimes ignorance was bliss… but she did miss her, and she also had Terry to think about.

Selina rubbed her eyes tiredly, feeling cold. Helena would be angry, that was for sure, resentful even. She closed her eyes, chewing her tongue. Despite her best intentions, faking her own death would have ripped the heart out of her baby girl.

*Can't take it back.*

*But, how did you even begin to explain all this to your child?*

She looked out of the window, as the sky started to darken. All that guilt and shame weighed down on her like a sack on her back, and it only seemed to get heavier after all these years.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

**09/22/2023**

**19:59**

Bruce leant against the wall, as Dick said his goodbyes to Helena and Tim at the front door, while Alfred slipped in some Tupperware packed leftovers into Dick's travel bag.

Dick ruffled Tim's hair. "Remember to work on that move I showed you," he told the boy. "It's all about balance."

Tim nodded, touch screen tablet underneath his arm. "Ditto." He reached out and hugged him, hanging on a little longer than usual. "Don't get shot."

Bruce's brow creased while Dick just laughed it off and patted him on the back. Once Tim un-embraced the young man, Helena went in for the next hug. "In other words, stay safe," she commented, kissing his cheek.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Dick replied once she'd let go and took a step back. "Just try to make sure things don't go to hell while I'm gone." Alfred handed him his bag. "Thanks, Alfred." Dick picked his helmet up off the floor. "I did mention I'm trying to lay off the brownies," he added when he strapped his bag around his shoulder, hearing the jostle of Tupperware.

A shadow of a smile appeared on the butler's face but the elderly man didn't comment. Bruce straightened up. "I'll open the gate for you," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets as he walked over to him.

Dick nodded, a flash of understanding appeared in his eyes. They still needed to discuss Tigress' call. "See you later, folks," he said, brightly patting Alfred on the back as he turned to leave.

Helena started to head upstairs (most likely to see Jason) while Tim walked towards the dining room. Alfred smiled slightly and opened the front door for Dick and Bruce. "Goodbye, Master Dick."

Dick shot the butler a grin as he and Bruce walked outside. The motorcycle was parked at the end of the steps. "How did the call go?" Bruce asked evenly when Alfred closed the door behind them. He took out the small remote and pressed the white button to open the gates from afar.
The smile faded from Dick's face. "The Light's angry because someone stole some ancient tablet," he answered, walking down the steps. "She didn't know the big details, but apparently it's linked to the meta-human experiments. Magical properties."

Bruce hummed, frowning, as the two of them came to a stop at the foot of the stairs. "They know who the thief is?"

Dick smiled grimly. "They know it's a speedster."

Ah, Barry's boy.

Bruce sighed, narrowing his eyes. "West was already told to rein him in."

"He already tried. The kid's twelve, it ain't that easy," Dick remarked, tightly, sighing. "Even Iris can't control him, and Wally can't get two words in before Don runs off." The younger man raised an eyebrow. "I mean, he's not the only one with a wayward partner."

"Jason isn't twelve," Bruce replied, gravely.

"Coulda' fooled me." Dick secured the bag strap around his chest. "Look, I've got this handled, so don't worry about it." He smiled at him while Bruce's stony expression didn't crack. "I have a plan, I just need Tim, Helena, and Jaime's help."

Bruce's shoulders tensed, as his lips thinned. Maybe he was being too overprotective, but sending Robin and Huntress out on a solo mission out of Gotham made him feel uneasy. "Are you sure Jaime is ready?" he said instead.

"The guy is a quick learner," Dick replied, smiling crookedly. "Don't worry, I'd never give them a mission they couldn't handle, you know that." He slipped his helmet on. "I'll call them to Bludhaven when I've pinpointed Don's position."

Bruce nodded, taking a step back when Dick mounted his motorcycle. "Keep me informed of the plan."

"Yeah, I know, otherwise you'll worry." Dick revved up the engine. Bruce narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. "See you, B." He drove off and through the opened gates.

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**Gotham City**

**09/23/2023**

**00:47**

It was cold and dark underneath the bridge near the water, with fire in a can for light and warmth.

A name means a person/weapon. She only knew a few names, though, names of people who she made a list of because they were important.

*Cassandra/Cassie (why two names?) is me.*

*Talia is nice but a bad woman.*

*Damian (eyes mean something) will be bad.*

She frowned, huddling up in a tight ball. Her memory of the boy was fuzzy, but she'd never forget
Cain is bad man and Shiva is bad woman, but they are reason I am born.

Still all bad, but Helena is...not bad I think. I will see.

Cassandra's face scrunched up, resting her back against the stone, feeling tired, she closed her eyes. The yellow scarf felt warm around her neck. She was hungry still, even after eating the meat from the trash outside the place that sells chicken.

She was tempted to go to the shelter where it was warm, but it was too dangerous. People would ask questions like that doctor had. Suspicious questions that could lead to her getting taken by the people of shadows again.

Her stomach grumbled and she could feel her ribs, it hurt but she could still ignore it and sleep.

Footsteps nearby made her wake up and get onto her feet. She looked around and listened, narrowing her eyes.

"I could hear your stomach a mile away," someone said silkily.

Cassandra turned around and glared at the intruder. It was a girl, same height as her, with weird pink hair, light brown skin, and black clothes, smiling falsely, with eyes and body language that showed danger and arrogance. A lot of danger.

Don't trust. Snake like Talia.

"I can help you out, I know a place downtown," the pink girl said, smiling still. "They won't ask questions."

Liar

Cassandra didn't move, clenching her fists tightly, taking a step back.

The girl's eyes narrowed.

Run

Cassandra bolted.

The girl clicked her fingers, and the can of fire exploded, burning Cassandra's coat when she sprinted past, making the shiny material sizzle.

She gritted her teeth when the pain registered and blistered her skin, running out of the way to avoid the flames.

The ground cracked with a thunder, shaking.

Cassandra quickly tried to find her balance, narrowing her eyes at the girl who was smirking.

Can't run have to fight.

Takedown.

She ran towards the pink girl like a rabid dog.
The girl with pink hair was surprised but then became angry and took on a more fighting stance, clicking her fingers.

Things around her started to shake and break, exploding and moving all on their own.

Cassandra kept running towards the girl, focussed, while she avoided the danger around her. The pink haired girl was on edge when she got near.

*Pink girl not good at real fighting.*

The pink haired girl tried to dodge Cassandra's attacks, using her strange powers to try to distract and block the stream of attacks.

Cassandra moved fast, but her body felt weak and hurt. She couldn't clench her fists as tightly as she wanted, so the hits felt soft.

The pink haired girl grabbed the end of the scarf and tried to strangle Cassandra with it, but she kicked her in the face as the scarf was torn off with a harsh sound.

The pink haired girl lifted her arm, pink sparks coming from her fingers, but Cassandra bent the arm back, breaking the bone when sparks released.

"Ahh!" The pink haired girl screamed and the pink sparks hit the wall that held up the bridge.

When the pink sparks hit the stone big ugly cracks appeared, followed by a noise.

Cassandra jumped back when she realised the bridge would collapse.

The pink haired girl's arm was broken and she looked murderous, hateful, as she charged and clicked her fingers when Cassandra tried to run away.

The ground shook and cracked, harsher than others, and tripped Cassandra up as a large chunk of the bridge fell off.

Cassandra hurried to get up but the ground wouldn't stop shaking until the ground collapsed and made a deep hole. She fell down and hit the wet mud beneath, hitting her head badly.

Her head hurt and when she looked up at the sky the clouds blurred together, fuzzy and dark.

Everything was dark like she was falling asleep, slipping away into darkness.

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Chapter End Notes

I've always found Cassandra really hard to understand. I do like her, but I'm still trying to understand how her mind works from a writing perspective and how she actually thinks.

Cassandra is very intelligent but illiterate and was never taught verbal communication and kept in total isolation for eight years, but she can speak basic words after practice once she's been taught their meanings.
Names would probably be easier to grasp because it's simple to understand what it means. When people speak to her I assume she'd read their body language to understand the words they were saying.

So, when it comes to writing from her pov, I imagine she'd be blunt and straight to point in the way she observed the world around her, and would also have a limited vocab.

Oh, yeah, and Damian exist in this universe, but it's way too early for that plot-point.
Huntress frowned, walking closer to the wreckage. The bridge over the river was missing a big chunk of concrete on the left bank side. The whole bank was like the aftermath of a trench war, with a massive hole in the middle of it, with the ground cracked and burned.

A few officers were patrolling, with Detective Renee Montoya analysing the scene. The Latina woman had a few coffee stains on her trousers, a gun strapped underneath her arm. The detective caught sight of her and raised an eyebrow, while the other officer bent down and reached for something buried in the mud.

"You're out early," Montoya remarked, as Huntress approached her. "It's still daylight."

Huntress smiled crookedly, glancing up at the sky. It was still pretty early, but she'd wanted to fit in a quick patrol session before she spent time with Jason. "A friend of mine wanted me to investigate," she replied, surveying the damage once more. Oracle had mentioned flashing pink lights from the camera footage, so it was to be assumed Advanced Technology or meta-humans were involved.

"Well, there aren't any witnesses," Montoya said, looking over at the hole. "But, we have footprints and there were some chicken bones found under the bridge."

Huntress carefully walked around, narrowing her eyes at the footsteps. Two people involved; female judging from the foot size and the heel of the shoe. One of them had fallen in the hole judging by the tracks and then had been dragged off by the other female.

She followed the line of the tracks that led up the hill towards the road. "Any tyre marks?"

"No, but a few cars did pass through here so..." The Detective sighed deeply.
"Hey, Renee, I got something," said the police officers who had been examining the hole. "Take a look."

Huntress turned around and frowned when she saw the brown material on the man's hands. It looked like a scarf. Her insides twisted. "Let me see that," she said, walking back to them.

Montoya frowned, examining the end of the scarf. "K. Puckett?"

Huntress tensed, recognising the name. The family had been donating clothing to the homeless shelter for nearly two years now. "Let me see," she repeated, firmly, reaching out.

The officer exchanged a hesitant look with the detective but let her take it. Huntress scrutinised the material, using her thumb to rub away the dirt, catching a faint hint of yellow.

Damn it. Cassie, what the hell happened?

"You recognise the name?" Montoya asked, folding her arms.

Huntress looked up, silent. Answering with the truth would lead to a whole load of unwanted questions. "No, but I'll find out." She handed the scarf back. "Judging from the footprints they were both girls."

"And both sleeping rough," Montoya added, looking over at the bridge. "Judging from the chicken bones and blankets we found." She heaved a big sigh. "It would have taken a serious arsenal to make all this happen."

"And, for what?" Huntress questioned aloud. "If they were abducting a homeless girl, then what for?" She let the question hang there. Montoya and the officer looking grim, they could all probably think of a good number of twisted reasons.

The detective rubbed her eyes. "Any of the big guns who could have caused this damage are locked up," she said, looking at Huntress pointedly. "Unless you got any leads of any outsiders?"

Huntress chewed the inside of her mouth. "None come to mind, but I'll see." She reviewed the damage, again. "Judging from the damage, I'd figure a meta-human with elemental powers, magic, or maybe plasma," she told her. Oracle would need to send over the footage so she could analyse it. "I'll keep you posted."

The detective made a doubtful noise but nodded all the same. "Right, sure."

Huntress didn't comment and just nodded, her brow furrowed thoughtfully as she walked passed to examine more of the crime scene.

Being back at the Manor felt more or less the same as when he'd first arrived as a kid, feeling like he didn't belong in the fancy building, and he'd be kicked out before the week was up. Only it was worse this time around since he couldn't move properly or take a piss without being in pain.

Jason lay in bed with Helena snuggled up next to him with her laptop in-between them. She was catching him up on all the Star War's movies he'd missed in the last six years. Right now, they were finishing up The Last Jedi as the credits were starting to roll, but the familiar soundtrack didn't have the same effect on him like it had used to like that nostalgia had faded a bit.

Truth was, he felt sick and desperately needed a cigarette or some kind of booze. He'd been clean for four days and he felt like shit. He couldn't go outside for a smoke and even if he could, he
didn't have any cigarettes since the others wouldn't buy him any, and he wasn't allowed to take alcohol with his medication.

"So, what'd you think?" Helena asked, closing the screen when the credits continued.

He blinked a few times, shrugging. "Yeah, it was cool, I guess." He hadn't been paying much attention.

Helena raised an eyebrow but shrugged it off. "I liked it better in 3D," she said. "You wanna watch the next one?"

Jason rubbed his eyes and shook his head. "Nah, not tonight. Tired." He leant further back against his pillow.

She nodded, closing the laptop. "Okay, that's fine," she replied, distantly, placing the laptop next to the desk lamp. "You want me to let you sleep or—"

"No, stay, it's fine." He looked at her quickly, feeling uneasy and not sure what to talk about. He couldn't think straight.

Helena frowned, shifting to sit up better in the bed. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He sighed, crossing his arms. "Just tired."

She didn't look convinced, eyeing him warily. "You don't look fine," she said, firmly, getting off the bed. He looked at her surprise. "Do your bandages need changing?" She whipped the covers off, making him flinch.

"Hey, watch it!" he snapped, trying to grab the covers back as she scrutinised his bandages. "Alfred changed 'em. Chill already."

Helena hummed suspiciously, letting the covers go as he pulled them back. "Then why are you pale and sweaty?" She folded her arms stubbornly. "Jason, what's wrong?"

"Fuck sake," he muttered, running a hand over his face. "Listen, I just really need some booze or a cigarette, okay, that's all."

Her brow furrowed, looking him over anxiously as she uncrossed her arms. "When was the last time you had a drink?" her voice had an edge to it.

"Four days ago, I dunno." Jason half-shrugged, avoiding her gaze. He wasn't keen on her knowing how often he got wasted.

Her eyes widened a fraction, muttering something under her breath. "And, when did you last take your medication?"

"Three hours ago."

She sighed, scratching the back of her head. "Wait here," she ordered, fixing him with a stern look. "I'll get you something." She walked around the bed towards the door.

Jason perked up at this, watching her leave while his forehead creased. The only alcohol in the house would be the wine or champagne which were kept under lock and key by Alfred. The thought sent an odd happy feeling to his brain, but the feeling faded when he realised what had happened.
Was... was he an alcoholic?

A sick sensation wrapped around his stomach like bad indigestion, leaving an awful taste in his mouth. Jason grimaced and rubbed his bandaged torso. He may get wasted a couple of times but... shit. Okay, so maybe he was a little too dependent on booze to help ease the memories, but it wasn't like he was violent because of it, he could still control himself.

Except, when he didn't...

For a long while, he just kept silent, staring into space with that big heap of dread stuck in his stomach.

Then, a few seconds later Helena came back with a glass of red wine serves in a normal water glass. He licked his lips, growing more alert.

"You'll need to delay taking your medication for another five or six hours to be on the safe side," she said, closing the door behind her. "And, we're gonna need to wean you off the wine slowly."

He frowned, watching her curiously as she sat down on the bed, presenting the glass. Jason looked at the wine, feeling that dread in his stomach grow bigger. "Thanks, but I don't want it."

Her eyes narrowed. "Jason, how often do you drink?" she asked, evenly. His lips thinned, not answering. "I'll take that as a lot." She sighed, as her gaze softened. "Look, if you don't wean off booze properly the withdrawal's gonna get worse, okay, so just have a little bit, please."

He clenched his hands into fists, swallowing a dry lump don his throat. It was only one drink. "... How'd you get this anyway?" he muttered, taking the glass from her. The smell filled his nostrils, relaxing him.

She smiled crookedly. "What, you think I can't break into a wine cellar?"

He smirked, feeling a small swell of pride. "Well done, young padawan." He raised his glass to her and then hesitantly brought it to his lips and drank. The liquid left a strong bitter taste in his mouth that hit the right spot.

Helena eyed him with concern and sighed. "You really do make me worry sometimes, you know."

He swallowed a large gulp of the wine and then wiped his mouth. "Yeah, well so do you," he replied, narrowing his eyes. "How do you think I feel about you wearing the cape and jumping from rooftops?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Well, first off, I don't wear a cape," she remarked dryly, crossing her arms. "Secondly, I'm in a position to help people, so I will," she added, frowning. "I mean, you were younger than me when you started, so pot calling the kettle black."

"Yeah, well, blame Bruce's questionable child-rearing," Jason retorted, grimacing. "And, our circumstances are different— what are you doing?!" He balked when he saw her strip off her t-shirt to show her bra—her boobs—Oh God no! Just no. "Put your top back on!" He closed his eyes and looked away.

"Don't be a wuss," she said, dismissively. "Open your eyes and look for a second."

Jason scrunched up his face in disgust and downed the rest of the wine, making his brain feel a pleasant buzz. Apprehensively he looked up, catching sight of the scar from where Rose had shot her was still visible and pink. "Why?" He shifted his gaze to her torso where most of the scars
"Do you remember this?" Her finger trailed along the long faded scar underneath her bra. His stomach churned as he faintly remembered where that scar had come from, but he hadn't realised the cut had been that bad.

She'd been kidnapped when she was ten by Professor Pyg. The freak had seen her on the news a couple of times and had become transfixed on making her into one of his child Dollotrons, along with some other high profile kids.

Jason recoiled, looking away, placing the glass on the side table. That had been the only time Batman hadn't reprimanded him for beating up a villain half to death and also how Helena had found out about their secret identities.

"And, this one?" she continued, shifting around. He looked up and saw her back, where there were faded burn marks on her back.

Those had been from the time Firefly had attacked her school and burned the place down when she'd been nine.

Jason gritted his teeth. "Okay, I get it," he snapped.

Helena narrowed her eyes and slipped her t-shirt back on. "Whatever normal childhood I had died when my mom did," she said, coldly. "And, I refuse to let my trauma control me." She met him with a frigid gaze. "That's the only difference I see."

He bit down on his tongue hard. "So I should just get over it, right?"

"No, Jason." She sighed deeply, shaking her head. "You probably won't ever get over what's happened, and that's okay, but you have to start looking at the future and the type of man you wanna be." Helena held his hand tightly. "You can be angry all you want, but it won't help."

His gaze lowered, resting his head on the pillow. He supposed the big question he had to ask himself was whether he wanted to salvage his relationship with Bruce. The fact Batman hadn't turned him over to the police showed the old man still had a soft spot for him.

Jason's mind trailed back to Intergang and Mr Stone, feeling a cold sensation overcome him. He looked up at Helena and opened his mouth, feeling the confession try to crawl up his throat, but he couldn't say anything.

He closed his mouth and swallowed. He'd be only fooling himself if he thought Mr Stone's murder was the same as the others because at least the other killings could be justified in some way and that was probably why Bruce was willing to let them slide.

The killing of an innocent man was another story altogether.

"Jay?" Helena's expression softened.

"I…" His chest tightened, but if he didn't tell them now they'd find out eventually… unless he made sure they didn't. Cover it up and make sure they never knew. Batman didn't know everything, and he'd already wiped the CCTV footage. Right now none of the family had reason to investigate Mr Stone's murder, they were too distracted with him and making sure Gotham didn't tear itself apart.

"Okay, now you're starting to freak me out," she muttered, frowning as she checked his forehead.
"I just… you're right," he said, clearing his throat. Her frown deepened. "I need to step up and, you know, not let what happened control me." Jason rubbed the back of his neck.

Helena blinked rapidly, scrutinising him suspiciously. "You really think so, huh?" she didn't sound convinced.

He glared at her. "Listen, I'm not making any promises, but I'll try to meet the old man half-way, okay." Jason grimaced. "I don't wanna feel like shit forever, you know… I just… it's hard to not be angry."

Her wariness remained but it grew less intense and faded back a little, as a small smile crept onto her face. "Yeah, I get it."

No, no you don't.

He held his tongue and nodded. God help him if he fucked this up.

Wayne Manor, Gotham

09/25/2023

10:00

The cell phone was on the bed."—the former CEO's are still insisting on another meeting with Tim beforehand," Lucius was on speaker.

Bruce smoothed down his shirt as he finished getting ready in his bedroom, the room spotless, well organised, and decorated in rich reds and browns.

He was expecting at the unveiling the new refurbished monorail. "Tim was very clear in the last meeting, Lucius. Re-affirm that his decision is final," he said, sternly, glancing at the collection of photographs on the dresser.

The most recent one was of himself, Helena, and Tim on their camping trip last year. "I'll make sure they don't try to corner him on the day," Lucius replied, lightly while Bruce picked up the photo and smiled faintly.

"Thanks, Lucius." Bruce placed the photo back down. "Call me tonight with an update."

"Have a good afternoon, Mr Wayne," the Vice President replied before hanging up.

A second after the line went dead someone knocked on the door. Bruce's brow furrowed, glancing over his shoulder. "Come in."

The door knob rattled for a moment until it was finally opened. Jason hesitantly inched his way in on crutches, with a heavily bandaged torso, wearing some pyjama pants. "Uh, hey…" the young man glowered at the ground.

Bruce's lips thinned into a disapproving line. "You should be resting," he said, walking over. Though he'd admit, he was glad Jason was regaining his strength back.

"M'fine." Jason inched away from him and moved towards the bed, sitting down quickly like his legs were about to give way. "I came to talk about plan #23."
Bruce paused, eyeing him with interest. "I'm listening."

Jason took a deep breath and met his gaze. "Listen, you were right about me taking responsibility for my actions and shit," he said, shrugging. "I'll help you settle the gang war."

That was slightly unexpected. Bruce stuck his hands in his pockets and hummed quietly, narrowing his eyes a fraction. "I wasn't expecting you to turn around this quick," he remarked, lightly. "What changed your mind?"

Jason rolled his eyes, looking over at the photos, a glimmer of surprise flickered in his eyes. "Helena's nagging may have had something to do with it," he answered, shrugging.

That he could agree with. His daughter did have an argumentative side to her, something that would serve her well in a courtroom but was also sometimes grating when directed at her family.

Bruce sighed, shaking his head. "It can be annoying," he admitted, sitting down next to him on the bed.

"Yeah, well I'm willing to play nice, but that doesn't mean I'm sticking around for too long," Jason said, defensively, brow creased.

Bruce kept his face passive as he adjusted his cufflinks. "I see." He stood up, as his gaze flickered to the set of photos on the dresser. "Well, I appreciate your help." He glanced at Jason from the corner of his eye. "With Black Mask gone the mobs' money is unprotected, I've already leaked evidence to the GCPD."

Jason smirked. "It was page three in the news. You work fast." Then his smirk faded when his brow creased. "I also noticed a lot of my money's decreased."

Bruce gave him a blank look, pretending like he didn't have the faintest clue why when he shrugged. "The longer the gangs stay at war with each other the fewer profits they make. It's in their best interest to unite again," he said. "But, they still won't trust me, and that's fine for the short term until I find a successor to take over."

The younger man levelled him with a cold look. "Spoken like a true mob boss."

Bruce's stomach twisted, despite his efforts to remain detached, while outwardly he kept his emotionless mask in place. Contingency plan #23 was one of the plans he despised most in some ways because of the fact it made him most like those he hated, but the alternative was worse if the wrong person took over Gotham. That was part of the reason why he needed Jason right now.

"If I'm going to decrease organised crime I need to do it a chunk at a time, just like the Falcones and Maronis," he replied, evenly, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Which is why I need you, Jason. To do what I can't do."

Jason met his intense gaze unflinchingly for a moment before his eyes dimmed in acceptance and nodded, sighing. "Can't be a mob boss without getting your hands dirty, Bruce," he commented, shaking his head. "But, you're right, can't have you turning evil, Gotham wouldn't stand a chance…"

Bruce silently agreed, as his gaze trailed to the photos at the very back. "Which is why I'll be leaving the daily running of it to you," he told him, picking up one of the photos, remembering less complicated times. "Not that I won't be keeping an eye on you of course, so no killing."

"Pfft, right, because that'll be easy," Jason mumbled, struggling to his feet with a shaky grip on the
crutches.

Bruce frowned and stepped forward when he saw the inevitable about to occur. "Careful," he chided lightly when Jason's crutch skidded on the floor. He caught him by the arm before he fell, hoisting him back up onto his feet.

Jason gritted his teeth and jerked out of Bruce's grip when he was steady. "...Thanks," he grunted, begrudgingly, heated gaze wandering to the photo before scowling. "I thought I burned that?"

Bruce glanced at the photo which was of Helena's eighth birthday party at My Little Pony World with Dick and Jason standing alongside her. All three of them had matching violet My Little Pony t-shirts on.

"You tried to," Bruce replied, smiling faintly, holding up the picture to view. "I can't imagine why."

Jason shot him an irritated look which didn't hold much bite behind it as he made a 'tsk' noise and looked away, but Bruce could have sworn he saw a ghost of a smile on his face.

**Bludhaven**

**10/01/2023**

**12:15**

The safe house was more like a cold warehouse with grey concrete walls and a floor. It was mainly used to store weapon artillery above all things, hence the spare utility belts and experimental weapons decorating the walls.

Huntress, Robin, and Blue Beetle stood to attention while Nightwing relayed the plan to them, a holographic computer separating him from them.

"Over a week ago an ancient scarab artefact was stolen from the Metropolitan Museum of Art," Nightwing told them, showing the stolen artefact on the screen.

"Scarab?" Blue Beetle took a step forward, eyeing the stone tablet suspiciously.

Nightwing looked at him curiously. "Look familiar?"

There was a pause. Jaime looked away and shook his head. "No not really," he replied, taking a step back while Huntress watched him with interest.

Nightwing's eyes narrowed briefly, lips pursed as he nodded dismissively. "Well, it was donated to the museum by Dr Helena Sandmark a month ago, and is rumoured to have magical properties, hence the Light's interest," he told them. "Your mission is to retrieve a stolen artefact before the Light get their hands on it," he instructed, clicking on the screen to bring up a map.

Right now they were looking at a map of New York City with a mass of red lines correlating around the Harlem area.

"What are those?" Blue Beetle asked, gesturing to the lines.

Nightwing opened his mouth but Robin beat him to it. "They're supersonic disturbances," the boy answered brightly, eyeing the map with interest. "They're picked up by a satellite."
Blue Beetle frowned, glancing at Huntress. "And a supersonic disturbance is to do with sound, right?" he asked, while Nightwing nodded.

"Basically the satellite picks up objects that are moving faster than sound," she told him, glancing at the map. "Normally the cause is a jet craft or Superman but in this case, I'm guessing it's a speedster?"

"A+ on the speedster," Nightwing replied, bringing up the second screen. "One who you two should be familiar with, Don Allen."

A picture of a thirteen-year-old boy with floppy dark red hair, a sharply pointed chin, and bright green eyes appeared on the screen.

"Ugh, not him," Robin despaired, burying his face in his palm while Huntress sighed.

"I thought Flash said he had it handled," she exclaimed in exasperation.

Nightwing grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, that didn't go so well," he replied, looking over at Blue Beetle. "He's been charged with theft four times in the last two years, while his alter-ego Tornado has been charged for 36 accounts of theft, including the attempted theft of the Mona Lisa."

Blue Beetle let out a low whistle, eyes wide. "That kid's been busy."

"Unfortunately," Nightwing said, zooming in on the map. "He's also been squatting on abandoned properties so he's been a little hard to find, but I've managed to pinpoint his position to this block of apartments in East Harlem, the place is scheduled to be demolished but it has over sixty squatters still in it."

"So, quarantine the perimeter with the force field pods?" Robin suggested.

The young man nodded. "With no unnecessary risks to civilians," he told them, narrowing his eyes. "Keep the situation contained and make sure you capture Tornado." Nightwing's gaze shifted to Huntress. "Huntress, you're the team leader."

She shifted on the spot and nodded, raising her shoulders up in confidence. "Got it." Huntress crossed her arms. "Do you have the building layout?"

Nightwing clicked the side of the screen, bringing up a 3D diagram of the building. "You'll find Tornado on the third floor." He pointed to the third floor, making the entire floor flash yellow.

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**Gotham City**

**10/01/2023**

**14:00**

Jason leant against the railing, biting down on his tongue to mask his wince. Thankfully the helmet concealed any expression of pain he had on, but his body language would give it away if he wasn't careful.

"I'd like to take the time to thank you all for coming," Matches Malone said in his heavy accent, sitting at the head of the table with the other bosses who had come while The Red Hood observed from above holding the AKA47.
Jason had been to family dinners less tense than this.

Bruce's disguise as Matches Malone was basically a moustache, black hair dye to cover up the greys, an Italian suit, and dark sunglasses, as well as a strong city accent. It did the trick just as well as Clark Kent's glasses unsurprisingly enough.

There were 24 people in the room. The big bosses of Cosa Nostra, East Side Dragons, The Blackgators, The Deacons, Penguin's gang, and Burnley Town Massive. Along with their lieutenants and underlings.

The head of the Deacons, Sly Tolliver, narrowed his eyes, leaning back against the chair. He was a tanned man with ash blond hair and a bad overbite. "Couldn't resist seeing the elusive Matches Malone in person," he remarked, dryly, eyes flickering to The Red Hood. "Especially when he's got the Red Hood collared."

"Careful, Tolliver," Jason warned, slyly, pointing the gun in the air as he leant against the railing. "What'd I say about being rude to the guy holding the AKA47?" he spoke to him like he was a small child.

Tolliver bristled, straightening up, glaring. Matches raised a hand. "Red and I have more of a partnership, a mutual interest of protecting our profits," Matches told them all.

The head of Cosa Nostra, Franco Bertinelli (an Italian man with a square face and dark brown eyes) cocked an eyebrow and steeped his fingers together on the table. "Forgive me for pointing out the elephant in the room, but the whole reason our money's in danger is because The Red Hood started the war with Black Mask in the first place," he said, coldly, gaze zeroing in on the man holding the gun.

Jason gritted his teeth into a sharp grin they couldn't see and readied to speak but Matches beat him to it. "Black Mask stole nearly all our profits and gave us more heat from the Bat than Falcone or Maroni ever had." Matches let out a grim laugh. "Look at us we're meeting in fucking daylight with our tail between our legs for Christ sake."

Most of the bosses looked away in displeasure but the Penguin sneered. "Like you're one to talk, where have you been the last decade? Hiding, that's what," he snarled, slamming his fist against the table.

That seemed to rile a number of them up. "Yeah, exactly!" an older black woman with a lot of muscle and short black hair, Mercedes, Leader of the East Side Dragons shouted.

Jason shifted cautiously, on the ready to shoot them all down (even if Batman wouldn't like it) if things went to shit.

Matches however just smiled crookedly, which caught a few of them, especially Bertinelli, off guard. "Do any of you remember a time when shipments were stopped by regular police, rather than freaks in capes?" Matches said, smoothly, leaning forward on the table. "The whole game's become a circus show and the money just ain't what it used to be. Am I right?"

The room grew silent, a few of them members exchanging dark looks. Bertinelli's gaze shifted between them all until it landed back at the man at the head of the table. "So, how do you plan on getting the money back to how it used to be?" he asked, coolly.

Matches surveyed them for a second before he reached down and picked up the suitcase that was at his feet. "I got three things to offer you, one, international shipping," he began. Penguin's eyes lit
up at this. "Two, I'll increase your percentage of the cuts in exchange for more territory—"

One of the lieutenants from the East Side Dragon's, a burly looking punk, interrupted. "You can't just step in and—" Jason shot the punk in the shin. "AH FUCK!" The guy screamed when he keeled over.

Mercedes stood up in outrage, while her other subordinate pulled a gun. "You wanna start, Fuckbag?!

"Hey, it ain't my fault your bitches don't know manners," Jason taunted, glaring at the man carrying the gun. "And, tell your man to put down the gun before he hurts himself."

"You do need to control your boy, Mercedes," Matches said, voice hard like flint.

Mercedes gritted her teeth, feeling the other's eyes on her. Despite what the public may think, none of these assholes wanted a big shoot out or any chance of business was done. "Pfft, I'll control mine if Mr Trigger-Happy over there keeps his in check," she sneered, sitting back down. Her subordinate stood down, glowering at the Red Hood.

Jason smirked while Matches cleared his throat. "And, the third offer is a little peace offering," the fake mob boss slid the suitcase along the table, it came to a stop in the middle. "Open it."

The others eyed the case warily and discreetly looked around the room, making Jason's smirk grow when he realised they were probably worried the case had the dismembered body parts of one (hell maybe even all) of their men.

The Penguin scowled and stood up, reaching over to open the suitcase, somewhat apprehensively lifting the lid while the others leant over to look. The Penguin's scowl faded to confusion for a second, taking out the photographs. "Who the hell is this?"

"Let me see that!" Mercedes reached over and grabbed one of the gory photos, scrutinising the photos for a second before her eyes widened in alarm. "Holy shit is that—"

"Black Mask's accountant," Matches interrupted. "He was on his way to Switzerland with 80% of Black Mask's holdings, including the money of nearly half of the people in this room." Matches smiled darkly. "I cut him off before he left New Jersey."

That was a lie, the accountant was hidden away in Alaska, but Jason had to commend the old man's acting, it was fucking on point.

"Huh…" Tolliver picked up one of the photos and smirked. "And, our money?"

"Will be transferred into each of your offshore accounts," Matches replied, slyly, meeting each one of their gazes. "As soon as we reach an agreement."

The room was silent enough to hear a pin drop until Bertinelli let out a low chuckle, hiding his mouth with his hand. The others looked at him warily. "You son of a bitch," his voice light-hearted and amused, but his smile was like a shark as he relaxed in his chair while Matches smiled thinly. "Where you been hiding all these years?"

Matches' chuckled, folding his legs. "I'm a man who likes to travel."

That seemed to have a domino effect the others, as they seemed less hostile and more curious, sitting back down and looking at Matches Malone with a newfound respect.
East Harlem

10/01/2023

17:30

Blue Beetle was crouched down next to Huntress in the apartment next door, the two of them listening in on the small radio after they'd bugged Don's apartment, waiting for the kid to return from wherever he'd run off to.

Jaime drummed his hands against his thigh, glancing over at Huntress who was staring at the radio with an unusual amount of eagerness. He couldn't help but notice it was the first time in a while the two of them had real privacy. "So, you been to many stakeouts?" he asked, evenly, smiling.

'Now isn't the time for small talk,' the Scarab was quick to chide.

Blue Beetle rolled his eyes. Ever heard of multitasking? He thought irritably.

She blinked a few times before she lifted her head and looked at him. "Oh, yeah, lots," she replied, returning the smile. "This is my first solo one out of Gotham, though," Huntress looked back at the radio, turning up the volume. "I'm pretty surprised Dad seems okay with it."

He frowned, but he guessed it made sense Batman would be a little overprotective. "Glad he isn't my guardian," he tried to joke, nudging her. She raised an eyebrow. Ah, crap, that did sound a little rude. "Uh, anyway." Blue Beetle cleared his throat. "What's the deal with this Don kid?"

Huntress sighed, looking away. "It's a long story, and I would be compromising the Flash's identity…"

"I kind of already got the gist of who it was," Jaime replied, dryly. "Was the original Flash's Don's dad by any chance?"

She shot him an unimpressed look. "Okay, smartass, fair point." The corner of her lip twitched upwards. "Okay, so around seven years ago, the original Flash fought with Professor Zoom in a battle around the world which ended when the speed force destroyed their bodies." Huntress narrowed her eyes at the radio when it started buzzing. "And, then about four years ago, Don's mom started dating a new guy, which is when Don started acting out."

"And, became a thief? A bit of a leap, isn't it?" Blue Beetle commented.

She shrugged. "Don didn't like his mom's new boyfriend."

Blue Beetle's stomach squirmed. "Why, what the guy do?"

"Nothing, that's the thing," Huntress replied, sighing. "Flash, Don's sister, Iris, Even Nightwing all looked into it and the guy was clean. It wasn't like he'd abused Don or anything, it was more like the opposite, they just didn't like each other." Her brow creased. "Then, after things reached a boiling point a year ago, the kid ran away."

Blue Beetle pursed his lips and hummed lowly since he didn't know the full story it was hard to determine if Don was entirely to blame. "So, he—"

'Ssh!'
Huntress raised her hand to silence him. "Ssh, listen," she whispered, narrowing her eyes at the radio when the white noise changed to something else. "He's here." She touched her communicator. "Robin."

"He's here," Huntress spoke from her com-link.

Robin was in the other apartment next to Don's, the individual pods that connected the force field together were positioned at four points around Don's apartment, hidden away in the other apartments surrounding his and on the next door building's roof which was on the level of the third floor.

"On it," he replied, pressing the activation button on his computer.

The force fields activated and conjured up a transparent blur that surrounded the entire building.

He closed the door behind him. "Babe, I'm home!" Don exclaimed, tossing the empty bag of Wendy's Burger on the ground. The purple hoodie he was wearing was ready to be binned as were the dark jeans and worn out black boots he had on. A negative side effect of super speed, unfortunately.

The studio apartment was dark and the faded wallpaper had patches of yellow and brown on it. The carpet wasn't much better, old and worn. The room was cluttered with fast-food packaging, loads of graffiti spray cans, and there was a bucket full of dirty clothes he was washing by hand.

It sucked and there was no heating but it was better than nothing.

Don shrugged and let out a loud burp which he sounded into the letter A as he walked over to the mattress to kick off his shoes. His feet smelt worse than— why was the window open?

He froze and stared at the open window as a gentle breeze floated in. Don's face scrunched up in confusion. "…Huh?"

He saw a pale blue glow gloss over his hands for a millisecond.

Tornado zoomed to the other side of the room when the blast hit the spot where he'd once been. He looked up in alarm, but then his alarm turned to a toxic thrill when he saw Huntress jump down from the ceiling with a Blue armoured sidekick by her side.

"Huntress, how you been?" Don grinned widely, showing his teeth, body buzzing as he felt the speed force coiled around him. "Who's the side-piece?"

The new guy bristled and bared his teeth, but Huntress didn't seem chatty today and just lurched forward at Don, throwing two Batarangs.

The first one was aimed at him, which he dodged, but the second one lodged into the wall further along and released a blast of gas that hit him straight in the face.

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Tornado held his breath and ran around on the spot to create a blast of wind, thinning out the smoke, but when he came to Huntress was there to greet him with a punch in the face.

Fuck

He clutched his eye, head reeling, but the bitch didn't stop there. She delivered five hard punches to
his stomach and then hit him in the face again before he had the chance to breathe. Tornado was pushed back, his feet skid across the ground as he tried to regain his footing.

It was kind of ironic that no matter how fast he was the guy in the armour behind him still managed to nail him while he was disorientated.

Tornado's body was slammed against the wall, nailed to it with these giant, giant…staples? He blinked a few times in surprise. "Huh, weird." Then his eyes narrowed as he vibrated his molecules out of the blue staple as the two of the wannabe heroes closed in on him. "See ya."

He escaped from the staple and got to the door, flinging it open to escape to freedom, only to hit some invisible force that sent a shock through his entire body that sent him flying through the air and onto his back.

Tornado was gaping in shock, eyes rolled back, body twitching.

"Mierda." That new guy said something. "Is he gonna be okay?"

A collar was latched around Don's throat by Huntress who was standing over him. "Yeah, don't worry," she said, evenly, clicking the collar in place.

Don's eyes drooped as he felt himself lose consciousness. The outlined blurs of those…uh…they were standing above…

His eyes closed when his head sank against the carpet and passed out.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

**10/01/2023**

**18:00**

The lecture from Bruce was inevitable even if he hadn't killed anyone he knew there'd be something the old man would find fault with, a small tick Jason was unable to smooth out.

So, far Bruce had barely uttered a word to him when they got back ho—to the manor, and just went about changing Jason's bandages while the young man sat down on the operating table, both of them silent.

Bruce secured the final bandage around Jason's torso, tying a neat knot in place. "Do you need more painkillers?" he asked the young man, frowning.

"No." Jason shrugged, there was a distinct ache in his torso like a really bad cramp, but it was manageable as long as he didn't move around too much.

Bruce's lips thinned, not convinced. He'd probably force Jason to have one or two later on after dinner. "The meeting went well," he said, coolly.

Ah, and here it was.

Jason tensed a little and shrugged, looking away. "Yeah." He sighed, expecting a lecture he wouldn't argue against, he was too tired. "Listen, can we skip the lecture, I seriously need to sleep a wink or too," he groaned, rubbing his eyes while his other hand rubbed his ribs.
"I'm not going to lecture you for doing a good job," Bruce replied, evenly, cocking an eyebrow, making Jason frown and look up. "While, I'm disappointed you shot that East Side Dragon member, I'm also glad you didn't kill him."

Jason eyed him warily for a moment. It wasn't exactly praise, but it wasn't exactly a reprimand either, so he just settled to leave the matter as it was and change the subject. A good glance around the cave triggered a new question. "Where'd Helena and the replacement run off too?" he asked.

Bruce's brow furrowed together, displeased. "His name's Tim," he replied coolly.

Jason rolled his eyes. "Tsk, yeah and?" He met his former mentor's hard gaze challengingly.

Bruce didn't let it slide, hough. "If I hear you call him Replacement again…" His eyes narrowed warningly. "You won't be allowed to see Helena."

The threat actually had an impact, making him seize up and his gaze to turn more frigid. Jason opened his mouth, a little too stunned to fully communicate his outrage. That threat wasn't empty and they both knew it, if Bruce really wanted to he could convince Helena to stop talking to him.

Jason's chest tightened, closing his mouth. Because, it was fucking typical of Bruce to pull that card, acting like Jason having a good relationship with his sister was a privilege, not a right.

Bruce looked at him searchingly for a moment before sighing. "If that's what it takes to keep you from upsetting Tim then so be it," he continued, eyes darkening. "You already left a bad impression when you pointed a gun to his head."

Jason bit down on his tongue hard, feeling an uneasy shift in his stomach which wasn't from the cramps. Okay so maybe Bruce was right, it wasn't fair to shit on a kid who'd never done him any harm but it was like his anger didn't understand that.

Tim could be the nicest little cherub in the world but it didn't change the fact he'd taken Jason's place.

He balled his hands into fists. *Play nice,* he had to remind himself. "Fine, I get it, I'll leave the kid alone," Jason told him coldly. Bruce stared at him sternly for a few more seconds before he nodded. "So, where are Tim and Helena?" he repeated the previous question more politely.

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**East Harlem**

**10/01/2023**

**18:25**

Don started to come back to the land of the living and groaned when he stirred awake with a banging headache. "Ughhh," he groaned woozily, lolling his head to the side as he opened his eyes.

He was sitting on his mattress but his hands were bound in handcuffs with a freaking collar around his neck.

"Oh, look, he's awake." Oh, how *wonderful,* Robin was here!

Don looked up at the three of them drowsily. "You know if you guys wanted to hang out you could have just said so," he mumbled, raising his hands up to touch the heavy collar around his neck, feeling a spark of anger when he realised it was one of those special ones they used in the special
Juvenile Hall to suppress superpowers. "Unless this is some kind of perverted fantasy you Bats do on the weekend?" Don arched an eyebrow at the guy in blue armour. "You in on it too, Side-piece?"

The guy in blue narrowed his eyes—Don backed up a little—hand transforming into a cannon. "Can I spark him, please?" he was talking to Huntress.

She placed a hand on her hip and glared at him. "No."

"It'd be like a bee sting," he argued, holding his hands/cannon up dramatically while Huntress crossed her arms. "Okay, maybe in actuality it'd be multiple bee stings."

From behind them Robin sighed in exasperation and stepped forward. "Look, Tornado," the boy began sternly, making Don arch an eyebrow at him. "We know you stole the ancient scarab artefact." Robin stood in front of him, looking down at him from his high stance. "Thing is, so does the bad guys who wanted to steal them as well."

Okay… that was slightly worrying.

Don narrowed his eyes, squaring his shoulders, trying to shrug off the small (extremely tiny really) bit of fear that curled over his chest. "Okay, even if I did know what you're talking about, which I don't," he retorted smoothly, earning a glare. "I wouldn't steal a stupid ancient scarab artefact."

Huntress sighed, while the cannon on the blue armoured guy's arm disappeared when he buried his face in his palm. Robin's glare lessened, taking a step back as he activated the holographic computer on his wrist which showed a series of blurred frozen images of him going into the museum.

Don scowled and watched Robin scroll through the freeze frames of him, though it looked more like a blur of purple, red, and black so it wasn't strong enough evidence—oh, wait, no that frame just now was clear enough to see his face…crap.

Robin paused on the slightly fuzzy but distinctive image of Don's tiny moment when he'd taken a second to look at the ancient tablet.

Sloppy. Damn it, he'd been sloppy.

Don chewed the inside of his mouth as his gaze switched from the security footage to the three of them. "Well…I'm not the only red-headed speedster in the world," he said slowly.

The guy in blue armour shook his head in frustration. "Ese, you're literally wearing the same clothes in the security footage." He gestured to the holographic image dramatically to reiterate his point.

Robin closed his computer and sighed again. "Listen, this is serious, Tornado," he said sternly. "These people will kill you for this."

That actually sent a shiver down Don's spine, not the good kind either, causing him to look down at the handcuffs. This did seem really serious because he doubted they'd go to all this effort for nothing. He had to swallow his pride when he looked back at Robin, wishing he was standing up so he didn't have to crane his neck.

"…Okay, fine, yeah I stole the thing from the museum," Don confessed, raising his hands up defensively. "But, I didn't know it was important, I just liked the look of it, and the beetle looked cool…" He frowned, sighing deeply. He was definitely going back to Juvenile Hall after this.
Robin's grimaced, sharing a look with the others. "We need the artefact, Tornado," his voice was less harsh this time. "Is it nearby?"

Don’s fear melted when he felt a flare of amusement, letting out a scoff. "What kind of idiot would keep their stolen goods nearby?" he remarked, surveying them in disbelief. "That's just irresponsible."

Huntress arched an eyebrow. "So where did you hide it?"

The speedster smiled slyly. "Oh, you know, I thought this island near Peru would be a good place," he answered lightly, shrugging.

There was a long silence as they all just stared at him like he was joking, but seriously, he had super speed and could do a full 360 of the world within ten minutes; maybe twenty or thirty on a bad day.

Huntress stepped forward, narrowing her eyes at him. "If you're messing us around the bad guys after you will be the least of your problems."

Oh, he didn't doubt that. His stomach was pretty swollen and sore from their little meet and greet session. The speedster looked up, irritated. "Listen, I hid the artefact on that Santa Cruz island near Peru with all my other expensive stuff," Don replied impatiently.

"Scarab says he's telling the truth," the guy in blue armour piped up.

Huntress hummed quietly as she kept her gaze locked on Don's, when he refused to flinch or look away she finally softened her glare and said, "okay then, it looks like we're going to Santa Cruz."

Chapter End Notes

I'm taking a lot of creative liberties with Don Allen since he doesn't appear often in the DC universe, and he's only ever been shown as a grown man.

The whole idea of Bruce having to get directly involved in the mob business left a queasy feeling in my stomach, especially since the actually plan is canon so the only way I could see it work is if it's temporary, and Jason does most of the grunt work because I'm pretty sure Bruce is already busy enough trying to raise kids, be Batman, and semi-manage a company. Adulthood's a stinker ain't it?
The bridge was blocked off by the police, surrounding an old banged up grey car that had been reported stolen a few hours ago.

Batman's gaze followed the trail of blood from the car to the edge of the bridge, while Robin talked to one of the police officers's behind them. The bridge left a long drop into the ice cold river, without any protective gear on the impact of hitting the water would knock you out cold, leaving you to drown.

"Uh, Batman," Jason's voice was hesitant, unusual seeing how the boy was often outspoken.

He looked over his shoulder at his partner, catching sight of the officer handing over a white envelope. "What is it?" Batman started to walk over.

Robin looked paler, worried, as he stared at the envelope. "Ugh…I think Bruce Wayne's gonna be expecting a visit from the police," he said, turning to his mentor.

Batman frowned, stopping in front of him, the envelope partly hidden from view. "And, why is that?" he questioned, evenly.

Robin apprehensively held the envelope up to him. "I think whoever wrote this wanted his attention, immediately."

Batman's jaw clenched, confused for a second until he saw what was written on the envelope. The writing was jagged and shaky but recognisable, Selina. Unfortunately, the identity of the sender wasn't the most shocking thing.

It read:

To Bruce Wayne, the father of my child
Needless to say, she had his attention.

Isla Santa Cruz

10/02/2023

01:30

Huntress piloted the plane over the ocean towards the Island, while Robin kept an eye on Don who was sitting handcuffed to one of the seats in the jet.

Blue Beetle was standing behind her, grinning as he looked around the grey mocha interior curiously, with an energy drink in his hand. "Okay, I'm gonna ask, when did you learn how to fly a plane?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him, like flying a jet was a walk in the park. "Batman taught me back when I was fourteen," she answered, shrugging as she looked back at the horizon. "I can teach you if you want?"

Blue Beetle's eyes bulged. "Really?"

Huntress smiled crookedly. "Well, yeah, if you want to," she offered.

He grinned. "¡A huevo!"

She frowned, blinking rapidly. Had he just said 'to egg'? Huntress shrugged it off, she'd probably just misheard or she needed to brush up on her Mexican some more. "Uh, great," she replied, assuming his enthusiasm was a big yes.

"Hey," Robin called from the back of the jet. "How come you always say no when I ask?"

Blue Beetle arched an eyebrow at her while he drank his drink. She rolled her eyes. "Well gee, I don't know," she said, lightly. "Maybe it has something to do with the fact you nearly killed us both last time," she accused.

They'd nearly crashed into a mountain.

Robin made a loud sound of protest. "Give me a break, I was eleven."

"Yeah, well, it's still pretty fresh in my memory, Bud."Huntress gripped the control wheel tighter.

"What exactly happened?" Blue Beetle asked, uncertainly, crushing the empty can in his hands and tossed it in the small bin behind her seat.

Ugh, she did not want to relive that story again. "Just a mission in Brazil that went bad," she replied dismissively. "Nothing noteworthy."

"Besides Kobra," Robin commented from the back.

"Who?" Jaime asked incredulously.

"Freaking hell, Dude. How new are you?" Don scoffed loudly.

Blue Beetle turned around abruptly, and she could hear his armour clinking together when he tensed, an argument brewing. She sighed and stretched her arm out to nudge him. "Did you give
"Oh, yeah." Apprehensively, he came to sit down next to her; she glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "I told them I was staying over at yours," he divulged, shifting in his seat.

Huntress arched an eyebrow while she glanced down at the radar display on the control panel. "So were they not okay with that?"

"Uh, no they were fine with it," he replied, scratching the back of his neck, the sound intensified because of the armour. "They kind of…it's pretty funny actually." He chuckled but it was strained. Her brow furrowed together. "They think you're…that we're together, or something."

Her nails dug into the control wheel.

*Remember to breathe.*

Her cheeks felt hot. "Oh…" She turned to look at him, only to find he was already staring at her. "…Okay." Her mind went blank for a second.

He averted his gaze. "Um, yeah…" He drummed his fingers on his leg.

She opened her mouth for a second, and then closed it, facing straight ahead again. "…Is that a bad thing?" she ventured, lightly, as her eyes flickered towards him for a second before looking out at the horizon.

"Oh, no," he said quickly and then winced. "Well…no, I…You're a very beautiful person."

"What?" Her head snapped toward in him in surprise, eyes wide like saucers.

He raised his hands quickly. "I mean, any guy would be lucky to date you!" he shouted, hands shaking. "So what I mean is, having my parents think you're my girlfriend is really…cool."

The jet was silent enough to hear a pin drop, that as well as the shuffle of movement coming from the back.

"Oh…" Huntress gaped for a second before she quickly closed her mouth. "Um, thanks…" She averted her gaze and bit down on her tongue, feeling him staring at her. "I think it'd be pretty cool to have my dad think I'm dating you too," she said, unsurely, looking back at him. Then she frowned. "Though he'd probably end up placing a tracker on you…"

Blue Beetle's posture relaxed as a small smile grew on his face. "Heh, he already did…"

Her brow rose briefly as she cracked a smile. "Huh, he already did…"

Blue Beetle's posture relaxed as a small smile grew on his face. "Heh, he already did…"

It took Selina ten goes to actually work up the nerve to break into her daughter's school. Once she was inside and searching the empty dark halls she almost felt like she was tying her own noose.
She sighed quietly and followed the line of lockers with a small flashlight in her hand. Helena's locker was number 148 from what the school records had detailed.

Every muscle in her body was screaming at her to turn back, she could get her revenge on Powers, keep things simple…but how long had it been since she'd actually heard her daughter's voice or seen her face that wasn't projected on a TV screen?

The threat of Black Mask hanging over her head was gone but… Selina came to a halt at locker 122. This would be a bombshell for both of them and there was no taking it back when it finally happened.

Her stomach twisted and churned badly, feeling a spite of cowardice for the first time in years.

Which was for the best, ignorance or the truth? She couldn't keep hiding forever and there were so many things she'd never got the chance to tell Helena, to explain why she'd had to leave. The last thing she'd ever wanted was for her daughter to think she hadn't been wanted.

Selina swallowed thickly, as her legs started moving without her say so, slow and gingerly at first as she walked around in the dark hallway, shining the light on the lockers until before she knew it, locker 148 was right in front of her.

The letter she was holding was tinted pink and blank and for all, she knew Helena could dismiss it at first glance and toss it away, but on the off chance, she opened it and then followed it's instructions then… well, that was a whole other complicated scenario she envisioned.

"Best case you at least want me to be alive," she whispered, fiddling with the letter in her hand. "Worst case you'll hate me…"

But, the hatred was a given, you could build something from hatred, which didn't make it a necessarily a good thing but it was still something.

Selina bit down on her tongue and inwardly said 'fuck it', slipping the letter through the thin slit of the locker.

The faint sound of the drop felt like a stone in her stomach.

A lot of the coast of the island was under water since the sea levels had risen, so there were a number of trees and former land underwater which left the hiding spot, a cave on higher ground, mainly untouched.

Don led the way to the cave with Robin, Blue Beetle, and Huntress following behind him. The cave was up ahead, over the shallow river that ran towards a lake up ahead.

Blue Beetle let out a low whistle when the full scenery was revealed, a little paradise tucked away behind a mass of trees and greenery. "How'd you find this place?"

Don shrugged, feeling a bad tightening in his chest. "Found it when I was a kid, you know, just from exploring the world," he answered nonchalantly, keeping his gaze ahead as they came to the river. The collar felt tight around his neck.

They all crossed the river and Don stopped when he arrived at the entrance of the cave. His gaze drifted to the side of the cave which was decorated with the lightning bolt carvings Dawn and his dad had carved into the rock, gritting his teeth he glanced at the others, expecting them to make a comment but none of them did.
Robin looked at him expectantly. "Lead the way."

Don's face scrunched up into a glare as he walked them through the cave.

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East Harlem

10/02/2023

02:05

"This place is a pigsty," the brown skinned teen, Jinx, remarked, covering her nose to mask the scent. The apartment was a mess with ugly wallpaper and a ratty carpet, she'd seen slums more sanitary than this shit. There were even chicken bones just scattered on the floor that was now being eaten by two cockroaches.

"Quit complaining, Rookie," Icicle Jr snapped, pushing past her to get into the apartment. Ice blue skin almost fading into the grey and dark looking room.

She shivered from the cold he emitted and scowled, tempted to trip him up, but she calmed herself, smoothing back her pink Mohawk as she let out a deep breath and followed Icicle Jr into the room. "Just making an observation," she said, dryly, looking around.

Icicle Jr made a groaning noise. "Listen, kid, it's two in the morning and I haven't had any caffeine so..." he trailed off when he came to a stop in front of the wall near the kitchen where a black knife was stabbed in the wallpaper.

She took a step forward and narrowed her eyes, trying to scrutinise it in the bad light. The distinct points made the outline of a bat, realisation dawned fairly quickly once she'd put two and two together. "Ah, fuck me!" she growled, face-palming. "How did Batman get involved?!!"

Icicle Jr glared at her. "Yell a little louder, Jinx, I don't think the drug dealers heard ya."

Her mouth clamped shut, gritting her teeth, walking over to him. "Think the place is bugged?" she murmured, looking around warily.

Icicle Jr pulled the Batarang out of the wall, narrowing his eyes as he swept the room for a moment. His posture was tense, ice decorated shoulders hunched. "Let's just go," he muttered, bitter, walking passed her. "This place is a dump."

Inside the cave was dark and had three different levels. The first level was the entrance that led you down underground, while the second level was narrower and had a few tunnels that seemed to lead down into the dark, and the third level was a goldmine, the driest patch protected from flooding and covered with stolen loot, with two other passages leading straight down.

"That's a lot of stuff," Blue Beetle said, exchanging a look with Huntress.

She hummed in agreement, scrutinising the pile of stolen goods; there were piles of jewellery, movie props, wireless stereos, stuff that ranged from expensive to priceless. She had to admit it was impressive.

Don smiled slyly, walking up towards the pile. "What can I say, I work fast."

Robin let out a small sigh, eyebrows knitted together in disapproval. "Yeah, we read your file," he
remarked dryly, wiping the smile off the speedster's face.

"So where is the artefact?" Huntress asked, stepping onto the third level, Blue Beetle by her side as he looked around.

"Just give me a sec," Don's tone was clipped, kneeling down on the floor. "Unless you'd mind loosening these cuffs, it'll take a few minutes." He was glaring daggers as he shifted a porcelain vase out of the way.

"Okay, I was just asking where it was." She looked over at Blue Beetle and made a rude gesture towards Don, rolling her eyes.

Blue Beetle wiped his mouth to hide his smile, as his shoulders shook a little like he was suppressing his laughter. "Heh, so why did you steal all this stuff?" he asked, amused, looking around the vast space which was almost like a dome.

Don didn't look up and just kept on searching. "If I like something I take it, nothing else to it," he answered curtly, shuffling over to the other side of the pile.

Robin picked up a painting, examining it intently as if something about it was amiss. "Wait a second…is this…" He lips twisted into a scowl. "You stole the Jeune fille endormie!?"

"They barely even noticed it was gone," Don replied, shrugging. His face scrunched up when he picked up a golden cup.

"It's Picasso." Robin's face was twisted into a scowl.

"Yeah, I know, I'm not an idiot." Don rolled his eyes and ignored him, moving a giant prospected tooth that was the size of her cat out of the way. "Say, how about you do something useful and help me look for this stupid thing?"

Her adoptive brother let out a low groan, pinching the bridge of his nose, while Huntress sighed and shook her head. "Let's try to focus here, people," she chided, shooting Robin a pointed look. "Help him look, Robin."

Robin muttered something under his breath and placed the painting back down, moving to the pile of quilts, chests, and figurines that Don hadn't looked through yet.

Her gaze shifted to Blue Beetle for a second, pausing when she saw his back was to her and he was whispering something she couldn't make out.

Huntress felt a small hint of wariness grow in her stomach. "Blue?" she said, quietly, taking a step forward.

He whipped around like he'd been struck by a whip, causing her brow to furrow. "I'm fine." He raised his hands out to keep some distance between them, but then he looked at his arms and suddenly grabbed one of them and hid them both behind his back. "I'm just tired. Energy drinks wore off, you know the drill."

She looked him up and down, studying him briefly. His eyes were wider than normal and his whole upper body was stiff like he was planning to run away. "Blue, what's wrong?" she asked, softly, taking a step closer.

He took a step back, shifting and moving like he felt uncomfortable in his own skin. "I need some air. I just—"
"Found it!" Don exclaimed.

Blue Beetle's gaze shifted to behind her where the others were. She followed his line of sight and turned around. Don was holding up the stone artefact, the scarab carving prominent against the grey stone.

"Thanks," Robin said, taking the tablet from Don, earning an irritated glare from the speedster. "Now we can go, and return the rest of this stuff back to its rightful place."

Don's eyes flashed with rage. "Oh, come on, Man, don't be an ass!"

"This stuff isn't even yours," Robin argued, raising his arms up in exasperation.

Huntress held back a groan and narrowed her eyes, opening her mouth to tell them to shut it, when something stopped her, the scarab beetle on the tablet was glowing. "What is—?"

"Ahh!" There was a crash from behind her.

The boys bickering stopped at once, as she turned around. "Blue?" her voice wavered for a second when she saw him on the floor. She rushed over to his side and knelt down beside. "Come on, stay with me."

Was he injured, was his armour damaged, what the hell was wrong?

Blue Beetle curled up on the floor, his body jerking like he was having a fit. "No, no, don't!" His eyes were snapped shut, trying to shove her away but his movement was clunky.

"Talk to me, what's happening?" she demanded, looking him over hastily, but there weren't any physical marks on him.

"Shit is he having a seizure?" Don shouted.

Huntress felt a frigid cold dread wash over her when Blue Beetle's hands transformed into cannons. She jumped to her feet and took a step back. "He's gonna shoot. Move!" she ordered when the cannons lit up.

Blue Beetle's arm shot up and aimed straight at her. "No, stop!"

Don and Robin ducked for cover while she ran in the opposite direction. The beam skimmed past her arm like a harsh bee sting, making it numb. Huntress shimmied her back against the wall, clutching her stung arm, the sleeve of her costume hot from the faint heat of the blast.

Then Blue Beetle got to his feet, levitating, and started shooting at the boys. Robin shoved the artefact back in Don's arms, pushing the speedster behind him. "What are you doing?" Robin snapped, fighting back while Blue Beetle tried to blast them, the power of the blasts creating cracks in the walls.

One of the stray blasts hit the Picasso painting, sizzling the paint and burning the paper.

"I don't know!" Blue Beetle yelled, shooting left right and centre. Huntress quickly approached him from behind. "I-I can't—Stop!" He managed to regain control of his left hand so he could wrestle with his right arm.

The one arm he seemed to have control over her trying to transform back into a canon, erratically jumping between the two forms. Huntress got back onto her feet, her jaw clenched tight like it was
locked in place.

The cave shook as the cracks in the stone grew larger.

She threw a smoke pellet on the ground and ran towards him while Blue Beetle swerved around in confusion. Huntress jumped him from behind while he was wrestling with himself. His body buckled and nearly fell to the ground when she latched on and locked her legs around his torso.

Huntress put him in a headlock as he started to buckle like a bull, trying to knock her off. She looked around in alarm when the cave walls shook more violently, so thinking quickly she took out her taser.

Long blue pipes grew from Jaime's back and coiled around her throat choking her, the pipes cutting into her skin like wire.

"Stop it!" Blue Beetle shouted, voice echoing around the cave as the ceiling started to cave in. "Let her go!" While the other arm kept firing his non-weaponized arm broke free and grabbed one of the pipes, trying to loosen its hold on her.

Huntress gritted her teeth as the air started to leave her lungs, releasing her hold on the headlock so she could grab the pipe that had her in a death hold. She pulled and the pipe, trying to make some sort of gap between it and her neck.

Blue Beetle reached around and helped her yank the pipe away from her windpipe, as the ceiling above them started to cave in. Huntress sucked in a gulp of air, the white spot dimming from her vision, as she grabbed Blue Beetle by the throat and sunk her taser into the weak spot in his armour.

The electricity sizzled and made his body jerk and spasm as his eyes rolled back. Large chunks of rock fell as the two of them hit the floor, his fingers twitching as his armour started to recede.

"Find cover!" Robin yelled from the other side, shrouded by the rainfall of dirt and rock.

Huntress felt her heart thunder against her chest and hastily dragged Jaime to her side, smashing their bodies against the wall of the cave. There were dirt and dust everywhere, getting in her lungs and eyes like a poison.

She kept dragging him back until the wall disappeared and the two of them fell down into a dark hole as rocks rolled after them.

He was in a tight space where both his shoulders were pressed against the tunnel. Robin coughed badly, the air around him dirty. He covered his mouth and pulled out a small flashlight. "Tornado?" he called out.

"Over here," Tornado wheezed, stumbling in the dark. Robin scraped his shoulders against the walls to half-turn and shine the light in the other boy's face, making Tornado hiss and scrunch his eyes up. "Get that light out of my face, dude," he snapped, shielding his eyes with his hand. The speedster's face was grey from the amount of dust and mud that was covering him, Robin figured he didn't fare much better.

"Oh, sorry." Robin lowered the light, glancing behind the boy so he could see the rest of the tunnel, but the whole thing was caved in. His stomach plummeted when he thought of Jaime and Helena. "Did you see Huntress and Blue Beetle make it?"
Tornado shrugged and readjusted his grip on the ancient artefact which was surprisingly still intact. "Uh, no…" He grimaced when he looked at Robin's expression. "Oh, sorry."

Robin hastily steeled himself and kept his face blank, swallowing a thick lump in his throat. He checked his wrist computer, the holographic screen flickered like a bad TV signal, while he tried to access their coms only to be disappointed. "Coms are down," he said, sighing he turned off the screen. "They'll find a way out." Robin frowned. "Huntress is trained, and Blue Beetle is… we just need to worry about getting out ourselves."

"What was with that guy anyway?" Tornado spoke up, frowning. "He went, full psycho."

Robin chewed the inside of his mouth and narrowed his eyes at the ground. "I'm not sure…” His gaze flickered to the tablet, as a memory resurfaced from earlier when they'd been at the briefing. "But it might have something to do with that thing." He shined the light at the stone tablet. "Next time we see him, keep it hidden."

"Don't need to tell me twice, dude," the red head said, tucking the artefact into his hoodie sleeve. "We need to start moving before the bugs get in our ears."

Robin shivered when the image flash before his eyes, he quickly brushed it off and turned away, while Tornado raised an eyebrow. "Good idea," he replied, shining his light around the tunnel. "Any chance you could vibrate your molecules out of here?"

Tornado scoffed. "Dude, do you know how thick these walls are?" he exclaimed, waving his hands in the air, but the space was too small so he ended up hitting the rock, wincing. "I can only do it for thin stuff like through house walls or a portaloo or something," the speedster exclaimed, rubbing his sore hand.

His powers were still developing so that made sense. "Oh, right." Robin eyeing him curiously. "What?" Tornado's eyes narrowed.

The dark haired boy just shrugged. "I'm just surprised you didn't try to lie so I'd remove the collar," he remarked, catching a glimpse of Don's dumbstruck expression for a second before he shined the flashlight down the tunnel. "So it looks like we'll have to go this way right?"

Tornado didn't reply since he was busy berating himself with his face buried in his hands, making mumbling noises, so Robin took a guess and assumed this was the only other way out and started to crawl down the tunnel.

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Jaime's body felt heavy and the ground beneath him pressed against his face, and the air was damp and warm. His brow furrowed when he realised his armour had powered down.

'Wake up.'

His eyelids twitched before blinking open, a bright light shined in his eyes. "Ugh." He covered his face with his hands and moved to sit up. There was a flashlight on the ground next to him.

A foot came crashing down on his chest, pinning him on his back. "What happened back there?" Huntress said sharply, looming over him with her crossbow pointed at him, looking more than a little pissed off.

Jaime's body seized up as his eyes widened in surprise. Then his gaze landed on the rip in her costume and the painfully pink flesh that was peeking out from the hole. "Your arm…I..." The
memories came barrelling back, making his chest tighten. He noticed the bruising around her neck where her collar didn't cover her throat. "I don't know what happened." He raised his hands. "The scarab just went haywire."

Her lips pursed tightly and her eyes narrowed down at him for a moment, flickering away for a second before fixing back on him. "Has it done that before?"

'...My reasoning is far too advanced for you to understand.' The Scarab didn't sound apologetic.

He felt a hot blaze of anger run through him. You hurt them, you strangled her. What the fuck is wrong with you?!

'She...' For the first time, the machine actually hesitated. 'She was a threat to this vessel.'

¡Me vale madres! He fumed in his head. Her.

His stomach churned, closing his eyes in resignation. "Yes, it has," he admitted, sighing quietly. "First time the scarab activated it took control of me." Jaime opened his eyes to look at her. "But I swear that's it."

Her mouth twisted into a grimace, lowering her crossbow as she lifted her foot from his chest and took a step back, slipping her crossbow back into its holster. Jaime propped himself up on his elbows. "You freaked me out back there," she said, accusingly, looking at him intently and then let out a sigh when she looked away.

"I know, I'm sorry," he apologised gently, while he stared at her arm. "Is your arm okay?"

She clamped her hand over the tear in her costume. "It'll be fine," she answered, stiffly, sighing quietly she shook her head and held out her hand to help him up. "...Come on."

He accepted the hand and was helped back onto his feet. "What about your throat?"

She pulled her hand out of his grip. "I said, I'm fine," she repeated, more firmly this time, crossing her arms.

She was lying, because there was no way in hell she was fine after that, after what he'd done. "Helena, I strangled you," the moment he said it he felt queasy. "You're not fine."

Her gaze sharpened like a knife. "Jaime, just leave it," she snapped.

He jerked back and averted his gaze, feeling sick. "I'm sorry." His eyes closed in shame. "I swear I tried to stop it." He looked at her pleadingly while she stared back at him coldly. "I would never turn on you guys."

The silence that followed stretched on, with the two of them staring at each other. Huntress didn't say anything at all for a long time, as his skin grew clammy and his mouth filled with a bad taste that wouldn't go away no matter how many times he swallowed.

"I know, Jaime, I just..." The sharpness in her gaze softened a little when she unfolded her arms. Her hand ghosted across her throat. "Are you okay?" she asked, taking a hesitant step forward. He looked confused. "I tasered you, remember?"

His hand shot up to his neck where the sore spot was, but he barely felt anything, it was just a bruise. "I'm not the one who got attacked," he said, unable to look her in the eye when she came to stand in front of him.
"It still hurt, though, didn't it?" Her lips were drooped and her eyes had dark circles underneath them.

Jaime nodded faintly. "Well, yeah, it did..." he wasn't sure if he should feel bad for admitting his own pain or happy that she didn't seem angry. "But, it's fine, you had to do what you needed to."

"No, none of this is fine." She frowned and looked over at the wall behind him "But, I do know you weren't in control of yourself," Huntress said, looking him in the eye again. "Something about that artefact triggered the scarab to act out of control."

Jaime searched his memories, the feelings starting to resurface. "Yeah, it felt like it was terrified."

'I fear nothing!' the scarab hissed.

*Now look who's lying, Blue Beetle thought scornfully.*

Huntress hummed, rubbing her chin. "It could be because of its magical properties or..." She cast him an uneasy glance.

Jaime's brow furrowed. "Or maybe it isn't just an AI," he said cautiously, feeling his skin prickle when the scarab remained unnervingly silent.

_Am I right?_

'...You comprehend nothing, Jaime Reyes,' the scarab almost sounded weary.

Huntress scrutinised his shoulder as if expecting another attack. "We'll dwell on that later." She met his gaze, there was still distrust there. "We need to focus on getting out of here and find Robin and Tornado."

"Right, gotcha." His brow furrowed, touching his comlink, getting a loud sound of static in his ears. "Coms are down."

"Yeah, I already tried." She nodded, picking up the flashlight to survey the cave. "It looks like we're at a dead end." She clicked on her holographic computer, a small red dot flashing on the map. "And, Robin's tracker still shows him in the cave." Huntress turned the screen off and rubbed her chin.

Jaime approached her from behind but stopped when he saw her tense and then straighten up, clearly uncomfortable. He took a step back and balled his hands into fists, frowning.

"We'll have to go back the way we came."

She chewed her bottom lip, crossing her arms. "It'll be blocked by the rubble from the cave in."

Jaime thought for a moment, an idea clicked on like a light bulb. "I could try to drill our way up to the top," he suggested, looking back at her.

_Her eyes widened a fraction. "You can do that?"

Jaime hesitated for a second since he hadn't actually ever done it but he knew his arms could transform into electric drills. "Yeah, I found out when I tried to fix my dad's car," he replied, smiling sheepishly. "I was actually trying to change them into spanners."

_The corner of Helena's lip twitched upwards before she scowled and looked away. "Okay, so depending on how deep underground we are it could take a while." She flashed her light at the_
hole they'd come through and then up at the ceiling. "Hm, our best bet is to go up the tunnel we came from and drill our way through from there."

"Sounds like a plan," he said, powering up his armour. It spread from his back and covered him whole, the orange tinted lenses turning a lime coloured green when they switched to night vision.

She stepped back, scrutinising him with uncertainty. "Lead the way."

He tried to make himself look smaller, hunching a little. "Right sure." Blue Beetle levitated up and climbed into the hole, it was thick with dust which made him cough. "Need a hand?" He held his hand out to her.

"I'm fine, thanks," she replied, curtly, hoisting her leg up.

His lips dropped, crestfallen, as he withdrew his hand. "Okay." He backed away to give her room when she grabbed onto the bed of the rock, trying to get into the tunnel. Jaime was tempted to help her up but he was pretty sure it wouldn't be appreciated.

There was this weird bad smell in the tunnel that reminded Don of the time when he'd been six and had left some raw bacon out in the sun to see what would happen, the results had made him lose his stomach and throw up over the new rug in the living room.

"So, where exactly did you say this tunnel leads to?" Robin spoke, his backside blocking most of Don's view.

Don shuffled along behind him with his hands still cuffed. "It leads out into this pool near the sea," he answered. "It's easy to get out of."

"And, the other tunnels?" his voice betrayed his worry.

Don didn't blame him, though; if Dawn was the one trapped with an unpredictable nutcase he'd be worried too. "Some lead to dead ends and some lead out into the water but…" He winced when he remembered the last time he'd tried to explore the other tunnels.

Robin stopped and glared at him from over his shoulder. "But, what?"

"...Some of the tunnels get smaller the further you go down so you get trapped which isn't so bad until high tide kicks in," Don replied, trying not to picture it. Robin's eyes narrowed dangerously. "But, I'm sure they're fine and everything."

The other boy pursed his lips tightly, hands clenched into fists. "Do any of the tunnels intercept?"

"No." Crap this was kind of awkward, and for some reason, Don felt a wave of guilt, like this, was his entire fault, which it wasn't… right? "Listen once we get out we can find them." He forced a smile.

Robin's serious expression didn't change. "Right," he said, flatly, like the funeral arrangements had already been announced. "Let's just keep moving." He turned around and started to crawl down the narrow tunnel.

Don's stomach dropped, sighing quietly. The whole situation sucked at both ends, because even if the blue guy (Blue Beetle kind of sucked as name, why would you wanna be named after a bug?) and Huntress were fine he was still getting locked up again, and this time he bet they wouldn't be stupid enough to put him in a normal cell.
How the fuck had things turned out so bad? One wrong theft and he had a freaking evil organisation after him and a band of wannabe Justice Leaguers. All because he picked up a creepy mystic tablet when he should have grabbed the swanky piece of jewellery nearby.

His gaze wandered to Robin's cape where a glimmer of the utility belt could be seen. There had to be some kind of off switch for the collar, but the Bird-boy had too much tech on him. "So when we get out of here, what happens to me?" Don asked somewhat hopefully.

"That'll be up to Nightwing," Robin replied coldly.

Don tensed. "But, you said people were after me, shouldn't I go into witness protection or something?" his voice rose.

"We won't let them hurt you," Robin's voice softened, more reassuring this time.

The speedster's eyes narrowed. "But I'm still getting locked up?"

Robin sighed. "Dude, you're a thief, what do you think is going to happen?" he looked over his shoulder at him. "Life has consequences."

Don felt his stomach churn like he'd drank rotten milk. "And prison's meant to cure me?" he snapped. "Drop the self-righteous bullshit, I haven't done anything to hurt anybody."

The boy wonder stopped, making Don feel slightly uneasy when he saw how stiff the other boy's shoulders were. "Have you ever once stopped and looked at yourself a mirror?" Robin said tightly, slowly turning around. "And, realised how much of a completely selfish, annoying, asshole you are?" his voice was hard like ice with a gaze to match.

Don's eyes widened at the outburst for a second before his wits returned. "Have you?" he shot back, digging his nails into the mud. "The only thing you know about me is what's on a file, shit-brain." He levelled Robin with a glare. "Yeah, I steal, so what? You're a vigilante, that isn't exactly legal even if the police turn a blind eye."

Robin turned around fully and moved in closer, his jaw clenched tight and eyes narrowed. "Difference being is that I help people while you only help yourself," he said, coldly.

Don felt his face heat up from anger, as his nails dug into his palms. "I do what I do to survive."

"No, you don't," Robin rebuked. "You do it because it's fun," his voice grew cold. "I do what I do because it means something, which is more than I can say about you."

"Shut up! Just shut up you idiot. You don't know anything."

The speedster's temper flared violently, grabbing Robin by the collar of his cape; the boy didn't flinch. "your life doesn't mean shit in the end!" he hissed. "Everyone steals and everyone dies, and nobody cares what you stood for because you're dead." His hands shook from rage, as Robin's hands circled around his wrists tightly in warning, but Don didn't let go. "Don't you get it?" He couldn't see Robin's eyes but he still searched his face to try to understand what the boy was thinking.

Robin's lips thinned into a line, gritting his teeth, he pushed Don away. "You're the one who doesn't get it," he said firmly. "You're wrong, maybe some things will never change, but that doesn't mean I'm going to stop helping people." He levelled Don with a stern glare while the red head felt like hitting him. "You may think no one will care what me or the Justice League stood for when we're dead, but I know I cared about what your dad stood for," Robin's voice softened a little,
almost pityingly. "Even if you don't."

The speedster's body flinched ever so slightly, feeling like the other guy had gotten inside of his head, and he'd be lying if he said it didn't hurt. Was it all true? Yeah, maybe he was a walking disappointment but he'd rather be that than just a mindless soldier who went and died just because it was for some supposed greater good.

There was a thick lump stuck in Don's throat and his whole body felt hot with anger still. "You don't know me, okay," Don replied, unevenly, clearing his throat quickly. "So you can say whatever you want, but it doesn't change anything."

Robin's posture relaxed a fraction, less intense, and his gaze became less harsh. "I know you lost your dad," he said, making Don feel cold. "I know how that feels and I'm sorry it happened." Robin sighed wearily, shaking his head as he turned around. "But he died a hero and he'd want you to be proud of him for that."

Don stayed where he was while Robin started to move further down the tunnel. His mouth tasted like ash and his stomach felt hollow like how it did at his dad's funeral, but he pushed the feeling away and tried not to focus on it.

"No, he'd want to be alive," Don murmured bitterly, following after Robin.

They hadn't hit the main cave in yet but there were still large chunks of stones and rubble that needed to be moved. The tunnel grew steeper the further they went up, which made moving the rocks more hazardous since Huntress was further back behind him. She'd attached the flashlight onto her mask to provide light.

He shoved one rock behind him a little too quickly and hastily looked over his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She looked up at him and shrugged. "I'm fine, don't worry," she said dismissively, stretching her leg up to climb. "Come on, we need to keep moving," she told him when he stayed still.

Blue Beetle's shoulders slumped as he resumed moving through the tunnel. "There's enough room for you to get closer." His brow furrowed in frustration. "I'm not going to go psycho or anything," he grumbled to himself.

"Excuse me?"

He might have spoken louder than intended.

'Be mindful of your tongue.'

'It's your fault she doesn't trust us.'

"Nothing, just forget about it," he said quickly, moving a big pile of dirt out of the way. Huntress started coughing, making him wince when he realised the dirt had landed on her. "Eh, sorry." He smiled down at her sheepishly.

The top of her head was caked in mud. She seemed to be kind of stuck since she was further back than before and the tunnel had a large gap where the walls were wider than the others.

"It's fine," Huntress replied dryly, shaking her head to brush the dirt off. Then she tried to get her footing again, but the gap in the tunnel was too big so her shoe kept brushing against the stone.
He watched her try to reach for a moment longer until he cleared his throat, regaining her attention. "Um, are you sure you don't need some help?" he asked, staring at her uncomfortably.

Her gaze shifted to the wall she couldn't reach and then back to him. With a wary gaze and a small sigh, she held out her hand. "I could use a little help…please."

He smiled a little, taking her hand to hoist her up to his side, keeping hold of her hand until she got a firm grip on the wall. Huntress smiled at him briefly but then averted her gaze and started moving up, near alongside him.

Jaime sighed quietly as he continued to dig, the both of them covered in dust and dirt. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye when she kept silent. "So do you think Robin and Tornado are okay?"

She nodded, pushing some more rocks out of the way. "I'm hoping," she said, sighing deeply. "I'm just worried he's injured or knocked out." Huntress faintly shook her head. "So much for being the team leader."

His forehead creased. "Don't beat yourself up over this, you're doing okay," he reassured her. "You guys didn't know the scarab would, well, go full crazy all of a sudden." Blue Beetle shrugged uneasily, staring at his hands while he dug.

'I disagree and would rank her leadership skills—'

"Ese, shut it," he hissed, glaring behind his shoulder.

"So, it's talking again," Huntress commented coldly.

Jaime blinked and looked back at her, she was staring at his scarab scornfully, making Blue Beetle's skin prickle uncomfortably.

"Uh yeah," he answered, smiling sympathetically, as he heaved away a big lump of soil. "It's sorry about what happened."

'I never—'

"Like really sorry about what happened," Jaime continued like the interruption hadn't occurred.

Huntress didn't look convinced, raising an eyebrow. "Of course it is." She squeezed through the gap in the tunnel and held her hand out to pull Blue Beetle up.

After what happened you should be sorry, he chastised the scarab harshly.

'...I will admit the artefact triggered something unknown and illogical,' the scarab's voice was subdued, lacking its usual air of authority.

Jaime was surprised by the admission but brushed it off and got back to work. He partly hovered to give himself a boost up, since the tunnel was getting too steep and would be more difficult to climb. "Climbing up there is gonna be a problem," he remarked, shooting her a look. "You can piggy-back."

Her eyes flickered from side to side.

She really doesn't trust me, he thought to himself. Not that I blame her but still…

"I mean, you don't have to," he added, trying to shrug it off.
Huntress looked at him for a second or two, before she gave him a slanted smile. "I guess if you think you can handle the weight, then it's fine with me," she said, breaking him out of his stupor.

His mouth opened in surprise but he quickly closed it and helped her onto his back as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He swallowed nervously. "I think I'll be able to manage." His lips quirked up into a half-smile, while she locked her legs around his torso. "Hold on tight."

He pushed away large rocks that blocked some of the passage as he flew further up. It was kind of weird having her so close but also relieving since she seemed to be trusting him enough to let him carry her. He chewed his tongue for a moment before he opened his mouth.

"Listen, for the record, I am sorry—" be started to apologise again but she interrupted him.

"Jaime, it's okay," she sounded tired. "Don't worry, alright, I get it."

He bit down on his tongue, shaking his head. "Yeah, but back at the briefing I felt something was off with the scarab and I didn't say anything," he told her, wanting to get it off his chest. "So that's on me."

She didn't reply straight away and let the silence hang there as he shovelled more stones out of the way. "Listen," Huntress spoke, apprehensively. "It's not that I don't trust you, I just don't trust the scarab." She tightened her grip on his armour. "I know you're a great guy and you wouldn't betray us like that on purpose."

"Especially since you're dad would kill me," he said, seriously, shivering when he thought to how Batman would react to his loss of control. "He might still."

Huntress sighed deeply. "He's not going to kill you."

"Uh, are you forgetting my crazy moment from earlier?" He shook his head in distress. "I nearly got us all killed, and worse, I got you injured."

"You wanna bet?"

"Yeah, and you'd lose," she remarked, loosening her legs. "The Bottomline is, what happened wasn't your fault, and I'd never let him torture or kill you," her voice was firm like she was making a promise. "Ever."

A warm feeling wrapped around his chest, as a soft smile crept onto his face. "You really mean that?"

"Yes, you dunderhead," she said, exasperated. "Believe it or not..." her voice gently shifted to something more tender and genuine. "I actually really like you... a lot,"

His eyes bulged and his body grew pleasantly warm, and he was very aware of how close she was as he pushed his way through.

She liked him a lot... so did that mean she...?
"Wait, you mean…" His cheeks were burning.

Her breathing hitched. "As a friend, yeah," she said hastily, flustered. Jaime's brow furrowed together. "Friends, yeah…sorry, the air in this cave is making me feel really woozy, you know."

Friends…right.

'The female lies,' the scarab sounded impatient, or was that exasperation? 'Her hormone levels, lack of composer, and body temperature contradict her statement of friendship.'

Oh…oh… wait so she, she likes me? As in…dating?

A strange burst of energy spread across his chest, a happy feeling but also kind of terrifying.

He froze, digging his nails into the dirt. It felt like her entire body was burning through his armour.

"Blue?" she said, warily.

Relax and just play it cool.

Jaime swallowed and let out a deep breath. "I like you too," his voice hitched in the middle, might have even been a bit too high pitched, he wasn't quite sure. "Uh, anyway, we're nearly there."

The tightening in his chest unwound when he finally spoke, making him breathe more easily as he flew further up the tunnel.

"Right, sure," she replied, warmly, resting her head on the back of his neck.

He gulped, trying to hide a smile until he came to the main blockage. "Here we go." Blue Beetle transformed his hands into drills. "You might want to close your eyes and not breathe." He started drilling through the mass of rocks and dirt.

The noise of the drills thundered down the tunnel.

The water reached passed Robin's elbows. He bit down hard of the flashlight which was in his mouth, pulling his hand out of the water to hold the light. This was as far as they could go now, they'd have to swim the rest of the way, as the tunnel dipped down into the dark water.

"How long of a swim is it?" Robin asked the boy behind him.

Tornado looked over Robin's shoulder at how far the tunnel went down. "Ah, yeah, must be high tide…crap." He scratched the back of his head. "We won't make it, it's a ten minute swim."

"We can do it," Robin said, firmly, sitting up to reach into his belt. "You direct me and I'll follow." He pulled out his small breather, a tube device in the shape of an obscure T. "Use this it'll help you breathe."

The speedster frowned, apprehensively taking the breather (Tim didn't let it go straight away). "What are you gonna use?"

Robin forced a smile. "I'll be fine, I've held my breath for longer." Okay, so that was technically a lie, he'd only managed five minutes while Nightwing could do seven. "Just try and be quick." He reached into his belt and took out a small key to unlock the handcuffs.

Tornado looked confused. "What are you doing?" he said as Robin removed the handcuffs.
"It's just in case," Robin replied, folding away the handcuffs back into his belt. "We'll both be fine."

The red head looked at him like he was crazy, but Robin tried to ignore him as well as the uncertain fear that was building in his chest.

You can do this, this is what Batman trained you for.

"Give me the artefact so it doesn't weigh you down." Robin held out his hand.

Again, Tornado hesitated but did hand over the heavy stone. Robin tied the ends of his cape around his midriffed so he could slip the artefact on his back, the cape securing it like a pouch. Robin relaxed his muscles and let out a deep breath before slowly inhaling. He popped the flashlight in his mouth and ducked his head underwater, Tornado following after.

The boy wonder hung back so the speedster could swim in front, and to Don's credit, he was trying to swim as fast. The weight of the stone wasn't too much to handle, he'd carried people heavier.

Robin kept his body relaxed as he swam after Tornado, the tunnel grew bigger as it led out into the wider terrain of water that had fish swimming around and plants life on the stone as the ground became covered in sand as they swim on.

Robin's face was scrunched up tight as a faint pain in his chest began, which meant they were nearly at the five minute mark. The current started to get stronger the further they went, swimming through the narrow passages.

Tornado looked over his shoulder at him, the faintest sign of worry in his gaze. Robin gritted his teeth and swam harder, floating further up to try to reach the top of the cave, but he was slower than normal and the pain in his chest grew more persistent making his ears feel like they were stuffed with cotton.

Robin's hands hit the ceiling of the cave, a small gap of air left untouched by the water. He took the flashlight out of his mouth and sucked in the remaining air. Stay relaxed, he had to remind himself. The minute he started hyperventilating it was game over.

Holding his breath once more, Robin popped the flashlight in his mouth and ducked under the water, following after Tornado who was even further away now.

The water was dark even with his flashlight, it was like a dark green fog. Robin kicked his legs and started to catch back up with Tornado, a faint flicker of light casting shadows in the water. The surface was close, and the cave was expanding but so was the number of fish.

The fish seemed appeared out of the darkness, coming in a horde as they blocked his vision of Tornado. The flashlight knocked from his mouth when one of the fish hit his face.

Robin tried the grab the light but it fell down into the sand, leaving him in the dark.

Huntress pushed the last rock out of the way as she and Blue Beetle made it out of the cave, the sun starting to rise above the horizon.

"Ah, air," Blue Beetle announced brightly, gathering himself to his feet.

Huntress hummed and quickly checked her computer, wincing when she saw the missed calls from her dad and Nightwing. "We definitely need better coms," she remarked, sighing as she brought up
Robin's tracker. Her stomach twisted when she saw where Robin still was. "Robin's still in the cave."

"Ah, man," Blue Beetle rubbed the back of his neck, standing behind her. "Can we pinpoint his location?"

She zoomed in on the screen, narrowing his eyes. "Not exactly, but he is further away from his original point. Look," she said, pointing to Robin's location on the map. "He's closer to the sea this time." At least it proved he was conscious, though. "On the other side of the cave." She pointed in the right direction.

Blue Beetle nodded and activated his wings. "Want a lift?" He smiled wryly and opened his arms out.

A small smile flashed across her face. "You better not drop me," she warned, sternly, closing the computer she wrapped her arms around his neck.

He scooped her up and kept that happy smile still on his face. "If I do I'll try and aim for the water," he remarked slyly, bending his knees before he flew up into the air.

Robin swam in the direction the fish were coming, fighting against the current. His lungs burning for air while he tried to stay focussed. The surface wasn't far away, he could do this.

He just needed to keep going… why did it feel like he was sinking?

Tiny bubbles escaped from his mouth and his arms felt like led, water filling his lungs as his vision went blurry and bright.

*Just keep swimming!* His mind screamed at him as he tried to swim towards the light, but he wasn't sure if the light was real or not.

The water filled his lungs and his arms stopped moving.

…

…

…

Cold

Wet

Sand

"Please don't be brain dead."

Someone slapped him across the face, waking him up.

Robin turned over and threw up on the sand, retching violently as he breathed in that sweet oxygen.

"Phew, you're alive." Wait, that was Tornado.

Robin looked up and blinked a few times to adjust his vision, sitting up. Tornado was kneeling down next to him, soaking wet with his red hair clinging to his cheeks. "Tornado?" the boy wonder
said, hoarsely, running a hand through his wet hair as he looked around the empty beach.

They were on higher ground, he could see as much since the cave entrance below that led into the sea was submerged in water. The sky a mix of bright oranges and yellows from the rising sun.

"You saved me," Robin said, slowly.

The redhead rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm a thief, not a murderer," he remarked, glaring at no one in particular. "Not that you heroes can tell the difference," he muttered scathingly.

It continued to baffle Robin how people found it embarrassing to admit their own morality. Robin touched his back the artefact was still hidden away in his makeshift pouch. "How did you carry me?"

Tornado snorted, standing up. "Dude, I've carried ten year olds bigger than you."

Robin's eyes flashed in indignation. He wasn't small, he was just still growing that's all. He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips tightly. "Hmm, funny." Robin got to his feet, stumbling a little at first, and touched his utility belt. "But, thanks for saving me," he said, sincerely. "Your dad would have been proud."

Tornado tensed and crossed his arms defensively. "Unless you plan on freeing me from this collar, save the praise, dude." He flicked the collar around his neck.

Robin sighed quietly and undid his cape to take the artefact out.

"Robin!" He was so relieved to hear that voice.

He swerved around and looked, smiling when he saw Huntress, but his smile faltered when he saw Blue Beetle carrying her as the two heroes landed on the ground not that far from them. Robin looked at the artefact in hand and hastily shoved it against Tornado's chest.

"Hide it," the boy wonder said, quickly.

Tornado's gaze slid to Blue Beetle, growing paler, he frantically stuffed it under his hoodie to keep it out of sight.

Robin turned back to Huntress and Blue Beetle, relaxing a little when he saw Huntress didn't seem worried. The two of them were covered in patches of dirt, their shins and arms practically brown from the stuff.

The boy wonder rested his hand near his bizaro, narrowing his eyes. "You guys okay?"

Blue Beetle averted his gaze and rubbed the back of his neck while Huntress nodded, the two of them coming to a stop. "Yeah we're good, despite Blue's little freakout," she replied, nudge Blue Beetle's shoulder teasingly (like, you know, it had all been just a big ol' misunderstanding) which made the other teenager smile gently.

"Is that what we're calling it?" Robin arched an eyebrow, wondering what the hell had happened in that cave to make them both all chummy again. Either that or some mind control mumbo jumbo had gone on, but he wasn't sure the scarab had that type of power.

Blue Beetle must have caught on to Robin's distrust because that smile soon changed into a grimace again. "Listen, I'm sorry about what happened," he apologized to the other boys, raising his hands in a peaceful gesture. "The stone tablet triggered the Scarab and the next thing I know I
"You nearly got us killed," Robin shot back, feeling his temper start to build when he saw the bruises around Huntress' throat and the rip in her costume. "You nearly got Huntress killed."

Blue Beetle's face broke and his body seemed to wilt. "I know, and I'm sorry." He rubbed his arm. "I thought I had total control of the scarab but I was wrong."

Robin kept his eyes narrowed but his temper dimmed the longer he stared at Blue Beetle. "...We should have made sure you were," he said, looking away. Lots of metahumans still struggled to control their powers, it was a part of what made them dangerous. "We'll find out why it happened."

Huntress nodded, placing a hand on Blue Beetle's shoulder. "Yes, we will," she reassured, smiling warmly.

Blue Beetle's shoulders rose, returning her smile. "Thanks."

She patted his shoulder. "And, we're gonna get to the bottom of how and why it happened," Huntress told him, placing her hand over her mouth to hide a yawn. "But, right now we need to go home before school starts..." She scowled, rubbing her eyes.

Tornado laughed. "You guys go to school?"

Blue Beetle rolled his eyes. "Yeah, it's how we know how to add two plus two," he retorted, dryly.

The speedster glowered at him. "Pfft, it took you that long to learn two plus two?" he shot back, snidely, as Huntress slipped the pair of handcuffs back on. "Hey!"

"Come on, kid, you can save your insults for Nightwing," she said, lightly nudging him forward.

Tornado gritted his teeth and marched forward. "I know how to walk," he grumbled when she tried to touch his arm.

Huntress rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine."

"You gonna be alright to fly?" Blue Beetle asked.

She shrugged. "I'll just drink a few energy drinks on the way, no biggy," she replied, giving him a lopsided grin. "And if not, we have parachutes."

He grinned. "And, that just makes me feel extra safe." Blue Beetle nudged her playfully, making her smile grow.

Robin raised an eyebrow at their behaviour, following the two of them as they walked up the hill towards the other side of the island. His brow furrowed together, pursing his lips as he watched them walk ahead. He wasn't sure on the details but he had a feeling Batman wouldn't be thrilled about whatever was going on between those two.
This chapter was a freaking pain to write, hence why it took so long to update. It also ended up longer than intended since this was mainly meant to be a filler chapter, just focusing on some character development.

I'm still not 100% happy with it, but it's a pass in my books.
The Moment of Truth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Issue #20

The Moment of Truth

Wayne Manor, Gotham

10/02/2023

07:05

The smell of breakfast wafted through the Manor as Helena made her way over to the dining room. She was dressed for school but she hadn't bothered combing her hair since she'd been too tired so it was in a tangled ponytail that had a few ends sticking up. She'd managed to fit in a quick half an hour of sleep when she'd got back to the cave and passed out at the plane wheel.

Helena yawned loudly when she walked into the dining room. "M'ning," she mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

"Hey." Jason was sitting at the table—Helena stopped and did a double-take—eating some waffles while his crutches leant against the arm of his chair.

"Oh, hey…" Helena blinked a few times, walking over to the chair next to him while Alfred came in with a fresh pot of coffee; her mouth watered when the smell hit her nose.

"Good morning, ma'am," Alfred greeted in his usual light-hearted manner. "A late night?"

She scoffed quietly, sitting down next to Jason. "Yeah, pretty much." Breakfast was laid out like usual, single plates full of waffles, fried eggs, bacon, and buttered toast. Alfred put a plate in front of her and started to pour her some coffee. "Thanks, Alfred," she said, shooting him a smile while she piled her plate up with eggs, bacon, and toast.

He swallowed his food and washed it down with some orange juice. "So, how'd the mission go?"

She tried not to grimace and instead just shrugged. "Besides getting trapped in a cave?" She took a sip of her coffee, smiling when the sweet taste of caffeine filled her mouth. "At least we got the artefact back, so that's one thing I guess."

"So what happened with this Blue Beetle guy?"

Helena held her mug tighter and sighed, placing the mug back down. "The artefact triggered something in his AI."
"And, nearly got us killed." Tim entered the room, dressed in an expensive looking suit. His eyes widened when he saw Jason but then he quickly averted his gaze and walked over to the opposite side of the table, nearer Dad's usual seat at the head of the table.

"You know it wasn't his fault, Tim," she said, firmly, narrowing her eyes.

"Why are you dressed up?" Jason asked not very nicely.

Tim stiffened when he looked back at Jason, causing Helena to shift uneasily. "I have a meeting at Wayne Enterprises today," he replied, evenly, picking up his cutlery.

Jason leant back in his chair, letting out a low whistle. "Well aren't you a little darling." He smirked humorously. Tim grew paler. "You're like those pets you dress up—"

She felt a harsh wave of disgust. "Jason, leave him alone," Helena rebuked sharply. Her glare intensified when Jason glowered back.

"I was joking," Jason replied, irritably.

"No, you were being a jerk," she snapped. Helena glanced back at Tim who was keeping silent, his lips set in a thin line. "I think you look great, Tim, and you're gonna ace that meeting." She smiled encouragingly.

Tim's posture relaxed, smiling. "Thanks."

Helena nodded and took a bite of her egg while she glowered at Jason warningly. Jason pursed his lips, turning back to his food. "Pfft, whatever," he muttered, shoving another waffle in his mouth. "It was just a joke."

"Then I assume you won't mind apologising, Master Jason?" Alfred said, cordially, looking at him expectantly from where he stood next to Tim.

Jason stiffened and glared at his plate while he chewed his waffles. Alfred's stern gaze was unwavering like a scorching heat. "Okay, fine." Jason finally cracked, looking over a Tim resentfully. Helena felt an uneasy twist in her stomach when she saw the look. "I'm sorry, okay."

Tim fiddled with his knife, shrugging stiffly. "It's fine," his voice was clipped.

Helena sighed quietly, looking at the both of them apprehensively. Her glare softened when heard her dad approaching, his footsteps echoing from the hallway. "Morning," Dad greeted, as he tightened his cufflinks. He was wearing his favourite red tie with his suit again and arched an eyebrow when he saw Jason. "I'm surprised you're all up on time." He sat down at the head of the table as Alfred approached with the coffee pot.

Tim shrugged. "I got two hours sleep so I'll be fine." He started to eat his breakfast.

Her dad glanced at her, but she just shrugged. "Eh, I'll be fine. I already packed an energy drink," she said, waving her hand dismissively.

Dad hummed lowly, drinking his coffee. "You two should both skip patrol tonight so you can catch up on some sleep," he said, it didn't sound like a suggestion.

Helena frowned. "I'm still investigating that missing girl case, though, remember?" Her lips twisted into a scowl when her dad didn't appear phased. "Can't I just do an early patrol and then come back at like two in the morning or something?"
Dad opened his mouth to speak but Tim interrupted. "I was gonna do the same as well." The boy smiled crookedly. "She needs my help recovering the deleted CCTV footage."

"CCTV footage of what?" Jason spoke up in mid-bite of eating his waffle.

Tim's smile faded, shrugging as he picked at his food with his fork. "Just of the fight that happened a week or so ago."

Jason clenched his hands into a fist, making Helena's brow furrow. Was he jealous of Tim's skills or that Tim was spending time with her?

"Can't Barbara help?" Bruce asked, sipping his coffee.

She washed her bacon down with some coffee as she swallowed. "The League is keeping her busy, and besides, Tim's quicker."

Tim looked up and grinned. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime," she replied, smiling wryly.

Her dad sighed quietly, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Fine you can patrol, but I want you both back by midnight. Understand?" Dad's brow furrowed.

She sighed, slouching in her seat. "Yes, Dad."

"Midnight and not a minute late, gotcha," Tim agreed, resting his chin on his knuckle while he poked at the fried egg on his plate.

Dad nodded and picked up a piece of toast. "Now eat up, we'll need to set off soon."

Helena gave her dad a thumbs up and shoved some toast in her mouth, making Alfred frown and shake his head faintly.

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Gotham City

10/02/2023

12:01

"Helena, wake up," a bossy voice spoke through the hazy fog of sleep.

Her face was resting in a pool of drool, which was probably her drool.

Someone started to poke her. "Come on already!"

"Maybe we should just let her sleep," that was definitely Lydia's voice.

The poking became more painful when the sore injury on her arm was touched. Helena's face scrunched up as she stirred awake. "Stop it," she moaned, groggily sitting up in her seat as her eyes blinked open.

Her vision was blurry for a second or two before Anada and Lydia's faces came into focus, the rest of the classroom was nearly empty with their English class and even their teacher already gone.

"Finally," Anada said, irritably, crossing her arms. "We have a blood test in ten minutes," she said,
while Helena rubbed her eyes and sat up straighter. "And, I am not getting a detention because of you, Babe."

"Okay, sorry." Helena learnt under her desk to get her bag, rolling her eyes when she was sure they weren't looking. "I had a late night last night." She took out an energy drink and slung her bag over her shoulder, blowing some hair out of her face.

"Pfft, doing what, late night prayer?" Anada remarked dryly.

The chair scraped against the floor when she stood up. "No." Helena's eyes narrowed. "I just had a late night, enough said." She undid the cap of the can and drank a large gulp, while Anada and Lydia's gazes became more curious.

"Were you with someone?" Lydia asked, slowly, raising an eyebrow.

Helena nearly choked on her drink and quickly swallowed, wiping some excess liquid from the side of her mouth. "No."

Anada's eyes gleamed. "You were with someone!" She grinned and clapped her hands together. "It was that Mexican boy wasn't it?"

"Stop jumping to conclusions," Helena said, defensively, starting to walk through the desks towards the door.

"Oh, my gosh, you so spent the night with him," Anada purred, forcefully linking her arms with Helena's while Lydia followed behind. "You can tell us, come on."

Helena felt like smacking her head against the wall, sighing deeply as the three of them walked into the corridor where a lot of students were loitering around their lockers. "Can't you just drop it already, nothing happened, we just hung out and watched a movie," she lied, breezily, shrugging.

"So, you were with him." Lydia was by her side, smiling teasingly. "So what's the deal with you two?"

"Nothing, we're just friends." Helena squirmed her arm out Anada's grip.

Lydia frowned. "But I thought you liked him?"

"Yeah." Anada crossed her arms, blocking Helena's path. "What's the holdup?"

Helena sighed, eyes flicking from Lydia to Anada. "I do like him," she said, readjusting her bag. "But, I don't know if we'd last that long," she told them, shrugging. "So maybe we're just better as friends."

Her friends exchanged a look. Anada pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes while Lydia shrugged. "Okay, that makes sense. Totally respect that," Anada said evenly, placing a hand on her chest. "But come on…are you serious?" She raised her arms in exasperation. Helena scowled. "Every Disney tween drama wannabe thinks that about their first boyfriend!"

"Hey, don't yell," Helena hissed, looking around self-consciously when she felt a few students staring. "I just don't wanna ruin our friendship."

Anada pinched the bridge of her nose and Lydia groaned, covering her face with her hand. "That's what everyone says," Lydia said, shaking her head. "But, come on you've known this guy for what a month? It's not like you've got years of friendship in jeopardy."
"Exactly." Anada, patting Lydia on the back. "See this is why she's the smart one."

Helena's cheeks grew hot, looking away. Okay, so Lydia had a pretty decent point, but if things went bad it wasn't like she could just cut Jaime off. They'd still have to work together and he already knew her secret.

"It's complicated," Helena said, leaning against the side of a locker.

"Listen, babe," Anada's voice softened, taking a step closer. "I get it, he's your first crush but also your friend. Kind of a lot of pressure for a first boyfriend." She held Helena's free hand, clasping it towards the hand holding the energy drink. "But, if you don't tell him how you feel you're going to be walking on eggshells around him until it all comes out at the wrong time."

Helena's brow furrowed together, lowering her gaze thoughtfully. "Listen, these feelings for all I know could just be temporary."

"Well, yeah, duh," Lydia exclaimed. "That's what a crush is, but if you want it to more you gotta work on it. Like..." her forehead creased, scowling for a second before her eyes lit up."...Like that episode of the Real Housewives of Star City, remember? The one with Chris and Tania at that nightclub."

Helena arched an eyebrow, trying to recall the reality show. "You mean the episode where Chris asked Tania out?"

Lydia snapped her fingers, smiling. "Exactly! Just like that...except without the weird horse fetish—but anyway, the point is, he just wanted to have sex with her but after two seasons of dating they actually fell in love even though they were both shallow assholes."

Anada nodded, looking oddly serious. "Lydia is giving you some high-end love advice here, Babe." She smiled sympathetically. "Look, do us all a favour and just ask the guy out on a date or something and tell him how you feel," Anada said, letting go of her hands. "At the end of the day he's just a guy, there's plenty more where he came from if it ends badly."

Don't underestimate Batman's power of scaring off potential suitors. Helena nodded and chewed her tongue. Routine and complacency were safe but it was a stalemate, and maybe a change wouldn't be so bad. "Okay, fine, I'll ask him out the next time I see him," she told them, meeting their sharp gazes. "I swear."

The two of them smiled smugly. "Finally," Anada exclaimed, flinging an arm around Helena's shoulder. "I swear without us you'd be a spinster by seventeen."

Helena cocked an eyebrow. "I'm not sure that's how it works."

Lydia's smile grew warmer, but it disappeared after a second. "Oh, crap, we're late for the blood test."

"Shit." Anada hastily grabbed Helena's arm. "We gotta go."

Anada dragged her suddenly, making the can in her hand spill. "Hey watch it," she snapped, switching the can into her other hand when her friend kept pulling her.

Tim usually enjoyed visiting Wayne Tower, especially the science department, but this was one of the rare times he wished he was back in school.
The suit he was wearing was grey with a crisp blue tie tightened around his neck, and his dark hair was slicked back with gel, not a single hair out of place. If it wasn't for his age or height he'd look the picture of a perfect CEO, but the illusion was broken by the too large chair he was sitting in and long glass table that seated the much older CEO's staring down at him like sharks.

Half of the main WE board members were on the left and the other half was composed of the remaining Drake Pharmaceutical's CEO's who had survived the cull.

"This is the last section that requires your signature, sir," his lawyer spoke from behind him, turning the page of the document.

Tim kept his face blank as he positioned his pen near the signature section of the starch white document in front of him, hesitating when he knew he shouldn't.

Would his dad have been angry with him?

The boy's stomach churned and twisted, fingers shaking ever so slightly as all eyes were on him.

A firm hand on his shoulder made his fingers stop shaking. Tim looked up to meet Bruce's reassuring gaze, reminding him that he wasn't alone here.

A warmth waved through the boy's body, gaze shifting to Lucius who was by Bruce's side, (he was quite old with white hair and wrinkled brown skin) and then to his father's old friend, Derek Powers; a man with a chin sharp enough to cut glass, brown eyes, and slicked back mousey hair. All three of them were looking at him encouragingly.

Tim stared at the document, sitting up straighter in his chair as he signed on the dotted line below the other signatures after he'd done so he set the pen down and took a deep breath before he addressed the rest of the board. A speech he'd spent practising in the bathroom mirror while he'd gotten dressed.

"Thank you all for your patience during these tenuous two years," Tim said, curtly, as Bruce's hand left his shoulder. "It is after much conviction I have placed the daily running's of Drake Pharmaceuticals into Wayne Enterprises hands. Such a decision is necessary considering my age and lack of experience at this present time." His gaze swept over each of the board's faces. "But be rest assured that I will resume control when I am of age to do so, all I ask is that you give me time, thank you."

The board and other ten people present started clapping politely with some albeit reluctantly. Bruce put on the usual charm when he smiled at the board. "Lunch is being served in conference room C," he announced as the lawyers started to file away the legal documents.

Tim stood up, buttoning his blazer as the rest of the board stood as well, all their chairs scraping against the floor. Bruce's hand rested protectively on his shoulder, which Tim was grateful for.

"You handled yourself well," Bruce said quietly as they all filed out, heading toward the conference room down the hall. "I couldn't have pulled that off at your age."

Tim's lips quirked up a little. "Thanks," he murmured, walking passed the offices. He was tempted to look back at the board members who were following behind but he resisted and kept his back straight and face passive.

I'll get better at this, he reminded himself. He loved business and he understood he had a responsibility to keep his family's legacy alive, but he still needed time and more experience so his hands wouldn't shake when he addressed the CEO's who judged him as nothing more than a
When they entered the conference room he was greeted by the rich smell of delicious food, a long table of food lined up against the giant window in the room. Mixed platters to cater to the individual taste buds and was probably enough to feed the people who came to the homeless shelter Helena volunteered at. Tim's forehead creased at that thought, but he was distracted when someone cleared their throat.

"You were quite impressive in there, Timothy," Derek Powers had approached them, dressed in an expensive green suit that rivalled Bruce's in quality. "Your father would have been proud," he said, warmly.

The comment hurt despite the good intention behind it. "Thank you, Mr Powers," Tim replied, forcing a smile, clasping his hands behind his back as the rest of the board members started to pile into the room. "I hope my father would have respected my decision."

Powers smiled in his usual way, sharp and shark-like. Something Tim's dad had always commented on, describing Powers as something of a close friend but whose ambition was something to be wary of. Friendship only extended so far.

"Thank you for coming, Derek," Bruce said, smiling pleasantly. "I trust Lucius has answered the concerns you had about your shares in the company?"

Powers' eyes squinted the tiniest bit. "Yes, he was quite helpful," he replied evenly. "You understand my apprehension, of course?" He looked down at Tim.

Tim nodded, wishing he was taller so he didn't have to strain his neck to look up. "Completely, Mr Powers, please understand this really wasn't an easy decision to come to."

Powers nodded, glancing at Bruce briefly before looking back at Tim. "I understand, and I have to admit, even I couldn't have handled it so well at your age." He chuckled lightly. "I suspect you'll be running things before you finish high school."

Bruce patted Tim on the shoulder. "Well, I suppose I better start looking for a new job then." Bruce chuckled along with Powers while Tim forced his smile to stick. "Now, if you would excuse us, I've been eyeing those chicken roll-ups since we arrived."

"Yeah, I'm starved," Tim said, touching his stomach.

"A growing boy needs his food," Powers replied, tilting his head in agreement. "We'll catch up another time, gentlemen."

Tim nodded along with Bruce as Powers took his leave. Once the businessman was out of sight Tim's smile faded, letting out a sigh as he and Bruce walked towards the table of food. "You trust him?" he whispered, glancing up.

Bruce's lips thinned, raising an eyebrow. "Not particularly. You?" He picked up a plate and passed it to him.

Tim shrugged, accepting the plate while Bruce got his own. "My dad trusted him," he replied quietly, staring at his empty plate. There was something about the small patronising comments Powers kept making about Tim's age that rubbed him the wrong way, while the comments were expected since everyone more or less did that, with Powers there seemed to be a predatory lilt in his words. "But I don't." He sighed and looked back at his guardian. "Something about him feels off."
Bruce nodded, gathering food onto his plate. "You should trust your instincts," he said, picking up some cutlery. "In the meantime, a few company functions and dinners should help ease the transition and it'll be a good experience for when you take back control."

Tim smiled grimly, loading his plate with some sandwiches. "So much for video games at the weekend," he remarked, wryly. "You sure it isn't just my company I'll be taking over?"

Bruce's smile became crooked and less businesslike. "I think Lucius will be the one who'll have the final say in that."

Tim ended up smiling for real this time, relaxing for a second until a few more shadows loomed over him when three of his board members came over with gleaming smiles.

It'd be a long day.

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**The Hall of Justice**

**10/02/2023**

**12:30**

The Flash was staring at Don through the two-way glass in the interrogation room. The twelve-year-old still had the collar around his neck and was dressed in a grey sweatshirt and joggy bottoms since his clothes from before were soiled through. The kid was glaring at the table with his arms crossed, completely silent.

The door slid open from behind him. "Hey," greeted Nightwing, standing by his side. "You okay?"

"No." Wally sighed, arms crossed. "I failed him, Wings," he said, glancing at his friend sadly. "Barry trusted me and I let them both down."

Nightwing placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Listen, Don has his own demons he needs to deal with, and it's not your fault," he told him. "You tried your best but sometimes people can't be helped until they want it." He removed his hand and smiled feebly. "Just try to talk to him."

Wally looked back at his cousin and sighed quietly. "I'll try…” He took a deep breath and walked towards the door next to the two-way mirror.

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The hallway was getting emptier as lunch started to come to a close. Helena made her way over to her locker to grab her science books. There was a polka dot band-aid hidden underneath her left sleeve from where the needle had dug in.

She put in the combination and opened the locker, pausing when she saw a pale pink envelope was inside on top of her books. Helena tensed, digging her nails into the locker door as she stared at the card. She hastily looked around anxiously before settling her gaze back on the card.

It could just be a boy, she'd had a couple last year but that had been closer to Valentine's day. At least no one had broken into her car again, that was a plus. She was tempted to scan it but there were still students loitering around so it was best not to risk it.

Helena picked up the envelope and ripped it open, frowning when she pulled out a letter. She tossed the envelope back in her locker and unfolded the paper, squinting when she saw the writing. It seemed familiar but she couldn't pinpoint whose handwriting it was.
Dear Helena,

I think you're really pretty and I really like you, so I was hoping you'll meet me under the bleachers after school today.

I just really need to talk to you.

XXX

She cocked an eyebrow at the note, judging by the style of writing it looked like a girl had written to her, which was odd but she supposed there was a first time for everything.

Helena pursed her lips, wondering if she should meet the girl or not. If she ignored it the girl would be upset but she might not contact her again, or the opposite could happen and Helena's admirer might keep pestering her, and that was a conversation she definitely didn't want to have with her dad.

Helena folded the paper away into her skirt pocket and grabbed her science books, closing her locker.

The five-hour nap he's had beforehand didn't help his tiredness. Don could feel the bags under his eyes and the faint drowsiness still buzzing in his head. The bright lights from the interrogation room he was in didn't help things much either.

The second Flash, Wally, was sitting opposite him twiddling his thumbs anxiously on the metal table while he waited for him to speak. Don just glowered at him, too tired to argue or even attempt a conversation. He eyed his cousin's costume for a second, it was slightly different to his dad's.

The red body suit and cowl remained mostly the same except for the eyeholes and the thin golden lines that ran along the side of the costume like race stripe, as well as the lightning bolts on his ears were gone. The emblem on the middle of his chest was exactly the same as Barry's which felt out of place in contrast with the small tweaks to the costume.

"So, Santa Cruz, aye?" Wally finally spoke.

Don crossed his arms and slouched in his chair. "What about it?"

The Flash shrugged, smiling apprehensively. "Nothing. I should have figured you'd hide stuff there," he replied, leaning back in his chair, lifting it up a little off the floor which caused it to creak. "You guys always used to love that place."

Don shrugged, looking anywhere but in Wally's direction. "Whatever." He leant forward on the table. "Are you gonna throw me in jail or what?"

Wally frowned, sitting up straight in his chair, scratching the back of his neck. "Listen, man, I...I'm sorry if you felt like you couldn't talk to me," he said, sighing. Don bit down on his tongue. "Barry would have wanted me to be there for you and I pretty much failed."

Don squirmed in his seat, looking back at his cousin. Wally was annoying but he meant well, he didn't need to feel guilty. "Dude, I do what I want because I want to, that isn't your fault," he replied, flatly. "Now am I going back to Juvie or not?"

The Flash stared at him for a moment, brow furrowed together. It was a look he'd often given Don when he was younger like he couldn't quite work him out. "No, not this time, bud," he replied, as
his gaze softened. "How do you like Robin, Huntress, and Blue Beetle?"

"They're a bunch of jerks," Don answered, narrowing his eyes.

Wally grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh, right, yeah you probably would think that." He smiled forcefully. "Well, congratulations, because as a part of your community service to avoid Juvie, you're going to be on a team with them," the excitement in his voice was fake.

Don grew rigid, unfolding his arms to hit them on the table. "No, I'm not doing that."

Wally grimaced. "Look, D—*Tornado*, this is your chance to make a difference," he argued. The young speedster clenched his fists tightly. "You might not think so, but you're a good kid." The Flash smiled grimly. "You keep saying you just wanna steal, but isn't there anything else?"

Don shifted in his seat, looking away. Robin's words from before itched at the back of his head like a mosquito bite. It was either this or the detention centre so how much of a choice did he have? Besides, who's to say he had to stick around for too long, they couldn't keep an eye on him forever.

"...I get to design my own costume," the young speedster demanded, raising his chin defiantly.

Wally smiled, genuine this time. "It's fine with me, kid."

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**Gotham City**

**10/02/2023**

**15:35**

Helena stepped onto the playing field in her yellow and black cheerleading uniform, gym bag flung over her shoulder with her blue pom-poms in her other hand. Her gaze wandered towards the bleachers for a second, frowning.

The football pitch was large, with two posts on opposite ends and the bleachers in between. There was a large electric fence that separated it from the school parking lot, with two security officers positioned at each end in case someone was stupid enough to enter without authorisation.

Anada slapped her on the back, making her jerk forward at the sudden contact. "What's up with you?"

Helena forced a smile and shrugged, glancing at her teammates as they all filed in onto the field. "Nothing..." She looked over at the bleachers, narrowing her eyes when she saw a flicker of movement. "Tim sent me a text to meet him under the bleachers," she said, looking back at Anada who whose brow was furrowed. "He's meeting a friend after school but he left his wallet in my car so, I just need to give him the keys."

"Under the bleachers?" Anada looked at her oddly.

Helena shrugged. "He's shy around girls." She smiled sweetly. "It's pretty adorable."

Anada's brow smoothed out. "Oh, well okay then." She shrugged. "Give him my love," she chimed, waving her hand dismissively when she turned around.

"Will do." Helena started to walk over to the bleachers, sighing deeply.
Whoever this person was she'd need to let them down gently, and hope the gossip columns didn't get wind of this. She was not going through that mess again.

Helena ducked under a tree branch when she stepped under the shade of the bleachers. "Hello?" she called, looking around.

There were trees behind the seating, blocking out a majority of the light. Her gaze zeroed in on the figure hiding behind one of the trees at the far end. She frowned and walked closer, stepping on some old cigarette buds.

"Hey, it's me, Helena. You said you wanted to talk." Helena stopped half-way towards where the person was hiding, frowning. "…Um, hello?" She arched an eyebrow.

The figure shifted, feet crunching against the grass, and then the woman —definitely a woman judging by the size of those hips—turned around and hesitantly peered around the tree. The situation turned a whole lot stranger. She was blonde and Caucasian, wearing some tight jeans and a jacket with a green t-shirt underneath.

An uneasy feeling prickled Helena's skin. There was something about this woman which was familiar… was she a new teacher?

Then the woman spoke quietly, "Kitten?" stepping out from behind the tree, hands visibly shaking.

Kitten

Helena froze, as the colour drained from her face. "What did you say?"

The woman walked closer, as the beams of light that slipped through the bleachers hit her face. The woman's hair was different but her eyes were a familiar green and her face…

"I missed you," the woman, the person with her mother's face and voice, said warmly. "And, I am so sorry," her voice hitched, eyes watering.

"Oh my god," Helena whispered, feeling like she was going to be sick.

No, no, this isn't real!

It isn't her, it can't be her.

"Helena…" The woman stepped closer.

Helena stepped back suddenly full of anger. "Don't touch me," she snapped, holding onto the strap of her bag, hunching her shoulders up. "You're not real." Her eyes felt wet. "Who the hell are you?"

This was a trick. It was a lie, because, b-because it had to be.

Run, shout, and leave!

Something stopped her, though, staring at the woman who had her mother's face. A part of her wanting and begging it to be true.

The woman's gaze softened, twin tears sliding down her cheeks. "No, sweetie, it isn't," her voice was raw and sincere. Helena shook her head, shaking. "I left to protect you, to keep you safe." She reached out but Helena recoiled. The woman's face crumpled. "I left because if I didn't Black Mask would have killed you."
The words were like a stab in the gut because suddenly everything hurt and burned.

That face, that voice, and those words were all her mother's. The woman who'd kissed her bruises, taught her how to punch like a man, and say please and thank you like a lady.

This was her mom.

Helena's lips trembled, forgetting how to speak for a moment, staring at her mom who wasn't meant to be alive but was. "...Mom?" the word came out broken and her eyes blurred up from the tears, gazing at her like she'd disappear in a second. "Why?"

Her mom reached out and touched her shoulders, Helena flinched. The sleeves prevented the physical contact but she could feel the warmth radiating from her mother's hands. This was real, despite the feeling like this was all a dream.

But, hadn't she said it herself and to Tim, Death wasn't always a permanent destination and this case it had all been a lie, to begin with.

A lie for the last nine years.

"I had to protect you, Helena," Mom said softly, looking at her tenderly.

The tears in Helena's eyes started to dry as a new emotion clouded her grief.

Nine years without any hint that she'd been alive, just like Jason but worse. Worse because Jason had actually died, he hadn't had a choice, had come back mentally handicapped at first.

What had her mom been doing the last nine years while she'd grieved?

"I thought you committed suicide," Helena's voice was empty. Her mom winced. "I thought...I thought you didn't want me anymore."

Selina's face scrunched, tears streaking down her face. "No, no never," she insisted, cupping her face. "I left because I had to and I kept away to keep you safe. That's why I left you with your father."

"The letter said you couldn't cope with me anymore," Helena ignored her pleading, shaking her head, wanting to scream or run as her anger started to grow, boiling under her skin. "Get off me," she snarled, pushing her mother away.

Selina reacted like she'd been slapped in the face. The ends of her blonde locks clung to her wet cheeks, eyes wide and somewhat desperate. It was a side Helena had never seen before and one she didn't want to see.

Reality came crashing down and only made the pain worse like it was hitting her repeatedly with the truth after truth.

What was she meant to do?

Helena took a step back, as her chest seized up.

What will Batman do?

Selina was still a criminal, one he'd locked up years ago despite having some affection for her.

If she told Dad then she'd be betraying her mom but if she kept it a secret then she was betraying
her dad.

Helena wanted to throw up and curl into a ball, as her head pounded. "Just don't touch me, just…" She looked back at her mother, feeling her anger merge with her grief in a messy combination.

"Let me explain everything, please," Selina implored, taking a step forward.

Helena jerked back, feeling trapped like her mother would grab her, and maybe she would… there was no way in hell her Dad would ever give her mother shared custody.

She didn't know what to do, so like an animal in the wild, she did the first thing that hit her and bolted.

"Helena, wait!" Her mom tried to grab her.

Helena dodged and ran out from under the bleachers and across the field.

The rest of the team were busy warming up but they stopped when they saw her running. Anada was doing a handstand and hastily flipped onto her feet when she saw Helena run passed. "Helena, where are you going!?

Helena had no idea, ignoring her friend as she ran passed the main building and through the slipway to where the car park was, her chest heaving as she looked around frantically.

"Helena!" Anada was running after her.

Helena looked over her shoulder and then at the main road, running down the path. She didn't care where she went she just needed to get the hell out of here.

Chapter End Notes

And, finally, they meet!

Considering how hard Selina's death hit Helena the only reaction I can envision is denial and then a full breakdown when it's realised she's been deceived for the last nine years.

If Selina hadn't mentioned that the whole thing had been a lie at first then I think Helena might have had some time to absorb the information and keep calm. Straight up saying you lied about committing suicide within the first few minutes is like a train slipping off the rails.

So, just saying, Selina could have handled it better, but with the type of character she is I think she'd straight up be honest to her kid mainly out of guilt. On the other hand, maybe I'm wrong and she would have handled it better.
A hi nos vemos = see you there
Te veré mas tarde = see you later

Gotham City
10/02/2023
17:00

Helena wasn't quite sure how many miles she'd run but she was now sweating and some of her hair had come loose from her ponytail. She straightened up and leant against a shop window, brushing some hair out of her face.

A curvy woman pushing a stroller paused to frown at her. "Uh, are you okay?"

Helena tensed and straightened up, forcing smile. "Yeah, just late for my bus," she replied, cheerfully.

The woman gave her an odd look and smiled warily. "Okay then." She continued walking, the smile dropped when she thought Helena couldn't see.

Helena sighed and looked in the shop mirror, doing a double take when she saw her reflection. Her eyes were red ringed from crying, and her makeup was badly smudged, with her lipstick smeared down her cheek.

"Oh, damn," she muttered, touching her mouth. People probably thought she belonged in Arkham. Helena looked around for somewhere she could clean her face, after a second her gaze zeroed in on the Starbucks across the street. "Thank you, corporate America." Helena smiled faintly and walked over to the traffic lights.

When she crossed the road and closer the café all the tables were full with people on their phones and laptops. She pushed the door open and stepped inside where the air was warmer and smelled of sweet caffeine.

A few people glanced at her, making her grimace and quickly run towards the bathroom. The last thing she wanted was for her appearance to be all over online.

Helena sighed quietly when she walked into the bathroom, a line of twelve cubicles opposite the mirrors and sinks. She took off her gym bag and walked over to the large mirror, taking out a white towel from the bottom of the bag.
She dumped her bag next to the sink and turned the tap on to wet the towel, as she dipped the corner of the towel in the water her thoughts drifted to her mother, causing her chest to constrict.

The idea that her mom had gone off and lived her life without her was… it made her want to smash the mirror in front of her.

Helena narrowed her eyes at her reflection as she wiped her make-up off.

"Is that Bruce Wayne's kid?" One woman whispered from behind.

"I don't know she looks kind of rough…" the second woman muttered.

Helena rolled her eyes and ignored them, as everything that had happened started to sink in.

Her mom was alive, that in itself was (meant to be) great, so why didn't it feel as wonderful as she'd dreamed it would be?

Why did it feel, to put it bluntly, like she'd eaten shit?

Helena finished cleaning her face and placed the towel down and stared at her reflection, at least her face was clean.

Her gaze snapped towards her bag when her phone started vibrating, the noise echoing throughout the bathroom. Was it her dad?

She balled her hands into fists as she looked at her bag, biting down hard on her tongue. The vibrating continued while she waited for the call to go to answer machine.

A young girl with red hair glanced at her while she washed her hands, arching an eyebrow. Helena gritted her teeth and ignored her, waiting for the call to end.

The vibrating stopped after a moment when the other girl finished washing her hands and moved over to the dryer. Helena sighed, lowering her shoulders briefly before she stiffened when the phone started vibrating again.

With cold acceptance, she hesitantly reached into the gym bag and took out her phone.

The caller ID was confirmation, it was her dad and unless she wanted a visit from Batman she needed to answer.

Helena took in a deep breath and answered. "Hey, Dad," she said lightly, turning away from the mirror as she grabbed her bag.

"Is everything alright?" her dad replied, stiffly.

"Uh, yeah, why?" she forced some amusement into her voice, as she hurried out of the bathroom, flinging her bag over her shoulder. "Did something happen?"

"Helena," His voice lowered warningly. "Where are you?"

The question wasn't about where she was in particular, but more so why she wasn't at home.

Helena ducked her head as she rushed passed the customers in the café and headed outside. "I was just grabbing a coffee," she replied, looking around anxiously, trying to find an excuse."I'm…I'm just heading to Jaime's house to hang out, didn't I mention that?" She slipped around the corner into an alleyway, pressing her back against the wall.
"I thought you said you were going to try and find that missing girl?" Dad said, suspiciously.

Her stomach dropped. "I am." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "I was going to ask Jaime for help," her voice shook in the middle.

"Oh, I see," he was using the Brucie voice now, which wasn't a good sign. "So, why did your friend Anada call claiming she last saw you running away crying after lying about meeting Tim under the bleachers?"

Helena's mouth clamped shut, her body as still as a statue while she stared at the ground. It felt like he was right there glaring down at her. "I… Some guy sent me a note," she lied, uncertainly, rubbing her arm. "He wanted to meet me under the bleachers, and I only went so I could let him down gently, but he, uh…he yelled and I got upset, that's all."

"What did he do?" his voice hardened, his protectiveness winning over.

She nearly sighed in relief. "It was nothing, just insults—listen, I don't wanna talk about it okay."

"Who was it?" he said coldly.

She nearly groaned feeling like a spider caught in its own web, wishing she had told a better lie. "Dad, seriously, just let it go," her voice rose.

"If someone's upset you—"

"I can take care of myself!" she finally snapped, her hands shaking. She instantly regretted snapping when she received a stony silence from the other end of the line. "Sorry." Helena turned her back to the street, pressing her arm closer to the wall. "It's just been a rough day, Dad, so can you please just, just drop it…" she whispered, finding it hard to speak.

The other end of the line was silent for a moment, while she waited with baited breath.

"…Alright, we'll talk about it later."

At least that gave her some time to work this mess out. "Thanks," she murmured, resting her head against the wall. "I'll be home soon, I promise…"

"Okay, fine I'll see you soon."

She held her phone tighter. "Okay…I love you."

*Please say it back.*

Her dad hesitated, making her stomach churn like rotten milk. "I love you too," he replied gently, making her smile.

The line went dead after a second. Helena looked at the home screen for a moment, sighing in relief that she hadn't had, to tell the truth then and there, but she still needed to talk to somebody about it.

Her fingers seemed to act on their own accord as they swiped through her contacts and selected Jaime's name.

She stared at the phone anxiously while it rang.

"Hey, Helena," Jaime answered, a faint blasting noise in the background. The noise reminded her
of the video games Tim played in his room. "Hello?"

She blinked and quickly shook her head, pressing the phone to her ear. "Sorry, not really myself today..."

The noise in the background stopped. "Why, what's wrong?" concern slipped into his voice.

She bit down on her lip and turned around to look out onto the street. "Can I come over, I need to talk to someone," she said quietly, looking up at the dimming sky. "Please."

"Yeah, sure," he sounded suspicious. "You want me to pick you up or...?"

"No, it's fine, I'll just get..." She froze when she realised she didn't have her purse, and she wasn't in the mood to break back into school. "Actually, can you come get me? I forgot my purse..."

She heard the spring of a mattress and a shuffle of movement from the end of the line. "Sure, where are you?"

Helena looked up at the massive skyscrapers to figure out where she was. "Do you know where Cherry Hill is?"

"Uhh..."

"It's the place with the three glass skyscrapers next to each other." She walked back onto the street, heading towards the skyscrapers.

"Ah, got it. See you in twenty minutes." She could hear him powering up his armour.

She frowned. "Make sure you land somewhere out of sight."

"Yeah, I know, relax," he replied, breezily. "Ahí nos vemos."

Helena smiled fondly. "Yeah, see you soon." She ended the call and stuffed her phone back in her gym bag.

Oracle sent him the CCTV footage, the footage from the school played on the large monitor screen while Bruce watched it with a hawk-like gaze.

"See this frame?" Oracle said, replaying the footage.

The woman was blonde with curvaceous hips that stirred something he'd long buried. The way she carried herself when she walked down the path and the way she snuck into the playing field with well-practised ease was all painfully familiar.

"She was the only person to go under the bleachers at that time and she left a few seconds after Helena ran off," Oracle told him.

Batman swallowed, leaning back in his chair while he stared at the frozen frame. "Zoom in."

The woman's face came into focus but was still a bit blurred, revealing her slim face and the sunshades that covered her eyes. He gritted his teeth and stared at her face for a long moment, feelings something tug in his chest.

Batman quickly closed the footage and looked away from the screen. "Thank you, Oracle," he said, clasping his hands on his lap. "I'll discuss this with Helena when she gets back."
"She probably has a good reason for lying, B," Oracle replied with a hint of protectiveness. "Go easy on her."

He hummed dismissively and ended the call.

Batman let in a deep breath and closed his eyes. Helena may stretch the truth at times, but she wasn't the type of person to falsely accuse a stranger, he'd raised her better than that.

"Hey that Madolyn woman tried to call again." Robin flipped over the railing and landed on the platform; he'd gotten a lot better in the last year. "I thought you dumped her already?"

Batman sighed derisively. "We were never going out, to begin with." He'd already turned down the last three dates Madolyn had suggested, but the woman didn't seem to understand the word no.

Robin walked over to his side and frowned. "So where'd Helena run off to?"

"She went to go see Jaime," Batman answered, evenly, opening his eyes.

"Right…and we're definitely sure we can trust him?"

"I'm still analysing his blood sample," Batman replied, sighing. "But, I still want the Scarab examined. If it or Jaime puts up resistance though then well …"

Robins chewed his lower lip, humming. "I don't think Jaime would be resistant, despite everything, he's still a decent guy." He crossed his arms. "The Scarab is more predictable."

"We'll take precautions like we always do," the vigilante replied.

The boy nodded, as his gaze flickered from the screen back to Batman. "So, is Helena okay? Because you seem kind of worried," he asked, apprehensively, frowning.

Batman's brow furrowed, rubbing his chin. His emotions weren't that obvious were they? He hummed lowly. "She says she's fine." Batman clicked on the frozen frame of the blonde woman, causing Tim's gaze to snap back to the screen. "But, something happened at school today involving that woman," he voiced his thoughts, glancing over at Robin. "Any ideas?"

The boy shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine," he replied, brow furrowed, looking at him thoughtfully. "Unless you already know…?"

"I know who I want it to be," the Dark Knight said, quietly. "The problem is differing want from instincts." He stared at the screen for a long moment, as his eyes trailed along the woman's long hair and the curve of her hips.

"Well, since Helena's busy, I guess I'll head out on patrol," Robin interrupted his thoughts.

Batman glanced at him, pursing his lips. He still got an uneasy feeling in his stomach when he thought of Tim going out alone, but the boy was growing up and he'd proved enough times that he could handle himself.

"I still want you back by midnight." Bruce supposed it was about time he gave the kid some more breathing room.


Batman hummed and turned back to the screen, locking his gaze back onto the woman.
Jaime walked back into his bedroom with a plate of banana fritters in his hand. Helena was curled up on his bed with her back pressed against the headboard.

"Hey, I got you something to eat," he said, shutting the door behind him with his foot.

She sat up on the bed. "Thanks. Your parents don't mind do they?"

He sat down next to her and shrugged. "Mom's working a night shift and dad's tired from his meds," he answered. "It doesn't matter."

Her gaze was curious. "Oh, okay then." She picked up one of the fritters, frowning for a second before she took a small bite of the treat. "Mmm." Her eyes widened as she chewed, making him chuckle at her expression. "This is good," she mumbled, swallowing. "Who made them?"

"My dad." Jaime took a fritter and bit out a large chunk, savouring the taste.

She hummed, eating the treat whole while he ate his. "They're good…" Her gaze lowered.

"Her bio-chemicals are imbalanced,' the Scarab said.

Yeah, I noticed.

Jaime wiped his mouth and stared at her thoughtfully. "So, what's wrong?" he asked curiously. "You seem pretty…not yourself."

She shrugged, sighing. "It's hard to explain."

"Come on, try me," he replied lightly, smiling.

Helena seemed to deflate like all the energy was just drained out of her. "I guess, you're the only one who won't be biased," she murmured, staring at her hands curled on her lap. "…Someone left a note in my locker today, they wanted to meet me under the bleachers."

The bleachers? Jaime felt a small ache in his stomach. "Oh, so some guy wanted to…" He didn't want to think about it.

Helena's head snapped up. "What? No, it wasn't a guy," she said, exasperated. He felt a swell of relief. "It was a woman who…she, uh… it was my mother." She visibly cringed. "She faked her death."

Jaime blinked in surprise, leaning back in surprise. "Wait, your mom faked her own death?" he repeated slowly.

Wait, what? Faked death?

His mouth started mouth but no sound came out, the words stuck in his throat.

'It is quite an extreme act,' the Scarab mused.

She looked away, closing her eyes. "She said she did it to protect me," she answered quietly. Helena crossed her arms, resting her arms on her knees when she leant forward. "From what I know, she upset Black Mask before I was born and he held a grudge," she explained, staring at her mud-stained, white trainers. "I didn't know it at the time, but he found us when I was seven and made her do a job which backfired badly, but I don't know the rest. Only that she left a note and jumped off a bridge."
Jaime winced.

Helena's voice sounded empty and numb like how'd she'd been at the Coffeehouse.

Hesitantly, he rested his hand on her back. "I'm sorry, Helena," he wasn't sure what else he could say. "I'm really, really sorry."

"Your apologies mean nothing, so why speak them?"

He frowned. That's not the point, you don't always apologise because you did something wrong.

'...Interesting.'

She let out a shallow breath that shook her shoulders. "All I ever wanted was to have her back," she whispered, bringing her hands up to her arms like she was trying to stop the shaking. "And now she is and I should be happy, shouldn't I?" Her voice was strained. "She did it to protect me because she loved me, so why aren't I happy?" her tone grew tighter like a wound up thread, glaring up at him.

To his surprise, there weren't any tears in her gaze, only anger, and the blue in her eyes seemed harsher and colder.

He nearly retracted his hand, a little worried she'd start lashing out, but he kept his hand where it was. "She lied to you. It's okay to be angry," he told her gently. "Do you wanna tell me what happened exactly?"

Her glare dimmed, the anger withering to something which was more like weariness than a fiery temper. "I freaked out is what happened," she said, shaking her head. "I just needed to get out of there, so I ran…it probably wasn't the best idea." Her lips drooped and her forehead wrinkled.

"Considering the circumstances, it makes sense," he replied, giving her a small smile. She kept silent, her gaze focussed on the floor. It made him shift on the spot a little nervously. "Um…do you want another banana fritter?" He held up the plate.

'How is that meant to help?' the scarab sounded derisive.

Helena looked up, blinking as her brows furrowed together. She glanced at the plate of fritters and then at him.

Unsure, he smiled back sheepishly.

Then, after a second, she smiled. It was small at first, and then it grew when she let out a brief laugh. "No, thanks, I think I'm good." Her gaze was warm, the coldness melting away, but still kind of sad. "Sorry, for spilling my problems all over you."

"Helena, it's fine." He put the plate down on the floor and moved his hand away from her back. "You can tell me whatever you want, I'm cool with it."

Helena stared at him intently, like she thought he was lying, but, after a moment, her gaze flickered away and her shoulders lowered, a tentative smile on her face. "Thanks…” Then, she sighed and moved in closer, hugging him, her head resting on his shoulder.

Jaime's eyes widened, feeling like he was being hit with surprise after surprise, only this one was a nicer surprise than the others.
He wrapped his arm around her as she closed her eyes.

She stunk of lipstick and sweat, but he didn't have the heart to tell her, and besides he didn't mind.

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**Gotham City**

**10/02/2023**

**21:34**

In the small security room, two guards were peacefully sleeping on the floor from the knockout gas while Robin hacked into the City Security footage.

The boy's face was illuminated by the twenty screens that filled the room with a disorientating bright light.

Uncovering deleted CCTV footage was difficult but not always impossible, mainly because the people who deleted it hadn't actually completely erased the data like they thought; a classic Recycle bin scenario only with the bin having a hidden layer underneath.

Robin typed away on the computer while he carefully collected and fixed the scattered data.

Batman had more or less indirectly taught him how to do it. It had started when his mentor had shown him how to properly erase CCTV footage so their movements around the city weren't caught on camera. They were already hacked into the main grid so that helped make things a lot easier.

The boy grinned when he found the final piece of the puzzle, restoring the last thirty days of deleted footage. "Tadaa," he chimed, spinning around in his chair. "Okay, now let's see what we've got here."

He started downloading all of the clips onto his hard drive and started to open up the ones dating back to 09/23. His smile dimmed as his eyes narrowed at the bottom screen when the video started to play, it was from a distance so it was hard to make out faces but there was a bright pink light being thrown about, with two people fighting each other under the bridge.

Robin chewed the inside of his mouth and went through the other clips, looking back further. The next scene showed the back entrance to Gotham General, of a pink haired goth girl walking into the hospital.

He sat up straighter and scowled, scrutinising the footage more closely. As he clicked through the next two clips he could see the pink haired girl again, but he didn't recognise her face. She was young and maybe only a little older than him.

Robin expected to see her in the last deleted footage, but instead, he saw someone else. His chest tightened when he pulled up the 09/17 file and saw Jason leaving Gotham on his motorcycle, dressed in his Red Hood outfit with a suspiciously bulky backpack on.

The boy's thoughts trailed back to that day, his brow creasing when Oracle had lost track of Jason and they'd just assumed he was hiding low in the city…

Robin replayed the footage again, fixated. "Where were you going?" he murmured, frowning.

He paused for a moment, trying to think, debating going to Batman straight away. The boss would
want more evidence before he started questioning Jason. For all they knew it could be nothing, but seeing how it was Jason, that was a naïve idea.

Tim chewed his tongue, drumming his fingers against his thigh. Maybe if Jason let his guard down he could poke him for answers, slowly at first. Minor things like what type of motorcycle he drove…

The free medical centre was an old townhouse in the East End, the building was in bad shape and on its last legs, but like in a true Gotham fashion is survived and carried on going.

"Are you sure this is the right clinic?" Blue Beetle asked as the two of them searched through the clinic's records. The office was small and worn down, with air bubbles trapped in the blue wallpaper. There was a large desk which took up most of the space, and a great mass of file cabinets.

Being on a mission kept her mind focussed, right now she wasn't even thinking of…well, anyway she needed to focus on counting the files and finding the right date.

Huntress was currently searching through one of the cabinets, trying to find the right date. "A few homeless kids and the staff claim she came here regularly every once a month," she told him, frowning as she flicked through the files.

"27 files instead of 25. Doesn't add up."

Blue Beetles was standing above her looking through the files in the top drawer. "Why every once a month?"

"They hand out free sanitary products for the girls, and only on a specific day," she answered evenly, closing the bottom drawer when she couldn't find the date.

"Oh, right of course..." He cleared his throat. "But, why would they keep her on file?"

She nearly rolled her eyes at the number of questions he was asking, but maybe she was just used to working with people who already had the answers. With Jaime, it was like he liked to work the answers out with you as some kind of teamwork. It was odd but kind of refreshing.

"It's mainly for the audit. They keep all the regulars on file and sometimes they do medical check-ups as well." Huntress opened the second drawer and started flicking through the files, her brow scrunched up in concentration. "What I wanna know is why out of hundreds of homeless kids in Gotham did they single her out?"

"Maybe she was unlucky," he reasoned.

She hummed quietly. "But, sending a Meta to deal with her, that's a little too much effort for just a random homeless kid." Her fingers froze when she came to a line of files which had the date she was looking for. "Bingo."

Huntress pulled out a large pile of files and dumped them on the floor. Blue Beetle closed the top drawer and crouched down next to her. "And, now for the fun part," he commented dryly, picking up one of the files, while Huntress did the same.

She flicked through the first few pages, it had limited information on the children but it did report their gender, ethnicity, blood type, weight, height, and age. "Look for Asian in ethnicity, even if it's mixed," she told him, putting the file down to pick up another. "She's a teenager but can't be much
older than Robin."

Blue Beetle started skimming through the folders, placing one down to the side as soon as he was finished with it. The two of them sat on the floor in the dim room, the light from the desk bathing the room in a sickly yellow colour.

Huntress' brow furrowed as she scanned the file pages, but the result was the same. "Hey, I found a girl who matches," he said, holding up a file to view. 

_Had her theory been wrong?_

She took the file and scrutinised it, but after a moment she shook her head. "It isn't her, she's listed as 4'7, Cassie is not that short." The file was tossed to the side. "Keep looking."

"My bad..." He scratched the back of his neck and picked up another file. "Do you know what they'd want with her?"

Huntress grimaced as she flicked through the files. "There're rumours of the Light doing Metahuman experiments involving children," she answered quietly.

She felt him grow tense beside her; his hands paused when he picked up a folder. "The Light's the same people who wanted that tablet, right?" he asked cautiously.

Huntress nodded, shifting through some more folders. "Yeah, they've been around for a long time." Her thoughts shifted to Artemis and Jason, the two of them having been caught in the crossfire. "We haven't had much luck taking them down."

Blue Beetle pursed his lips as he skimmed through the file. "Well..." He looked up and shot her a small smile. "That's going to change pretty soon, right?"

She raised an eyebrow but ended up smiling back. "Yeah, sure. They don't stand a chance." Her gaze shifted back to the folders as her smile faded.

They continued to look in silence, waving through the thin brown files until there weren't any left. "That's the last one," he said, sighing. "She isn't in here."

Huntress silently counted the files they'd looked through. "25, 26..." she counted under her breath. Blue Beetle frowned, eyeing her up and down. "Um...Huntress?"

"30 files," she whispered, a slow smile spreading across her face. "It doesn't add up."

"What?" He stared at her in confusion.

She jumped to her feet. "It's 30, not 31—I knew it!" Her grin was wide as she slapped her hands together.

"Um, can you explain please?" Blue Beetle stood up, with his nose scrunched up and eyes wide from lack of understanding.

She probably should explain.

"My theory was right," Huntress replied, turning back to him. "All of these are just hard copies, but they're emailed to Gotham General at the end of every month, to show evidence of numbers." She clicked on her computer, the blue light flashing on her face. "I had Robin hack their logs and it showed 30 files on their system."
Blue Beetle stepped closer to look at the holographic screen. It showed the data from the hospital records, a list of dates that matched up with the hard copies they’d just looked through. "Okay, so is Cassie's file missing or something?" He looked at her for verification.

She blinked in surprise and nodded. "Uh, yeah, pretty much." Her fingers flicked on the keypad to show the previous dates. "But look Cassie is still in the older files." She opened one of the folders. "The description, height, and age match up, so why is her file missing now?"

Huntress closed her computers and rubbed her chin, as she lowered her other arm. "But, how did you know there's a file missing in the first place?" he asked warily.

Huntress glanced back at him. "Because, when the files were emailed over to the hospital the original data showed 31 documents being sent over, not 30." She looked down at the pile of folders. "So if 31 files were sent why does the hospital only have 30 in their system?" She shot him a pointed look. "I just needed to confirm it was her file that was missing."

Blue Beetle rubbed the back of his neck while he stared at the floor, his face twisted from concentration. "So, I'm guessing they only deleted the recent file so it wouldn't be too suspicious," he said slowly, looking back up. "But, if Cassie had been coming here for months or maybe even years, why would they suddenly take her now?"

"And, there lies the big question." Huntress crossed her arms and looked around the room. "The fact the hard copy's missing indicates someone in the clinic is in on it, most likely a higher up."

"You already know who?"

"The IP address was Dr Rodney Egson, he's the guy in charge," she answered, grimly, shaking her head. "He's most likely only a minor player."

He scratched his chin. "But, if we ought him that could make things worse," Jaime replied, meeting her gaze.

Huntress nodded. "I know, he could end up ratting us out," she muttered, thinking it over. She clicked her fingers. "But we can use that to our advantage."

Blue Beetle hummed, crossing his arms. "Tapped phones?"

"If he's a minor player they may contact him in person," she replied, smiling slightly. "We might even be able to get him on our side, depending on what his next move will be."

His lips twisted into a grimace. "In that case, you may want to go easy on the interrogation."

Her smile dropped, narrowing her eyes. "I'm not going to torture him," she said, dismissively. "Geeze, I'm not evil."

Blue Beetle raised his hands in defence. "I'm just saying you can be a little too rough sometimes," he reasoned diplomatically, shrugging. "Maybe we should try the good cop/bad cop approach to even things out."

Huntress arched an eyebrow. "That's a little too 80's for me."

"Oh, come on, trust me it'll work." He grinned, puffing out his chest, causing her to smile a little. "I'll do the good cop, you do bad cop. It'll be kinda fun."
Interrogations weren't meant to be fun, but his naivety was refreshing and it did sound a little fun.

Her smile curved into a smirk. "Okay, fine." She shrugged and bent down to pick up the folders. "We'll clean up here, leave a bug, and then head to his house."

Wayne Manor, Gotham

10/02/2023

22:35

Tim was very good at being quiet, he'd perfected it at the age of nine after three years of sneaking out of the house without his parents or the maids noticing. It was harder to do so now since he lived with people who too had mastered the skill, but he still managed to sneak up on Jason while the young man had been in the gym lifting some small weights.

Jason should have been resting in bed, but he seemed to be just as stubborn as Batman in the taking it easy area. Fortunately, Jason was just sticking to the handheld weights for now and was sitting down as he did them so it wouldn't cause strain on his injuries.

His crutches were nestled underneath the bench he was sitting on, which gave the illusion of vulnerability which was spoiled by Jason's bulky frame that could probably crush a man's throat in with enough force applied.

Tim observed him for a few seconds, while he tiptoed towards him, holding his breath as he approached.

Jason grunted as he lifted one of the weights, his right bicep-straining from the heaviness, highlighting a thick set of veins pulsing under the skin. Tim stared for a moment longer before he cleared his throat.

"Hey, Jason."

"Fuck!" Jason twisted around in surprise, the small weight held above his head like he was going to throw it. His gaze darkened when he saw the boy. "What the hell are you doing here, shit-head?"

Tim forced himself to relax, even though his instincts were telling him to leave. "I wanted to use the gym..." He shrugged, looking at the floor.

"Isn't it your bedtime?" Jason said, snidely.

_Oh, haha really clever, Asshole._

Tim let out a deep breath and looked up, jutting his chin out. "Listen, it's been nearly two weeks, so I'm going, to be honest." He clenched his fist, putting his interrogation method into use. "I know you don't like me..." he began, making Jason snort.

"A+ detective skills there."

Tim sighed. "Which is fine but... You're not going to kill me are you?"

Jason's face scrunched up into a scowl, as he slowly lowered the arm holding the weight. "What, you think I'm gonna sneak into your room and slit your throat or something?" he said, coldly, narrowing his eyes.
He wouldn't be that diabolical.

Tim shrugged, steadying his gaze. "No, but I just wanted verification," he replied, dusting his foot against the floor. "I mean we still have to live with each other."

Jason raised an eyebrow as his face smoothed out, looking a little intrigued. "Verification?" he repeated, setting the weight down on the bench. "Are you for real, kid?"

The boy shrugged again. "I'm just trying to make peace, so cut me some slack." His brow creased, biting down on the inside of his mouth, standing taller. "I'm fine with you not liking me, but I'm not going to be your punching bag."

Jason's brow rose higher as he stared at him. "Oh, really?" his tone was oddly nonchalant. "You done?"

Tim sighed, trying to move the conversation along. "Look, I'm not your replacement, okay." His shoulders slumped. Jason's brow furrowed together. "If anything you made it harder for me fit in here," he added, crossing his arms, studying the other's reaction. "If you think Dick's shadow was big, yours took up the whole cave."

Jason's brow smoothed out slightly at that small confession, as his lips twisted into a scowl. "Listen, kid, what are you really here for?"

Tim kicked at the ground, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "I…I just wanted to talk," he told half the truth, wondering if he'd played this too weak. He sighed deeply, averting his gaze. "Forget it..." He half turned, taking a step back.

Jason's scowl grew, but it was more irritated than angry this time. For a brief second, something flashed in his eyes but it went away too fast for Tim to decipher. "Wait," Jason spoke, uncertain.

Tim paused and looked over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

Jason gritted his teeth, making his jaw clench tightly. "...Make yourself useful and get me some water," he said gruffly, shuffling around he turned his back to Tim. "And remember the ice."

Tim raised an eyebrow, a small smile twitching up from the corner of his mouth. "Okay." He faltered, twisting his hands. "And, uh..."

Jason let out a low groan, glaring at him over his shoulder. "What?"

"Do you have a motorcycle?" Tim asked.

The young man frowned. "Yeah, what about it?"

"Helena said you're really good at mechanics," Tim said, cautious at first. "I, uh, I was wondering if you could help me upgrade my motorcycle," he mumbled, ducking his head as he rubbed the back of his neck.

There was a long pause that seemed to make the gym feel colder. Had he overstepped his boundaries? Tim frowned and rubbed his arm while he waited for the former Robin to respond.

"...Fuck sake." Jason heaved a large sigh. "I'll think about it," he finally answered, disgruntled. Tim looked up and beamed, causing the other man to glare. "Now go get me some water, shithead."
Tim nodded eagerly and quickly bounded out of the room.

That had gone a lot better than he'd expected.

Huntress checked the time on her computer while she stood in the small tool shed in the garden. It was already half eleven. She sighed and pressed the record button on her computer before switching off the screen, and then squared her shoulders when she turned back to the doctor who was tied to the wooden chair.

"We better hurry this up," she said.

Blue Beetle nodded, glancing back at Dr Egson. "Just tell us what we need to know and we'll go."

Huntress narrowed her eyes at the doctor, crossing her arms. Dr Egson was in his forties, with sagging skin and an overall pale complexion. He was wearing some green silk pyjamas when they'd kidnapped him from his home and tied him to the chair, with his bare feet shivering against the concrete floor.

Huntress took a step forward, resting her hand on the doctor's shoulder to push him against the wall. "In your clinic, there are files missing of kids who've disappeared shortly after seeking your help." Her gaze grew cold as she stared him down. "Mind clearing that up for us?"

"I-I..." Dr Egson's stammered out, sweating badly. His eyes were wide and his chest rose and fell rapidly. "I didn't know they were missing, I-I swear!"

Blue Beetle put a hand on Huntress' shoulder and gently pulled her away from the doctor. She raised an eyebrow but kept silent, stepping back to give him his turn. "Listen, I know you're scared, but we will protect you if you tell us why there are files missing," his voice was calm and level.

Dr Egson gulped. "I keep telling you, I don't know anything!" he snapped, struggling against his bonds. "This is crazy, all of this, can't you see that?"

Huntress scrutinised the doctor closely. "Why do you run the clinic?" she asked frigidly, moving in closer.

The doctor flinched, a flash of confusion flickering in his eyes. "To make a difference," he replied, indignantly. "The same thing I've wanted for the last twenty years," his tone grew harsher.

"So how do you feel about a girl you treated going missing?" She moved Blue Beetle out of the way.

His trembling ceased, with his teeth gritted. "How do you think I feel?" he hissed, spit flying from his mouth. "Of course I feel bad, but it isn't my fault!"

Sweet Mother of God he was an awful liar.

Huntress tangled her fingers in his hair, making him flinch and grow rigid. "Hmm, you really suck at this," she said coldly, as her glare cut into him like a newly sharpened knife. "Like, really bad." She slammed his head against the wall.

"Huntress!" Blue Beetle quickly grabbed her arm.

Was he still acting?

Huntress looked over her shoulder to meet his gaze, which made her glare soften when she saw he
actually looked a little nervous. She released Dr Egson and jerked her arm out of Jaime's hold. "This is going too slow," she said tightly, walking over to the toolbox on the shelf. "I'm going to ask you one more time, Dr Egson." Huntress grabbed one of the metal pliers.

Dr Egson grew a sickly grey like old porridge.

Blue Beetle reached out. "Hey, wait a—"

She shot him a sharp look, maintaining his gaze for a brief moment. Jaime's eyes narrowed a fraction, as his hand lowered. She nodded and moved over to the doctor.

"You—I already told you I don't know!" Dr Egson leant away from her as he approached, trying to push himself against the wall.

"Tell me why you destroyed the girl's file," Huntress said darkly, pinning the chair legs to the floor when she shoved her knee into his lap and grabbed the back of his head. "Otherwise I'm gonna have to pull one those teeth out." She clicked the pliers threateningly.

Dr Egson's chest pumped up and down frantically, staring at the pliers with wide bloodshot eyes. "No, please, please. I swear—"

Huntress nearly sighed, and let go of the back of his head to grab his jaw. "Not the answer I was asking for." She shoved the pliers in the man's mouth.

Dr Egson made a gargling noise which resembled a desperate plea.

Blue Beetle took a step forward from behind her, shifting on the spot anxiously.

"Tell me what I want to know," she spat out, the pliers grasped around a tooth at the back.

The doctor squirmed and thrashed underneath her.

*Just a few more seconds.*

She gently pulled on the tooth.

Blue Beetle let out a distressed gasping noise.

*Come on...*

She tugged again, the pliers tightening around the tooth.

"STAAAG!" the doctor choked on his words, pulling against his bonds. "ALFUE TWEF YUA!"

Her glove was coated in spit when she took the pliers out of his mouth. "Could you repeat that?"

Dr Egson was heaving and shaking like a leaf, a fresh coat of sweat on his face. "I'll tell you," he whispered, as his wrinkled face scrunched up like a child about to cry.

Huntress got off him and stood up straight, tossing the pliers back onto the workbench, while Blue Beetle was breathing loudly, clutching his chest. Her gaze flickered to him for a second, raising an eyebrow; he had known she was just acting right?

She shook her head and looked back at the doctor, folding her arms. "Well, start talking," she ordered sternly.
The elder man hung his head. "They were going to shut us down, and no about of money was going to change that," he began to say, hesitant at first. "They just wanted files, that's all, I didn't ask why... at first, I thought it was some kind of immigration thing or, I don't know..." He looked up at them with sunken dark eyes. "And then kids started going missing..."

"But you still went along with it," Blue Beetle said disdainfully, glowering at the man.

Dr Egson flinched and then sighed softly. "Well, what else was I meant to do? Let them make me disappear too?" he argued hastily. "My clinic helps—"

"I know," Huntress interrupted, eyeing him with contempt. "The clinic helps people, a few small nobodies is nothing in comparison, right?" She stepped closer. "The thing is, you can make it look as grey as you want, the fact of the matter is that you singled out kids to be knowingly taken for who the hell knows what."

"No, not like that," the doctor protested, looking around quickly. "It wasn't me who decided it was just their blood."

Huntress froze, her eyes widened slightly. "Their... blood?"

"W-we tested their blood, and something was different in some of theirs," Dr Egson stammered. "The blood tests, the blood tests they all took because they weren't meant to be a bad thing."

"How were they different?" Blue Beetle frowned, glancing at her warily.

Metahuman experiments.

The doctor seemed to curl inwards on himself, shifting his shoulders and lowering his head like a retreating turtle. "They have a dormant gene, not necessarily metahuman but it has the potential to evolve into it."

"Who really gets the files you delete?" Huntress felt some anger slip into her voice.

"Gotham General," the doctor answered quickly, squirming. "The gene is hard to find or verify, sometimes I've made mistakes." He grimaced, recoiling. "I don't know who at the hospital checks, but if the file I've sent proves correct they contact me and tell me to destroy the hard copy."

"Who contacts you?" Blue Beetle was tense, digging his fingers into the palms of his armour.

"They leave a letter," Dr Egson replied weakly, closing his eyes. "I do as it says and... that's it."

The shed filled with silence as the information started to sink in.

Huntress clenches her hands into fists and looked away. The confirmation of the Light's involvement left a bad taste in her mouth. It looked like the Light had its claws dug in deep and there was no solving it overnight or on her own.

"If they find out you told us this, they'll kill you," she warned the doctor. The man shivered and kicked his feet against the chair legs, trying to shuffle away. "So it's in your best interests to stay quiet."

Dr Egson froze, his silken pyjamas soaked through with sweat. "Y-you're not going to arrest me?"

Her eyes narrowed as she turned off the recording. "No, it's like you said, you didn't do anything," she replied bitterly, turning to Blue Beetle. "We're done for the night, untie him and then we'll go."
She started to walk towards the door.

They didn't have enough evidence at the moment anyway. Sometimes you had to wait until all your dominoes were lined up before you knocked them down, and this was one of those cases.

Blue Beetle nodded, casting a shifty look when she walked past, causing her to sigh, and knowing him he'd probably want to talk about this later.

Huntress walked back onto the street towards her motorcycle, the vehicle was leant against a lamppost and in camouflage mode, with the paint job a midnight black instead of neon purple.

She clicked a control button on her wrist to activate the bike, the vehicle beeping when the lights turned on and the bike jerked up to face straight ahead, while the black paint changed back to purple.

Huntress walked over and lifted up the seat to grab her helmet from the boot, just as Blue Beetle flew up from behind the house and over towards her. She sighed quietly, lowering the seat back down.

"What happened back there?" Blue Beetle touched down on the ground and marched towards her.

Her eyes narrowed, stuffing her helmet under her arm. "I was playing the bad cop, duh." She cocked an eyebrow. "Or did you really think I was gonna rip his teeth out?"

"Well it sounded more like the psycho cop," he rebuked.

Huntress bristled. "Well welcome to Gotham," she retorted snidely, feeling a swell of anger curl its way up. "I was acting, okay, I'm not a sadist."

Did he really think she was that cruel?

The thought hurt and dampened her anger.

The silence that followed made her chest feel heavy but also frustrated like a persistent nagging at the back of her head.

Jaime scowled and looked away, glancing at the ground for a moment before he looked back up to stare at her. His scowl faded after a second as he scrutinised her face. "…Sometimes I don't know what to expect from you," he answered softly, sighing.

Huntress bit down hard on her tongue, glaring at him. "Well, I don't know what to expect from you sometimes either," she shot back, defensive. "You only attacked me yesterday, but I'm still here with you." Her fingers dug into the hard material of her helmet. "So can you do me a favour and have maybe a little faith in me."

Blue Beetle grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's not like that."

Between them, which made her glare falter and start to crack. His face fell like he was disappointed about something. "It's not that I don't think you'll do the right thing it's just I don't know what you're capable of."

Her forehead creased, looking over at her bike. She let out a deep breath and looked back at him, placing her helmet on the bike seat. "Let's get one thing clear, yeah, I'm aggressive and maybe I enjoy throwing punches a little more than I let on, but I wouldn't torture someone to get information out of them," she said firmly. "There's always a line, and I won't cross it." Her gaze
grew softer. "You have to believe that."

She touched his clenched fist.

His fists unclenched as his right hand entwined his fingers with hers, as an apprehensive smile started to creep onto his face while he stared at her.

"I guess I'm still new to all of this," he replied quietly.

Her hand seemed to hold his tighter, not in a hurry to pull away. "Yeah, you're kinda a noob." The heavy weight in her chest lightened, as her lips formed a smile. "But it's cute."

"Cute?" His smile became crooked. "Not the word I'd use but I'll take what I can get."

Huntress squeezed his hand, feeling all the previous tension leave her shoulders. Her gaze lowered to his chest plate and then back to his face. "Well, thanks for tonight and everything..." Her smile dimmed, as her thoughts strayed back to her mother, her stomach twisting. "I appreciated it." She forced her smile to grow. "You're a good..." She trailed off when she met his gaze, as something seemed to shift in the air around them. It wasn't unpleasant it just felt unfamiliar.

More importantly, her hand was still holding his but it refused to let go.

Did she even want to let go?

Everything around her felt weird like they were inside this warm bubble where nothing else seemed to matter.

The sensation was nice and pleasant, which was why she didn't move away when Jaime touched her cheek with his other hand and leant in closer, his warm breath tickling her mouth.

She closed her eyes and —

The alarm on her computer started beeping.

They both stopped and opened their eyes.

It was midnight and she was late home, and just like that the bubble popped.

Huntress sighed and looked down at her computer, letting go of his hand. "I need to get home." She turned off the alarm and looked up.

Blue Beetle took a step back and averted his gaze. "Y-yeah, yeah, sure," his words came out clumsily. She quickly slipped her helmet on to hide her pink cheeks. "I'll see you later."

Huntress swallowed a lump in her throat and hopped on her bike. "Yeah right, definitely...yeah." She smiled back at him apprehensively. "...Te veré mas tarde."

He looked up and cracked a smile, relaxing a little. "Yeah, adios."

She revved up the engine as Blue Beetle flew out of the way.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

10/03/2023
He knew she'd still be awake, he'd heard her rushing to upstairs when she'd thought he hadn't been in the cave.

Bruce knocked on the door. "Helena?"

There was a shuffle of movement from inside the bedroom. "Um, come in," she didn't sound eager to see him.

He opened the door to her room and looked inside. The desk light was on by her bedside, and Helena was sitting on the bed wearing one of Jason's skull t-shirts (from his teenage rock phase) and some shorts for nightwear, with a tablet resting on her lap.

"Hey." Bruce stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "How did your patrol go?"

Helena shrugged, fiddling around with the iPad. "It was fine, I got some information," she answered, looking up. Her lips were drooped in a faint scowl. "It looks like Cassie's disappearance is linked to the Metahuman experiments," she told him. Batman narrowed his eyes, feeling a cold touch coiled around his chest. "And, we need to take a closer look at where the blood tests get sent because it looks like the Light has their hands on that too."

His expression darkened, as the cold sensation grew worse. The League had already taken investigated where the blood test results were being sent way back in the beginning when it had first been introduced, but clearly, they hadn't been as thorough as they'd thought.

Bruce sat down on her bed, channelling his anger into a glare he focussed on the desk lamp. "I want you to write up a report on Tuesday night," he told her, sternly, tearing his gaze away from the lamp to look at her. His glare softened when she looked back at him. "But overall good job."

The corner of her lip twitched upwards. "Thanks."

His anger simmered after a moment when he remembered why he'd needed to talk to her in the first place. "I want you to tell me what happened at school today," he said, reaching over to remove the tablet from her lap.

She looked away and crossed her arms while he turned the tablet off and placed it on the bedside table. "And what if I don't want to?" she replied in a quiet but defiant voice.

"Well, that's just too bad, because you're going to tell me."

Helena glared at him, scowling, and looking very much like the teenager she was. "You'll just get angry."

His eyes narrowed, turning around to face her fully. "And, why exactly would I be angry?" he asked evenly, raising an eyebrow. She kept stubbornly silent, making him sigh. "I already know you lied about there being a boy, I saw the footage." She stiffened and brought her knees up to her chin. "Who was the woman I saw?"

"...You saw the woman?"

"Yes."

"...Did she seem familiar?" she murmured, hugging her knees tightly.
Bruce's stomach gave a sharp tug, the memory of the way the woman flashed in his head. The woman had seemed and looked painfully familiar, but he didn't want to spend all night playing guessing games.

"Tell me," his voice sharpened.

Helena's expression was tight and guarded when she looked at him. "She...that woman was Mom, my mom," she told him. His eyes widened. "She faked her death, Dad. It was all just a lie," her tone became strained.

Bruce's chest constricted as he let out a breath he'd been holding in.

Was it shocking Selina had faked her death? No not with her. Did it hurt any less that she'd tricked him again, no, in fact, it was safe to say he felt just a little bit pissed off with her.

"And, you're sure it was her?" he asked, needing to be sure.

Helena's brow furrowed. "I can tell the difference between the truth and a trick, Dad," she rebuked sharply, hunching her shoulders up. "It was her."

He stared at her, analysing her body language and the frustration her eyes. She wasn't naïve enough to fall for a trick, so if she really did believe Selina was back then it was the truth. Even if a small part of him was still suspicious.

"Alright, I believe you," he said, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

The corner of her lip twitched up and her shoulders loosened, uncurling her legs out. "She left me a note in my locker, but I didn't recognise her handwriting." She moved towards him as his hand encircled around her shoulder, pulling her in closer. "And I didn't believe it was her at first, but then she started talking and...it was definitely her."

"Did she say why she came?" he asked.

Helena shook her head, snuggling in closer so that her head could rest on his chest. "I freaked out and left before she could say more but since Black Mask is dead and she was trying to protect me from him, I can take a wild guess on what triggered her to come back," she replied, quietly, closing her eyes.

"Good point." Bruce hummed faintly.

Black Mask's death would mean there was nothing stopping her but it still didn't add up right, especially since it was still so soon after the mob boss's demise, he would have thought Selina would wait longer and not spring the truth on Helena so suddenly.

"So what do we do know?" Helena looked up.

And, there was the big question he didn't want to answer. He paused for a moment, staring at the door. He knew what he was supposed to do but with everything that had happened with Jason, could he actually lock Selina up again?

A strange type of guilt grew in his stomach as he slowly began to realise he didn't want to lock the former Catwoman up because maybe...maybe she didn't deserve it. The law dictated a person needed to pay for their crimes but there were exceptions, and if anything, Jason was more deserving of prison than Selina yet he was still walking free so to speak.
Bruce glanced down at his daughter and held her a little tighter. This wasn't just a random crook on the street, this was the mother of his child and someone who he knew was capable of reforming.

"We're going to sit down and talk with her," he finally spoke after a long pause.

Helena's eyes widened. "You want to talk to her?" She sat up straighter and pushed him away slightly.

"She had her reasons for leaving," he said, stroking her hair back while her face creased into a frown. "Just like she had her reasons for coming back."

Helena curled her hands into fists and glared at her lap. "Right, of course…"

The bitterness and anger in her voice weren't much of a surprise, and she'd need time for it to all sink in, but since she was generally a forgiving person he doubted she'd stay angry at her mother for too long.

He removed his hand from her hair and placed it back on his lap. "I understand that you're angry," he spoke apprehensively like one bad word would set her off.

It was times like these he remembered that fighting psychopaths were easier than fatherhood.

Helena's glare intensified as her fists curled up tighter, breathing in a deep breath that made her nostrils flare. Then after a second she closed her eyes and sighed loudly, unclenching her hands as she blinked.

"I'm just glad she's alive," she stated, stiffly. Then she glanced up, hesitating. "…Are you?"

He nodded, his hand sliding back to her shoulder. "Yes."

Helena nodded and looked away, clasping her hands tightly on her lap. Her fringe hid most of her face with the way her back was hunched and her head slightly bowed it was obvious she was upset.

God help him if she started crying.

He wasn't sure what he was meant to say to make her feel better. Though, he could say he was proud of her for… no, it would just sound like empty praise.

Bruce tried to think of the thing she needed to hear right now, some reassurance. "Helena, I know this is hard for you right now…" he frowned and considered his next words carefully when she looked up at him. "But no matter what happens this is your home and we're still a family."

Helena's forehead creased, looking a little confused. "Oh…thanks, Dad." Her brow furrowed more. "I…I'd still choose you over her if that's what you're worried about." A faint smile crept onto her face.

Bruce sighed, his posture slumping. "Helena, that's not…" He scowled and ran a hand through his hair. "It's not about choosing sides," he tried to explain. Bruce glanced at the clock and was reminded of the time. "Listen, it's late so we'll talk about this tomorrow, okay."

It was better if they both had some time to clear their heads, and besides, he still had work to do.

Her smile disappeared, glancing away. "Okay, fine." She sighed and quickly kissed his cheek. "Goodnight, Daddy," she mumbled, moving back so she could crawl underneath the covers to lie down.
He tried to give her a smile but it didn't stick, so he just ended up kissing the top of her head which seemed to have the same effect."Goodnight."

Bruce got off the bed and walked over to the door, hearing her turnover in the bed. He paused at the doorway and looked back at her from over his shoulder, but she was facing the other way so all he could see was the back of her head.

His gaze lowered briefly before he turned away and closed the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks Gradis for helping me out with the Spanish.

Again, this chapter was way longer than intended, but I'm very much looking forward to the next one since Selina will be back again.
"Alright, so who can find the value of E?" Mr Croyden said, clapping his hands together, a mathematic equation on the Smartboard.

A few people in the class raised their hands, while Helena doodled in her notebook, not really paying much attention. There were so many other things she needed to focus on, things that actually meant something.

Cassie was most likely who-knew-where being experimented on like countless other kids, and her mom was back after lying to her for nine years, and to top it off she hadn't even had time to check and see how Jason was doing.

She didn't even want to think about Jaime right now because that was a whole other story and she couldn't afford the distraction (even if his smile was like a cute puppy's).

Not to mention they had nearly kissed…

Helena's brow furrowed, shaking her head faintly. No, stay focused.

"Hey," Lydia whispered from in front of her. Helena glanced up, Lydia had turned around in her seat and was frowning at her. "You okay?"

Helena shrugged, glancing around self-consciously. "Yeah, I'm fine," she whispered, looking back down.

"Oh…" Lydia shifted in her seat making it creak. "Um, because Anada mentioned—"

Helena's head snapped up. "Lydia, I'm fine," her voice sharpened.

Lydia's eyes widened, drawing back a little in her seat. "Okay, fine," she mumbled, facing forward again.

"Uh, ladies," Mr Croyden interrupted, arching an eyebrow in her direction. "Pay attention."

Helena tensed, holding her pen tighter when the rest of the class turned around to look at her and Lydia.

Lydia grimaced, rubbing the back of her neck. "Sorry, Sir…"
Their teacher made a low humming noise before he turned back to the board, clicking the board to go to the next slide. "First we need to simplify the equation."

The teacher's lack of interest seemed to have the same effect on the rest of the class as a lot of them went back to facing the front, while some didn't.

"Hey, Helena," Francesca Crowne whispered from behind her. "Why did you run off yesterday?" her voice soft like a pearl cushion.

Helena sighed quietly and stared at her desk to avoid the scrutiny. "What's it to you?" she muttered, scribbling around the date in her book.

Helena gritted her teeth when Francesca poked her arm with a pencil. "Just asking, geez, why so defensive?" the other girl whispered, leaning over her desk.

"Maybe because you should mind your own business," Helena hissed back, hunching her shoulders.

"…For E to equal 75," Mr Croyden droned on in the background.

"What is your deal?" Francesca murmured, digging the pencil further into her arm. "Anada totally spilled you were meeting a boy…was it Byron or Kyle?"

The comment stung and left a bad taste in her mouth.

_Couldn't Anada keep her mouth shut for a day or two? She thought resentfully. I mean I'm not asking for much, just a little bit of discretion._

Helena narrowed her eyes and cringed when she felt the other girl's breath on her neck, balling her hands into fists.

_Don't make a scene._

"Just shut up, Francesca," she whispered, stiffly.

_Shut up before I shove that pencil up your ass._

Francesca stopped poking her but still moved in closer, close enough that Helena could see the side of her face from the corner of her eye. "No need to be a bitch," she murmured near her ear. "Was just wondering if you finally gave up your v-card."

Helena's face scrunched up in disgust for a second before she dug her nails into her palm and jerked away from the girl behind her. "Mr Croyden!"

Francesca moved away instantly while the rest of the class and their teacher stopped to look in her direction.

"Uh, yes, Helena?" he asked, frowning, with his pen poised on the Smartboard.

Helena's cheeks felt hot, forcing herself to sit up straight. "I really need the bathroom."

There was a collective silence for a second or two, with Lydia staring at her in confusion. Then after another second Mr Croyden just nodded and moved back towards his desk. "I expect you back in five minutes."

_Yeah sure, like I'd miss anything significant._
Helena resisted the urge to roll her eyes and hastily stood up, grabbing her bag. "Yes, Sir," she apologised, smiling sheepishly while she avoided everyone else's stares. He raised an eyebrow and handed her the hall pass. "Thanks."

She stuffed the pass in her blazer pocket and hurried towards the door, feeling the prickling of her classmates gazes on her as she made her way out.

The elevator made a low pinging noise when it stopped on the top floor of Wayne Enterprises. Bruce straightened his blue tie while he walked down the corridor, his shoes clicking against the polished floor.

All he needed was to sign a few papers and then he'd be free for the rest of the day. Bruce checked his watch as he made his way to his office, and frowned when he saw his secretary, Rebecca, wasn't at her desk, but then again she could have just gone to the bathroom.

Bruce felt his paranoia spark a little as he made his way over to his office, scanning Rebecca's desk, her coat was still hanging over her chair, and the computer was still on but she'd taken her bag with her.

His brow furrowed as he clenched the doorknob, pressing his ear against the door to listen.

He could hear a faint shushing noise followed by a small whimper that sounded like it belonged to a baby.

Wait, a baby?

Bruce frowned and quickly opened the door, the blinds were drawn down plunging the room in darkness, but from the corner of his eye, he could hear someone hiding in the corner. His frown stayed put as he turned on the lights and closed the door behind him, walking towards his desk, waiting for the person to speak.

He balled his hands into fists.

"Selina," he said quietly, staring out of the large window. "What did you do to my secretary?"

"Her husband likes to cheat, I just sent her the pictures." Selina took a step forward, dressed in a cleaning worker's outfit with a blue pinafore on, with her hair dyed blonde and tied back. "She's busy crying in the bathroom." She held her baby close. "Helena told you everything, didn't she?"

Bruce's gaze drifted to the baby, narrowing his eyes. The baby had short dark hair, dark blue eyes, and pinkish skin.

"Not everything it seems."

Selina pursed her lips and held her baby close. "His name's Terry…Helena doesn't know about him yet," she told him, apprehensively, walking towards the window. "I knew seeing me would be enough of a shock."

Bruce stuffed his hands in his pockets, as he tried to keep his composure in check because of he sure as hell had a lot to say after all these years.

Here she was after sixteen years, just out of nowhere—

"I'm sorry I kept Helena from you," Selina interrupted his thoughts. "It wasn't fair on both of you."
His stomach twisted like he'd been punched, as his brow scrunched up, suppressing his anger. "I missed seven years of her life," he said quietly, narrowing his eyes at her.

Her passive expression didn't change. "And, I missed nine."

His temper flared. "That was your choice," he snapped, taking a step forward.

The baby stirred and whined softly, making Bruce falter and take a step back. Selina's face tightened, clutching her baby closer. "You think I wanted to leave?" Her voice sharpened, marching up to him. "I was backed up against a corner with no way out!" Terry made a whimpering noise. "Everything I did was to protect our daughter."

"I could have helped," Bruce hissed, matching her glare with his own. "I would have protected both of you."

"Well, I didn't want your protection," she snapped, clenching her hand into a fist.

Bruce opened his mouth to speak but a knock at the door made them both freeze. "Mr Wayne?" It was Rebecca. "Is everything alright."

He kept his gaze locked on Selina's, her green eyes sharp like a knife. "…Yes, Rebecca, I'm just entertaining a guest," he said, breaking her gaze for a moment as he started to walk towards the door.

Bruce cracked the door open just wide enough to see Rebecca's curious expression; her eyes were pink-rimmed and puffy from crying, and her make-up had been re-applied. "A guest?" she repeated, warily, frowning.

He smiled pleasantly. "More or less," he replied slyly. "Would you be a dear and make sure we're not disturbed?"

His secretary arched an eyebrow but then nodded nevertheless. "Of course, Sir," she replied. "Would you like some refreshments?"

"No thank you, privacy will be enough," he answered, briskly, shutting the door before she could say any more.

His smile dropped as soon as he turned around to where Selina was still glaring at him. Once his gaze reconnects with hers, to which she looked away and sighed, rocking her baby. "I came here to talk, Bruce," her tone was still standoffish. "You deserve to know the whole story and why I came back."

Bruce scrutinised her for a moment, swallowing a bad taste in his mouth. "...Follow me." He walked passed her towards the glass bookcase on the wall opposite. "We can't talk here."

Selina's eyes narrowed at him when he passed but she still followed his lead towards the bookcase. "Since when were you so paranoid?" a hint of suspicion in her voice.

He gritted his teeth and paused in front of the case. "We're in Gotham," he said, lightly, pressing a transparent button on the outer rim of the shelf. "Everyone's paranoid." The bookshelf slid away to reveal a small panic room. "After you." He stepped back to let her pass.

Selina raised an eyebrow and stayed put, she probably assumed he'd lock her in. "It's your office."

"Fair point." He smiled tightly and stepped into the panic room first, with her following after.
He pressed a button on the wall to close the door once she'd entered the room, as the lights above flickered on, revealing the white walls and blank video monitors. There was a leather sofa against the right-hand wall.

Selina looked around as she walked further in. "Cosy…" Her gaze rested on the sofa.

Bruce watched her as she went to go sit down. "Why didn't you tell me about her?"

She re-adjusted Terry in her arms while she stared back at him. "You know why."

"I want to hear you say it," he said, coldly.

Selina maintained his gaze for a long moment, pursing her lips. "You would have taken her away from me," she replied, shifting as Terry grabbed her pinafore in his tiny fist. "I was angry and I was afraid you'd turn her against me."

You did that yourself.

He bit down hard on his tongue, breathing in deeply through his nose before he spoke. "You really think I'd be that cruel?"

Wariness flickered in her eyes, surveying him with interest. "I wouldn't know, you never showed me the real you, only the parts you wanted me to see," she answered, looking away. Bruce gritted his teeth, feeling a faint stab in his gut. "All I knew was that only one of us was going to be raising Helena," her voice hardened. "And, I was not going to have someone take away my baby."

Bruce's gaze drifted to Terry and how close she held the boy, imagining a tiny little Helena in her arms instead. He looked away and stared at the blank monitors. "It doesn't matter anymore, we both lost years with her," he said, subdued. "What I need right now is to understand what happened to get us to this point, Selina."

He turned around to face her and found her staring right back at him. Her gaze was unwavering and somewhat challenging like she was debating whether she owed him an explanation.

Her gaze softened. "…I do owe you an answer," she said after a moment, glancing down at her baby. "I never planned to tell Helena who you were, and I didn't know what I'd do if she found out…"

Bruce walked towards her and leant against the wall, keeping a respective distance between them. "Did you ever consider what would happen?"

Selina sighed, slouching further into the sofa. "Only in my nightmares, so I tried to ignore it and keep it buried." She stroked her son's forehead gently as he started to drift asleep. "I was afraid she'd resent me or..." She looked up. "...run back to you and I'd never see her again."

Helena's words from last night resurfaced. I'd still choose you over her if that's what you're worried about.

Bruce sighed quietly, closing his eyes. "Tell me what happened the night you disappeared."

There was a brief silence which was only broken when Selina let out a deep breath. "When they blackmailed me to rob the jewellery store I tried to sabotage it and get out," she answered, dully. "But it, uh…I was out of practice and I was sloppy."
The Jewellery store was plunged in darkness with only their flashlights providing light. Cat—Selina mentally corrected herself, no she was Selina right now, Catwoman was to remain buried despite the costume she was wearing.

"Hurry up," one of the goons hissed, shifting on the spot. She ignored him and focussed on the security lock in front of her, the most expensive watches and jewellery were kept in the safe underground and were locked up every night before closing time. Silky had assured her the job was simple but no robbery was like picking a bike lock, it still took brains.

The six guys and herself were downstairs in the store room with a large blue storage safe in front of them.

The safe was one of those manufactured by Gruber, an old one, but still sturdy. Forced entry wouldn't work so it required a more delicate touch.

"Selina," Silky warned from behind her, sounding twitchy. He prodded her with the small metal decoder, a small square device with a red digital touch screen. She glared at him from over her shoulder and snatched the small machine from him. "You know better than most not to rush me, Silky."

He met her glare with one of his own, placing a hand on his gun. She didn't flinch and just maintained the glare until she dismissed him to focus back on her work, letting out a soft shallow breath as she reeled in her emotions.

*Keep it together.*

*While they're distracted, that's all I have to wait for.*

Selina took a deep breath and started to work on the combination, feeling an old rush of adrenaline the minute she touched the cold metal and attached the

Despite everything and no matter how much she tried to deny it, she had *missed* this.

She swallowed some bile of self-loathing and narrowed her eyes at the combination lock, attaching the suction cups of the device to the metal surface.

It didn't take too long from there even if she was a little rusty, it was like muscle memory as her hands settled back into her old routine and worked their magic.

Selina's thoughts strayed back to Helena and the man who'd be guarding her, waiting for the order that would snuff the life out of her little girl.

The safe was nearly cracked, but she took her time to allow herself to glance at the guards from the corner of her eye. Silky knew her tricks but the rest of those idiots didn't, she just needed to get her hands on one of their phones so she could text 911 and get the police to her apartment. Then she just needed a gun.
The combination clicked into place, as Selina's grip on the lock tightened. She pretended the door was jammed. "Hey, one of you boys help me move this thing," she ordered, looking over her shoulder at the goon wearing a baggy brown coat. "Silky, take this back." She shoved the device into Silky's hands when he stepped forward to presumably open the safe door himself.

The guy with the brown coat grumbled something under his breath as he moved to push her out of the way. Instead of jumping out of the way she deliberately bumped into him and then made a show of pushing him away when her chest came into contact with hers.

The phone was in his inner pocket, pinching it was like peeling an apple.

The phone disappeared down her sleeve. "Watch it," she hissed, pushing him away as she shoved past.

Silky's eyes narrowed.

The goon's nostrils flared and snarled, before turning back to the safe. The door opened instantly once he turned the lock. "Stupid, Bitch," he muttered scathingly, yanking the door fully open.

Silky glanced at her suspiciously but his gaze was drawn back to the stash of goods in the safe.

Selina stepped back when the rest of them eyed the Rolexes, diamonds, and gold jewellery greedily.

She slipped around the door of the storage room, the phone was a burner and pre-smartphone, it made texting 911 easier; the actual physical texting process not so much.


Fuck. She'd forgotten how hard it was to text on these old things.

Her fingers fumbled to type, as her heart thundered in her chest, clicking send.

She heard footsteps and quickly slipped the phone in her bra before she turned around.

"What are you doing?" Silky grabbed her arm, making her eyes widen in anger.

"I'd worry less about me and more about you," she hissed, wrenching her arm from his grip. "They got what they wanted and you don't have a gun."

Silky's gaze shifted back and forth betraying his fear, whatever walls of denial he'd built up to keep his composer were starting to crumble around him.

"Hey, get back over here." The guy in the brown coat pulled out a gun while the others were stuffing the stash in black duffel bags.

Selina's eyes narrowed at the gun and then at the distracted goons, this could be her only chance.

Silky forced a painful smile and raised his hands. "Whoa, cool it. We were just talking—"

She shoved passed Silky towards the guard. "Honey, if that gun is meant to be intimidating then you really are dumber than a sack of shit," she sneered.

Anger flashed in the man's eyes, pointing his gun straight at her. "Say another word."

Her lips pursed, eyeing him carefully. Was he bluffing or would he shoot her right here and now
without a second thought? The bottom line was she still wasn't close enough.

Selina raised her hands and kept quiet, while some of the others looked behind to see what was going on.

The man stepped closer, his bravado building by the way his lips formed a smile. "Go on, say something," he goaded, walking in closer while he still pointed the gun.

She looked down at the floor and bowed her head as he pressed the barrel of the gun against her crown.

He leant in closer, his hot breath touching her skin. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

She smiled.

*Close enough.*

In one swift movement, Seline yanked his wrist up towards the ceiling—the gun went off—and then grabbed the back of the man’s head to knee him in the face.

She yanked the gun out of his grip just when the other men dropped their bags to grab their own guns, while she kicked the man in the brown coat to the ground which broke his nose.

They were two seconds away from shooting before she managed to pull the trigger first.

She shot two of them point blank in the head, retreating back behind the door when the other two started firing—Silky had already fled, with his footsteps echoing from down the staircase.

Selina took cover behind the door as bullets split the wood with a harsh crack. They started to advance forward so she ran, bolting down the stairs where the main shop area was.

The others footsteps thundered like a stampede as she ran down each step, coming close to tripping when she nearly missed a step.

Her chest was heaving as she dashed around the corner when she made it down the stairs but was met by one of the goons, the heavy muscled one that looked like a pit-bull.

He was towering over an unconscious Silky who was currently nursing a bust lip, but when he saw her he started firing.

She ducked behind the counter, the bullets bombarding the wooden shop counter. Selina gritted her teeth and opened fire when the guy stopped shooting to reload.

One of her bullets landed on his shoulder, jerking him back. Her gaze snapped to the door when the other two goons came running in, the third following behind them.

Her hands were clammy as she pulled the trigger again, feeling like the air as getting thicker and heavier around her.

The three with guns fired at her simultaneously, until she shot one of them in the chest, leaving her open for a shot which hit her shoulder and knocked her onto her back.

"Fuck," she swore, gritting her teeth to hide her scream as the blood flowed out of her arm and created a puddle.

She scrunched her eyes closed at the three remaining men towered above her. She tried to raise the
gun to shoot but it was kicked out of her hand by the man in the brown coat.

He sneered down at her. "Stupid bitch."

Selina opened her mouth to spit at him but he kicked her in the face before she had the chance.

Her head bashed against the floor and her body went limp when she slipped into unconsciousness.

Gotham City

10/03/2023

11:10

Helena grabbed her American History book from her locker while students walked on by to their next class.

"Mind explaining what happened back there?" Lydia broke away from the crowd and leant against the locker next to hers.

Helena sighed and closed her locked. "Francesca was just being a…" She shrugged and pressed her book against her chest. "…her usual charming self." She rolled her eyes and forced a smile.

Lydia crossed her arms. "Yeah, well whatever she said just ignore her," she replied, smiling. "She's just a sad little loser with no friends." Lydia stood up straighter and linked her arm with Helena's. "Well, besides the ones she pays for." She chuckled at her own joke.

Helena forced her smile to stick and just shrugged, stuffing her book in her bag. "I'm fine honestly," she reassured. "I just have a lot on my mind…" Her smile dimmed. "Come on, we're gonna be late for class," she said, tugging Lydia away from the lockers.

Bruce rubbed his eyes, while Selina changed Terry's diaper. She seemed to be keeping baby supplies in her pinafore.

Terry kicked his feet in the air, making her smile as she fastened the fresh diaper on. She smiled warmly and leant down to blow raspberries into his stomach, the sound merged with the baby's laughter.

He watched her tend to her baby, as his gaze softened. "…You're good with him."

Selina looked up, her smile flickered when she met his gaze while Terry continued to giggle. "I have experience," she replied, shrugging as she buttoned up Terry's blue hooded onesie. "And, he's better behaved than his sister."

He nodded, taking a step closer. "Was she a handful?"

Social Services had only found a few hard copies of Helena's baby pictures, but from what he'd seen she'd looked like a relatively happy baby.

Selina snorted, lifting Terry up to cradle him in her arms. "She was very loud, that's all I can say," she replied, kissing the top of her son's head. "She nearly got us kicked out of our first apartment because of the noise complaints." Selina leant back against the sofa.

"I can imagine," Bruce commented.
Selina hummed contently as she cradled her baby in her arms. "She was very opinionated, especially at school," she continued, watching him for a moment. "She used to get into fights."

The corner of his lip quirked upwards, imagining his little girl throwing a solid punch while still in kindergarten. The information felt like Selina had offered him something special and priceless, a glimpse into the time he'd never be able to get back.

Bruce considered her for a moment, closing the distance between them, feeling an urge to offer some information of his own. "Helena told me she wants to be a lawyer," he said, sitting down on the armrest.

Selina’s smile started to come back, prouder this time. "A lawyer?" Her eyes widened. "Since when?"

He shrugged. "She got the idea after watching that TV show Suits." He tried to laugh but it came out a little too forced.

She raised an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

Bruce cleared his throat. "That and something to do with changing the justice system," he added, lightly.

Selina rocked Terry in her arms, as her gaze became warmer. "Well, I'm proud of her, she has a lot more… career goals than I did at her age."

A small fond smile crept onto his face. "She is something to be proud of."

They lapsed into another silence.

Selina looked up at the ceiling before she glanced at him briefly. "I know I shouldn't have left her the way I did, Bruce, I never wanted to hurt her but…" Selina trailed off, sighing

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**Gotham City**

02/11/2014

07:50

The basement was damp and dark, and the smell of blood was so thick it made her nearly vomit.

Selina's body felt beaten and weak, with her costume gone with only her underwear protecting some of her self-respect. Her hands were cuffed behind her back, attached to a metal chain bolted to the wall, and her skin was patterned in dark purple bruises, with the right side of her face so swollen she couldn't open her eye.

"I would have killed you quickly, Selina." Black Mask tangled his fingers in her hair and forced her head back. "And, left your little girl out of it too."

Selina gritted her teeth as her head was slammed against the brick wall, disorientating her further.

The black skull mask looked moulded to the man's skin, with the only human feature left being his mouth and bloodshot eyes.

"But, you just had to go and fuck things up didn't you?" He dug his nails into her scalp and then
smashed her face against the wall again, letting her go.

Her body hit the floor, white dots appearing in her vision while her bandaged shoulders shook.

"So, now I gotta drag this out and kill a little girl just to make an example out of you." Black Mask sighed loudly, straightening up. "That costs money you know…Unless…"

She squinted up to look at him, watching him dust off his bloody knuckles before he reached into his dirtied white suit jacket to grab a pack of smokes and a lighter.

Black Mask stared down at her, tilting his head. "Unless you paid me back that $55,000," he said, silkily, lighting up the cigarette perched in his mouth. "I mean if you don't mind me saying you're a good looking woman, Selina." He smirked and bent down. "I mean look at these beauties." He grabbed her left breast, squeezing it.

Selina stiffened and tried to kick him with her knees. "Fuck off!" she snarled, trying to head butt him.

His smirk widened, blowing a whiff of smoke in her face, making her choke and cough. "Lotta people would pay," he said, silkily, molesting her breasts like she was a piece of meat, trapping her body against the wall.

Black Mask looked at her face as his hand moved away from her chest and towards her jaw, grabbing it roughly. She glared at him like he was scum, wanting to rip out his throat with her bare teeth.

He blew more smoke into her face, forcing her to close her good eye when it started to sting. "Police are still questioning your kid, gonna cost money to sneak her back here, you know," he said, sighing. "So how about I do us both a favour and you re-reimburse my money, then your little girl doesn't have to die. Fairs, fair."

Selina bit down on her tongue hard enough to draw blood. Her stomach twisted and shrivelled up, sweat-caked all over her body. She felt less like a human being and more like an animal.

Black Mask let go of her jaw and shrugged. "I mean, I'd still have to break your legs to keep you in bed, but at least your kid's still breathing, right?" He smiled crookedly and took another leisurely drag of his cigarette.

Selina forced herself to sit up straighter, eyeing the mob boss with a dark gaze. "And, then you'll kill me?"

"After the debt's paid, sure I'll even do it myself," he replied, smoothly, tapping some ash off the bud of the cigarette.

"How considerate." Selina's glared at him coldly.

The door to the basement creaked open, making Black Mask scowl and look over his shoulder when one of his subordinates came half-way down the stairs. "What?" the mob boss snapped.

The subordinate froze, clenching the bannister tightly with starch white knuckles. "Sorry, Boss, but you said you wanted to know when the other guy woke up."

Black Mask sighed and stood up. "Oh, yeah, I did." He smiled down at her coldly. "Gotta go have words with your old friend Silky," he told her smoothly. "So you go ahead and think about my offer while I'm gone." He flicked the used up cigarette against the wall when he was finished with it.
"Scott, keep an eye on her."

"Sure thing, Boss."

Her chest burned as her rage boiled and grew, watching him turn around and walk up the stairs, Black Mask's footsteps caused the stairs to creak loudly as he made his way up, while Scott came to stand near her.

She looked away when the door slammed shut behind him.

Selina's gaze drifted to the cigarette bud which was still smoking, trying to think of a plan. The main large chain was nailed to the wall and the whole area was just concrete and brick, but there was a small boarded up window, a slab of wood drilled into the wall.

She glanced at Scott who was keeping silent, he was largely built and had dark hair and pink tinted skin. Direct hand to hand combat wouldn't work with him, not in her current state, so the only way to take him down was to use his own weight against him.

Selina forced a cough that was loud and hoarse, spitting on the ground. "Can I…I need water," she said weakly, crawling towards Scott. "Please."

Scott's face scrunched up in disgust when he looked down at her. "Shut up."

"Please." She nuzzled her face against his leg while the chains behind her back jingled, as she very carefully and gently wrapped the chain around his leg. "I just."

He grabbed a fistful of her hair, making her wince and cry out. "Get back on the floor, slut." He shoved her to the ground.

Her shoulder took the brunt of the pain when she hit the floor, gritting her teeth as she gathered all her remaining energy. "Fuck you," she hissed, jerking up to the chain loosely positioned around his leg.

The chain coiled around his leg tightly when she yanked, pulling his leg with it.

Scott let out a yell as he fell onto his back.

Selina bent her knees up to her chin so she could slip her hands underneath and to the front of her body.

He reached for his gun but Seline elbowed him in the throat, winding him.

She wrapped the chain around his neck and pulled, fighting to stay on top when he tried to grab her. She pushed her body down on top of his arms to trap them, closing her eyes tight while he clawed at her face.

His arm broke loose and punched her in the face before he grabbed her by the throat and strangled her.

She choked, her face red hot as she tried to keep pulling.

Scott's face was discoloured and bloated, with the chain digging into his throat. His fighting weakened while her grip on the chain became tighter until Scott's body grew still and he stopped breathing.

Her chest heaved up and down, sweat dripping from her face, but she didn't move or release her
grip on the chain, staying exactly where she was as she felt his heartbeat start to fade.

When his heartbeat stopped she let go of the chains and fell back, swallowing thickly, staring up at the ceiling. Selina breathed in deeply, clenching her hands tightly to stop them from shaking.

After a few seconds, she got up and started to search through Scott's pockets, ignoring his blank gaze staring back at her.

The gun was the first thing to be taken, then the man's jacket, followed by a lighter, and then his wallet. She flipped the wallet open and took out a twenty but paused when she saw a small photo of Scott with a blonde woman.

Someone who'd miss him.

She sighed, smothering her pity and guilt, tearing her gaze from the photo. "You should have had better taste in men, hun…"

Selina shook her head and hastily tossed the wallet, undoing the man's belt so she could wear his jeans. She grunted and struggled a little to take the pants off, leaving the corpse in his boxers, as she swallowed down a thick taste of bile and slipped the jeans on, fastening the belt in place.

They were baggy and barely fit but they'd have to do. Selina touched her bra and tried to push the underwire out of one of the cups, bunching up the material in her hands until the wire poked through the material. She took it out and used it to pick the lock on the cuffs, the metal clicked when it unlocked and fell to the ground.

Selina stuffed the gun in the belt holster and the cash in the jean's pocket and slipped on the jacket to cover the rest of herself, zipping it up to her collar as she stood up, limping still.

There was noise from upstairs, causing her to look up anxiously. Selina moved faster towards the blocked window and scrutinised the wood covering the small window. The window would be big enough to fit through but it'd be a squeeze, as for the wood she'd need to burn at least the first part of it to get out, though, too much smoke would alert Black Mask.

"Here goes nothing." Selina stretched on her toes, wincing from the strain, and just about reached the window to light the end of the wood.

The wood caught alight and started to burn, the smoke starting off small at first as the wood burned. Selina looked over her shoulder at the door as the smoke rose towards the ceiling.

"Come on," she muttered, looking back at the burning wood. The flames were picking up and it only had half-way to go but the smoke was spreading and the footsteps above were getting louder.

The muffled voice started to get louder, one of them definitely belong to Sionis. Selina gritted her teeth, looking back and forth between the door and the burning wood.

"Don't come back until you got that kid," Black Mask yelled at, she assumed, were his goons.

The footsteps stopped outside the door.

The door knob turned. "Shit," she hissed, looking back at the fire which was still burning. "Fuck it." She pointed the gun at the window lock and shot it off.

The door burst open, Black Mask's towering silhouette looking like the grim reaper himself.
Selina flung the window open with one hand and started firing at the mob boss with her other.

Black Mask ducked behind the door, as a swarm of goons stampeded towards the archway.

Despite the still burning flames, she lunged through the window and forced herself through the window and screamed when the flames from the wood burned into her side, the jacket catching on fire, but that pain was nothing compared the pain of a bullet hitting her in the back of her shin.

Selina's eyes bulged when the pain registered like someone had stabbed her shin and was now twisting the knife around over and over. "Aaah, fuck—shit—fuck!" She dragged herself out of the window and ran jaggedly, fighting through the pain.

The flames spread to the sleeve of her jacket, she hastily ripped it off and tossed it, making a run for it despite the limp slowing her down.

She was in a backstreet alley surrounded by old rundown houses. It was dark and hard to see, some of the street lights flashing on and off. She moved in between the parked cars, closer to the road.

The goons ran out of the house, looking around for her.

Selina backed into the road, catching sight of a bright light from the corner of her eye.

A car beeped and screeched, bumping her in the side, and if it had been going any faster it would have knocked her to the ground.

There was shouting. The goons spotted her and started to run.

Her hands smacked onto the blue car, the gun denting the car bonnet. The driver was a woman with heavy make-up and bleached blond hair. "Get outta the way!" the driver yelled, beeping.

Selina glanced at the incoming men and then slid around the car towards the passenger seat.

The woman tried to drive off as Selina opened the door but she hung on and jumped in before the driver could ditch her.

The Black Mask's men started firing, breaking the back windshield mirror.

"Holy fuck," the driver shouted, swerving the car too close to the curb.

Selina slammed the door shut and pointed her gun at the woman, making the bleach blonde freeze. "Drive faster," she snarled, her arm shaking badly like the rest of her body.

The driver accelerated and nearly crashed into the side of a house when she made a sharp turn around the bend.

Gotham City

10/03/2023

11:55

"...I kicked the driver out of the car a few blocks after," Selina told him, staring blankly at the wall opposite like she was reliving the memories. "Then I headed to my safe house and..." She closed her eyes and sighed.
She could feel Bruce's gaze bore into her. "...I would have helped you," something about his voice was different, he almost sounded sad.

Selina opened her eyes to look at him, as Terry snuggled closer against her chest. "Your help would have involved taking on Black Mask head on through bureaucracy," she said numbly, standing up. "Which would make you a target—"

"I've always been a target," Bruce interrupted, getting off the armrest. "I would have..." He reached out but his hands froze midway, meeting her gaze. He lowered his hand. "Black Mask would have paid for his crimes."

*Still a naïve little rich boy, Bruce.*

People like Black Mask didn't go to prison, they played the game and won, even if it ended with death they still managed to make sure they took as many people with them as possible.

She sighed, shaking her head. "No, he wouldn't have," her voice softened, cradling Terry's head. "People like him always win..." her eyes narrowed and grew darker.

Bruce stared at her intently like he was studying her, it was the most focused she'd ever seen him. "You're in trouble again, aren't you? You're running from someone," he deduced, glancing at Terry. "...What happened to Terry's father, Selina?"

*Maybe he's not so naïve.*

Selina's gaze grew curious, scrutinising him, her eyes lingered on his well-chiselled chin for a moment before shifting to his gaze. "He's dead," she answered stiffly, staring at him warily. How much could she afford to tell him? "He...there was a car crash."

Bruce's gaze sharpened, making her shift on the spot at the transformation. "If that was the case then you wouldn't be here," he called her out.

She moved to the side, watching him closely. There was this strange familiarity, nostalgic in a way she couldn't quite remember. "How do I know I can trust you?" she said coldly, turning Terry away from him.

His demeanour seemed to falter, and his face smoothed out, less tense. "Because our child would never forgive me if I betrayed you," he answered firmly.

*Our child,* the one thing that kept them linked and probably the thing that ensured his loyalty.

Selina's shoulders relaxed a fraction, analysing his face for any deceit but she couldn't tell if there was any. "...Terry's father was Warren McGinnis," she spoke with a small hint of uncertainty. "We were together for five years, married for two." She raised an eyebrow when his brow rose. "As surprising as that may sound."

Bruce quickly smoothed out his features. "What, I didn't say anything?" he sounded more like... himself? She wasn't sure.

She sighed and shook her head, re-adjusting Terry in her arms. "Warren died a few days after Terry was born." She swallowed a lump in her throat, looking down at her baby. "The police said it was an accident with the breaks being faulty," she tried not to let the bitterness show in her voice. "Which I knew was bullshit from the start, but I didn't bet on them going after me quite so soon after killing him."
Bruce's gaze grew sterner. "Who?" there was a dark undertone in his voice. "Selina, I need a name."

It was like she was talking to two different people who were flipping back and forth.

Selina narrowed her eyes, hesitating. "Warren worked for Derek Powers in the science department," she divulged, breathing in deeply to keep her anger at bay. "For the last three months, he was…" Selina sighed, trying to find the right words. "Not himself." She nuzzled her face against Terry's hair, finding comfort from it. "I don't know if he found something he should have or if he knew all along and finally cracked, all I do know is that I found a flash drive and now Powers wants to kill me."

"What's on the flash drive?" Bruce asked, his brow furrowed.

She pursed her lips, debating how much to tell him. "It has info of Warren's old colleagues and some kind of coded biology I can't make sense of." Her gaze wandered back to Terry who was chewing the strap of her pinafore with his gums. "I was planning to come back to Gotham to get evidence on Powers but…" she trailed off, sighing. "When Black Mask died I knew I couldn't keep making excuses." Or avoid confronting Helena.

Bruce stared at her with a hint of suspicion, but after a second the suspicion subsided a little. "Let me see the drive." He presented his hand.

Her eyes narrowed, taking a step back. "That's not going to happen, sweetie."

He lowered his arm and frowned. "Selina, Powers is dangerous—"

Oh, here we go.

"Oh, really I hadn't noticed," she retorted lightly, raising an eyebrow.

His frown deepened, and she anticipated a growl but instead, he seemed to quickly recompose himself. "Selina, if you can't go to the police at least let me help you," he said, calmly. "I can have my people analyse the coded biology and I can get close to Powers."

Selina bit down on her tongue, frowning. "He could end up targeting you too."

He smiled crookedly. "He'll try but I wouldn't hold out much hope on his part."

She narrowed her eyes at his arrogance, grimacing. "It's not just you, Bruce, it's our daughter as well," she replied stiffly.

His smile dimmed. "I'll always protect her, Selina," he said levelly. "You have my word."

Selina scrutinised him but his gaze was sincere. "I want to speak with her first, to explain everything properly," she replied, kissing Terry's head when he started to stir. "Then I'll hand over the flash drive."

"She still needs time to cool off." Bruce sighed, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "I'll need to talk to her first to make sure she's okay with speaking to you," his voice was firm like he wouldn't budge on his decision.

Selina narrowed her eyes, trying to quell the small spark of anger in her chest. Helena had been extremely emotional last time and was probably still reeling from the shock so she would need more time before they were all ready to talk with each other.
"Okay, fine," she replied, holding Terry a little tighter. "I'll wait until she's ready to talk."

Bruce smiled but there was something pretentious about it. "Thank you." His gaze flashed to Terry briefly before looking back at her. "I can arrange a place for you and Terry to stay, somewhere more secure."

It was kind of him but she didn't want to involve him too much. "I'll be fine where I am," she replied.

His smile dimmed as he frowned. "What about money?"

"I have enough," she lied curtly; she was down to her last twenty.

Bruce's lips thinned, not looking convinced. "You'll need money for diapers and food," he said, reaching into his pocket for his wallet.

"I can manage," Selina insisted, scowling. "I always do."

Bruce ignored her and took out some notes. "I only have a hundred on me," he said, holding the money out for her to take. Her hand balled into a fist, biting down on her tongue. He sighed. "Selina, please just take it." He stepped closer. "Besides, I already owe you seven years of child support."

Her hand balled into a fist. "Oh, just a hundred?" she remarked dryly, raising an eyebrow at the money.

Bruce sighed. "Selina, please just take it." He stepped closer. "Besides, I already owe you seven years of child support." He tried to smile again but it was forced.

*She did have Terry to think about.*

Her hand unclenched, swallowing her pride she took the money and quickly folded it into her jean's pocket. "Yeah, well I owe you nine years," she remarked uncomfortably, flicking some hair out of her face. "...Thanks."

He nodded, eyeing her thoughtfully. "It's fine."

She felt a small tingle of warmth in her stomach when she looked back at him. "I need to go." Her gaze shifted to the door. "Mind getting rid of your secretary?"

The corner of Bruce's lip quirked upwards. "It won't be hard."

"...So, now he's threatening to take custody of the dog," Rebecca exclaimed, blowing her nose into the blue handkerchief Bruce had given her.

Bruce was sitting on her desk as he patted her on the back, a strained smile on his face. "I'm sure he just needs time to cool off."

From the corner of his eye, Bruce could see Selina pushing a cleaning trolley towards the end of the hallway, with Terry's outline wriggling around in the blue sack hanging from the handles, hidden from sight.

Rebecca wiped her eyes with the clean end of the handkerchief. "I mean he's the asshole in all of this, what right does he have to take my dog, I paid for the damn thing," she snapped, glaring into her hands.
Bruce nodded sympathetically, as his thoughts wandered back to Selina. Prison was now out of the question entirely with the revelation of Terry, but now he had to make sure they both didn't get caught. Not to mention Helena might not react well once she found out she had a half-brother.

He debated telling her before her mother got the chance, Helena might end up developing a pre-judgment if she didn't hear the truth from Selina directly, but at the same time, he didn't want it to be sprung on her so suddenly.

Bruce's brow furrowed, removing his hand from his secretary's back while the woman cried. Then there was the issue of Selina not knowing his secret, but that was better left as it was. If he was going to keep her out of prison he needed to get her a new identity and secure some funds for her and the baby to keep them safe, relocate her to another city...

He frowned, staring at the elevator as Selina disappeared behind its doors. After Helena had cooled down she'd want to visit her mother more regularly which could cause some issues if people noticed.

Unless Helena decided to go live with her mother.

Bruce's stomach twisted unpleasantly, swallowing thickly. Helena leaving was a high possibility, and yes, he wanted her to reconnect with her mother but... Helena was his daughter too and he'd... he didn't want her to leave Gotham.

Rebecca sighed loudly, jolting him back to the present. "I just don't know what to do, there were so many pictures, I just..."

Bruce sighed quietly and stood up. "He should have treated you better, Rebecca," he said with finality, re-buttoning his suit. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off to clear your head? He suggested. "I don't plan on staying here too long anyway."

Rebecca got to her feet and sniffed, wiping her eyes. "Are you sure, Sir?"

He nodded, already half-way towards his office. "Yes, I'm sure." His face grew grave as he closed the door behind him, leaning against the expensive wood panelling as he ran a hand through his hair. After a moment of silence, Bruce sighed quietly slowly made his way over to his desk.

If Helena chose to live with her mother then that was fine but it would also complicate things since she'd have to hang her mask and boots up which she might very well do and he'd have to respect her decision.

Bruce sat down in his chair and stared at the photos on his desk, picking up the one of him with his arm around Helena's shoulder. It was from when she was thirteen and after her team had come in first place at a cheerleading competition, a gold medal around her neck, with red glitter stars painted on her cheek and a proud smile on her face.

He'd told her it wasn't about choosing sides but on reflection, he might have been wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Finally dished this one out.
Hope I nailed Bruce and Selina's interaction, they're slowly reacquainting with each other and are trying to see how much the other has changed.
Helena stared at her laptop screen despairingly as she wrote up the mission report Batman had wanted. She leant back in her chair, briefly glancing around her room while she stretched; she hadn't even had the chance to change out of her uniform, her skirt and shirt creased.

She read over the third paragraph of the report, the white glare from the screen making her vision blur a little. The main problem she was having was how to word what happened into a less…a brutal depiction of what happened, since on reflection the pliers may have been overkill.

"Tweezers could work," she murmured, shrugging as she drummed her fingers against the desk and slouched in her seat. "I threatened him with tweezers…" she mumbled, typing the sentence down and then paused. "…No." She shook her head and erased the sentence, resting her head on the desk, sighing. "That just sounds stupid."

A knock on the door jolted her head up "Can I come in?"

She raised an eyebrow at his tone, straightening up in her chair. "Yeah, sure."

The door opened and her dad stepped in, still dressed in his suit. He glanced at the laptop and closed the door behind him. "Working on homework?"

"Not yet," she replied, shrugging. "It's just the mission report you wanted."

Her dad nodded dismissively and walked over to the bed behind her. "How was school?" He sat down on the edge of the bed so that he was facing her.

Helena turned around in her chair. "Same old story," the lie came out easily, as she twirled her seat back and forth. "Why, what's up?"

A faint grimace flashed across his face as he clasped his hands together. "I talked with your mother today."

Helena stiffened, shifting in her seat. "When?" she asked, frowning.

"She snuck into my office this morning," he answered.

"Did you fight?" Her gaze flickered back to his.

Bruce's brow furrowed. "No, we just…disagreed on certain things."
So, a fight about me.

She sighed wearily, slouching in her seat. "So what happened?"

He rested his chin on his hands and sighed. "We talked about why she left but more importantly about why she had to come back," he said. "She had a husband."

Helena's gut twisted. "She got married?"

She moved on without me.

Her dad nodded. "He worked for Derek Powers." He sighed and straightened up. "Selina believes Powers had him murdered because he uncovered something he shouldn't have."

Helena's eyes widened and her stomach churned unpleasantly, a fresh spike of fear for her mother. Powers was an asshole but she hadn't thought he'd been capable of murder, but then again, if he was desperate to keep a secret buried who knows how far he might go.

"Does she have any evidence?" she asked.

"She says she has a Flash drive but she wouldn't show it to me," he answered warily. "Not until after she's spoken with you."

Helena nodded faintly, staring at the floor while her nails dug into the back of her chair. "Then tell her I'll meet with her whenever she wants." She met her dad's gaze. He leant back and stared at her with consideration, hesitant. "...Unless there's something else you're not telling me?" her tone grew suspicious.

Bruce's eyes narrowed, standing up. "Your mother should be the one to tell you."

"Why?" she stood up. "How serious is it?"

Her dad scratched the back of his neck, sighing quietly. "It's not my place to say..."

Her eyes narrowed, crossing her arms. "Dad, I don't want any more surprises, just tell me," she demanded, sternly. "What is it?"

He glanced away briefly, shaking his head before he looked back at her. "Your mother had another child."

Helena tensed, feeling cold, as the air around her grew thicker. "What?"

"His name's Terry," he said apprehensively.

Helena dug her nails into her arms, staring at her socks. "How...how old is he?" she asked, looking back up.

"He only looked a couple of months old," he replied, studying her face.

He was just a baby but...I was replaced.

She quickly shook her head, trying to get rid of the thought as quickly as it came.

Helena frowned and partly turned away from her dad, glancing over at her laptop. "You said they were being hunted," she said, feeling a spark of fresh fear. "Are they somewhere secure right now?"
"I've had Barbara track their movements; they're staying in an apartment in the East End."

Her frown grew. "The East End isn't exactly safe."

"I know." Dad grimaced, shaking his head faintly. "But your mother doesn't want my help." His grimaced faded when he met her gaze. "Where do you think you get that stubbornness from?"

She snorted, crossing her arms. "Oh, please, we both know that's all you, Dad."

The corner of his lip jerked upwards. "True, but you've got her fierceness too."

Helena shrugged uncomfortably. "Right…" She turned around, biting down hard on the inside of her mouth. "Well…You should arrange a meeting," she told him curtly, regaining composer. "The sooner she gives us more information the better then we can spring Batman on her once we know what we're dealing with."

Bruce nodded slowly. "I agree."

Helena tried not to grind her teeth, nodding instead. "Great, then we can have the meeting here, safer, plus the others will want to know the details."

"They don't have to be there if you don't want them," he said, furrowing his brow. "It can be just the two of you."

Her hands shook faintly, making her grasp them tightly. "I want them there," she insisted, a frown flashing across her face. "Except Jason, that might raise too many questions…"

Her dad sighed, running his hand over his jaw. "Where is he anyway?" He looked over at the window like he expected Jason to come crashing through it with a corpse in hand.

"He's down in the cave working on one of the bikes," she answered, shrugging. "He wanted to be left alone." Helena crossed her arms. "He's looking a lot better."

"Has Leslie stopped by yet?" he asked.

"Alfred said she came by at lunch," Helena replied, scraping her toes against the carpet. "Jason does seem in a good mood for a change."

Bruce hummed, eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Let's hope it lasts."

His comment poked at her like a needle. "Yeah, well so far he's been fine," she defended. "Tim and me are going on patrol soon anyway so Alfred will keep him distracted."

Jason was pretty subdued when he didn't have anyone to antagonise.

Her dad nodded dismissively. "Make sure you finish your homework first." He moved passed her towards the door.

Right sure, because homework was definitely her top priority right now.

Helena nearly rolled her eyes, plopping back down on her seat. "I will," she said with a strained smile on her face.

Dad narrowed his eyes a fraction but didn't comment, opening the door to leave the room.

When the door gave a resounding click she slumped in her seat and sighed, pushing her head back
The cave was so quiet you could hear the rustling of the bats and the tinkering of a spanner echoed around the large space.

Jason was sitting on the ground in the vehicle section of the cave where the Batmobile, R-Cycle, and Huntress' bike were stored along with a few spare motorbikes. The section was beneath the upper platform, with a lift in the centre to carry the vehicles up if the owners so wanted.

"So, Helena said you were the one who taught her how to ride a motorbike," Tim's voice echoed around the cave.

Jason sighed, grimacing when he was reminded his replacement was sitting right next to him. "Yeah, I did," he replied gruffly, checking over his own motorcycle since he'd been neglecting her for a solid month. The poor thing needed her oil changing.

"So who taught you?" Tim asked. Jason gritted his teeth and glared at the boy warningly, but Tim didn't flinch and just maintained an air of obliviousness. "It was Batman right?"

_Do you ever shut up?_

Jason kept his temper in check, all too aware of the cameras hidden in the cave, and turned back to his bike.

"It took me ten months to learn," Tim continued, fiddling around on the tablet in his hands while some kind of medieval game played on in the background. "I kept going too slow, nearly gave Nightwing a heart attack when I flipped the bike over." The boy gave a strained laugh.

_Why am I even putting up with him?_

Jason grimaced, gritting his teeth, glaring at the bike.

He supposed there wasn't much else to do around here, and he still wasn't well enough to do a shake-down on the streets again. He certainly wasn't doing this because he felt a little guilty for treating his replacement like shit, fuck no…

Jason narrowed his eyes at the engine, prying some mechanism apart when he saw a build up of oil, as his hand blindly searched for a cloth.

A stained blue cloth appeared in front of his face, held by a smaller hand. "So how many miles per gallon can it go?" Tim asked him.

Jason scowled and grabbed the cloth. "64." He cleaned away the excess oil.

Tim hummed. "I'm trying to upgrade mine to go 74," the boy said. "But Bruce won't let me do any more upgrades unless he's there to supervise." He sighed, frowning.

Jason glanced over at the boy when curiosity got the better of him. "Why what'd you do?"

"Uh, well… the engine sort of caught on fire," Tim answered hesitantly, smiling meekly. "Bruce wasn't impressed…"

The corner of Jason's lip twitched upwards for a second before he realised and quickly look away. "Pfft, well that's pretty stupid."
The insult didn't seem to register. "I was trying to make a deflector shield," the boy said. "But it didn't work."

*Is this kid for real?*

Jason arched an eyebrow. "Seriously?" he remarked, dryly, causing Tim to shift on the spot. He shook his head in disbelief and turned back to his work. "A fucking force field," he muttered to himself. "What planet did Bruce grab you from?"

From the corner of his eye, Tim tensed, fiddling with his fingers. "Uh…Mars."

Jason's brow furrowed, looking back at him. "Was that meant to be a joke?"

Tim smiled uncomfortably. "Blame Nightwing," he replied, looking back down on his game. "Anyway, how's the mob boss routine going?"

The boy tapped away on the tablet like the conversation was of little importance, which Jason called bullshit on that.

Jason shrugged, staring at the wiring. "Fine enough," he answered curtly. "Why you wanna know the body count?" He stared at the kid pointedly, raising an eyebrow.

Tim glanced up and shrugged, green eyes the picture of obliviousness. "Like I'd need to ask," he said flippantly, showing a bit more of the backbone he tended to hide. "I was just wondering how you and Bruce were going to run this mafia business, considering how messed up it is."

Jason felt his irritation grow. "Yeah, well we wouldn't have to do it if you hadn't got Black Mask killed," he retorted bitingly.

Tim's winced and his face seemed to crumble, something Jason drew a tinge of satisfaction from. "…Yeah, well you shouldn't carry around bazookas," the boy said, glaring at the young man defiantly.

The comeback was so weak Jason almost laughed. "Whatever helps you sleep at night, shit-head." He smiled sharply, baring his teeth.

Tim scowled, picking at the edge of his tablet with his thumb as he narrowed his eyes at the floor. His gaze flickered up after a second, a spark of interest gleaming in his eyes, which made Jason's smile dim. "What's it actually feel like to you know…kill someone?" the Replacement asked hesitantly.

Jason's swallowed a lump in his throat. "Why you wanna know?"

"I'm curious," Tim answered innocently enough. "It helps me understand."

Understand what, other criminals or just me in particular?

Jason bit down on his tongue hard before he opened his mouth, apprehensive as he thought his response over, as weird cold sensation washed over him. "…It depends on who you kill," he replied flatly, focussing his gaze on the wiring. He didn't really want to explain any further.

"Oh…" Tim trailed off. "So…" the boy began to speak again but Jason shot him a warning glare making the temperature in the cave feel colder than usual. Tim seemed to close off, growing rigid. "Right, sorry," he apologised, averting his gaze to the ground. "I just wanted to know so maybe we could understand each other better."
Jason narrowed his eyes. "I think we understand each other plenty."

Tim looked up, brow furrowed. "Jason, you barely know anything about me," he objected.

The young man bristle, scowling. "I know enough," he replied fiddling with the wires again.

"What's my last name?"

Ah, shit.

Jason blinked a few times before he quickly swept the boy over with his gaze. Did it start with a D right?

Davis

Danials

Duncan

"…Dean?"


Drakes? He had heard of the Drakes before, maybe at some charity functions or whatever.

Jason wrinkled his nose. "Close enough." He shot the boy a crooked smile."Besides I know enough," he insisted. "You're a little smartass who wants to be a mini Bruce, simple enough to figure out."

Tim's hands balled into fists, but after a second the glare faded into a cold look. "At least I don't have a victim mentality."

The former dead man's stomach churned like he'd been punched in the gut.

A feral look flashed across Jason's face, grabbing Tim by the collar. The tablet slid onto the floor. "You wanna repeat that you little shit?" he snarled, spit hitting the kid's face.

Tim's face scrunched up, shaking his head as he clutched his collar with his own hands, trying to break the young man's vice grip. "No...sorry." The boy glared at the ground, cringing away.

Jason let out a low growl and shoved Tim onto the floor. "Then piss off." The young man focussed his glare on his bike, trying to ignore a small smidge of guilt bubbling up in his chest.

He could hear Tim prop himself up on his elbows as he rose back onto his feet, picking up the tablet. Tim quickly leaves, the sound of his footsteps growing quieter the further he walks away.

Jason spends too much time staring at the engine when he doesn't need to, letting out a deep breath he'd been holding in, tension still in his shoulders.

Victim mentality, the words pestered around in his head like an awful song.

"Stupid little shit," he muttered to himself, even though he couldn't muster enough venom in his voice to make it sound convincing.

Dubai
The private chambers of the Demon Head were warm with wood panelled floors and a roaring fire at the far end of the room near the large bed, silk sheets and blankets draping the mattress. A vast collection of ancient swords decorated the wall, along with a wardrobe and glass chest set near the far corner of the room, and on the other side of the room, steam flowed out of the bathing area where the owner of the chambers was.

Ra's al Ghul sunk his scarred body into the steaming hot water, feeling the therapeutic water soak his legs and then his chest when he sat down in the tub. The Demon Head sighed, taking a rare moment to relax and ignore the ache in his bones.

The only other occupant in the room was one of his servants, Hager, a tall middle-aged sand skinned woman with tightly braided hair, was silently keeping watch but remaining respectful enough to not gaze upon her Master.

His thoughts drifted to the earlier meeting with The Light, they were growing more concerned about Batman investigating their projects. Their anxiousness was of their own doing, Ra's had already warned them to leave Gotham well alone when abducting children, but they had brushed off his warning.

A foolish action.

To add further disrespect they had requested Ra's keep Batman occupied since apparently, it was now his fault the Todd boy had escaped.

The Demon Head felt a strange sort of satisfaction upon hearing the wayward boy had somewhat reconciled with the Dark Knight since it felt like his debt was now paid. In fact, in some way it was as if Batman now owed the Al Ghul’s a debt since it was they who had returned his dead son, correcting the former transgression.

Ra's al Ghul stared at the ceiling, as his fingers skimmed across the water. "Tell me, Hager," he addressed his servant. "What has my daughter been up to?"

"Following your instructions concerning the Hive, Master," Hager replied evenly. "She is currently undergoing negotiations in Markovia."

The Demon Head hummed. "And my grandson?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at the wall opposite.

"Progressing faster than expected in his training, Master."Even though he couldn't see her face there was an odd tension when she spoke. "He has already surpassed his weapon's instructor."

"Why are you tense, are you lying about his progress in fear of my wrath on you or him?"

Ra's lips thinned. "We will see," he commented frigidly, taking in a deep breath as he closed his eyes. "Have him presented in the training room in the morning."

Hager didn't reply straight away, hesitating. "…Yes, Master."

"Why the hesitation?"

His brow furrowed, noting the transgression down mentally. From it, he drew the conclusion that
Hager fears his displeasure would be directed at the boy. Had she grown to care for him or instead
grown to care for the woman who’d sired him?

Ra's opened his eyes. "Is there a problem?"

"No, Master," this time she replied straight away. "Forgive me I…I'm afraid there is something else
you should know about the young master."

"Specifically?"

"He had questions and would not quiet when they went unanswered."

Ra's sighed in exasperation. "Such as his father I assume?" It was the same question the child had
asked since he'd understood the concept of a father.

"Yes," there was a growing tightness in how she spoke; nervous and suspicious. "But also of the
blood tests."

Well, the boy wasn't stupid at least even if it would make both their lives easier if he was.

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "And, your answer?" He turned his head to look over at her.

Her gaze was lowered but her body was stiff and far too prudent, desperate to the hide her fear.
"That the tests were to make sure he remains at the peak of health," she replied steadily.

Ra's softened his gaze, smiling cordially. "You answered well." The smile vanished when he
turned away and stared back at the ceiling. "And, what did he reply with?"

Hager didn't sigh or shift on the spot, seemingly remaining perfectly still even though he was no
longer looking at her. "He didn't say anything, Master, he just remained silent and then left to have
his lunch."

"Of course," Ra's commented, clenching his jaw.

His grandson was smart, perfect mind and body, and smart enough to question everything but
fearful enough to know his place, but despite that the boy's arrogance was profound even if he tried
to hide it from his grandfather, Ra's was not fooled he saw it and loathed it.

The boy would not be an obedient heir so long as his stubbornness and arrogance confidence
remained, but no matter how hard he tried those two things remained intact and only grew stronger
after each year that passed. It was only a matter of time before his grandson stopped asking and
started doing instead when he'd grow to be a larger threat that would surpass Talia and himself.

Would the machine be ready by then?

He sighed deeply, briefly glancing down at his scarred body. Even with a perfect diet and training
his renewed body seemed only to age faster.

Ra's imagined a sword pressed against his throat while its holder, his grandson, towered above him
dressed in black armour like Death itself.

No, that day would not come.

Ra's scrunched up in outrage, tensing. All attempts of relaxation seemed to fade like the warmth of
the water. With his hands clutching the sides of the bath he lifted himself out of the water, droplets
dripping down from his skin.
Hager hurried over with his robe, holding it out with an unsteady hand. He barely looked at her as he stepped forward and slipped his arm into the brown silk sleeve. "My grandson, where is he now?" he asked, securing his arm through the other sleeve as Hager took a step back.

"Sleeping, Master."

His eyes narrowed, sweeping her over, imagining her by her grandson's side while the former boy stabbed him in the throat.

Would Talia stand by her son's side when the time came?

The answer was there but Ra's did not want to acknowledge it or even think of it.

Ra's tied the sash around his waist. "Wake him. I will spar with him now."

Hager's hands tightened for a second before they disappeared into the folds of her robe sleeves. "As you wish, Master," she replied smoothly, bowing as she moved further back to give him more room when he walked passed.

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**Detroit**

**10/04/2023**

**19:00**

The facility below the outskirts of the city was like its own underground world, with walls and ceilings that seemed as high as the sky.

The bright white lights above always shone down, illuminating everything in its oppressive glow. Jinx had grown used to it after time.

A scream tore through the walls.

She'd gotten used to the screaming as well.

The pink haired girl sighed, wandering down the hall with a coffee in her hand, beside her was a much older girl who carried her own coffee. The girl, Inque, was tall and on the brink of twenty, with long jet black hair, dark blue lips, and a frostbite complexion that looked almost metallic.

"So how's the fresh meat?" Jinx asked, sipping her coffee.

Inque shrugged swaying her hips more suggestively when she passed one of the guards; the guy gave her a wink, making her smirk. Jinx did her best to ignore the interaction. "Good looking enough but no progress in the powers section," she replied, grimacing. "The big boys are getting impatient I take it?"

Jinx sighed, turning a corner towards the cafeteria. "I haven't heard anything but it seems that way," she said, taking a large gulp of her drink. "I'm being run ragged chasing shadows," she muttered, brow furrowed.

Inque's eyes narrowed. "Well at least you get to leave," she retorted bitterly.

Jinx nudge her warningly, all too aware of the cameras watching them, Inque didn't seem to care though and just nudged her back harder, spilling both their coffees.
"Watch it!" Jinx cradled her cup and glared at her friend. "What's with you?"

"Nothing, I'm just a little claustrophobic," Inque replied, narrowing her eyes. She then downed the rest of her coffee in one swift gulp before she tossed the empty Styrofoam cup onto the floor. "Plus the food here is shitter than a lunch room, makes me cranky."

Oh, this again.

Jinx took a step forward. "I said I'd grab you a few things, I just haven't had the chance," she said stiffly "Besides last time you said you had all you needed."

Inque crossed her arms. "Well I'm down to my last honey jar, sweetie," she replied, tightly, smiling coldly. "And you said you'd restock me a solid month ago."

Jinx narrowed her eyes. "The store was out of stock."

Inque stepped closer. "Then get me the good kind." She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "I'm sick of processed crap. I want organic." A ghost of a smirk flashed across the girl's face, "Straight from the hive."

_Don't be obvious, idiot._

The pink haired girl pursed her lips, glaring at her. "If you want better stuff then push those morons harder and get some results," she ordered firmly, a tight smile sliding onto her face. "Unless you're not up to it?"

Inque's face twisted into a scowl but before she could speak a loud crash from the cafeteria interrupted them. The two girl exchanged a look before they pushed the doors open and burst into the large room.

Normally over a dozen teenagers of different genders, sizes, ages, and colour were dressed in grey overalls would be sitting at white tables in the otherwise grey cafeteria. However, that usual picture of order was disrupted by Cassie, a short Asian girl with messy black hair who had subdued two Orderlies on the ground and was in the middle of beating up a third; there was already swelling on his face.

Jinx growled in frustration while her friend looked mildly amused. "That the girl who broke your arm?" Inque asked, arching an eyebrow when Ms Ninja flipped over the table to body slam the fourth Orderly into the ground while the other kids watched on in awe, a small spark of hope in their wide eyes.

"Yeah, that's her," it was hard not to sound bitter. The pink haired girl narrowed her eyes at them, all it took was one rogue kid to start a riot and then they'd all pay the price. "I warned them to keep her sedated." Jinx pinched the bridge of her nose. "Do me a favour and knock her out." She glanced up at her friend, sighing in exasperation.

Inque shrugged, smirking up at the camera. "Okay." Her gaze became predatory when it landed on the rebellious girl. "I could use a workout."

In a second Inque's form dissolved into a black liquid that spread across the tiled floor—Jinx stepped back so she wouldn't stand in her—the liquid raced across the floor towards Cassie who was now throwing plates at the third Orderly who'd gotten back up and now had a sedative in his hand.

Cassie's eyes bulged when she saw the black liquid, jumping onto the table for cover, as Inque's
lucid form lashed out in the shape of a girl tried to dodge and parry the attacks, jerking her waist to avoid the shards of black, while the Orderlies stepped back from the fight, while the other subjects made an either wider girth between Cassie and Inque.

Jinx scrutinised the fight before, mildly impressed by Cassie's stamina since the girl had only been off sedatives for 24 hours. She looked over her shoulder when she heard a rush of footsteps, metal lined boots clicking against the polished floor as four guards came into view, carrying sedative guns.

"It's okay boys." Jinx raised her hand dismissively, causing the four of them to slow down. "Inque's got it handled." She looked back at the fight, feeling the guards come to a stop behind her but otherwise make no further move forward.

The other teenagers seemed to be in the same frozen state, silent like they were afraid one word would trigger Inque's wrath on them. Jinx smiled crookedly, watching as Inque grew into a seven foot mass of black and tried to encase the smaller girl like a dark cocoon of some sorts, but then Cassie slipped through the gap and jumped over the table.

Jinx's smile faltered when she saw the girl run, but then her smile returned when she locked eyes with Cassie, seeing the girl's face scrunch up in hatred. The girl was running so fast she wouldn't be able to stop in time even if she wanted too, and she was already half-way across the cafeteria when Jinx raised her hand and clicked her fingers.

One of the guards raised his gun but Jinx held her arm out to stop him, remembering how long it had taken to heal her arm even with magic easing the pain. "Wait," she instructed, posing her fingers as her smile grew. "Let me."

Cassie was already half-way across the cafeteria when Jinx clicked her fingers.

A pink spark hit the ground and summoned a large monstrous crack the size of a chair. Cassie was already running when her foot hit that, unfortunately, placed crack in the tiles, tripping over she hit the floor with a painfully loud thud.

The girl was on the floor in a second which was all Inque needed as her form spread underneath Cassie's feet and wrapped around her ankles. Cassie struggled, trying to rip her feet free from the dark puddle but Inque encased her whole body in a black cast, gluing her to the ground.

Jinx drank her coffee, grimacing at the cold taste. The group of Orderlies approached the now bound little ninja, one of the Orderlies dressed in a white uniform crouched down and brutally shoved the needle into Cassie's exposed neck.

Inque withdrew from the girl, the black liquid slithering away as it took human form once more when Cassie stopped struggling and grew still.

The orderly who had delivered the injection holstered the short girl over his shoulder and walked towards the exit.

Jinx's smirk grew, stepping to the side to let him past before she looked back at the mass of eyes staring back at her. "Well, what are you looking at?" she challenged, arching an eyebrow. "Sit back down and eat!" she ordered, tossing the remnants of her cold coffee in the bin near the door.

The silence broke as the teenagers hurried back to their seats, some of them pushing passed each other.

Inque came back to Jinx's side, looking quite pleased with herself while the pink haired girl's gaze
wandered to one particular teenager who hadn't made any move to go back to his seat.

Jinx smiled sharply and walked over to the bulky dark skinned boy who was easily double her size. "Careful, Victor," she warned silkily. "If you keep that sour look on your face you might get chipped." She crossed her arms. "You wouldn't want that now would you?"

Victor Stone's eyes narrowed, thick lips glued shut, while his hands tightened into fists. Her smile more twisted as she craned her neck to stare up at him while he glared down at her. He looked away to glance at the remaining Orderlies who were still tense from the last confrontation.

"…No," Victor ground out, unclenching his hands as he took a step and turned around to go back to his seat which was now covered in the food Cassie had thrown everywhere.

Jinx glanced over at the camera and shot them her best smile before she walked back over to Inque. "Now, where were we?"

Chapter End Notes

A little more insight into what the Al Ghul family and Jinx are up to.
Nightwing's safe houses tended to be warehouses made from slabs of grey concrete, something which was either a preference after spending too much time in a cave or because Dick had bad decorating skills.

Wally was dressed in his civvies (unlike the other two who were still in costume), sitting at the large table next to the widescreen computer monitor. Artemis was seated next to him while they waited for Dick to finish his phone call.

"Wait, she's alive, and no one bothered to tell me?" Nightwing exclaimed, pacing back and forth. "Like not even a text?"

Artemis cocked an eyebrow while Wally sighed and leant further against the table.

"...I mean, what am I the guy next door or something?" Dick continued to rant, pacing faster than before. "Wait...even Oracle knows?" He stopped walking. "So, I'm the last to know, again."

Artemis cleared her throat gruffly. "Uh hem."

Nightwing glanced over his shoulder at them. "Yeah...right, listen, I gotta go," he said, turning around fully. "I'll come round tomorrow...no, don't tell B, I'll just turn up." He waved his hand dismissively. "It'll be fine....yeah, yeah, it'll be okay. Thanks for telling me, Tim. Yeah, see you soon." He hung up and sighed in exasperation. "Sorry about that, guys."

"Family drama?" Wally guessed, resting his chin in his palm.

Nightwing put the phone on the table and shrugged. "It's never-ending," he remarked dryly, shaking his head. "Anyway, let's get back on topic," Nightwing said, touching the screen on the computer, bringing up a map. "Okay, so the team will need to intercept the truck at this point and do the switch." He zoomed in on the area as Wally and Artemis sat up straighter in their seats. "Two cars will be tailing the truck."

Artemis sighed, running a hand through her long blond hair. "More fun," she murmured, sharing a look with Wally, he smiled reassuringly, causing her to frown and look away. His smile dropped, sighing quietly.

"The transport leaves and 07:00 and is meant to arrive at Belle Reve," Nightwing continued, zooming out to get view another location. "But according to Deathstroke, they're taking her to
Detroit where he claimed one of the experiment facilities is." He zoomed in on a new location in Detroit. "M'gann's already agreed to be in on the mission."

"How did you explain where the info came from?" Wally asked, folding his arms.

Dick averted his gaze. "She trusted me enough to believe it was through detective work," he answered stiffly.

The red head bit down on his tongue, brow creasing. "So she'll be impersonating Rose right while the others sneak into the facility?" he repeated the main outline of the plan.

"That's the plan." Nightwing nodded.

Artemis sighed, rubbing her eyes. "This whole thing is still too risky."

Nightwing’s lips thinned into a scowl. "I don't like this any more than you, Artemis, but we made a deal," he said, firmly, resting his palms on the table. "And, Rose shouldn't have to suffer for her father's mistakes."

Wally inwardly winced at the remark, glancing over at Artemis who was tense in her seat. "Okay, point taken," he commented warily. "But Artemis does have a point, Dick." He looked over at his friend. "We can't trust Deathstroke."

Nightwing's glare faded as his forehead wrinkled. "I know, but we have limited options," he replied, stiffly, moving away from the table. "The transporter is government owned, so we have to keep the League out of this, same with the other areas out of their jurisdiction." He stared at the screen. "I need this team to be ready to fight the Light, which means bigger steps."

Wally frowned, standing up. "What if they're not able to handle it?"

Nightwing sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Trust me, they can take care of it," he insisted, frowning. "All of them know the risks."

Wally pursed his lips, feeling a swell of protectiveness coil around his chest. "Don's still reckless; he could compromise everything."

"Wally, I wouldn't put any of them out in the field unless I knew they could handle it," Nightwing said, furrowing his brow. "They already passed the first training—"

"Yeah, barely!" Wally interrupted, throwing his hands in the air. "They nearly got buried alive."

Dick's eyes narrowed, causing Wally to glare back while Artemis got to her feet. "That was caused by an unknown element we hadn't predicted, but despite that the team still solved their problem and saved themselves," Nightwing replied, coolly.

Artemis crossed her arms. "You know how many times we messed up when we were their age, but the League still gave us a chance." She gave him a look, making Wally slouch and sigh. "We weren't normal kids back then, and these guys aren't either." Her hand came to rest on his shoulder. "Don't underestimate them."

Wally balled his hands into fists, letting out a deep sigh. "I can't let anything happen to him, Artemis," his voice was quiet when he looked at her, finding her gaze comforting. "Not after losing Barry."

Artemis' eyes grew softer as she wrapped her arms around his torso, he leant into the embrace. Don
was a delicate case because if he did just leave the kid to his own devices, then there was a big chance Don would go down the wrong path and get worse. A team would be a good thing and help get him back on track, but it was still dangerous, but at the same time, they lived in a dangerous world.

"Wally…" Dick sighed, taking a step closer. "This mission is a risk, but we have a bigger picture we have to look at," he reasoned diplomatically. Wally grimaced. "But at the same time, Don's yours and Iris' responsibility so if you don't want him to join, then I'll respect that."

"Like it's that easy." Wally held back a snort, shaking his head as he gently moved out of Artemis' embrace. "Iris doesn't know what to do with Don, and the kid won't stop getting in trouble whether he's in a team or not," he argued, glowering at the computer screen that displayed the map.

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Batcave, Gotham

10/06/2023

16:00

Down in the dark cave where a group of Vigilante's called their home, Jaime was laying down on an operating table with wires stuck to his bare chest and on his forehead while Tim stood next to a laptop that was attached to a small grey box which linked all the wires together.

Jaime tensed when Tim started tapping on the laptop. "If this was Batman's idea then where is he?" he asked sharply.

The boy didn't take his eyes off the screen. "He'll be back soon," he answered nonchalantly. "Besides, this won't take long."

Jaime narrowed his eyes, tempted to get up and leave, which he could since he wasn't strapped down but Tim had sworn the examination was to help them better understand the Scarab.

His eyes bulged when he received a sharp electric shock to his arm. "Ah!" His hand clapped against his arm. The Scarab beeped loudly. "What was that for!" he snapped at Tim, sitting up.

Tim stared back at him blankly, finger poised over the enter key on the keyboard. "A reaction." His gaze zeroed in on Jaime's back.

The precipitant end of the abuse glared at the mini-vigilante. "Are you seriously—OW!"

The second shock hurt worse than the first, making Jaime lurch forward while Tim watched silently. Jaime clutched his arm as it morphed into a cannon, making his eyes widen in alarm.

"Hm, interesting." Tim seemed unbothered by the potential danger and instead started typing something on the laptop again.

Jaime's face twisted into a dark scowl, forcing his arm back to its original form. "You're pissing him off," he warned. "Do you want your head blown off?"

'I should punish him for his insolence.'

Please don't. Jaime flexed his fingers to make sure he was still in control.

Tim stared at Jaime's arm. "You were able to morph it back," he commented, tapping his chin
thoughtfully while Jaime's scowl faded into a frown. "You still have a lot of control over it."

Jaime rubbed his arm, narrowing his eyes at the boy. "Lucky for you."

He shrugged. "I wanted to see how it would react to varying degrees of pain before it took hostile action," Tim explained, as his lips twitched upwards.

The boy was a hidden sadist.

Jaime scrutinised Tim warily. "You're enjoying this a little too much, kid." He scratched the back of his neck when he felt the Scarab prickle his skin.

Tim shrugged again. "Maybe," he replied dismissively. "You did nearly get us killed after all."

Jaime suppressed a wince, averting his gaze. "That won't happen again," he said, staring at his hand.

"Yeah, I hope so too," Tim's tone wasn't hostile, but it wasn't exactly comforting either.

Jaime glanced at the boy, steeling himself when their eyes met. Tim's face was unreadable like every emotion had been carefully hidden away, which was terrifying since he was only twelve.

Jaime was the first to look away. "So have you found anything new?"

Tim sighed, the emotionless mask slipping away. "Well, after a closer look we know the technology isn't human, something Ted Kord neglected to tell us," he replied, frowning. "Though, he must have had his reasons."

'He was smart,' the Scarab spoke.

Jaime's brow furrowed, staring up at the cave ceiling. You remember him? He'd assumed the Scarab could only be sentient when attached to a host.

'You were wrong in that assumption, I have always been sentient,' the machine answered curtly. 'I had limited mobility, but I can assure you I was very much awake.'

So you know what happened to Ted Kord?

'Deathstroke assassinated him, that is common knowledge to the League,' the Scarab answered dismissively.

Jaime scowled in frustration. I mean, do you know why he was killed?

There was a brief pause. '…No, I am not sure,' an uneasiness clouded the usual monotone reply. 'But I assume it was a result of the Light discovering my existence.'

Jaime shifted on the table, biting down on his tongue, while Tim typed away on the laptop. Like how they were interested in that Artefact?

'…Perhaps.'

He nearly groaned out loud. Can't you just be straight with me for once?

The Scarab went silent.

Jaime closed his eyes and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.
"What did it say?" Tim asked, making Jaime jump and snapped his head back in the boy's direction. Robin stared at him unblinkingly. "Your brain activity spiked when you zoned out."

Jaime frowned, lowering himself down onto his elbows. "Oh, well yeah he did say some stuff about Ted Kord," he replied, scratching the back of his head. "The Light was responsible for his death right?"

Tim nodded, typing on the laptop again to bring up some bio reading. "Yeah, they wanted the Scarab by the looks of it, at least now we know why," he said, looking back at Jaime. "It all seems to link back to the Metahuman experiments again."

"Do you think they're trying to make an army or something?" Jaime questioned.

"Looks like it, but it could also be trafficking." Tim's forehead creased, humming lowly. "The Justice League is already looking into it but who knows how big this operation has gotten."

"We'll figure it out," Jaime reassured, smiling uncertainly.

Tim arched an eyebrow at him. "That's the problem; we may figure it out too late."

*Jesus, was this kid serious 24/7?*

Jaime's smile dimmed, but before he could reply Tim stiffened and balled his hands into fists, triggering the older teen to sit up straighter, on guard.

Tim looked over his shoulder. "You're meant to be resting, Jason."

Jaime's ears pricked when he heard footsteps, tensing as a tall, bulky young man came out of the shadows and leant against one of the thick titanium pillars. The guy had black hair with two strange white streaks on his fringe. His face was square like the rest of him, with hands big enough to snap Jaime's neck in one go.

The only thing that seemed to make him look slightly less threatening was the crutch he was leaning on and the fact he was barefoot, had surfer shorts on, and was wearing a black t-shirt with a yellow smiley face on it.

Jason?

Jaime wracked his brain, remembering the name being mentioned enough times by Helena and her family. From what he'd found online Jason had been adopted into the family a decade ago, but he'd died…except he wasn't dead so had he faked his death as well?

The Scarab beeped loudly. *He is the one who shot us!*

Jaime tensed, shifting on the table, keeping his limbs stiff so that he retained control. *He's Helena's brother we can't outright attack him!*

Tim turned around entirely while Jason crossed his arms and stared back at them passively. "Is there something you wanted?" the boy's voice was stiff.

"Who are you?" Jason ignored Tim, narrowing his eyes at Jaime.

Jaime swallowed a lump down his throat, pulling the wires from his chest and forehead. "I'm Blue Beetle," he answered, taking the wires off his arms so he could finally get off the table. "We met before."
Jason cocked his head to the side and rested his crutch on the pillar, taking a step forward; he had a noticeable limp. "...Didn't I try to shoot you?" the young man wagged his finger at the teen.

Jaime's jaw clenched. "Yeah, you did."

A crooked smile slid onto Jason's face when he towered (seriously how tall is this guy?!) over him. "Huh, oh yeah I remember," he replied, clicking his fingers before he pointed at him. "Heh, my apologies."

Jaime scowled, raising an eyebrow at Tim who still looked tense. "So, you're Jason right?" he said unsurely. "Didn't you...um..." he trailed off, not sure how to politely phrase it.

"Get beaten by a crowbar and die?" Jason smirked, eyeing him curiously when Jaime balked. "Yeah, pretty much, but death ain't exactly as permanent as you think it is."

Jaime blinked rapidly, looking back and forth at Tim and Jason. "Uhh..."

Jason's smirk faded. "So how come the Bat let you in on the secret?" Something dark flashed in his eyes.

The teen's mind hurried to assemble a quick synopsis on how he'd been plucked from his normal life and flung into this world of insanity, but Tim beat him to it.

"He's Helena's boyfriend," Tim answered calmly, folding his arms.

Jaime's heart nearly jumped out of his chest, as his face drained of colour and he choked on his voice. "W-what!" His gaze snapped back to Jason and froze. "No, I—" The words got trapped in his throat.

'Hmm, the boy is a sadist,' Scarab commented lightly, not seeming concerned at all.

Jason's face darkened as all amusement faded and his posture became tenser. "Boyfriend?" he said the word like a curse and practically spat it out.

A la verga.

It took all Jaime's raised his hands defensively. "Well we're not really a thing..." he tried to explain, forcing a smile. "Right now we're just...friends."

The teen nearly winced, remembering the near kiss which made him wonder if he and Helena were deluding themselves into thinking they were just friends.

Jason didn't seem appeased. "Right now?" He was acting like Jaime was bragging. "What's that supposed to mean?"

'We should stun him.'

Will you stop trying to stun people!

'Would you rather a swift kill instead?'

NO!

Jaime winced, growing more uneasy. "It just means we're friends," he insisted, keeping his voice calm. "I don't get what the issue—"
"My little sister likes you, that's the issue," Jason replied solemnly. "See, if you treat her right then, we don't have a problem." He smiled coldly, pointing his finger at the teen. "But if you treat her badly I'll shoot you in the nuts."

Jaime's eyes widened in horror. *What the hell is wrong with this guy?*

"Geez, Jason, no need to traumatise him," Tim commented, frowning, seemingly having had enough of Blue Beetle's torture.

Jason bristled, shooting a glare at the boy. "Stay out of this, Replacement."

"Don't call me that," a hint of ice found its way into the boy's voice. "Why did you come down here anyway?"

"Pfft." Jason narrowed his eyes at Jaime for a second, giving him a quick look over. "Helena sent me down here because of Ms deadbeat mom's visit."

Jaime frowned at his tone. "You mean Helena's mom?"

The young man's brow rose. "I said deadbeat didn't I?"

"She isn't a deadbeat, *Jason,*" Tim rebuked.

"Tsk, fuck she isn't," Jason scoffed, scowling.

"You don't even know her side of the story." Tim crossed his arms, narrowing his gaze at the man.

"Don't care." Jason's gaze was icy. "She wasn't there when Helena needed her. End of story."

Tim sighed loudly, shaking his head. "Don't you think you're acting irrationally?"

"Save the psychoanalyse for someone who cares, Replacement." Jason scoffed.

Jaime looked at them both cautiously, watching as Tim bared his teeth like a dog ready to pounce. "So where is Helena?" he said, earning a glare from Jason. "I kind of need to talk to her. About everything."

Jason pursed his lips and glowered at him, but his glares weren't as bad as Batman's, and Jaime had pretty much grown used to them by now. "...She's in her room." Then his eyes flashed. "But don't get any ideas."

Jaime sighed wearily. "I won't," he stressed, quickly grabbing his grey shirt off the floor while Tim started to tidy away the equipment.

Blue Beetle walked passed Jason and shook his head in disbelief as he walked further away from them, slipped his shirt on.

He just couldn't catch a break with these people, if they weren't threatening him, experimenting on him, or trying to kill him they were accusing him of stuff he hadn't even done.

Helena walked out of her closet, dressed in some blue yoga pants and a tank top. Her bedroom door was half-open when Jaime knocked on the door before he poked his head out. "Hey," he greeted.

Memories of their near kiss came reeling back. "Oh, hey..." She smiled sheepishly, rubbing her arm. "When did you get here?"
He stepped into the room, shrugging. "Half an hour ago but Tim said you were at Cheerleading practice so..." Jaime sighed deeply, looking a little hopeless. "Your brothers, no, actually your whole family is crazy."

Helena raised an eyebrow, resting her hand on her hip. "I thought that was obvious," she remarked, unable to hide the smile that crept onto her face.

"I'm serious, Helena!" Jaime whispered furiously, walking up to her. "Tim electrocuted me, and Jason threatened to shoot me in the balls."

She groaned, shaking her head in exasperation. "Oh boy," she murmured, sighing. "Listen, I'm sorry about them, Tim's still holding a grudge over the Scarab freak-out incident and Jason's just an asshole." It didn't excuse their behaviour though, especially when it was over some stupid alpha male crap. "I'll make them apologise."

Jaime grimaced. "Please don't, then he'll try to shoot me again, and Tim will...you know what I don't even want to think about it," he said, shaking his head. "Don't worry, I can handle it," he reassured. "I just wanna be able to rant about them when they tick me off."

Helena grinned. "In that case, I'm all ears," she replied, brightly, moving towards her bed where a red towel was rolled up. "You wanna spar in the gym? It'll make you feel better." She chuck the towel around her neck.

"Isn't your mom coming over?" His brow furrowed. "Isn't that why you told Jason to go hide in the cave?"

Her smile wavered, but she forced it to stick. "I just sent him down there because he wouldn't stop trying to project his mother issues onto me," she replied, flippantly, shrugging. "My mom isn't arriving for another two hours."

His frowned faded, seriousness washing over his face. "Oh well, do you have a minute? The whole reason I came over was that I wanted to talk."

Talk?

Helena gripped her towel tightly. "Yeah, sure, we can talk in the gym," she replied, avoiding his gaze as she walked passed him, trying to think quickly.

"Okay but I don't have any spare clothes," Jaime objected.

She's already walked out of her room. "There'll be some extra ones in the locker room."

His eyes widened. "You have a locker room in your gym?" he sounded impressed.

Helena let out a strained chuckle. "Yeah, crazy right." She quickly hurried ahead of him.

She wasn't prepared for this, why wasn't she prepared for this?

Sure, she knew the biology of it all but an actual relationship? The only thing she had to go off was RomComs and her family's dysfunctional romantic endeavours. Sure, she liked Jaime, and he liked her, but actual dating was an entirely other level put together. That was a relationship, something that brought with it a whole territory and messy emotions.

"Hey, wait!" Jaime called after her, but she was already halfway down the stairs.
The sun crept into the luxury apartment, highlighting the shape of the art deco vases, the silver and blue colours making the room seem brighter.

Inside his home office, the light from outside hurt Derek's eyes as he pinched the bridge of his nose, sitting behind his desk he tried to make sense of the information his assistant was detailing him on Maria McGinnis with a collection of pictures and ID.

The pictures showed her as a beautiful redhead with blue eyes, but something about her face was eerily familiar.

His assistant Rolland; a skinny man with blond hair, and dark brown eyes. "Seven years ago Maria Lysin didn't exist." He placed a stack of papers onto the desk—Derek's eyes narrowed, picking them up to scan them over. "If you look closer, her entire existence was fabricated."

Derek scowled as he glanced over the forged identity papers. "Well do we have any leads on who she is?" he snapped, dumping the papers on the table. "Friends, family?"

Rolland shifted on the spot, neatening the photos on the desk. "We do have a lead, sir," he replied, reaching up to fix his tie. "We also traced her last known location to a house in South Dakota."

Derek drummed his fingers against his desk impatiently. "And?"

"The owner was Holly Robinson who's from Gotham," Rolland explained, seeming uncertain all of a sudden.

"She was a prostitute." Rolland reached into the folder, taking out more pictures. "And she was a friend and colleague of Selina Kyle." He showed him a headshot of the woman.

The businessman's posture stiffened when he saw the picture.

It was a prison headshot, her eyes were green, and her hair was cut short into a messy brown bob, but the face was identical to Maria's.

"That bitch," he whispered in disbelief.

Rolland grimaced, placing the photo on the desk next to the others. "CCTV footage from one of the bus stations showed a woman with a baby leaving on a bus to Minneapolis which is on—"

"On route towards New Jersey, yes, I know," Derek interrupted, glowering at the set of photos. "Which means she's no doubt already here." He clenched his hands into fists as his temper grew. "And if she's gone to Bruce Wayne for help with the flash drive…"

"The flash drive won't be enough evidence," his assistant argued. "And, if Wayne compromises us he'll compromise Tim Drake, and by association his own company as well."

"They might still find a way!" Derek snapped, standing up suddenly. His assistant jerked back in surprise.

The Waynes were part of the oldest families in Gotham, even older than the Powers, and no matter what scandal or how hard their rivals tried to bury them for some reason the Waynes survived.

Derek's shoulders slumped, letting out a deep breath to calm down. "If she gathers enough evidence and Luthor finds out, then he'll bury me," he ground out, meeting Rolland's gaze. "Do you
understand?"

Rolland was paler, nodding apprehensively. "Yes, Sir."

The business man slowly sat back down. "She could already be living with them, and we wouldn't even—wait." Derek's eyes narrowed up at his assistant. "I need you to get someone to scout the mansion, but discreetly," he stressed. "Their security is high end, and the last thing I need is for someone tipping them off."

"Are you honestly suggesting a break in, sir?" Rolland's eyes bulged.

Derek leant back in his chair. "It can be easily written off as a robbery," he brushed off his assistant's concerns. "Besides, I need that Manor searched." Derek rubbed his eyes. "I'll invite them to a party in the boy's honour, get them out of the house for a few hours while they search." His gaze sharpened when he looked up at Rolland. "I need to make sure."

His assistant sighed like a broken man. "I'll make the arrangements, Sir."

Derek nodded solemnly, pursing his lips as he stared back at the photos. Of all the people McGinnis had to fall in love with it had to be that devious and resourceful bitch.

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A few weights were lying around the edges of the gym from an extra session. Helena was balancing on a shelf while she meddling with the cameras, turning them off. The last thing she needed was her family spying on a private talk.

She gathered the small wires into a bundle and shoved them back into the camera before she clicked the machine back onto the wall, as she heard Jaime re-enter the gym.

"You worried they're spying on us?" Jaime said.

Helena smiled crookedly, glancing over her shoulder. "Privacy is pretty much dead in this house," she remarked, looking him over.

He'd found an old oversized t-shirt and sweatpants to wear. "You guys do seem overprotective of each other," he replied, frowning. "I mean it's sweet if you ignore the death threats."

Her smile wavered, sliding down the shelf and onto the floor. "Yeah, those can get old pretty fast." She fiddled with her fingers, avoiding his gaze. "Anyway, so what did you wanna talk about?"

"Uh, you know…" Jaime chewed his bottom lip, making her shift on the spot. "When we nearly kissed."

Her eyes locked onto his feeling like she was under the microscope. "Oh," he voice was high. "Yeah…okay." Helena hastily turned away and started to stretch her arms.

"How do you even ask a boy out?! They'd already gone for coffee, what happened from this point?"

"Uh, are you okay?" Jaime was speaking.

Helena kept her back to him, clamping her mouth shut to stop herself from saying something she'd regret. "…Yes," her voice was strained, bending down to do the splits. "Yeah, I'm all right."

He grew silent for a moment, while his bare feet crunched against the mat as he slowly walked around to face her. "Okay, well about that kiss…it, uh, got me thinking about…us."
Helena could feel him standing in front of her, but she didn't look up. Instead, she focussed on the throb from her muscles. "Yeah, me too…"

Jaime sat down on the floor in front of her, so they were on the same eye level. "Um, Helena…?" He was staring at her, wanting her actually to look at him.

She stiffened, biting down hard on her tongue as she tore her gaze away from her foot and towards his eyes. "Yeah?" Her lips felt dry.

He too a deep breath and looked her straight in the eye, squaring his shoulders. "I really like you."

Helena's throat seemed to seize up, as the inside of her stomach exploded into a soft and strange bright feeling that made her feel dizzy.

_I really like you too_, she wanted to say, cementing the moment to be a sweet one, but instead, she said…

"Do you wanna be my boyfriend?" she said quickly like a frazzled woman, and it had meant to be a question, but it ended up sounding more like a request. The second she realised this after the words left her lips she wanted to bury herself under the extensive collection of weights.

_Please, Lord, just kill me._

Jaime's eyes widened in (what she hoped was) surprise. "You want to be my girlfriend?"

Well, I did promise not to lie to him.

Helena swallowed a thick dry lump down her throat. "Yeah, I do but…" she looked away and stood up.

"But what?" Jaime's tone became tenser.

She looked at him and folded her arms. "I don't want us to stop being friends if things don't work out," she replied, quietly. "This thing we have, it's special, and I don't want to lose it."

There was a five-second pause of complete silence while he stared at her. Then his gaze flickered away for a second before returning to her again. "I don't either, but I can't pretend I don't have feelings for you," he reasoned, running a hand through his hair.

Her chest tightened so much it hurt. "I wouldn't ask you too..." Maybe there was no avoiding this.

Jaime breathed in slowly, staring at her searchingly. "If you're not ready for a relationship then okay, but if it's because you're scared of letting your guard down then…" He squared his shoulders. "…then you need to ask yourself why, because you can't spend your life keeping people at a distance."

Helena felt a bitter taste form in her mouth. "Tell that to my dad…” Her eyes stayed locked on his, trying to get him to understand. "There are few people I'm willing to let get close, and maybe to you that's not an okay way to live but for us, it's a necessity." Helena sighed deeply. "And, you're one of the few people I want to be close with."

He looked puzzled for a second like she'd said something contradictory but then after a moment, it started to dawn on him what she meant.

"Then can't we just take a risk and just be together?" he said, there was a hint of frustration in his
voice even though he tried to hide it. "I'm not making any promises that it's going to be great and we'll end up being together forever, okay." Jaime held her hand, which she responded by interlocking their fingers together. "I'm just asking that you just give it a try."

Helena remembered something similar she'd said to Jason. She sighed, scrutinising him for a second. She'd be a hypocrite if she didn't follow her advice. "You sure you know what you're getting yourself into?"

His posture relaxed, amusement clouding his eyes. "I think I can handle it."

The corner of her mouth curled upwards as she closed the small gap between them, holding his other hand as she closed her eyes and leant in closer, kissing him. He moaned against her lips and pulled her in closer.

Her hold on his loosened as she broke away from the kiss, grinning she traced the outline of his chest with her finger "Now, how about we mark this moment with some sparring?" she proposed light-heartedly.

Jaime raised an eyebrow. "Or I could just keep kissing you?" The smile he gave her was a hopeful one.

"Aw, you're sweet." Her grin became slanted, kissing him deeply for a few more seconds before she backed away suddenly, causing him to blink in surprise. "But I still have some untapped aggression to work through," she said, clapping her hands together. "So, how good are you at dodging?"

Jaime's smile slipped into a grimace, with his jaw clenched tight. "Umm..."

Wayne Manor, Gotham

10/06/2023

17:55

Trying to make sure the Manor was spotless of any Vigilante clues or evidence was causing Bruce's paranoia to go into overdrive. He'd already ordered Tim to check his bedroom for the fifth time; the boy may have said a few curses under his breath, but Bruce would deal with that later.

He walked past a vase as he entered the front hallway, pausing to scrutinise the vase for a moment, but then shook his head and carried on walking. Tea, he needed some hot beverage to calm his nerves.

The sharp click from the doorknob made him tense and snapped his head in the door's direction. Selina didn't have a key, and everyone else was accounted for except...

Bruce scowled, as the door opened and Dick walked in with his helmet tucked underneath his arm. "...Dick," he greeted his eldest, crossing his arms.

Dick pursed his lips and made a tsk noise, closing the door a little too harshly behind him. "So, Selina's alive, huh?" His eyes narrowed. "So, was I meant to find out at Thanksgiving?"

Bruce sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I didn't want you to miss work."

The younger man looks at him in disbelief. "That's BS, and you know it." He scoffed, shaking his
head as he walked up to him.

Bruce's gaze narrowed. "No, it's true," he said sternly, causing Dick to scowl. "You're already on thin ice at work, and you have your own city to protect."

Dick's scowl dimmed, as his forehead creased. "...I still like being kept in the loop."

The older man let out a long-suffering sigh. "Fine."

"That's all I ask," Dick replied, resting a hand on his chest.

Bruce's lips twisted downwards, shaking his head. His ears perked up when he heard footsteps approaching.

Dick looked over his mentor's shoulder and smiled. "Hey, H," he chimed, smiling crookedly when his eyes shifted further. "This the guy I've heard so much about?"

"Hopefully all good things?" Jaime's voice was casual, but there was some tension in it as well.

Was Jason to blame for Jaime's apprehension or was it Tim?

Bruce sighed and looked over his shoulder and turned around to face the newcomers as Helena and Jaime came to a stop in front of him; he scrutinised them curiously when he saw their cheeks were flushed with colour.

Helena raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess Tim's been gossiping again?"

"Pfft, no," the young man replied flippantly while he smiled. "It's not gossiping, it's reporting."

She rolled her eyes, folding her arms. "Sure it is, Wings." Her gaze shifted back to the boy next to her. "Jaime this is Dick/Nightwing." She gestured to the young man. "Dick, this is Jaime the new Blue Beetle."

Jaime's eyes widened. "Nightwing? I was still wondering who was who around here," his voice barely hid his excitement, but then the gleam in his eyes faded after he glanced at Helena and then back at Dick. "You're not going to do the whole threatening thing?"

Bruce arched an eyebrow, wondering what threat Jason said to him.

Dick chuckled, coming to stand next to Bruce. "Relax, I'm the nice one," he reassured, raising his hand out for the other boy to shake. "And, since you did good on the last mission, you're on my good side."

At that moment it suddenly occurred to Batman he hadn't ever offered to shake the teen's hand, but considering the circumstances of their recurred meetings, it seemed to have just been something he'd let slip passed him.

Jaime seemed relieved, smiling as he grasped the outstretched hand and gave it a good shake. "So no threats then?" he said, glancing over at Helena who smirked.

Dick laughed. "Nah, you seem decent," he replied, letting go of the hand. "Besides, Bruce's the one who likes dishing out that stuff." He nudged the man in question, earning a low growl. "Ha, see, he's a natural."

"I don't enjoy threatening people..." Bruce half-lied.
His daughter scoffed while Jaime smiled sheepishly when his gaze flashed in Bruce's direction. "Right, well, I need to head home," the teen said but then frowned, looking back at Helena. "Unless you want me to stay...?"

The smile Helena gave Jaime one her father couldn't recall seeing before, it was tender but also amusing. "Thanks but things might get tense so..." she trailed off, the smile fading to something sadder.

Jaime just nodded. "Call me later?" he touched her lower arm; Bruce frowned.

"Yeah, sure." She shrugged walking passed her dad and Dick while Jaime followed.

"Just make sure you're out of sight when you fly off," Bruce said, watching them carefully, sensing something had shifted.

"Will do, Mr Wayne," Jaime replied, smiling politely.

"Yeah, see you around." Dick waved, cocking an eyebrow at the two of them. "And, don't worry the others just take a little longer to warm up to."

Helena opened the front door, letting in the cold night air. "Jason, not so much."

"Yeah, I'm not holding out much hope," he replied, stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets.

"You said you could handle it," she remarked, smiling coyly as she leant in closer towards Jaime."Bye." She kissed his cheek.

Bruce nearly choked, eyes wide, while Dick looked bemused. Jaime's eyes had flickered towards them before he let out a strained laugh when he saw their faces. "Heh, yeah." The teen looked back at her and suddenly started to relax like he'd forgotten there were other people present. "Bye." He kissed her on the cheek and was gone a second later, door shut behind him with an echoing click that left the hallway in silence.

Helena smiled the same smile from earlier, touching the cheek he'd kissed, while her father felt a strange urge to yell at something.

Madolyn pulled up on the curve next to the great big wall that shielded Wayne Manor mostly from view. She reversed further into the shadow of the trees, so she was out of the way of the road, and turned her lights off. Her hands clutched the steering wheel tightly, as her heart pounded against her chest.

She'd curled her hair and applied a fresh layer of red lipstick to make herself look presentable for Bruce even if he might not want to see her. Madolyn dug her nails into the steering wheel. He kept insisting he was too busy looking after Helena and Tim, but those kids couldn't be keeping him busy 24/7 could they?

Madolyn glanced over at the passenger seats where there was a box of chocolates. He might not appreciate the sweets but his kids might, and maybe if she got on their sweet side that'd show Bruce how good of a mother she could be, as long as his family approved everything would go smoothly.

She reached to open the car door but froze when she saw another vehicle drive passed. The car slowed down and came to a stop in front of the gates.
Madoyln's shoulders were stiff as she watched a slim, curvy figure get out of the car. It was too dark to make out any facial features, but the slender figure and body movement were enough hints of what gender the person was.

Why was another woman here visiting Bruce?

Chapter End Notes

And, finally my obscure ship has come together, but at least it makes more sense than RobinxWondergirl. I'm hoping the admission of love was on point, it's still early days in the relationship so expect a lot of awkwardness and a few misunderstandings.

It'll take a while for Jason and Bruce to come around to it, but in the meantime, they'll just have to disapprove in the background quietly.

*only just realised I made a continuity error, bare with me while I fix it.
Wayne Manor, Gotham

10/06/2023

18:35

In the sitting room where all seven of them were seated, it was like the room was divided. Selina was sitting in an armchair near the unlit fireplace with Terry in her arms, while Bruce, Helena, and Tim were sat down together on the couch opposite, and Dick was sitting down on the armchair in-between them and Selina, Alfred was the only one standing up as he pretended to clean the same vase near the window.

Tim had his laptop on his lap with the flash drive stuck in, reading through the data while Selina explained how Black Mask had captured her and then how she'd gotten away.

"...Once I jumped from the bridge I barely made it to the car," Selina said, readjusting a sleeping Terry in her arms. "I kept driving until I got out of the city and then checked into a hospital..."

Helena listened silently, feeling a sick sensation in her stomach, swallowing thickly. Selina stared at her sadly, cradling Terry close to her chest. Helena took in a deep breath before she spoke. "Where have you been, how...?" she trailed off, clenching her hands into fists as she looked away. She felt her dad's gaze on her. "Just help me understand, okay," her voice hardened when she looked up.

Selina's lips thinned, nodding. "I spent a few years jumping place to place, switching identities until I ended up in Detroit," she explained, a shadow of a smile on her face. "It's where I met Warren."

"How long did he work for Powers?" Tim spoke up for the first time, looking up from the screen. His eyes were cold, a hint of betrayal flashing cross his face.

"He said ten years," she answered, sighing. "He's from Gotham originally but got transferred after his divorce." Selina looked down at Terry, smiling warmly. Helena felt a small spark of jealousy and averted her gaze. "He quit a year ago when we moved to California."

"Long way to move," Dick said, raising an eyebrow.

Selina sighed. "He wasn't exactly honest with me about why we had to move so far," she replied, tightly. "And he wasn't the only one who'd died after working for Powers." Her gaze shifted to the laptop. "On the drive, there's a list of co-workers that have gone missing or reported dead."

Tim's eyes were glued back to the screen, frowning. "Yeah, I see it," he said, narrowing his eyes. "A lot of them had prior connections to STAR Labs as well as Adam Strange, Eduardo Dorado, and
Silas Stone," he recited, rubbing his chin.

Helena's gaze narrowed. Why the sudden cull?

"Silas Stone was murdered in a robbery, nearly a month ago," Dick commented, scowling briefly before he quickly made his face passive when he saw Selina looking. "Did you have any suspicions about his work?"

Selina sighed, staring down at Terry. "No, we both had secrets," she divulged, her eyes flickered back up. "He never asked for mine so I never pried too deep into his."

Helena chewed her lower lip restlessly, as she straightened up in her seat. "So you never told him about me?"

Her mother's gaze locked onto hers, causing her tense. "I wanted to," Selina said steadily. "And I should have…"

Helena's gaze grew colder. "But, you didn't wanna ruin your perfect family, figures." She shrugged dismissively while her dad and Tim both exchanged a look.

"No," her mom's voice sharpened, frowning. "That isn't why."

Helena crossed her arms, looking away. "Sure looks that way."

She heard her mom stand up and let out a sigh. "Helena, it isn't…Can you boys give us a minute?" Selina asked, stepping closer towards them.

"Yeah, sure," said Dick, standing up.

Tim snapped the laptop close and got off the couch. "I need to take a closer look at these files anyway." He tucked the laptop under his arm.

Helena looked up, narrowing her eyes at her mom who still a respective distance away. Selina stared back at her unflinchingly, levelling her with a stern look of her own.

From the corner of her eye, she saw her dad study them both for second before he too stood up. "Take as long as you need."

Helena nearly scoffed, the room was bugged so he'd probably head to the cave and listen in. She heard the sound of retreating footsteps as each one of them left the room, even Alfred had slipped out when they hadn't been looking.

Selina remained silent until they both heard the sound of the door click shut. "I understand you're angry."

Helena kept her gaze narrowed, slowly rising to her feet. "Why did you even bother to contact me?" , she said coldly, tilting her head up a fraction; they were nearly the same height now.

Selina's eyes widened. "Because I missed you," she said like it was obvious. Helena felt her muscle wind up tighter. "I left to protect you." She readjusted Terry in her grip when he started to squirm. "I understand—"

The tension in her shoulders snapped. "No, you don't!" Helena interrupted, harshly, causing Selina to stiffen. "I don't even know who you are, and I don't think I ever did." She moved away from her, walking towards the window. "You lied about everything."
"Helena, I didn't have a choice," her mom argued, her brow knitted tightly together. "I lied to keep us together, so we could be a family..." She sighed, clenching her jaw. "Your father left me in prison, and I didn't know if he'd accept you or give you up."

Helena's stomach twisted, rubbing her arms, feeling a pang of remorse that stung. "Then I guess you didn't know him very well," her voice wavered, meeting her mother's gaze. "Dad wouldn't leave...he would never abandon me."

Unless he gets himself killed, but she tried not to think about that.

"You're right, I didn't understand him," Selina said, taking a step closer. "He made sure of that. Always keeping me at a distance."

Helena closed her eyes tightly for a moment before opening them again. "He's just afraid of getting too close..." she said. "It's just how he's always been." She glared back. "Besides, this isn't about him," she continued, balling her hands into fists. "It's about you not being there when I really needed a mom."

Selina grew still, a fresh layer of guilt clouding her features. "Baby, I'm... I know what that feels like." She moved in closer narrowing the gap, making Helena's shoulders were high and stiff. "I love you more than anything, and if I could take back all those years and start again I would but I can't, I can only make up for now, and all I can say is that I'm sorry."

Helena bit down hard on her tongue, feeling a sharp tug in her stomach. "...Do you really mean that? About starting again?"

"Yes," Selina stressed, taking a step closer. Helena stared at her for a long moment as her words sunk in. "I wish we could too," her voice was subdued. "I know you just wanted to protect me." She looked at her brother Terry when his dark blue eyes looked back at her. "But, just be honest with me," Helena said softly, glancing back at her mother. "If Warren hadn't been killed, would you have still told me the truth?"

A silence suffocated the room.

Her mom looked like she'd just been punched in the face, and opened her mouth to speak but then closed it again, looking down. "...I'm sorry."

Helena's eyes felt wet and her throat hurt. "Just say it."

Selina closed her eyes and gently shook her head. "...No," she said, opening her eyes to look at her. "I wouldn't have told you."

And, that was the truth, Helena had had stab wounds less painful.

Helena quickly wiped away a tear from, looking away for a moment.

When she stared back at her mother, she felt a thick sticky lump of spitefulness fill her mouth. "It's fine." Helena held herself taller. "The best thing you did was leave me with, Dad," she replied coldly.

Selina winced, sucking in a deep breath. Terry made a low whimpering noise, distracting Selina as she quickly rocked him in her arms. "Sssh, Baby," she whispered, looking back at her daughter hesitantly. "I did what I thought was best because I love you." Selina reached and grasped her
daughter's hand tightly, making Helena go rigid but didn't pull away.

A small part of Helena wanted to move in closer and embrace them both, but it felt like her feet were bolted to the ground.

Helena looked at her baby brother, at this small broken family that seemed to barely hold itself together, but it felt like how home had used to feel like.

It made her feel cold and lost. "...I missed you," it was almost an accusation.

Selina moved in and kissed her forehead and squeezed her hand before letting go. "All I ever wanted was for you to have a normal life, Helena, to be safe."

The moment shattered when reality set in.

Her thoughts drifted to the scars hidden from view, each one having a story behind it. The kidnapping and collateral damage had caused just as many bruises and cuts even before she'd taken up the cowl.

A normal safe life wasn't something a Wayne could get in Gotham.

Her mother never wanted her to be a hero or put her life on the line, she wouldn't approve and she'd take out her anger on Batman. It was a disagreement which would just make things worse and result in someone feeling betrayed.

The mission was more important, saving lives as Huntress was ten times more valuable than anything she'd ever hope to accomplish as Helena Wayne.

Her brow furrowed together as she stepped away from her mom, causing Selina's face to grow crestfallen. "Then you shouldn't have left me behind," Helena said numbly, walking passed her mother and towards the couch. "I don't...I can't do this."

*I can't lie to you, even if you deserve it.*

Her mom started walking towards her. "Helena--"

"Mom, please, I don't...I'm so- I don't want to see you again." Helena interrupted, keeping her back to her. She walked over to the door, ignoring the urge to look back at her mother.

She opened the door and rushed out into the hallway.

Tim was sitting at the Batcomputer uploading the files from the flash drive Selina had left with them. The sick feeling in his stomach wouldn't go away as he unlocked another one of the files that seemed to solidify Derek Powers’ growing list of trespasses.

He stopped typing and hunched his shoulders, lowering his gaze from the screen. He couldn't help but dread if his parents had already known about their friend's crimes, or if they themselves were a part of it. Tim felt like he really would be sick, clutching his stomach. It would add more reason behind their deaths after the hacking Powers might have assumed they'd gone rogue and been involved in their assassination.

The sound of Jason's crutches brought Tim out of his musing.

"Has she left yet?" the ex-Robin asked.
Tim kept his eyes on the screen, shifting in his seat. "Bruce is showing her out now."

"Pfft." Jason leant against the dashboard of the computer and squinted his eyes when he looked up at the screen. "Did she give us anything useful?"

Tim cast him a wary sideward's glance, shrugging. "Yeah, it's pretty useful, mainly stuff about her husband's colleagues," he answered, hesitantly bringing up the list. It showed the names and profile photos of the colleagues, with some small bit of info on their current state. "Most of them are dead or missing." He turned his seat towards Jason.

Jason stared at the screen with a blank expression, as his eyes flickered back and forth, reading the list until his gaze froze and his shoulders tensed.

Tim narrowed his eyes and followed the man's line of sight, he was staring at the end of the list which showed three scientists; Silas Stone (dead), Martin Stein (missing), and Wei Chang (active). It was hard to decipher who exactly he was staring at.

After a second, Jason lowered his gaze, jaw twitching. "So they're all linked to those experiments, right?" He looked over at the boy.

Tim's frowned deepened, studying him briefly, which earned a glare from Jason. "From the looks of it, yeah," he answered curtly, glancing back at the screen. "All of them started out at STAR labs but then got singled out by other facilities and private companies." Tim grimaced. "Powers being one of those companies." He scowled and slumped further down in the large backed chair.

"You mean Derek Powers?" Jason asked, being suspiciously civil.

Tim raised an eyebrow at him and shrugged. "Yep, which will compromise my family's business if it all gets out." He sighed, sitting up to lean against the dashboard. "We need more evidence, though, more companies must have been involved and not all of these scientists are dead or missing."

"Don't you love a good old conspiracy?" A new voice startled them.

Both Tim and Jason jumped when Dick suddenly appeared behind the chair.

Jason glared at the eldest of the group. "Fuck sake, wear a bell, Dickface."

Tim rolled his eyes while Dick leisurely leant against the chair. "Now where's the fun in that?" Dick remarked lightly, tilting his head to the side; he was still dressed as a civilian. "So, Tim, give me a sum up."

The youngest of the three cast a quick glance at Jason before he looked up at Dick. "The flash drive mainly has a list of scientists, but it does have some details on genetic mutations," he answered, rubbing his chin. "Mr McGinnis worked for Powers in the Medical Technology department." He clicked out of the file and onto another one in the drive. "This is from one of the files I managed to unlock."

Dick drew an inched closer to the screen while Jason slipped into the background. The folder showed a list of payments to an unknown source, the cost was in the thousands, with money going in and out, but the payment dates were a good three years old. The file itself wasn't a direct bank statement but copied down and placed onto a normal spreadsheet, so there wasn't anything concrete to go on.

Dick scrutinised the payments. "I'll hack Warren's financial records to see if he made any trips to
Gotham.” He patted Tim on the shoulder. “As for the payments, we're gonna need to get access to the company's personal records.”

Tim nodded. “I can get access,” he said, folding his arms. “I just have to convince Powers I'm not so sure about Bruce.”

Dick smirked, ruffling his hair. "Nice."

Tim grinned, but his smile was short-lived when he noticed Jason was gone; the crutches left next to the dashboard. "Hey, where'd Jason go?" he said uncertainly, feeling a prickling on his skin.

Dick's smirk faded as he frowned, giving the cave a quick glance around. "Huh…"

Bruce had hoped his daughter and Selina would have found some common ground but unfortunately, their relationship just seemed more strained after their talk.

Selina was tense and on edge when he walked her to the front door, Terry started to fuss and wriggle around in his mother's arms.

"Helena will come around...eventually," he reassured, as the two of them stopped in front of the door.

Her eyes narrowed, re-adjusting the baby in her grip as the heavy looking baby bag slipped down her shoulder. "She doesn't want anything to do with me, Bruce," she said, gritting her teeth when Terry started to cry. "Not that I blame her but still—Terry stop!" she snapped, scowling. The bag hit the floor.

The baby's eyes brimmed with fresh tears. "Whuah!"

Bruce grimaced when the baby started crying, reaching forward to support his head when Selina's grip went slack. "It's okay," he told her, steadying the baby's head. "I'll hold him, it's fine."

Selina let out a deep sigh, looking exhausted as she handed Terry over to him. "...Thanks."

Bruce felt queasy when he held the crying baby, making sure to support his head, rocking him a little."Is he hungry?" The crying began to hurt his ears but Selina seemed oblivious to the noise as she cracked her neck and bent down to pick up the baby bag.

"No, he just wants his dummy," she replied tiredly, opening up the bag to look.

"WHUAH!"

Bruce continued to rock Terry, as the infant twisted around and smothered its face against his shirt. "Well, can you hurry?"

Selina shot him a glare. "You offered to hold him," her voice sharpened. He narrowed his eyes at her, pursing his lips tightly. She made a low humph noise and reached into the bag, pulling out a yellow pacifier. "There."

The pacifier was popped into Terry's mouth, the baby's mouth clamped down on the object and sucked, while stray tears slid down his cheeks.

Bruce arched an eyebrow, surprised it had worked so fast. "Huh…” He cradled Terry closer, watching as the baby's expression became more peaceful.
Selina smiled crookedly, brushing some hair out of her face. "I'm dreading the day when I'll have to wean him off it," she commented, stepping closer to place a hand on the top of Terry's head while Bruce stared down at the infant.

The corner of Bruce's lip twitched upwards for a second before he glanced back at Selina, pausing when he saw how she looked at her son with pure love.

His thoughts drifted back to Helena, sighing quietly. "She'll come around eventually, Selina," he said gently.

Selina looked up at him, as her smile dimmed. "Yeah, you said..."

"Teenagers just take more time and patience to deal with." Bruce touched her shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly.

She sighed, smiling a little as she secured the baby bag over her shoulder. "I guess you speak from experience." She reached out to take back Terry.

Bruce's thoughts briefly trailed back to Dick, Jason, and the Team, causing him to smirk to flash across his face briefly. "You have no idea." He removed his hand from her shoulder and carefully handed her baby back over. "I'll have my people unlock the rest of those files on the flash drive, in the meantime, you should keep a low profile."

Selina cradled Terry in her arms while she raised an eyebrow. "I'm not going to sit and wait by the phone all day, Bruce," she replied, agitated.

He sighed, taking out a set of keys from his pocket. "Look, these are the keys to one of my townhouses," he said, presenting the shiny set of keys. "You and Terry will be safe there."

Her eyes narrowed. "And, what, wait around for you to do something?"

"The Powers family is powerful," he argued, frowning. "We'll need undisputable evidence to send them to trial."

Selina's gaze grew colder. "I know that, but I didn't come to you on a hope you could prosecute them." She averted her gaze and glared at the door. "I wanted to see Helena but I also needed a backup plan for Terry in case..." Her glare softened into wariness, sighing quietly, glancing at the keys in his hand and apprehensively took them. The keys disappeared inside her hand like she was afraid he'd change his mind. "I'll contact you if I need you."

He lowered his arm, watching her closely. "...Killing him isn't the answer, Selina."

She shoved the keys in her jean's pocket, scowling. "It seems pretty straightforward to me," she retorted, resting Terry's head against her shoulder. "You said you'd help me, was I wrong to place that trust in you?"

"...No," he replied, sighing quietly. "But Helena won't forgive you if you murder him." And, I won't let you, he thought silently, resisting the urge to narrow his eyes.

Selina bit down on her lower lip, a spark of hesitation glinting in her gaze. "I don't expect her to forgive me at all, Bruce." She turned and opened the door. "Thanks for the safe house. You'll know where to find me."

Her back was facing him as she stepped outside. Bruce sighed as he watched her walk down the steps towards her car, while he studied her for a moment. She was going to kill Powers she'd be
smart about it, but he assumed she'd want more evidence first which is why she probably hadn't already murdered the man.

Terry would also be delaying her since she had to protect him, she was being patient, something he could take advantage of.

Bruce closed and locked the door when he saw her car drive off as the gates closed behind her, the car disappearing around the corner. He turned away and rubbed his eyes as he made his way to the Batcave while he mulled over the evening events.

Clearly, he'd underestimated how deep Helena's resentment for her mother went and he wasn't really sure how to tackle it other than give her some space. He couldn't force her to forgive Selina and she wasn't exactly forthcoming about her problems. Bruce ran a hand through his hair as he neared the study that led down to the cave. Not mention Selina would just make things worse if she murdered Powers, but if Bruce Wayne couldn't convince her then Batman would have to.

He paused outside of the door when he heard someone moving from inside before he opened the door and looked in. Jason was sitting on the carpet, leaning against the big wooden desk that faced the entrance to the cave.

Bruce's brow furrowed, closing the door behind him. "Is it your leg again?" he asked, walking over. Jason didn't look up to acknowledge him, appearing sickly, which only made Bruce grow more concerned as he bent down in front of the young man. "Jason?"

Jason didn't look at him, shrugging. "M'fine," he muttered, bringing his knees up to his chin.

Bruce's pursed his lips, scrutinising him for a second. From his experiences, Jason only tended to be docile when extremely upset, physically exhausted, or when he had something to hide. "Did something happened?"

"No." Jason's eyes narrowed, reaching up to grip the edge of the desk. "I'm fine." He gritted his teeth as he started to lift himself up.

Bruce stood up, reaching out help him up. "Where are your crutches?"

Jason bared his teeth, slapping the hand away when it got too close. "I don't need em," he grunted out, shakily getting to his feet, while his knuckles grew white from gripping the desk too tightly. "I left them in the cave."

"I see..." Bruce stared at him for a moment as he steadied himself against the desk and leant on it for support. "Have you taken your medication?"

Jason crossed his arms. "Yes, Mom," he sneered, glowering at him.

The older man hummed, studying his former charge's face. "You look ill."

Jason tensed, averting his gaze. "It's nothing...I just..." he trailed off, staring at the floor before he looked back up. "...Why are you even letting me stay here?"

"You're injured, you needed time to heal," Bruce replied evenly, eyeing him with interest. "And, I already told you, you have a home here."

The young man dug his nails into the edge of the desk. "I still murdered people," there was frustration in his tone like Bruce didn't understand. "I shouldn't be allowed to be here," he said through gritted teeth.
Bruce stared at him calmly, scrutinising him. "While I don't agree with your...methods." He lips twitched into a scowl. "If the last couple of weeks have shown me anything, it's that you still have morals," he told him, placing a hand on the ex-robin's shoulder.

Jason's jaw slackened and his eyes widened. "I..." he seemed to choke on his own words, closing his eyes tightly, causing Bruce's eyes to narrower further.

"What is it?"

Jason shoved his hand off his shoulder and quickly moved around the desk, nearly stumbling. "Nothing, I just..." He turned his back on him. "I just need some booze or some fucking smokes," his voice grew more hostile. "Medication got me sweating a shit tonne of water."

Bruce didn't buy the excuse, eyeing the younger man's form suspiciously, but as he opened his mouth to speak his communicator in his pocket went off. He sighed irritably and took out the normal looking smartphone as it rang persistently, clicking the home button to accept the call.

"I'm busy," Batman growled out, holding the phone to his ear.

"When aren't you?" asked Green Arrow from the other end of the line.

Batman glared at the ceiling. "It better be urgent."

Green Arrow sighed deeply, muttering something too quiet to hear. "Got disturbance in Atlantic City and you're the closest," he answered curtly. "Big guy with super strength causing a mess. Superboy's already on his way but he'll need back-up."

He glanced over at Jason who was still being unnervingly quiet, but whatever was wrong would have to wait. "...I'm on my way," he replied, hanging up. "We'll talk when I get back," Bruce said, slipping the phone back in his pocket.

Jason moved further away. "Pfft, whatever," he mumbled, still keeping his back to him.

Bruce eyed him one last time before heading towards the cave to suit up.

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**Atlantic City**

**10/06/2023**

**19:15**

"God damn it, stand down!" the head of security aimed his gun at the imposing eight-foot-tall man who had monstrous muscles, charcoal black dreadlocks, and pearl white skin.

The luxury hotel was located near the coast with the best view which attracted a range of wealthy clients was in complete chaos.

There was a massive hole in the lobby as the monster of a man walked forward towards the nine security guards that were pointing guns at him. He had a collection of unknown guns and weapons that looked straight out of an 80's sci-fi movie, with heavy looking army boots to solidify the theme.

"Pfft, Ka ree?" the Alien raised an eyebrow and reached for the weapon behind his back.
"Fire!"

The team started shooting at him, the guests that were left hiding behind furniture and desks screamed.

The bullets ricocheted off the man's skin like they were useless pieces of metal.

The near eight-foot man narrowed his eyes and withdrew his weapon as he walked forward while they kept firing.

He paused to glance down at his muscled chest as the bullets bounced off. "Ka Ree!?" The Alien rolled his eyes and swung his weapon, which seemed to be some kind of large metal blade attached to a rope which was a part of a handle made from real bone and wood.

The rope of the weapon swept away the guards like they were paper dolls, smashing them into the wall on the other side.

The chalk-skinned man ignored them and marched on forward towards his target, an Asian middle-aged man in a blue suit by the name of Secretary-General Tseng who was cowering behind a bodyguard as the two of them hurried to the stairs.

The monster of a man clicked a button on his weapon's handle to draw the rope back in, growling when he saw the Secretary try to run. He started to run after them, raising his weapon up over his head as he jumped over the front desk. People rushed out of the revolving doors, trying to escape from the trashed lobby.

"Hahn Sho Lobo skahveyt-ka, ka SKAHvey keezy Krolo!" the man who called himself Lobo shouted, releasing the blade.

Tseng was forced to jump back away from the stairs as the blade skimmed passed and buried itself into the wall, blocking the Senator's path.

The Alien grinned and yanked his weapon free from the wall, taking bits of it with him, jerking it sideways to slam the bodyguard into the lift doors.

Tseng was trapped against the end of the hall as Lobo closed in.


"Please!" Tseng raised his hands up, as sweat coated his forehead. "I don't understand what you want!"

For a second confusion sparked in the Alien's eyes, pausing to click a small button on his belt.

'Translating Interlac,' an automated voice droned out.

Lobo looked back at the Senator who was shielding his face. "Pfft, so that's how you wanna play it?" he tightened his grip on his weapon. "Fine. The contract calls on the Main Man to put on a show for the locals." He grinned darkly, baring his sharp teeth, walking closer. "So one more time; surrender or die."

"W-what contract?" Tseng's voice grew higher, nearly choking on his own words.

Lobo's grin became feral and turned more into a snarl. "Die it is." He raised his prepared his
weapon again.

But, as he closed in on his target Superboy smashed through the upper window of the lobby and dived down ready to punch.

Lobo's brow furrowed when he looked up over his shoulder. "Huh?"

Superboy landed onto the ground, creating a crack in the polished wood in front of the cowering Senator. He looked around seventeen years old with black hair and blue eyes, as he slowly rose up. He had cargo pants on, and a brown jacket over his S branded dark t-shirt.

"We can talk this out or we can punch it out, your choice," Superboy said, cracking his knuckles.

Lobo frowned faded when a smirk crept onto his lips. "That's funny." He swung his weapon around to hit him.

Superboy jumped in the air to dodge the hit, landing back down further away. "Have it your way," he quipped before he lunged towards Lobo with his fists raised.

Lobo stared at the attacking superhero, looking more amused than intimidated. Meanwhile, the Senator quickly made a dive for the stairs when the Alien was distracted.

Lobo retracted his weapon, moving to block the incoming hit, but Superboy aimed low, punching Lobo in the stomach.

The Alien was sent crashing to the floor, the grin was wiped off Lobo's face.

Superboy kicking him in stomach, spreading cracks across the floor. Lobo's red eyes narrowed dangerously and grabbed Superboy's foot before he could hit him again, pulling him to the ground.

"Ahhhh!" Superboy was flung across the room, going through the hotel wall, with half his body in the other room.

The impending footsteps of Lobo were like thunder, as Senator-General Tseng ran up the stairs, panting heavily. He looked down through the gap and saw the Alien closing in, so in a mad dash, he ran through onto the fourth floor to escape.

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"Krolo!"

"Ah!" Tseng yelled, stumbling back against the wall as his eyes shifted to the elevator at the end of
the hallway, he made a run for it.

Lobo pummelled through the wall, balling his hands into first, chasing after. Tseng smashed his fist against the elevator buttons, snapping his head back and forth between Lobo and the lift.

From behind Lobo, Superboy flung himself through the hole in the wall and into the hallway, running after the Alien.

"Hey, I'm not finished with you!" the Teenager barked.

Lobo looked over his shoulder and growled, pulling out his weapon he shot at Superboy, but Superboy grabbed the end of the rope and yanked hard.

"No do, Keezy ma." Lobo pulled back and managed to lift Superboy off his feet, and then retracted the weapon, sending the teenager hurling towards him.

Lobo pulled back his fist and punched Superboy in the face, cracking the Metahuman's nose. Superboy's head was snapped back as he hit the ground, causing the Alien to grin and turn his attention back to the Senator.

"Keezy ma frag Hahn Sho Lobo? Ka ree?" Lobo shook his head in disbelief, as the elevator pinged and the doors opened.

Tseng jumped inside and tried to close the doors but Lobo pushed them open and grabbed the Senator by the throat.

"Frag-ka, Krolo—"

The window smashed when Batman came swinging in and threw two Batarangs at the Alien.

Lobo's brow furrowed as the Batarangs hit his skin and exploded, pushing him backwards, the smoke clouding his vision.

Superboy came up from behind, blood dripping from his nose, and punched Lobo in the face.

Lobo grunted in pain, releasing his grip on Tseng.

Batman landed on the ground and looked over at Tseng. "Senator, with me," Batman ordered, grabbing the Senator. Tseng looked at the Vigilante in alarm when he was manhandled.

Lobo quickly regained his senses and hit back at Superboy, smashing his fist into the guy's stomach.

Batman withdrew his grappling hook and edged towards the window while he kept his eyes on the half-Kryptonian. "Superboy, keep him busy."

Superboy winced and lunged forward to put Lobo in a headlock. "On it," he wheezed, as Lobo grabbed the back of the teenager's head.

Batman grimaced, and pointed his grappling hook at the building opposite and jumped out of the window. "Hold on."

"Ahhhh!" Tseng screamed when they fell, but the line tugged a second later and the two of them were swinging around the tall buildings that stretched up towards the night sky.

Lobo's red eyes grew fiercer, elbowing Superboy in the face before he grabbed him by the neck.
and flung him out of the window. "Pfft, rano keezy ma," he sneered, cracking his knuckles as he stood up. He pressed a button on his leather cuffs to summon his ride.

He jumped out of the window as his hover bike caught him. The hovering motorcycle was like something from a death metal concert, with skulls and large exhausts decorating it.

Meanwhile down below on the high street, Superboy made a hasty landing. The impact of it shattered shop windows and made a massive crack in the road.

"Hey! Watch out!" someone yelled, as Superboy touched his bruised face.

A car smashed into him, trashing the bonnet while Superboy stayed rooted where he was. The woman in the ruined car poked her head out of the window. "What the fuck?!" she screamed, her face turning a blotchy red.

Superboy flinched when the light from a News helicopter flashed in his eyes, gritting his teeth he started to run, manoeuvring through the traffic as he picked up speed. He quickly looked up before he leapt into the air.

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Batman landed on the rooftop of a bank, setting the Senator down. Tseng stumbled back when they landed, as he shakily backed away, clutching his head.

Batman straightened up and pressed a button on his cuff guard to signal the Batwing, moving closer to Tseng. "Senator, you need to listen to me carefully," he said, stopping in front of the trembling man.

Tseng's eyes bulged when they looked behind him. "He's here!" he yelled, pointing at something behind him. Batman looked over his shoulder and reached into his belt.

Lobo was riding the hoverbike which looked armed to the teeth. "Frag!" A set of glowing red guns popped out from underneath the bike.

Batman threw a set of bombs at the vehicle and then lifted his cape to shield the Senator. The Batarangs lodged into the cracks of where the guns were and exploded, knocking the weapons off kilter when they fired out a set of laser beams.

The beams missed and hit the roof, while Batman dragged Tseng to the edge of the roof as the Batwing neared them.

Lobo gritted his teeth and quickly tried to refocus his fire, but Superboy attacked from behind, landing on the bike so hard it nearly flipped over.

"Miss me?" Superboy punched Lobo in the face while the bounty hunter tried to grab him.

Lobo got a hold of Superboy's collar and flung him across into the Batwing when it drew too close to the roof, sending Superboy and the Batwing into one of the casinos.

Batwing growled lowly and withdrew his grappling hook, but Lobo saw. "Oh, no you don't!" the Alien yelled, jumping out of the hovering motorbike, creating a crack in the roof, as he took out his weapon again.

Before Batman could aim and release the grappling hook, Lobo was too close and was already trying to hit him. The vigilante shoved Tseng out of the way and moved low to avoid the blade from Lobo's multi-functional sword, and tried hit back, but Lobo's skin was too thick so Batman
threw a set of small bombs in Lobo's face to blind him.

Lobo stepped back and was tackled to the ground by Superboy, who pinned him down and punched him repeatedly in the face. The weapon clattered to the ground.

"Urrgh!" Lobo was bleeding from the mouth and twisted his legs up to wrap them around Superboy's throat, throwing the superhero off him.

Batman was already half-way towards the senator, but Lobo was larger and quicker. The Alien jumped back onto his feet and leapt towards Tseng, whacking Batman away with his monstrous bicep.

Superboy got back onto his feet as Batman was reached into his belt to grab another weapon, but Lobo had already grabbed Tseng.

"Please! No," Tseng was shouting, as Lobo gripped the man tightly when he lifted him up off the ground and started to pull him apart.

"NO!" Superboy's eyes widened in horror, rushing forward with his arm outstretched.

Batman had a set of bombs at the ready but froze when he saw Senator-General Tseng's body was made of wire and metal.

Tseng's body was ripped in two, with flimsy green wired frayed apart like a rag doll, revealing a small green alien with a large head and sharp teeth.

Superboy stopped, growing paler. "W-what?"

"Plee-ay! Plee-ay!" the alien cried in a high pitched voice.

Lobo sneered down at the Alien and picked him up with his large hands, roughly shoving the creature under his arm.

Batman lowered his weapon, as he watched Lobo casually summon the hovering motorbike to land right next to him.

"The Main Man's contract's complete," Lobo said, picking up his weapon, he attached it to his back again. "Your world's your world." And with that, he got back onto his bike and placed the green alien in front of him where a metal choke-chained the creature down.

Superboy stared at the bounty hunter in shock as Lobo revved his bike up and drove off into the moonlight. "The Senator…" he exclaimed in disbelief, looking over at Batman who was examining Tseng's fake body. "He was an alien."

Batman paused to narrow his eyes at the half-Kryptonian. "I noticed."

Chapter End Notes
Ka Ree = Seriously

Hahn Sho Lobo skahveyt-ka, ka SKAHvey keezy Krolo = The Main Man can smell you, you stinkin' little Krolotean!

Ka seh Hahn Sho Lobo, Krolo. Plee-ay suh frag = Just you and the Main Man, Krolotean. Surrender or die.

SKAHvey Krolo = Stinkin’ Krolotean

Keezy ma = Little Boy

Keezy ma frag Hahn Sho Lobo? Ka ree? = Seriously? This little boy thinks he can take down the Main Man?

Frag-ka, Krolo = Time to die, Krolotean

rano Keezy ma = stupid little boy

I took some liberties with the language but the translation should be in accordance with proper Interlac.

*Sigh* You should have just told the truth, Jason.
Jason has a problem

Chapter Notes

Sorry, it's a bit late, hit some writers block trying to write Selina/Batman interaction. It should all be coming together now, but I may need to make this story 40 chapters instead of 35 if I can't meet the word count, but we'll tackle that near chapter 30 or 32.

Issue #26

Jason has a problem

Gotham City

10/06/2023

20:10

Helena was curled up on her bed next to her cat Benny while she texted Jaime.

A text popped up on her screen. /Wanna talk?/

She stared at the message for a moment while Benny pawed on her stomach before she let out a sigh.

/Thanks but don't want 2 talk right now. Talk later /

She got a quick reply. /Ok we can talk later...are you ok?/

Helena sighed, running a hand over her face. /It's complicated. I'll explain later xx/

/Ok xx/

The corner of her lips arched upwards when he added the two kisses back, feeling a familiar spark nestle in her chest, but a knock from the door distracted her. She glanced over her shoulder at the door, sitting up.

"Come in," she called, placing Benny on her lap.

The door opened, hesitantly, revealing Jason who limped in. "Hey..." he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "You...uh, you okay?" he asked, frowning.

Helena shrugged, placing her phone on her pillow as Benny climbed onto her chest. "Not really..."

"Yeah, I figured." He grimaced, walking towards her; there was definitely still some stiffness in his legs since he had to drag his other foot along with him. Jason came and sat down next to her on the bed, apprehensively reaching over to stroke the cat's head. "What'd she say?"

She sighed, resting her head against the headboard. "I get why she had to leave and...I understand
why she'd want to start a new life but…” Helena rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Even if I give her a second chance, then what, I go live with her?" She looked at him pointedly.

Jason's brow furrowed, averting his gaze briefly, moving his hands back onto his hip. "…But would you…you know?"

"Move back with her? No," she replied firmly, frowning deeply, regaining his attention when he looked up. "That's the problem, I can't go live with her because then I'd have to give up being Huntress," she explained, directing her glare at Benny who just stared back obliviously. "I can't let her find out our secret…"

He nodded, still frowning, pursing his lips for a second before he tried to smile. "It's probably better this way, anyway."

"Yeah, sure…” Her gut twisted unpleasantly when she remembered the hint of desperation in her mom's voice. She wrapped her arms around Benny, hugging him close for comfort when he gave a loud whine of protest. "I mean, it's not like I wanna hurt her or anything, but…this is the way it has to be," she murmured, nuzzling her face into the feline's black fur.

Jason's faint smile disappeared, as he shifted uneasily, opening his mouth a few times before closing it. "…Are you gonna be okay?"

A thin smile flitted across her face for a moment, as she lifted her head up. "Yeah, I'll be fine," she lied evenly, smiling tightly.

"Great…” He smiled back the same kind of strained smile, looking paler and sicklier than before.

Her forehead creased, looking him over. "Are you okay?"

His shoulders tensed for a second but then he shrugged, scrunching up his face when he scoffed. "Pfft, besides feeling like shit? Yeah, I'm great," he retorted, rolling his eyes. "I haven't had a smoke in nearly a month, you know what that feels like?" He scowled like he'd tasted something gross, earning a raised eyebrow. "I felt like clawing my eyes out earlier."

"Addiction's a slippery slope, Jaybird," Dick said, gaining their attention. He appeared from around the door and leant against the doorframe.

Tim poked his head out from behind the door, with his laptop under his arm. "Can't you just vape or something?"

Jason wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Yeah sure, and how about I chop my own balls off while I'm at it."

Dick smiled a lopsided grin as he looked at them both, nostalgic. "I heard you threatened to shoot Jaime's off," he replied, shooting him a soft disapproving glare which was more playful than serious.

Helena's eyes narrowed, remembering what Jaime had said. "Yeah, that alpha male crap stops now," her voice hardened, shooting all of them a firm glare. "No more threats."

Dick raised his hands in defence. "Well, I'm fine with him so…"

Jason scowled. "Making his life miserable is my job, Sis," he insisted, stubbornly. "You can't ask me to suppress my brotherly instincts."
"And, I didn't threaten him..." Tim argued, earning a raised eyebrow from Dick. "...Directly."

Helena sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "You electrocuted him."

Jason let out a bark of laughter, looking (dare she say it) mildly impressed. "Seriously?"

"It was a medical exam!" Tim said quickly, grimacing when Dick narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. "I was just testing his reflexes, honest."

The eldest of the group sighed. "Tim," Dick chided, shaking his head. "We talked about this."

Helena crossed her arms, as Jason's laughter quietened. "Yeah, remember last time you just wanted to test someone's reflexes?" She raised her eyebrow meaningfully.

The corner of Tim's lips twitched upwards but he tried to keep his face blank. "Oh, come on, Gar was more than willing," he exclaimed. "Plus, you still laughed when he turned into a bird."

She grinned while Jason frowned. "Garfield's still around?" he said curiously.

Dick's smile brightened at the question. "Yeah, he moved upstate with M'gann, he's kind of a part-time," he answered, briefly sharing a look with Helena.

Jason's expression tightened, averting his gaze. "Good for him...are M'gann and Conner still a thing?" He scratched the back of his neck, shifting uncomfortably. She wondered how long he'd wanted to ask about his old teammates.

Dick's smile never wavered. "It's an on and off relationship right now."

"Hm... and Wally and Artemis?" Jason's tone became more subdued as he met the oldest of the group's gaze. "You know, with her being dead and all."

Dick's smile faded, while Tim lowered his eyes to the ground. Helena sighed quietly, feeling cold. "He's...he's doing okay," the young man replied stiffly, looking away. "Aqualad..."

Jason's jaw tightened. "Is a murdering piece of shit, I know," he said coldly (Dick grew stiffer)."Don't worry, I did my research."

The room lapsed into a frigid silence, with all of them avoiding Jason's gaze until Benny whined loudly and jumped out of her arms and onto the floor.

Dick glanced at the cat and then at each one of them as a flicker of light started to shine in his eyes, shaking off his earlier discomfort as a slow smile spread across his face. "Hey, I have an idea."

Jason sighed, running a hand over his face. "Here we go."

Dick ignored him and clapped his hands together. "Since we're all together for once, we should watch a movie."

"I'd rather get beaten to death again," Jason remarked dryly, earning a terse silence. He raised an eyebrow. "What, too soon?"

Helena rolled her eyes and whacked him on the shoulder. "Don't be a jerk."

"Yeah, come on it'll be like old times." Dick was shooting her pointed looks, wanting her to back him up more. She folded her arms and cocked an eyebrow. "We can watch one of those B-grade horror movies and make fun of it."
"They were pretty funny, especially when they used tomato sauce for blood," Helena remarked lightly.

Jason sighed, narrowing his eyes at Tim. "Will the newest edition be joining?"

Tim shrank further back, hugging his laptop close to his chest. "I have a lot of—"

"Of course he will," Dick interrupted brightly, tugging Tim back by the hem of his red hoodie. "You need a break anyway."

Tim glowered at him, jerking out of his hold. "I still have to read the rest of these files, Dick. I don't have—Hey, give it back!"

Dick had swiped the laptop out of the boy's arms. "All work and no play is no way to live, Timmy." He held the laptop out of reach.

Tim strained to reach for the small black machine. "Oh, come on, I have work to do."

"It can wait," Dick said firmly, tucking the laptop under his arm before looking over at Jason. "So, what'd you say, Jason?"

"Pass." Jason stood up, scowling.

"Hey, don't be like that." Dick walked over, frowning. "It'll be fun."

Jason rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. "This isn't the Brady Bunch, Dick," his voice sharpened, making Helena frown. "I don't want to, now fuck off." He started to walk towards the door.

Dick looked at Helena urgently, triggering a wave of pity when she saw the expression. "Jason, wait," she called, getting off the bed. "Don't be like that."

Jason stopped in front of Tim and looked over his shoulder wearily. "I'm tired, Sis, give me a break," he replied gruffly, narrowing his eyes.

Helena gave him a chiding glance, moving towards him. "Come on, it'll be nice." She touched his arm. "And, I could use the distraction." She smiled softly. "Please."

Jason's jaw clenched, looking at Tim and then at Dick with irritation, as his glare shifted back to Helena, but the glare faded after a second when she widened her eyes and made her smile sweeter. "Fuck sake," he muttered, heaving a deep sigh. "Fine."

*Works every time.*

Her smile grew while behind him Dick was giving her a thumbs up. "Thank you, Jay," she said sweetly, earning a low growl. "Tim, you can help with the popcorn." She looked over at the youngest of the group.

Tim arched an eyebrow, staring at her and then at Dick before he sighed and slumped his shoulders in defeat. "Okay, fine, I guess one movie won't kill me," he remarked, brow furrowed.

"That's the spirit." Dick grinned and clapped the boy on the back, getting a sharp nudge in response. "Come on, I think we still have some ice-cream left in the freezer." He gently pushed Tim towards the hallway while Helen dragged Jason along.

Madolyn wrapped her scarf tighter around her throat while she waited in the shadows, a phone
pressed to her ear while she watched the old dirty apartment, staying out of the light so she wasn't seen.

Her heart was beating fast, terrified, the East End was not a safe place to be a night but if her Brucie was having a secret love affair then she had a right to know.

"The car's being hired for another two weeks," Lara said from the other end of the line. "But, it isn't registered to the address you're at."

"So she lied." Madolyn narrowed her eyes at the dim looking apartment, what kind of woman was this? "What name is it registered under?"

"Give me a sec…" There was some loud clicking. "…It says, Kristin Kringle."

She scowled, scrutinising the apartment. Was the woman a prostitute? No…no, Bruce wouldn't let a prostitute near his kids…would he?

Madolyn grimaced, bile filling her mouth. "Is there anything else?"

"No," Lara answered, irritably. "Listen, I could lose my job over this…"

Madolyn felt a flare of anger. "Do you want the money or not?"

"Yeah, but…” Lara trailed off, sighing. "I'm just a receptionist okay, there's only so much I know, Lady." She groaned. "I've never even met the woman."

Madolyn gritted her teeth, but then she froze when she saw the front door open, the sound of a crying baby filtered out. "Fine, then if that's everything—"

"Um, my money?"

"You'll get the rest of it in the morning," she hissed, quickly hanging up when she saw someone come out of the entrance, as the crying got louder.

Madolyn hid deeper in the shadows, making herself smaller as she watched a woman and a baby come out, tugging a large suitcase behind her.

Baby?

Was that Bruce's…no, no…he wouldn't be so… What was she talking about, of course, he would!

Madolyn's insides grew cold, feeling a horrible taste fill her mouth as she tried to get a good look at the baby. The woman was blonde but the baby was dark haired, the both of them looked the same pale skin colour, but it was hard to tell any distinct facial features from this far away.

She felt sick, drawing back towards her car when she saw the mysterious woman get in her own vehicle.

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**The Watchtower**

10/07/2023

17:45

"His name's Lobo," said John Stewart, Green Lantern, freezing the security footage on the chalk
The group of Justice League members—Batman, M’Gann, Superboy, Superman, Flash, and Wonder Woman—stared at the holographic screen which showed the security footage from the hotel.

Superboy frowned, rubbing the back of his neck. "What kind of language was he speaking, anyway?"

"Interlac I think," M’gann answered, brushing some of her short red hair out of her face when she scrutinised the screen. "It became popular when the United Planets formed, kind of a go-to language." She rubbed her chin.

John nodded. "He's extremely dangerous, but not likely to return." He flicked to the next frozen frame of the small green alien that had been in 'Senator Tseng'. "This little guy is another story." He zoomed in on the alien, grimacing. "That's a Krolotean, and Kroloteans always travel in packs."

Superman crossed his arm, furrowing his brow. "How many on average?"

"From what we've seen in the past, that'd be twenty-five to fifty…per unit," Green Lantern replied, uneasily.

"Per unit?" Flash’s eyes bulged. "How many bases could they have set up?"

John sighed, shaking his head. "Until we know how long they've been here, on a guess I'd say six at a minimum, and that's if they came through a one-way system."

"So, how do we find out?" Wonder Woman said, stepping forward. "We can already guess there are more of them posing as high-ranking officials."

"We're still analysing the leftover shell," Batman input. "Investigating Senator Tseng's recent activities will help us learn what the Kroloteans have been up to."

"In the meantime, I'll head to Oa and launch an investigation." John turned off the screen. "I'll have Hal cover me in case you need the extra set of hands."

"If we need the extra help?" Flash looked at the Lantern in disbelief. "This could be an alien invasion."

Superman smiled reassuringly and patted the young man on the back. "We've faced worse."

Superboy raised an eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure we haven't," he retorted, folding his arms. "We don't even know how many we're up against."

"I agree with, Supey." Flash jerked his thumb in Superboy's direction. "No offence, Big Blue."

The Kryptonian's smile wavered, sighing when he shared a look with Wonder Woman. "What I mean is, that whatever comes at us, we can take it," Superman said, a matter of factly.

Batman made a low grunt, not looking like he shared the other hero's optimism.
The restaurant was packed with the usual crowd, business women and men out for lunch while a few were here on their off day. The fine dining cuisine was located in the centre of the Diamond District in a high sparkling skyscraper which doubled as a designer shopping centre which was armed to the teeth.

The inside was sterile, with shiny glass tables and white walls and floors. Tim was impressed at how clean everything was kept considering how many dirty footprints got trodden in every day.

"Timothy?" Derek Powers was speaking to him.

Tim stopped staring into space and glanced back at his lunch guest, smiling pleasantly. "Sorry, Sir, I guess my head's not with it today," he replied, sighing deeply.

Powers lowered his cutlery to his plate; they'd both ordered the pasta even though Tim wasn't really that hungry. "Anything on your mind?" he asked, frowning.

The boy paused, sighing quietly, averting his gaze. "…It's just…do you think I made the right decision letting Wayne Enterprise manage my company?" he said, quietly, peeking up to gauge Powers' reaction.

A sympathetic smile was on the man's face. "Mr Wayne is your guardian, it makes sense that you'd trust him with your company."

Tim smiled sadly, making himself seem smaller. "It seemed like the right thing to do…but…"

Powers nodded, as his smile dimmed. "Yes?"

"…It's just…" Tim sighed again. "Bruce means well, and he just wants to guide me in the right direction but he can be…well, a little controlling." He rubbed the back of his neck, waiting for Powers to take the bait.

Powers couldn't resist. "How so?" he asked lightly like he was only mildly curious.

Tim grimaced, picking up his fork to poke at his pasta. "I've been wanting to propose these new projects, you know, like branching out so we can improve our medical technology." excitement built up in his voice, smiling meekly, while Powers nodded sympathetically. "But, Bruce thinks I need to focus more on being a kid and leave the big decisions to him…"

"Well, he's not wrong," Powers said, as his brow furrowed. "But he shouldn't have been so dismissive, it's your company after all." The smile faded as his frown grew. "Though…well, I suppose it would explain…" He sighed, as Tim looked at him anxiously. "It's not really my place to say…"

Tim almost rolled his eyes, but he kept his mask in place. "Say what?" he added some urgency into his voice.

Powers paused, pursing his lips as he stared at Tim. "…I don't mean to be cruel, but others have questioned why he was so quick to adopt you," he said, delicately, while Tim gave a sharp flinch. "That he may have had ulterior motives."

Way to be subtle, asshole.

Tim's clenched his hands into fists and let a little of his anger show. "Bruce cares about me, Mr
Powers.

Powers quickly raised his hands in defence. "I was just voicing my concerns, Timothy," he argued firmly. "I've known you before you could talk, you can't expect me not to be just a little concerned."

Tim buried his anger and unclenched his fists, closing his eyes for a second. "I know it's just..." He looked back at Powers, making his eyes seem bigger and more helpless. "You don't really think Bruce has ulterior motives do you?"

Powers heaved a sigh, staring at Tim like he was a beaten puppy. "Bruce Wayne is a good man, but he is also a businessman," his voice lowered. "And, your parents would have wanted you to embrace your legacy."

Tim tried his best to remain detached when the man's words struck a chord. "...Do you think they'd be disappointed?"

Powers frowned, shaking his head. "In you? Of course not, but they would hope you'd be making the right decisions."

Tim swallowed a lump in his throat, briefly scowling from his lack of composer. He couldn't let Powers get in his head, this was Robin's interrogation, not the other way around.

"I guess, you're right..." he replied quietly.

Powers watched him briefly before he reached into his jacket to get something. "I've actually been meaning to ask you something," he said, as he pulled out an envelope. Tim arched an eyebrow. "With everything going on with the company, and all this mess with the board members, I thought it'd be a good idea to bring everyone together." He slid the envelope across the table. "It should help clear up most of the gossip, don't you think?"

Tim opened the envelope and took out the cream coloured paper, in a fresh black ink an invitation to an upcoming party was printed. The date was close as well, which meant this was a last minute set up of his. "A party?" he voiced, glancing up.


Tim couldn't help but notice the way he separated the Waynes from the Drakes like it was obvious Tim was the outsider. "Do you really think a party would help?"

The man nodded. "You're the face of the company, Timothy, you need to be more in the limelight."

*More like push Bruce out of the picture*, Tim thought derisively, holding back a glare. "Maybe..." Tim deliberately trailed off, staring at the invitation thoughtfully.

*Why did Derek want them at the party, to begin with?*

A loud ringing interrupted his thoughts.

Powers sighed irritably. "Just a second." He scrambled to reach into his jacket pocket.

Tim forced a smile. "It's fine," he replied, as he folded the invitation into his pocket.

The man's brow furrowed when he looked at his phone, scrutinising the screen for a moment, a dark look flash in his gaze for just a second before it cleared. "I'm afraid something's come up,
Timothy." He lowered his phone to smile at the boy.

Tim's smile tightened, feeling his anxiousness peak when his eyes flickered to the shiny phone in Powers hands, it was now or never.

"That's okay, sir." He moved off his seat to stand up, taking his own smartphone out. "Alfred's parked around the corner anyway." He quickly typed the code into his phone to activate the cloning program, as he walked over to Powers who was in the midst of standing up. "And, it was nice being able to talk to someone."

"I hope we can do this again another time." Powers smiled thinly, moving to slide his phone back in his pocket.

Tim's chest constricted, acting quickly he flung his arms around the man's waist, nearly knocking the chair over when Powers stumbled to stand up. "It's just…it's like old time, you know, b-before…" He buried his face further into the man's stomach.

Powers seemed to grow uneasy placing his phone on the table with an audible thud. "Ah, yes…um, well…I know it's difficult." He patted Tim on the back while his other hand tried to gently push him away. "But everything will work out."

Tim nearly rolled his eyes and quickly released the man, sliding his smartphone face down over Powers'. Now all he needed was twenty seconds.

"S-sorry, I just…" Tim forced his hands to shake, trying to mimic Dick's infamous puppy dog eye look. "The anniversary isn't far off and I just…" he trailed off meaningfully.

Ten seconds.

Powers' smile strained, dusting off his now creased suit jacket like Tim had dirtied it. "I know, I feel the same too," he said lightly, squeezing the boy's shoulder. "They'd be proud of how strong you've been for them, they really would."

Done

Tim mentally heard the timer click in his head, while he nodded along to what the other man had said. "Thanks, Sir," he replied quietly, smiling weakly. "Especially for the invitation, you didn't have to do all this…"

Powers squeezed his shoulder, a tiny bit harder this time, but his smile remained intact. "It's the least I could do, Timothy."

Tim's smile grew as he reached out for his phone, the device disappearing into his pocket with well-practiced precision.

Powers picked up his own phone like nothing was amiss and slid it back into his pocket.

Detroit

10/16/2023

19:00

In the facility the lunch room was quiet, with over a dozen teenagers sitting at sterile grey tabled,
blinding white lights sucking the colour from the room, while an intimidating amount of security dressed white stood on the sidelines with sedative guns in their hands.

Back in the summer if you had told Victor about there was a whole conspiracy involving human experiments he would have put it down to a bad B-Movie plot. Sure, human experiments had happened in the past, there was evidence of it, but things like that weren't meant to happen to guys like him.

Victor sighed, rubbing his eyes. Okay, that sounded pretty arrogant, but this wasn't meant to happen, none of it.

*What the hell had his dad been involved in?*

Victor stared down at the tray of plain food in front of him until he felt a small nudge from the guy next to him. He glanced over at the younger guy, Virgil Hawkins, a fifteen-year-old with dark skin and short spiky black hair and a narrow face, with heavy bags under his eyes.

Vigil looked back at him, frowning. "Lily's on board," he whispered so low Victor could barely hear him.

Victor's eyes widened. "How'd you make contact?" he murmured, his lips barely moving as he watched a guard pass by.

"Short-circuit," he replied even quieter, a ghost of a smirk on his face.

Victor grimaced, understanding. It looked like Virgil's powers had finally kicked in, which meant they'd have to get out fast before the scientists found out and stuck a collar on him like the same had happened with Lilith.

"What about that ninja girl?" Victor muttered, poking his glob of grey porridge with his spoon, watching the gooey mixture wobble.

"Lily said, Girl Ward. Sedated." Virgil stuck a spoonful of porridge in his mouth and scowled, looking sick as he forcefully swallowed.

Victor nodded, sipping some water, looking at the three others opposite him, Chris; a short boy who looked with freckles who stuttered a lot. Asami (a tall fourteen-year-old Japanese girl who barely spoke English), and finally Nathan—a seventeen-year-old who was gaunt looking and skinny like a twig.

Victor lowered his cup and placed his hand on the table, showing three fingers.

*(Three days until we escape.)*

Asami nodded and lowered her gaze back to her food, while Chris bit his nails nervously when another guard walked passed.

______________________________

Batman scoured the roof, of the expensive townhouse until he reached the second bedroom window. The lights were off but he could still see through it, noting it was empty, which meant Selina must be keeping Terry close.

He clicked a control on his gauntlet to disable the alarm, an audible click resonated from the window, and then he picked the lock and slid the window open.
It was quiet when he slipped inside, but he could hear the faint sound of a lullaby from the other room.

Batman silently closed the window behind him and walked across the room towards the half-ajar door, a stream of light filtering into the dim bedroom. Gently, he pulled the door open, letting the light stream through as he crept along the carpet.

His gaze wandered down the hallway towards the living room where he could see light leaking from the half-open door, which was where the noise was coming from. The hem of his cape dusted the carpet as he walked towards the sound, narrowing his eyes when he heard a faint creak of movement from inside the room.

When he pushed the door open he was greeted by Selina who was holding up a gun, while Terry slept soundly in a small Moses basket on the sofa.

"I expected you sooner," she said coldly; her shoulders were tense and there were dark circles under her green eyes.

Batman paused in the doorway and stared back at her for a moment before his eyes travelled around the room, the glass coffee table was covered in maps which detailed Gotham streets, but there weren't any weapons in sight or photos of Powers apartment complex so he assumed she'd hidden them.

"I didn't come here to fight," he finally spoke, looking back at her.

She remained tense, narrowing her gaze. "The last time I saw you, you carted me off to jail."

"I'm not here to arrest you, Selina," Batman replied evenly, gaining a scoff in response. "I've been tracking you for weeks. I just came to talk…and help." He glanced over at Terry briefly. "And I don't condone guns near babies." His gaze sharpened when he looked back at her.

Selina's glare wavered, nearly wincing. She kept her eyes locked on him she slowly started to lower the gun. "You're lucky I don't want to wake him," she remarked coolly, emptying the bullets from the gun, while she kept her gaze on him. "He'd scream the place down." She stuffed the bullets in her jean's pocket along with the gun.

Batman nodded in appreciation, taking a step to the side. "And, that's something we both don't want."

"You don't look surprised to see me." Selina crossed her arms, scanning him over with contempt.

"Your note wasn't convincing enough," Batman replied, moving around the room towards where the bookcase was, ignore the faint irritation in his chest. Even though he wouldn't admit it, for a time, he had thought she'd been dead. He'd never felt more glad to have been wrong. "I also know why you came back."

Selina eyes him warily, keeping her gaze on him as she wandered over to Terry's basket. "And what exactly do you think you know?"

He considered his next words carefully. "You're not the only one who's been keeping an eye on Derek Powers."

She grew silent, staring down at her baby. "Not close enough," she remarked coolly, sitting down next to the basket. "Under your watch, he's acquired quite a body count."
Batman's eyes narrowed further. "And, getting your revenge won't stop it from growing," he retorted, taking a step closer. "Powers is a pawn in all of this, which is why I need him alive."

Her lips twisted into a snarl, draping her arm over the couch. "He'll pay bail and be out in a week," she said bitterly. "That isn't justice."

"Neither is revenge." He looked over at Terry and walked closer. "Think about what you have to lose, Selina," his tone softened.

Her snarl wavered when she glanced down at her son, pursing her lips tightly for a second, as her face smoothed out when she stared back at the man draped in black. "I already had my chance of a normal life stolen from me more than once." She stood up slowly. "The mistake I made the first time was not killing Black Mask when I had the chance," she said coldly, walking up to him. "I'm not going to make that same mistake twice." Her gaze was hard like flint.

Batman stared down at her with barely held detachment. "Killing Powers won't bring your husband back, and it won't give you that second chance you've always wanted," his voice sounded empty, making her tense. "What you do will have consequences for your son and daughter."

Selina stared up at him scathingly, gritting her teeth, but then she looked away and balled her hands into fists. "...I've already killed, I can't fix the mistakes I made."

His glare dimmed. "Killing Powers won't make things better either," some softness slipped into his voice. "I want to give you a second chance...help me take down Powers the right way."

She hugged herself tightly; staring at the wall opposite like it had the answers written all over it. "...I could have used that second chance sixteen years ago." Selina's gaze sharpened when she looked at him. He narrowed his eyes. "But...you can't fix the past." She sighed, staring at him intently.

His lips stayed clamped shut, waiting for her to either walk away or strike him, so when she did neither he spoke. "No, you can't."

She shook her head faintly, chewing the inside of her mouth. "You're a real son of a bitch," she said tersely, looking him over once more. "But fine, I won't kill him." Selina took a step closer and traced the outline of the bat symbol on his chest.

His posture remained rigid. "I want your word."

She tilted her head at him in a coy manner. "I won't kill him, I'll just ruin him like he did to me. Sounds fair right?" her voice grew softer. "Since you want to help so badly." She pressed her breasts against his chest while her hands wandered further down.

A lump formed in his throat as he felt a rush of déjà vu, reimagining the scene on a rooftop with tight black leather encasing her sculpted body, with those red painted lips trying to steal a kiss. *Close but never too close*, that was how their game of cat and mouse had always been. *Always teasing but never too intimate.*

Batman abruptly took a step, feeling too warm in his suit.

Selina's hands dropped back to her side, perfectly composed as she looked at him coolly. "Some things never change," she said, smoothing a blonde hair out of her (beautiful) face. "Do they?"

He moved further away, grinding his teeth in frustration. "I'll be watching you," his throat was dry,
swallowing hastily (she raised an eyebrow). "Do I have your word you won't kill Powers?" he repeated.

Her eyes narrowed, folding her arms, considering him for a moment. "...I promise."

Batman stared at her for a few more seconds until he was satisfied she was telling the truth. "Then, I'll be in touch." He sank further into the shadows while he kept his eyes locked on hers.

Selina stared back at him unwaveringly, a ghost of a smile on her face.

Dried blood caked the floor of the junkyard, with a tied up and beaten Footsoldier unconscious on the ground.

The Red Hood touched his ribs, glaring at the unconscious man like it was his fault. Jason's injuries still felt sore but this job hadn't been that strenuous, though, he had needed ten minutes to catch his breath while he'd been beating the man.

A familiar sixth sense made his skin prickle uneasily.

The helmet made his breathing sound more laboured while he looked around the junkyard before his gaze landed on a familiar black silhouette in the distance.

Jason balled his hands into fists; the gloves he was wearing were still stained with blood. He stared at the silhouette for another moment before he caved in and sighed, begrudgingly walking towards his former mentor.

Batman's outline stayed rigid on the spot, standing on top of the dirt hill that overlooked the yard.

"Come to make sure he ain't dead?" Red Hood asked scathingly, as he came to stand near him.

Batman tilted his head towards him and narrowed his eyes. "Is your leg acting up again?"

Jason gritted his teeth. "It's fine." He crossed his arms, holding back a sigh. "Now what do you want?"

"...You moved back into your apartment," Batman said, looking straight ahead at the horizon.

The younger of the two narrowed his gaze. "Doc gave me the all clear, so I don't see a problem."

Batman's lips thinned disapprovingly. "And, the drinking?"

Jason shifted uneasily. "I'm not taking it with my meds if that's what you're worried about," his voice grew defensive. "I'm not stupid."

"Just checking," Batman replied cordially, glancing back at him. "You haven't exactly been taking care of yourself."

He balled his hands into fists, feeling a fresh swell of anger. "I've managed fine, I just...it's just been a rough couple of months," he ground out, glowering at the older man. "So quit treating me like a kid."

Batman stared at him for a moment, turning around to face him fully. "...Can you blame me?" he questioned, receiving a stony silence. "Besides, you've been acting off lately," Batman said, narrowing his eyes. "Mind telling me why?"
Jason swallowed a lump in his throat, thankful the helmet hid his face. "Besides being stuck in the same house as you for nearly a month?" He scoffed, hunching his shoulders tightly. "I'm just super."

Batman's gaze narrowed further, lips twisted into a grimace. "You're lying."

Fuck

Damn it.

Jason levelled his glare with one of his own. "Okay, fine..." He hastily tried to find an excuse, a convincing one with a mix of truth to make it look real. "Maybe...maybe I'm trying to come to grips that you guys are my family," he answered, digging his nails into his palms. "Even if I don't deserve it."

Batman's eyes widened a fraction before his expression settled back to neutral. "You don't have to push us away, Jason," his voice lowered, taking a step closer.

Hypocrite

"Why not? You do it all the time," Red Hood muttered bitterly.

The Dark Knight froze, stiffening. "...Nevertheless," there was tension in his voice. "We need to stick together."

Jason shrugged, looking away. "I'm still here aren't I?" he argued. "Just because I'm not playing happy families in the cave doesn't mean I'm gonna ditch you guys." He shifted uncomfortably.

Batman scrutinised him for a long moment. "...And, that's the only thing bothering you?" he asked, warily.

Not even close.

Jason bit down on his tongue hard, feeling like he was being pushed into a trap. "Can we not do this?" He glowered at his old mentor. "There's nothing left to talk about, okay, so let's just leave it," he snapped, squaring his shoulders, ready for a fight, but Batman's stare didn't waver. "Or, better yet just stay out of my way, that's easier right? Easier for everyone."

Batman breathed in deeply for a second before he moved in closer. "Trying to run away from us won't fix anything," he said levelly. "Whether you like it or not you became my son when you signed that document."

My son.

Jason bristled, flinching back. "It's just a piece of paper..." his voice weakened.

"You know that isn't true." Batman sighed softly. "The point is, you're my responsibility, Jason, and nothing will ever change that."

Jason gulped, feeling his stomach churn like he'd be sick, staring down at the ground. "Fuck sake," he muttered quietly, feeling like a heavy weight was crushing his shoulders. "Just... why couldn't you just kill him, B?" he whispered, looking up at him. "I know it's messed up but..."

It would have shown how much you love me.

Batman was quiet for a moment, staring out at the skyline. "...No, it's okay, I understand," he
sounded tired, sighing. "The truth is, if it wasn't for Nightwing, I would have." His mouth twisted in disgust. Jason frowned, watching him carefully. "And, I wouldn't have stopped with him…I wanted…" Batman sighed again and stared back at Jason. "Just because I restrained killing the Joker doesn't mean I loved you any less, it just means I had people around me to stop me from crossing that line."

Jason felt a bad taste in his mouth. There were a lot of things he wanted to say to that but his tongue wouldn't move, it was like the words were stuck in his mouth. There was a sharp pain in his chest, a horrible kind of guilt he wished he could get rid of.

It was easier to hate Batman, so much easier. Especially considering how much there was to lose if the truth got out. If the truth got out.

"I…" Jason trailed off, feeling the pressure of Batman's gaze on him. "Why…why are you doing this, we never do this."

"I know," the older man replied stiffly. "I don't like it either but I want us to move past this, Jason." He took another step forward. "And, if that means we have to talk this out then fine, we'll keep trying to talk this out until we get it right."

Jason shifted uncomfortably, it all seemed too good to be true, too easy and simple, but that sixteen-year-old version of him which was buried underneath it all wanted this so badly. For things to just go back to how they used to be, to forget the bad shit and just go back to being happy.

Red Hood rubbed the back of his neck. "…We'll never get it right, B," his voice was quiet, shaking his head. Batman averted his gaze and remained silent. "…But, we're alright, I guess, you and me…yeah," he wasn't sure how to say it. "Listen, despite everything, I don't…I don't hate you."

It was the closest thing to I love you he could say, and in their family, it was more or less the exact equivalent.

Batman lifted his head, his expression becoming less cold and rigid, and more relaxed. "I'm glad."

They lapsed into a silence, but it was less hostile this time around and kind of nice. It was nice and Jason wanted it to stay that way, he didn't want Bruce to hate him or be more disappointed in him than he already was. Jason swallowed a dry lump in his throat, clenching his blood-stained gloves. He needed to make sure this mess with Intergang didn't fuck things up.

Jason took a step back, already making plans. "Yeah, well, I gotta go finish enforcing," he said, uneasily. "There's a drug shipment coming in at the docks."

Batman nodded. "Have you attached the tracers yet?"

"Not yet, gotta pick them up from Oracle," he replied, moving further away. "…I'll drop by later to give you the specs," he added hesitantly.

The corner of Batman's lips lifted ever so slightly. "I'll make sure to be there."

Jason felt a warm feeling fill his stomach. "Yeah…yeah, good." He felt a little dizzy, quickly looking away as he slipped down the mud hill, his boots scraping against the soil, feeling a small buzz of happiness.

The days were getting shorter now that summer was over, it was a lot colder too, especially at the docks.
Jason took off his mask and placed it on the grubby floor, he was sitting behind one of patrol boats which had been pulled in for repairs. He was hidden from Oracle's scrutiny since there weren't many cameras around the docks.

Jason took out his battered burner phone and dialled the number, holding it to his ear when it started ringing. His chest tightened as the phone rang, waiting.

The ringing stopped. "Our contract is complete." It was a woman on the other line.

Jason swallowed thickly. "Like hell it is," he snapped, forcing a tremor out of his voice. "Besides, I want to resume our trademanship, you scratch my back I scratch yours."

"...And, what exactly do you want?"

Jason briefly looked around before lowering his voice. "I heard a rumour Intergang was involved in some high-end trading, the genetic kind."

The reply he got was sharp. "Do not call us again."

"Wait!" The panic exploded in his chest, all bravado gone. "I pulled through for you last time, I can do the same again," he let out a shallow breath. "I just want a delivery gig."

To his relief they didn't hang up, instead, there was silence from the other end, lasting six seconds.

"A delivery gig?" the woman repeated coldly, almost sneering.

Jason swallowed a lump in his throat. "Yeah, the new head boss in Gotham ain't giving be an equal share of profits, so I gotta pick up the extra from somewhere, you know. Footsoldiers ain't cheap."

"Hm...there is some cargo that needs moving."

He held back a sigh of relief. "Just give me a time and place."

The woman made a tsk noise from the other end, muttering something to another person on the other end. "Pick up point 6 on the 20th at 5 am," she relayed. "Same rate as usual."

Then, they hung up before Jason could reply.

Jason let out a deep breath when the line went dead, lowering the phone from his ear. He allowed himself a few minutes to recompose, hanging his head low.

If he got access to the drop-off base then he should be able to hack into their computer and erase the contract they put on Silas Stone's head, and try to get more info on this Metahuman trafficking ring that seemed to be going on.

He just needed to remain one step ahead of Batman and then he'd stay in the clear.

Jason swallowed a bad taste in his mouth, feeling a fresh wave of self-loathing overwhelm him. It felt like the Silas Stone situation all over again—He shook his head violently, running a hand over his face. No, no it wasn't, he quickly corrected himself, because no more innocent people were going to die, not again.

This was just a simple transfer job, not an assassination, whoever he was transferring was going to be okay. They'd stop the experiments and rescue everyone who'd been taken, and Batman wouldn't find out about Jason's involvement in Mr Stone's murder.
Jason's gut twisted painfully, ducking his head. It would all work out, right?
Victor kept his gaze down as he and the rest of the boys were marched down the hallway towards the male ward. Virgil was walking alongside him, eyes switching back and forth from the ten guards that were keeping them in line.

The guards were carrying rods, sedative guns, and tasers. Victor looked ahead as they neared the crossroad of the corridor, the hallway straight ahead led to the other rooms while the corridor on the right went to the girls ward with the left heading to the boys' ward.

Victor looked over his shoulder at the two guards at the back of the line, before his gaze shifted down to Virgil. "You ready?" he whispered, beginning to feel queasy, his hands clammy.

Virgil grimaced, narrowing his eyes at the guards up ahead. "…I hope so," he murmured, clenching his hands into fists.

Victor slowed down as he approached the corner of the corridor and locked his gaze on the guard in front of them.

Better now than never.

Victor lunged forward and tackled the guard to the ground.

"Hey!" The guards rushed forward.

Chris ducked down and swiped a tazer from one of the guards who ran passed. The guard only realised a second too late, looking down. "What the—"

Chris stuck the tazer into the man's ribs and clicked the trigger, electrocuting him, and like a spark had been ignited, the other prisoners sprung to action and attacked the guards like a giant wave.

Victor elbowed the guard in the face, breaking the blond man's nose and drawing out blood. The other guards were too busy trying to push back against the mass of teenagers.

"CODE BLUE!" the husky woman guard, with dark hair, screamed before she was put in a chokehold.

All this happened in the space of ten seconds as Virgil used the distraction to press his hands against the wall, scrunching his eyes shut to concentrate; he released a large bolt of electricity that
rose up and knocked out all the lights running along the corridor, plunging them into darkness.

Inque had been enjoying a nice cup of hot cocoa when the alarm went off while she'd been sitting in the lounge, slouching in her chair. A new issue of Celebrity Gossip was laid open on the table; apparently, this model had joined a cult, but she seemed like an attention seeking bitch so it was probably all a publicity stunt.

The cup was poised near her lips when heard the alarm and the scraping of chairs as the guards rushed into action.

Her brow furrowed, lowering the cup back onto the table, looking over her shoulder. "Damn it, what now?" she hissed, pushing her chair back as she got to her feet.

Inque looked over at the door, gritting her teeth when she saw the lights in the corridor were out and the guards were rushing around with flashlights. A second later the lights in the lounge went out, leaving her in darkness.

The alarm was ringing throughout the base, echoing and vibrating off the walls.

They were running in the dark with only four flashlights with them to light the way.

"Come on!" Victor yelled, with Virgil, Chris, Nathan, and the rest of the male prisoners chasing after.

A flash of blinding lights appeared from up ahead.

"Stand down!" the commander of the security guards shouted, pointing a sleek black gun at them.

"Virgil, now," Victor ordered.

"On it." Virgil skidded forward and aimed a giant current of white electricity at them.

The guards were hit, yelling out in pain as their bodies convulsed from the shock. The guns hit the ground, with the bodies of the guards following after.

"Come on." Chris ran forward, jumping over one of the unconscious men. "They're gonna put us on lockdown."

Victor raced ahead, with most of the others trampling over the unconscious guards, but he couldn't find it in him to be concerned for the men. "This way!"

They zeroed in on the female ward, which was already a mess of chaos, ten of the girls who weren't locked up had taken advantage of the chaos and had turned on the guards, fighting back with Asami leading them in uproar, but it wouldn't be long until the full armada of security got down here and boxed them in.

The girl ward was like the boys', grey slabs of concrete for walls with glass cells lined out in perfect rows.

Virgil ran over to one of the cells where one of the girls was banging against the class, her voice silenced by the transparent barrier. "Step back," he warned, smacking his palm against the controls. "This better work." He released a bolt of electricity that carried on like a wave, filtering passed the metal and into the wires.
Victor was busy fighting the guards, punching one female on in the face before he snatched the taser and used in on her.

The electric locks on the cell doors overloaded, triggering the doors to open.

Virgil ran down the long line of cells, looking into each, frantic. "Come on, where are you?" he muttered to himself, trying to find the sedated girl. The lights above flickered back on, distracting him as he looked up. "Crap."

Virgil kept looking, nearly skidded on the floor when he saw the occupant of cell 45 hadn't run out like the others. He nearly slipped on the floor when he came to stop in front of the cell where Subject C20, aka the Asian-looking Ninja-girl (since she'd never said her name), was laid down on the thin bed with a drip plugged into her arm.

"Vic, I found her!" he shouted, looking over at his friend.

"Coming!" Victor wrestled a tazer out of one of the guard's hands, while Nathan attacked the man from behind.

Virgil rushed into the cell and ripped the drip out of C20's arm before he lifted her up and wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

"She okay?" Victor asked, hurrying over to help

"She's alive. Don't know how long this stuff will last, though," Virgil replied, as he carefully handed her over to Victor. "Can you manage?"

Victor smiled crookedly, hoisting her over his shoulder. "She's a lot lighter than a quarterback, now come on." His smiled faded quickly. "Let's go."

They ran out of the cell, where the number of free prisoners had multiplied, outnumbering the guards.

"Guys, come on!" Virgil yelled, waving his arm to signal them.

Asami led the frontline. "Ikou!" she shouted, carrying a taser and sedative gun in her hand.

Victor waved his arm up to signal the others to follow as he hurried down the other corridor. The sound of the alarm growing louder, mixing up with the noise of impending footsteps that seemed to be getting close, but the stampede of young prisoners thundered and drowned out the rest of the noise as they hall piled down the hallway.

The lights from the city blocked the stars. The street lamps of Detroit bathed the roads and buildings in a sickly pale orange colour.

An old blood stain was splattered near the middle of the car park, nestled in the shadows of two large buildings.

Batman and Robin touched down on the ground, their focus on the blood stain that had yet to be properly scrubbed away.

The Dark Knight silently approached the spot, while he surveyed the rest of the area. "What gun did the autopsy report say it was, again?" he asked, keeping his gaze focused on the stain.

Robin paused, the faint hum of his computer could be heard in the quiet parking lot. The only other
sounds were from the city traffic further away, but this area was more secluded, hidden away between a mass of buildings.

"The report says it was a basic Hi-Point semi-automatic pistol," Robin answered. "But the evidence was conveniently reported 'lost' after the autopsy report."

Batman grimaced, looking over at the building opposite. "And, they cremated his body soon after…" He frowned, staring back at the stain on the ground. "Take a look at the direction of the blood stain."

Robin came to stand at his side, bending down to examine the blood. "...It's off."

"Exactly." Batman narrowed his eyes at the building, re-imagining the scene. "This wasn't a close-range kill."

The boy stood up and looked around before his gaze settled on something on something up ahead. "Wanna bet they deleted the CCTV footage?" he said, a hint of mischief in his tone.

Batman turned around and followed his line of sight, a small smirk sliding onto his face when he saw the camera. "How long do you need?"

Robin looked up at him, grinning. "Not long."

The hallway was full of the escaped prisoners, it was chaos and she couldn't keep a lid on it.

Inque spread herself thin to engulf ten or twenty of the teenagers, shoving them back down the hall like a tidal wave before she snapped back into shape and extended her fingers like spears.

The ones stupid enough to get back up were attacked by her extended fingers, some of the sharp fingertips cutting into their arms and legs.

So much screaming.

Inque retracted her blood-stained fingers and liquefied her body again to entrap the prisoners.

"Behind!" One of the guards, Curtis, ordered, pointing in the other direction.

The guards shifted and so did Inque when she reformed her head so she could see what they were looking at.

Five prisoners were running passed the hallway to the Meta-Ring, with one of them carrying an unconscious girl with them. She recognised the apparent ringleader, Victor Stone.

Inque moved back, dragging her black ink form with her. "Now, where are you going?" she murmured, narrowing her eyes before she liquefied again so she could jump ahead of the guards in front. Her body bounced off the wall as she chased the runaways.

The smaller teen, he was a dark-skinned boy with spiky hair. Subject 54… Virgil Hawkins, right? He whipped around and extended his arm until… electricity came out.

What?

The electricity bounced towards her. Inque's white pupils bulged, as she dodged, skirting around the corridor like a rubber ball trying to break free.
Her eyes zeroed in on Virgil before she struck, her fluid form tackling him like a wave until he was engulfed by darkness, choking on her thick gooey form. She smirked, shooting out tentacles of thick sharp tendrils of ink at the others, like spears they dug into the walls, creating large cracks.

"Move!" Victor yelled, running in a zig-zag line as she attacked. The others followed suit, but the smallest one fell behind.

"Ahhh!" Virgil's gurgled scream reverberated out from her mutated stomach as he tried to break free, but she ignored him and focused on the littlest teen that was trying to run.

Inque entrapped the short boy in black goo that hardened like concrete when he tried to struggle—

Her entire form frazzled when electricity invaded every vein in her mutated body, ink texture bubbling until—

There was a ringing in her ear when she e…exploded—she couldn't feel any—Disorientated…can't think.

She was alive but bits of her were splattered—someone had walked over her, she could taste the dirt on their shoes.

Everything was dark until…wait, no she could feel again…her body was pulling back together, reforming, like metal drawn to a magnet.

The guards ran passed her, trodding their filthy feet on her body.

Her limbs curved and cracked together as her lower and upper body formed back together in a slithery and almost mechanic motion until her head was finally formed and she could breathe again

Inque gasped, eyes wide open when she looked around, the walls were crisp white again and the alarm was still ringing, the guards already running up ahead.

"You're wasting time, Inque," a cold voice with a foreign lilt to it spoke.

Inque turned around, broken out of her daze when she laid eyes on Professor Chang; the old Chinese man was dressed in his lab coat with orange tinted goggles on and with his medium black hair slicked back. There were more guards with him, ones she hadn't seen before, that were dressed in a red and black uniform which was different to the others she'd seen.

Inque blinked several times before she nodded and looked behind her where the teenagers had disappeared to. "Yes, Sir," she said quickly, liquefying, she zoomed ahead, hoping she hadn't lost much time.

The guards behind Chang clicked their guns ominously as the Professor followed after Inque with a less urgent pace.

Virgil's chest burned from the amount of running they had done, but he forced his legs to move faster, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling when he heard the thundering footsteps of more guards approaching.

The inside of the Meta-Ring was like the others Wards except the prisoners were in individual cells in the shape of a ring, and they weren't separated by gender. Each prisoner had a thick electronic collar attached to their neck to shut off their powers, and only seven of the cells actually had people in them.
From a distance they could see Lilith perk up when she saw them, pressing her palms against the glass.

Virgil smacked his palm against the control pad of one of the cells and electrocuted the controls, opening the cells.

"You actually made it!" Lilith ran out of her cell when the door was only halfway lifted, heading towards them. Her long, strawberry blonde hair fluttered behind her, she was tall for a fifteen-year-old, with sickly pale skin and a bony physique.

Virgil was shoved back when Lilith tackled him in a tight hug. "Oh, come on, we're not that useless," he remarked, smiling crookedly as she loosened her hold. His gaze lowered to the collar, causing his smile to widen when he touched the mechanism, frying the circuits.

Lilith grinned and gladly ripped the collar off. "Thanks." She tossed it on the floor.

The other seven Meta prisoners had gathered around. "Mind doing us next?" Kiran asked, scowling as she tugged at her collar; her straight dark hair messy and unkempt, and her usual glowing bronze skin was washed out.

"Guys, we need to move," Victor ordered re-adjusting Ninja-Girl in his grip as he started walking faster. "I told the others to meet near the back of sector 8 for teleportation."

Virgil shut down Kiran's collar while they ran, while Lilith looked down at her hands nervously. "I've never teleported that many people before," she said, grimacing as she looked back a Cyborg. "I might not get everyone out in time."

Victor didn't slow down. "We don't have many options, Lily."

"Look out!" Chris yelled, dodging out of the way when a great large mass of black hurled into Victor, slamming the large teen against the wall.

"Shit," Virgil swore, sparks flying from his fingers, gritting his teeth. He didn't have a clean shot.

"Get off of him!" Kiran yelled, her Indian accent seeping through. Her palm glowed bright yellow, as she flew towards Inque, sinking her glowing hands into the ball of mass.

Inque solidified and head butted Kiran in the face, knocking the girl back, as her hand morphed into a hard mallet and punched Kiran in the face.

Victor was thrown across the room, while Ninja-Girl was flung across the floor. Virgil took his shot and aimed at Inque.

Guards piled into the room, ones they hadn't seen before. "Close in!" the commander of the group cried.

One of the scientists balled his hands into fists. "Get me closer to Subject 14!" he ordered the commander.

Inque moved like lightening, bouncing off the floor in her liquid form as tear gas was thrown at the group of teenagers.

Virgil covered his mouth and ran towards the door, while Kiran summoned a shaky force field to try and protect them. "Lily, teleport us now!"
Lilith hesitated, wide terrified eyes swept over the group. "I-I…"

Chris dragged Ninja-Girl, but he wasn't strong enough to lift her. Virgil went to grab Victor while Kiran held up the force field, keeping Inque at bay. The prisoners stayed huddled together as the gas grew.

"I can't hold this much longer." Kiran's muscles were straining, falling to her knees as she held her hands up higher.

Lilith closed her eyes tight and summoned a large glow of red lights that covered nearly half the room.

"What the fu—"

Virgil's stomach flipped as he was consumed by a red glow, gravity disappeared until the red light disappeared and he was harshly dropped back onto the floor.

"I did it!" Lilith yelled, excitedly. "I…Oh." Her enthusiasm died.

Virgil looked around and understood why they hadn't teleported out of the facility, they were still in it. She'd teleported them into one of the labs which had strange technology laid around. Guns, large boxes, liquid containers, and things he'd never seen before but looked like they belonged in a Sci-fi movie.

"How did…?" a gruff voice broke the silence.

Virgil looked around and froze. On the other side of the room, the guards and scientist had been teleported with them as well, as well as Inque. One of the guards threw up on the floor before collapsing in the vomit.

Victor groaned, rubbing his head as he looked up, eyes widening. "Shit."

The commander's eyes narrowed, pointing at them. "Sedate them!"

Virgil's eyes narrowed as he jumped to his feet and aimed his electricity at the guards, but he didn't notice the dark shadow until Inque attacked him from behind.

Something hard hit the back of his head as he released the electricity from his palm.

The world went black, but before he lost consciousness he heard an ear-piercing bang that spread heat across his face, like heat from a fire.

The electricity hit a square box container with strange runes carved into the metal.

Victor stumbled to his feet, breathing heavily as chaos rained down around them. The guards were trying to fight the prisoners.

He caught a glimpse of Virgil hitting the floor, knocked out by Inque.

Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, a harsh heat touched his skin, gaining his attention. Victor turned around just as the strange square box exploded.

"Victor!" Chris shouted.

"MOVE!"
"Cover!"

A bright orange light absorbed everything in Victor's sight.

Pain.

(Kiran summoned a force field, a bright yellow light that combated the blast, but it didn't reach Victor in time.)

There was screaming, screams that were hoarse and barely sounded human.

His screams.

Victor's skin was on fire, the pain so intense he couldn't feel his body anymore.

There was something sticky on her face, warm…

Lilith rolled her head to the side, her ears ringing from the explosion.

She couldn't see anything properly, everything was blurry and orange tinted. She could smell something burning, like rotten meat.

"Ms Clay?" a lilted voice filled her ears. Someone in a white lab coat was standing above her, cradling her face in his latex-gloved hand.

"V-Vic…" Her tongue wouldn't move properly, she couldn't speak clearly.

"I wouldn't worry about him," The voice grew colder, making her blood grow cold when she recognised it. "I'd be more concerned about yourself."

Lilith choked on the air when Professor Chang's face came into view, seeing her own reflection in his orange tinted goggle; half her face was covered in blood.

Batcave, Gotham

10/20/2023

02:13

Robin held his laptop against his chest as he approached the Batcomputer where Bruce was sitting. His mentor had lowered his cowl but, like him hadn't changed out of his costume.

"I finished," Robin said, as Batman turned around in the chair. "But, come of the footage was completely destroyed, so I could only get a couple of decent shots." He opened his laptop to show him, stopping in front of his mentor.

Batman nodded. "At least it's something."

Robin chewed his tongue, pressing the play button. The footage started to play out, it was from a high angle showing Mr Stone unlocking his car, the image was a little static. The scene played out silently, confirming their fears when a bullet came out of nowhere and shot Mr Stone in the head.

Batman's eyes narrowed. "Replay in slow motion," he ordered, sitting up straighter in his chair.
Robin nodded, replying the scene again but slower. The angle of the camera meant the shooter couldn't be seen, but they could still see the direction of the bullet.

"Is there any more angles?" Bruce asked.

The younger hero nodded, turning his laptop around so he could select the next clip. "It's from the shooter's side, but it's still too low down." He showed him the clip and let it play.

The second camera was on the top of the building opposite, and they saw the same scene play out like before.

"They took the shot from the roof," Batman stated, earning a nod from Tim.

"I tried getting some footage but it was all blacked out," Robin said, frowning. "But judging from the blacked out footage I should be able to recreate a trail of how they got onto the roof…"

Batman nodded, swerving his chair around to face the computer. "Upload the files onto here, it'll speed things up."

Robin grew quiet, closing the laptop. "…I'm not sure that's a good idea," he replied hesitantly, looking over his shoulder.

"Why?" Bruce's eyes narrowed at him, turning the chair around fully. "What's the problem?"

Tim apprehensively took a step closer, grimacing. "…It's about Jason," he murmured, afraid the man would pop out behind the giant penny in the corner. "Is he…?"

Batman stared at him for a moment before he shook his head. "He's getting drunk at a bar downtown," he answered with a hint of disappointment. "And, Huntress is still out patrolling, so nothing leaves this cave."

For now, was the unspoken snag, because if Jason was responsible for what Tim thought he was, then there was no way in hell Bruce would ignore this hiccup.

Robin hesitated again, a bad taste was in his mouth, but he tried to ignore it. "…A few weeks ago when I was finding that footage for Huntress, I saw deleted footage of Jason leaving the city on the same day Mr Stone was killed…"

Batman's posture and overall expression seemed to grow colder as tension coiled around his shoulders. "Show me."

Tim bit down on his lower lip and opened up his laptop, balancing it in his arms as he found the old clip. He was silent while Bruce watched the short scene of Red Hood driving off on his motorcycle out of the City limits.

When the clip ended Batman remained silent, making Robin shift uncomfortably. "…It's kind of a big coincidence," the boy muttered, closing the laptop.

Bruce's jaw clenched, digging his fingers into the chair's armrests. "Have you told anyone else?"

Robin paused, the words feeling ominous. He gritted his teeth for a second before he shook his head. "No."

Batman nodded, looking away briefly. "Let's keep it that way, for now."

"And, what if he did kill him?" Robin blurted out, eyeing his mentor warily. Would you bail him
"out again, Bruce? "This isn't some paedophile or some irredeemable Psychopath, it can't be justified."

Bruce's gaze sharpened, but his hands loosened their grip on the armrests. "If I find out Jason is the killer, then there will be consequences," his voice was hard like ice.

Robin felt a thick lump form in his throat, tensing, he averted his gaze.

*Had he done the right thing?*

Tim grimaced, doubting himself.

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**New York**

**10/20/2023**

**08:45**

The Red Hood pulled the white van into the drop-off point parking bay. The facility was in an old factory hidden in the slums, with vans and trucks coming and out every twenty minutes, with different sized cargo each time. Some of the stuff looked like drugs, technology, and some stuff he wasn't quite sure about.

Jason turned off the engine and undid his seatbelt, looking behind his seat at the cargo. It was boxes of what he still wasn't sure, but he'd have to get a better look once one of those assholes checked it over first.

He shuffled out of his seat and opened the door, his boots clicking against the concrete. Jason leant against the doorframe when he saw one of the supervisors (or whatever they were called around here) notice him and walk on over. The guy was bald, with a thick blond beard and a heavy set of muscles which were shown off in his black t-shirt.

"S'up." Jason knocked on the van door. "Got your delivery right here."

The Supervisor raised an eyebrow, looking down at the thin touch screen tablet in his hands. "Order 14894?" he asked, walking passed him towards the back of the van.

Red Hood nodded, following him. "All packed up and ready to go."

The Supervisor opened the doors, revealing two crates full of brown unmarked boxes. He stepped inside of the van and withdrew a pocket knife from his belt, using it to open one of the packages.

Jason narrowed his eyes. "Everything up to standard?"

The other man examined the inside for another second, reaching in to pick up a computer chip… a computer chip?

The Red Hood frowned, it was hard to see in the dim light but that definitely looked like some kind of electric chip. Like a tracking device maybe?

Whatever it was, the bald guy seemed satisfied and capped the knife as he slipped it back onto his belt. "Yes, it's fine." He stood up and walked out of the van, while he tapped something on his tablet. "The money will be in your account by midnight."
"Can I call HR if it's late?" Jason joked lightly, earning a scathing look.

"Shut up and get out of here." The Supervisor waved over at some men dressed in Hi-Vis gear. "Hey, boys, come move this shit!"

Jason stepped back, briefly eyeing the merchandise in the truck. It wasn't his top priority to know what exactly those chips were for but that didn't mean he wasn't interested…but it could wait. "Yeah, well, I've been holding in a shit for two hours so….?" He looked over at the Supervisor. "Where's the bathroom?"

The Supervisor narrowed his eyes, as the Hi-Vis men came over to transfer the stuff. "They're around the back." He pointed to the right-hand side of the building.

Jason shrugged. "Much obliged." He stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked passed them, heading to the toilets.

His gaze scrutinised the rest of the outside, the main loading bay was open to all of them but the actual inside had all the admin stuff, so that section required an ID card to open the doors. The main objective was borrowing and ID card without the cameras catching sight of the transgression.

A potential target was walking towards the toilets up in front of him.

Jason smiled to himself, padding the inside pocket of his jacket. If there was one thing Batman was still good for, it was the toys.

The male toilets were in a small metal container with a crude male symbol painted on the door. He went inside, squinting at the bright blue light when he walked in—the target, a fat middle-aged guy with swollen cheeks and dark hair, unzipped his pants at the urinal.

Jason walked over to the urinal next to him, earning a wary glare. He arched an eyebrow in response, briefly glancing at the ID tag attached to the man's belt.

The man's brow furrowed, shifting further away while he aimed his junk at the urinal. Another couple of guys walked into the toilets while Jason took his time getting his cock out to piss.

The fat guy with the ID shook some drops of piss off his cock before he tucked it back into his briefs. Jason reached into his jacket, while one of the guys—kind of short with dyed blue hair—who had come in earlier, stood a few urinals away while the other one had gone into the toilets.

The man zipped up his pants and moved back, as Jason's hands closed around the device in his pocket. It was all about timing and having quick fingers, something Jason had plenty of experience in.

When the man walked passed him, Jason whipped out the device and dug it into the guy's back, a faint vibration hitting the man's back. The device had a unique ability to make you shit yourself through the use of a simple pulse.

"Ugh," was the faint noise the man made, stiffening.

Jason stuffed the device back in his pocket and zipped up, the blue haired man at the urinal nearby looked up and frowned when he saw the fat guy clutch his stomach, but when the large man let out a loud fart the blue haired guy wrinkled his nose and looked away.

Jason swiped the ID card from the large guy's belt and slipped it into his jacket pocket, stepping back when the fat guy stumbled into one of the toilets and basically collapsed on the seat,
slamming the door shut; he'd be in there for a while.

With that taken care of, Jason walked out of the toilets and rounded the corner where the trash was kept; he probably had ten or twenty minutes tops before they searched for him.

With the amount of stuff in the factory, the crates piled on top of each other, you could easily make a maze out of it all, which Jason used to his advantage.

He hid behind a stack of crates which had cocaine inside and hid his red helmet inside an empty ripped box which had been dumped near the side by someone clearly too lazy to find a fucking waste bin.

Jason sealed the box as best he could and then stuffed it under his arm, keeping his head down as he walked over towards the doors. At the edge of the factory, there was a large metal door that had a scanner for the ID. Next to the doors was the conveyer belt which had an armed guard stationed right next to it.

He supposed more people would try to sneak in through the conveyor rather than the main door. Jason avoided the guard's eye and pressed the ID card against the scanner, the machine beeped and flashed green, and then the doors slid open.

Jason hurried inside the hallway which was a dark brown colour with faded wooden flooring and washed out wallpaper that was stained with some kind of grease.

The next stages were creating a distraction and then try to find the main boss's computers. These admin offices tended to never be that big, though, considering most of the space went towards the storage and transport rooms.

First thing was first, a distraction, which was easy enough.

Jason walked into the storage room along with another worker who was dressed in a Hi-Vis jacket. There was a hook full of Hi-Vis vests on a hook, making it pretty easy to take one.

He walked towards the back of the storage room, passed tall large metal shelves which were cluttered with weapons and boxes of who the hell knew what.

"…So when are they gonna move her?" someone from the other side of the shelf was speaking.

Jason ignored them and carried on to the end of the wall where the pipes, and placed his box on the floor, pretending to tie his shoelace.

"Fuck I know," another voice swore, sounding impatient. "He's still in his office talking to that creep in the robe—now, help me lift this shit."

Jason frowned, pausing for a second before he brushed it off and got back to work. He didn't have much time, looking around hastily he stuck a micro bomb under the pipe as he picked up the box again and stood up.

His stomach twisted, walking faster than necessary towards the exit.

Bruno Mannheim was not an attractive man, with his too brutish appearance matched with an equally brutish physique, and tanned skin which only highlighted the rough wrinkles on his face. In fact, he was better suited wearing a dirty vest or jeans rather than that expensive Italian suit.
Bruno's office was a reflection of his less refined tastes. It was messy and cluttered, with outdated file cabinets, bland grey wallpaper, a chipped wooden desk which was home to a mess of crisps, stale snacks, and paperwork which was piled on top of each other like a landfill.

And, then there was that distasteful sight of a girl chained in the corner—

"Hey, Blood," Bruno interrupted his train of thought, leaning leisurely in his chair while he drank a cup of coffee. "You want a coffee or something?"

"No, that's quite alright." Brother Blood smiled thinly, sitting upright in his chair, with his hands clasped in the long sleeves of his white robes, a gold trim on the hemline. "I was just musing about the current turn of events," he said, glancing over at the blonde girl in the corner, she mustn't be older than fifteen or sixteen. "The Light has already shown a lack of control over those captured youths, which gives us an advantage."

"You can't steal 'em." Bruno set his coffee down on the desk. "They won't be easy to take, not when they're locked up tight."

"I have no intention of such a thing," Brother Blood replied dryly, arching an eyebrow. "I do not take things, I let them come to me." He couldn't help but shoot a pointed look at the girl in the corner.

Bruno's eyes narrowed at the jib, sneering. "It isn't really free will if they got chips in their head."


"Right, sure." Bruno rolled his eyes, smirking. "But, you gotta understand if they found out my involvement that could compromise my entire operation here."

Brother Blood nodded lazily. "A risk that will be compensated in full." The curl of his lip grew. "I understand the importance of keeping Intergang firmly in the neutral area," he added, resting his arm on the armrest as he stroked his chin. "A little competition is always good for profits, I'm told." He sighed. "And, besides with the Light and The Hive's differing…ideals, I think it best if my alliance with them ends sooner rather than later. You understand of course."

Bruno eyed him warily, leaning further back in his chair. "…Sorta."

Brother Blood smiled, looking over at the girl chained in the corner. Her blonde hair was lank and greasy, with sickly pale skin and dull blue eyes. She had a pretty face, like one of those a Barbie dolls and with a body to match, even if the grey jumpsuit hid most of it from view.

"Tell me, how long do you intend to keep her?" he asked lightly, with a sharp smile.

Bruno cocked an eyebrow, looking over at the girl. "You can't have her, Blood." He flashed his teeth in a tight smile. "My Boss already called dibs."

Brother Blood's smile grew. "Ah, yes, this infamous Master who hides in the shadows," he drawled, shrugging. "Fair enough, but I must warn you Kryptonite can be poisonous after prolonged exposure."

Bruno shrugged. "She'll be fine—"

A thundering bang interrupted their conversation.

"What the hell?" Bruno's eyes widened in alarm, standing up.
Brother Blood frowned, looking over at the door. "An Accident?"

"It better damn well be," the other man growled, heading over to the door. He ripped the door open and walked into the hallway. "What the hell is going on here?!"

Brother Blood sighed, shaking his head faintly.

"…V-volto," a small hesitant voice captured his attention.

He tilted his head towards the girl. "Hmm?" His face became the picture of concern, standing up. "What was that, dear?"

The girl's eyes were sunken with dark circles underneath. "Mor Volto elo," she whispered, reaching out.

Brother Blood walked over to her. "You poor thing," he simpered, tilting his head. "You would have made a wonderful student, my dear." He sighed, bending down closer so he could stroke her head. "But, business is business I suppose." Brother Blood's eyes gleamed, curling his fingers through her hair.

The girl's eyes widened but then narrowed after a second. "Ran elo xanoplip!" she hissed, jerking her head away.

His smile dimmed, narrowing his eyes. "Still not—"

He was cut off when a sharp pain, like a needle, was struck in his back. It was a cold touch that made him stiffen, as his eyes rolled back and he collapsed on the floor.

Jason lowered his dart gun when the old man hit the ground, grimacing when he saw the chained up girl; sex slave most likely. The old man was pale with a receding hairline, grey hair, and a weird robe on that looked like it belonged to a cult leader.

The girl looked at Jason with wide frightened eyes. "Lin fo ula?"

That was definitely not a part of any language he'd heard, but her accent sounded like a weird mix of French, Russian, and something else.

"The fuck you say?" Jason frowned, locking the door behind him, walking closer. He dropped the box on the floor. "Why…? Wait…." His eyes narrowed at the glowing green chains. Was that? "…Well, shit." His eyes bulged, looking her up and down. "Are you another clone?"

Fuck, had they made another Superman offspring again? (Supey would be pissed)

The girl's brow furrowed, a scowl slipping onto her face. "E ran mulo lon un bano."

Whatever the hell that meant.

But, shit, this made things complicated. If the Light had another Kryptonian on their side then that was a serious secret weapon… and he was the only one who knew….Shit.

A shout from down the hallway refocused him. Jason shook his head, hurrying over to the computer. "Listen, I don't have time for this." The computer was already logged in under the boss's name (Bruno Mannheim), making Jason grin. "Come on, babe," he whispered, hacking into the payment and data logs.
He ignored the rustle of chains as the girl tried to stand up. "Ula forno volto elo!" she demanded.

"Not now," he snapped at her, feeling his heart thunder against his chest. "Do you know how much I'm risking right now?"

The girl's eyes narrowed. "Volto elo!" She rattled her chains.

Fuck

Shit

Urgh!

"Okay, just shut up," he hissed, grabbing her hands to stop her from making noise. "I'll... Volto, okay."

Her eyes lit up. "Volto?"

He nodded. "Yes... Volto." He hoped that the word meant help and not something else. "But, shut up for a second okay. Be quiet, ssshhh." He pressed a finger to his lips. "Okay?"

She seemed to understand, nodding. "O-Kay," she repeated slowly.

Jason gave her thumbs up, stepping backwards. "Good," he stretched out the word, before looking back at the computer. The noises outside seemed to get louder. "Come on," he muttered, tracking down his payment info. "Yes." Jason grinned, deleting the files. "Now, come on, Stone, where are you..."

There was CCTV footage of the Red Hood shooting Mr Stone from the rooftops, a nice clear piece of footage which they'd kept tucked away.

 Fucking slimy bastards.

Jason flashed his teeth in a grin and completely erased the footage, now the bastards had nothing on him, but what other secrets did they have? His brow furrowed, remembering the computer chips. He took out a USB from his pocket and stuck it in, selecting to download as many files as he could fit onto the stick.

"Noyos," the blonde hissed, her chains scraping against the floor. Her legs wobbled weakly when she tried to walk towards him. "Quin ma noyos."

"Yeah, I know just—"

The doorknob rattled. "Blood, what are you playing at?!" a deep voice shouted from behind the door.

The girl stiffened, as her skin grew more washed out. "Volto elo," she whispered feverishly, violently shoving the chains in his face. "Volto."

Jason hesitated, looking at her and then at the door.

"Blood, open the fucking door!"

"Shit," Jason whispered, gulping. Okay, so he could try to take on the whole of Intergang by himself, which wasn't completely impossible...that much...or....
The girl looked up at him pleadingly, holding out the green glowing chains. A Kryptonian was one hell of a partner.

"That's it, break the door down!"

Ah, fuck it.

Jason reached into his pocket and took out a lock pick. "You better not make me regret this," he hissed, hastily picking the lock on her chains as the door was pummelled by human bodies. "I'm serious; I will shove these chains up your ass if you fuck me over."

The lock gave an ominous click and chains dropped to the ground.

The girl grinned at him and held herself higher. "Zedu!"

The door was pounded against, the hinges coming loose.

Jason picked up the Kryptonite chains and threw them across the room before he ran to get his helmet for the box. "Just...don't blow the place up," he snapped, picking up his helmet. "Fuck sake." He shoved the helmet on and then withdrew his guns.

The door was knocked off its hinges, hitting the ground.

A large ugly guy in a suit was in front of a group of workers, looking ready to kill with their guns drawn.

"Who the fuck—" The guy in the suit froze, all bravado melting when the girl stepped forward next to Jason, her eyes glowing red. "Oh, shit."

Jason shot him in the stomach, and then all hell broke loose.

Gotham City

10/20/2023

11:15

Helena sighed quietly, doodling a scribble on the cover of her English textbook.

At the front of the class their teacher, Mr Scarlett, was speaking; a short middle-aged man in a brown suit with mousey hair and glasses. He was holding a thick pile of essays he'd graded, walking passed each desk and handed them out. "Here are your essays from last week, a lot of you improved from last time so let's keep up the good work," he told them, placing each essay on a student's desk as he passed.

"What did you get?" someone whispered not so quietly.

"Shove off," another voice hissed.

"Let me see," one girl squealed.

"Settle down," Mr Scarlett chided, nearing Lydia.

Helena looked out of the window, tapping her pen against the desk until her essay was slipped under her nose when he walked passed, a bright red C+ staring back at her with the
Helena dropped her pen, stomach feeling queasy when she saw the grade. She couldn't remember the last time she'd ever gotten a grade below a B.

Next, to her, she could see that Lydia had gotten an A, making Helena grimace and fold her essay in half to try to hide it.

Helena swallowed a lump in her throat, hunching her shoulders up defensively. It was just one low grade, though, she could make up for it and get back on track.

The bell went off from outside the hall, everyone shuffled in their seats, picking up bags and packing away books and pens.

"...Remember to study chapter nine, it'll be on next week's test," Mr Scarlett said, pausing in front of his desk after handing out all of the essays.

Helena sighed again, stuffing the textbook back in her along with her pencil case before she zipped it up and got to her feet, the essay scrunched up in her hand

"Hey." Lydia smiled at her, tucking the seat back under the desk. "Do you have any spare notes for Spanish?"

What notes? Helena frowned, trying to remember their last class. There was a test coming up soon, but it'd be fine, it wasn't like she needed notes anyway...

Helena slipped her backpack over her shoulder and shrugged. "I didn't take any."

Lydia's brow furrowed. "Oh...okay, cool." The smile faded for a second but quickly returned, glancing around the classroom quickly. "Well, at least it'll give me an excuse to ask Kyle," she whispered, grinning.

Helena smiled back, following the rest of the class headed towards the door. "Good idea." The smile faded when she looked over at Mr Scarlett who was sitting behind his desk. "You go on ahead, I'll catch up."

Lydia raised an eyebrow, hugging a book to her chest. "Um, okay then." She shrugged, walking towards the door as the last student left. "See you later."

"Yeah...sure." Helena chewed the inside of her mouth as she watched her friend leave before she looked over at her teacher and moved closer towards the desk. "Sir?"

"Um, yes." Mr Scarlett smiled grimly, making her stomach twist. "Helena, over the last few weeks your grades have been...not at their best," he began delicately.

Helena clutched the strap of her bag tightly, standing stiffly on the spot. "I...I mean, I might have slipped on a few pop quizzes I guess..."

"If that were the case we wouldn't be having this conversation." The grimness on his face grew, looking at the paper scrunched up in her hand. "But, this essay, it was like you weren't even trying, Helena."

Helena winced, feeling a nasty lump get stuck in her throat. She averted her gaze and shrugged uncomfortably. "...I'm sorry, Sir."
He sighed. "I'm not the only teacher who's worried, Helena," Mr Scarlett said, uneasily. "I'm just concerned that...is everything alright at home?" he asked hesitantly, clasping his hands together.

Helena felt a swell of anger that prickled her skin unpleasantly.

"Yes," she replied a little too stiffly, swallowing. She looked back at him, standing up straighter. "As fine as things could be, I guess," her voice grew more light-hearted. "The paparazzi can be pretty stressful."

"I know it isn't ideal." A brief sympathetic smile flashed across Mr Scarlett's face. "Have you tried talking to the school counsellor, or perhaps your father?"

_I'd have better luck at Arkham._

"I don't really like bothering people with my problems, Sir," she replied curtly, frowning.

Mr Scarlett sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I understand, but I'm afraid this is important, Helena..." He reached into his draw and let out another heavy sigh. "Until your grades improve, you're being taken off the honour roll."

Helena clenched her jaw tightly, watching him present an orange slip of paper. "But, what if I did some extra credit?" She could still make this up.

He signed the bottom of the slip. "If your grades improve in the next few weeks we can look about getting you put back on by the end of the semester." He held the slip up for her to take; she looked at it like it was a slug. "But, I'll need your father to sign this so he knows the current situation. I expect it returned by Monday."

She bit down hard on her tongue and took the slip, folding it in her hand. "Yes...Sir." She schooled her expression, keeping calm. "Is that everything?"

He nodded, moving his pen to the side. "Thank you for staying behind."

Helena nodded stiffly and turned on her heel to leave, the muscles in her shoulders feeling tense like a tightly coiled ball of yarn ready to snap.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

**10/20/2023**

**16:00**

Bruce was silent when he stared at his daughter's essay, sitting at the head of the dining room table while she silently sat down next to him, fidgeting in her seat.

"Well..." He placed the homework on the table, mulling over his words. "It's not your best."

Her eyes narrowed, looking away. "Yeah..."

He rubbed his chin, sighing, trying to figure out the best way to approach this. "I'm not disappointed, just concerned," he told her, earning a frown. "...Does...is this because of your mother?" He felt like he was stepping on eggshells.

Helena's gaze sharpened, crossing her arms. "No," she replied a little too defensively. "It's just...It's
hard to focus with everything else going on."

Bruce hid his grimace, finding some truth in that statement. "You know school needs to come first, Helena," he said evenly, watching her seem to grow tenser. "I want you to cut back on your patrols and put a bit more focus on your school work."

Helena's lips drew into a thin line, glaring at him, a glare he returned with one of his own until something in her gaze seemed to finally snap.

"Me getting a bad grade in school is the least of our problems!" She threw her hands in the air and stood up, scraping the chair back. "Cass is still missing with a whole other group of kids, most likely getting tortured for all we know, Jason's a wreck, and my mom is being hunted down by a rich sociopath!" she ranted, cheeks flushed. "And, you want me to focus on school?"

Bruce stared at her calmly, narrowing his eyes disapprovingly. "I'm not going to have your future be jeopardised."

"Seriously?!" She smacked her palms against the table, glowering. "So, what, you get to be Batman 24/7 while the rest of us get benched so we can take part in the next pep rally?" Helena balled her hands into fists. "Do you know how hypocritical that is?"

Bruce remained silent, his gaze only wavering when he heard Tim creep closer to the dining room doors, trying to eavesdrop. He looked back at his daughter, noticing how her breathing was irregular, it was rare he saw her lose composer over such a minor thing, but there had to be more to it than just a bad day at school.

"I know it might not seem fair," he finally spoke, standing up. "But, I don't want your life consumed by the mission." Bruce placed his hands on her shoulders, causing her to look away. "Huntress should only be one part of your life."

"Dad, I can do more as Huntress than I'll ever be able to do as just…me." Helena's brow creased, stepping away from him.

This wasn't going well...

Bruce's eyes narrowed, running a hand through his hair, feeling cornered. "And, what happened to you wanting to be a lawyer, is that now off the table as well?" he tried a different approach.

"Yes, I did," he admitted reluctantly. "But even Batman and Huntress have limits."

She opened her mouth but then closed it, second guessing it seemed. Her shoulders slouched, eyes shifting back and forth. "...Maybe they do, but I still have a commitment as Huntress, though," she argued, eyeing him for a moment, sighing quietly. "...But, I'll still try to get my grades back up."

"That's all I ask."

"I'll be in my room." She moved out of his hold and walked passed him. "You can stop hiding now, Tim," she added coolly, opening the doors.

Tim poked his head from around the doorway, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "Heh,
“sorry…”

Bruce arched an eyebrow but didn't comment.

Chapter End Notes

From what I've researched, trying to find a translation of spoken Kryptonian is like trying to find a god damn diamond! I could only find the written language (which is basically just symbols) since that's how it is shown in comics, the only problem is that I don't think Fanfiction docs accept that format, so I thought it'd be safer and more interesting to try to show how Kryptonian would sound.

(in other words, I made it up)

Translation.

Mor Volto elo – please help me

Volto elo - help me

Ran elo xanoplil – don't touch me!

Lin Fo Ula? – who are you?

E ran mulo lon un bano – I don't know what you're saying.

Ula forno voltoelo – you have to help me

Quin ma Noyos – we need to hurry

Zedu– thank you

The Japanese word Ikou, from what I've researched, is translated as GO!, but if I'm wrong then tell me.
All three of them, Jaime, Helena, and Tim were in the training room. Jaime was sitting on the sidelines with the book, The Glass Castle held in his hands and a sheet of paper resting on his lap, while Helena and Tim practised sparring on the mats.

"...Okay, so question one, what does the bended Joshua tree symbolise?" Jaime read from the question sheet.

Tim coiled his legs around her neck, Helena flipped over to wrestle him off. "It, it sym-bolises," she choked out, elbowing Tim in the gut. The boy winced from the blow and was shoved to the ground. "The struggles they all go through and….hold on." She blocked a punch from Tim and grabbed his wrist.

"You're the one who said you could multi-task," Jaime replied lightly.

"And, I can." She flung Tim onto his back and locked his wrists in place. "Say, uncle."

Tim groaned, his feet and hands locked in place. "Oh, come on!"

"Should I be concerned?" Jaime asked dryly, a small slanted smile on his face.

"Nah." Helena grinned, looking back over at Jaime who was staring at them with a raised eyebrow. "It also symbolises how an environment, and can also be linked to the mom's own difficult life." She sat down on Tim, pinning him down.

"Hey!" Tim protested, struggling underneath her weight.

"Furthermore, the fact the mom chooses to paint the tree could also symbolise how she's trying to mask her own struggles and make herself beautiful or fix herself," she continued, briefly glancing down at Tim. "You okay there, Timmy?"

He let out a low growl, his struggles weakened as a deep scowl settled on his face. "...Fine...Uncle," he muttered.

"Thatta boy." She ruffled his hair, earning a sound of protest when it stuck out in odd places. "Now say sorry to Jaime for being mean to him."

"Oh, come on that was weeks ago," Tim whined, burying his face in the mat.
Jaime’s smile grew, sharing an amused look with her. "It is pretty overdue…"

"Yeah, where’re your manners, Timothy?” Helena chided.

Tim sighed a deep long-suffering one. "Okay, Jaime, I’m sorry I electrocuted you…”

Jaime shook his head faintly, sighing. "Apology accepted."

Helena nodded, satisfied. "Much better.” She moved and stood up, helping Tim to his feet. "And, you've improved a lot since last time."

Tim massaged his wrists, a faint smile trying to form on his face. "Better watch out then."

"Don't hold your breath, squirt.” She ruffled his hair again, earning a smack on the arm from the boy. "Now, go shower, you stink.” Helena shoved him towards the door.

"Speak for yourself,” Tim remarked, but nevertheless left the room to go upstairs.

Jaime folded the question sheet inside of the book before he closed it, standing up. "You patrolling tonight?” He walked over to her.

She sighed, hiding a grimace. "I can't, I promised my dad I'd study."

He scratched his neck. "That bad, huh?"

"Yep.” Helena briefly glanced up at the cameras and then back at Jaime; smiling a little. "I guess I might have been slacking the last couple of months,” she admitted, taking hold of his hand, leading him into the locker room.

"Yeah…is it because of …well, you know?” Jaime said uncertainly as they entered the room.

A frown flashed across her face, looking over her shoulder. "No…well…kind of.” She let go of his hand. "I don't like talking about it.” She crossed her arms, rubbing her shoulders for warmth.

He let out a deep sigh, and his eyes seemed sad. "Listen, I got your back no matter what but…” Jaime gently touched her shoulder to turn her around. "Being distant isn't good, not when we're… you know, supposed to be…” His eyes seemed sad.

Helena felt a swell of guilt and moved in closer, cupping his jaw as she leant in and kissed him. "You're sweet, Jaime, don't ever change…” she murmured, as he leant in to deepen the kiss. "But, I'm still new to this.” She heaved another sigh and stepped back, catching him off guard. "Okay, you really wanna know?” A grimace crept onto her face.

"Yeah, even if it's a little too heavy,” he reassured.

Helena sighed, looking over her shoulder at the door. "Okay, fine, but don't tell anyone,” she said, walking over to shut the door. "Especially my dad…”

"I promise,” Jaime replied, his brow furrowed. "There aren't any microphones in—?”

"He tried but then Tim kept playing pop music 24/7,” Helena replied, smiling a tiny bit at the memory. "So no, we have privacy for once.” She dragged her feet when she walked over to the bench and sat down.

"Just checking,” he said, sitting down next to her. "I'm pretty sure he's got my house under surveillance,” he tried to joke but it just came off as forced.
Helena hummed, feeling a dead weight in her stomach that reminded her of resentment. "I like to think he does it because he cares," her voice grew quiet. "But I think he just hates losing control, and I'm not sure how I feel about that, I've never been sure."

She could feel his shoulders grow tense. "Oh..." He hesitantly reached out and touched her wrists. "Well, it is pretty invasive."

"I think smothering is the word you're looking for," she replied dryly, feeling cold. "And my mom is... they're both so... " She closed her eyes, trying to think of how to explain it. "They want to protect me but they have no idea what they're doing." Helena glanced over at Jaime. "I mean, my mom left me with a man who has no idea how to be a real parent and somehow expected me to turn out fine after she faked her own suicide. How am I meant to turn out okay after any of that?"

Jaime cringed, pausing for a second while she waited for an answer. "...But if she hadn't you might have been dead."

Helena felt a swell of guilt, but she couldn't shake that small speck of resentment that seemed to grow the more she spoke. "Yeah, maybe I would have, I don't know what would've happened." Her forehead creased deeply. "But...why did...? I love my dad but he..." Once she said it there was no taking it back.

"It's okay," Jaime said, holding her hand with a solid grip. "Just take it slow, okay."

Her face scrunched up, squeezing his hand tightly, willing the words to come out. "She left me with someone who puts a tracker in my tooth and doesn't know how to say I love you without sounding constipated..." A lump got stuck in her throat. "So sometimes, I...I wish he was different, that he wasn't so cold or clueless." A horrible vile taste of guilt filled her mouth, making her feel sick. "Is that selfish?"

"No, it's not," Jaime said firmly, sitting up straighter. "Oy, just listen." She sighed quietly and stared back at him, his gaze focused on hers. "Just because your dad loves you, it...it doesn't make him a good dad, and you don't have to pretend he is."

Helena hid a wince. "But, I can't change him, and he's doing the best he can and I should be grateful for that."

He opened his mouth but then hesitated, closing it. Jaime paused, letting go of her hand; both their palms were clammy now. "It's okay to admit being unhappy with how your dad treats you, Helena."

She clammed up, swallowing thickly. "It's not that simple...and I don't want to be angry at him."

"Or your mom?" He gave her a look.

Helena bit down on her tongue and stared at her hands. "My dad always keeps making mistakes, but I always forgive him," she said, leaning against the wall. "Even if he's not a good dad, he's still my dad." She looked up at the ceiling, sighing. "But with my mom, it seems easier to just stay angry, at least then she can't hurt me again..."

Jaime frowned, leaning on her. "You know that isn't going to help, right?" He stared at her as she gave him a side-along glance. "You'll still get hurt."

She tilted her head towards him, feeling the heavy weight in her stomach grow bigger. Helena sighed, not sure how to argue with the truth. "...I don't want to talk about it anymore." She shuffled closer and rested her head on his shoulder. "Later, but not now, okay..." Helena closed her eyes...
"...Okay." Jaime put his arm around her. "But, just think about what I said."

She nodded, re-adjusting her head against his chest. "...Do you think I should try to talk to her again?"

He shrugged. "You can't keep the silent treatment up forever." Jaime kissed the top of her head. "Something's gotta give."

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**Bludhaven**

**10/21/2023**

**19:00**

The apartment was mostly tidy, disregarding the pile of dirty laundry on the kitchen floor. Dick lounged back on the couch, dressed in his boxers and old My Little Pony t-shirt, eating some take-out noodles with a fork while he watched re-runs of The Grey Ghost.

A sharp knock on his window distracted him from the show. He glanced over at the window, frowning he lowered the tub on the floor when the knocking persisted.

It was either Tim, or maybe one of his old teammates, or maybe it was someone trying to kill him. On a Saturday night, it was hard to tell which one was more likely.

Dick sighed and stood up, walking over to the window. "Okay, alright," he called, pushing open the curtains.

Jason was perched on the windowsill with an underage blond girl by his side.

Dick blinked, looking back and forth at them, imagining a great number of scenarios that may have brought them all to this point, he just hoped sex with a minor wasn't one of them.

"Open up, Dickface!" Jason hissed from behind the glass.

Dick paused for a second before he let out a deep longsuffering sigh and opened the window.

There went his Saturday night.

"What did you do?" Dick asked dully, stepping back as Jason and the girl climbed through the window.

"It isn't..." Jason scowled deeply when he looked at the t-shirt. "You still have that shit?"

Dick pursed his lips. "Don't change the subject, Jason."

The girl scrutinised him, raising an eyebrow as her eyes lingered on his boxers a little too long. "Vinroy Mo," her voice was weirdly coy.

Dick's eyes widened in surprise; his cheeks a little hot. "What did you say?"

Jason quickly pushed her to the side. "Listen, it's not as bad as you think it is." He ran a hand through his hair, avoiding the girl's gaze. "Has the boss been asking for me?"
"...No." Dick rested his hands on his hips, narrowing his gaze at the girl again. "And, who the hell is she?"

His brother shifted uneasily, eyes darting to the girl. "It's...It's complicated alright." He sighed deeply. "I only came to you because of her okay." Jason jerked his thumb at the girl, causing her to frown. "I can't keep her secret, not with how she is, but...first promise me you'll keep an open mind."

Dick pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oh, God..."

"I went to go investigate Intergang," Jason began evenly. "But I didn't tell Bats because I knew he wouldn't approve, not with my track record."

Dick narrowed his eyes. "Okay," he replied slowly.

Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "So, I went to investigate this rumour about the tech they've been transporting." He pulled out a USB stick. "I got some info and..." He looked over at the girl. "When I saw her chained up, I couldn't just leave her there. They were treating her like an animal."

Dick could sense some exaggeration in how Jason was telling the story, but the girl was here and if that USB did have some useful intel then there must be a lot of truth to what he was saying.

"So, who is she exactly?" he asked, while Kara stared back at him curiously. "And, what language did she just speak?"

"Ah, yeah about that..." Jason grimaced. "I think she's a Kryptonian, like the real deal kind."

Dick's eyes bulged. "What?"

"Yeah, I thought so too, but she's legit—watch." Jason looked around the apartment for a second before his gaze rested on the coffee table. "Hold this." He lifted up the table and shoved it at the girl.

"Jason!" Dick said out of instinct, stepping forward, but then he froze.

The girl frowned, holding up the coffee table with one hand, gripping the leg in her hand. "Lon's binto?" She picked up the box of Chinese off the table and examined it with interest.

Dick blinked slowly, staring at her with surprise. "Well...shit."

"I know right." Jason nodded in agreement, gently tapping the girl's hand.

She raised an eyebrow at him and slowly lowered the table back onto the floor, while she held the Chinese, sniffing it curiously.

Dick cocked an eyebrow, she definitely seemed a little Alien, either that or she was a test tube baby. "We'll need to contact Superman."

"Yeah, I know, that's why I came," Jason said, shifting on the spot. "I didn't really get permission to go investigate Intergang by myself so the boss won't be happy," he rushed to explain. "And, I may have used some shady connections to sneak into the Intergang base."

Dick ran a hand over his face. "Jason, why?"

"Because, that's how you get shit done," Jason retorted, waving his hand dismissively. "Anyway, I need you to be the one to give Batman the information and also take credit for Ms Supey's rescue."
"So you want me to lie?" Dick scowled deeply, glaring.

"...Well, yes basically." Jason grimaced, taking a step forward. "But only because the boss trusts you and won't doubt the information."

That sounded like bullshit.

Dick narrowed his eyes. "There's something else isn't there," his voice darkened, crossing his arms. The girl sat down in the corner as started to eat his Chinese. "What are you hiding?"

Anger flashed across Jason's face. "Wow, you and the old man are two sides of the same coin, ain't you?" he snarled. "I went to investigate Intergang to try and help those missing kids."

"But, that isn't the only reason." Dick gritted his teeth. "Don't lie to me."

Jason's jaw clenched tightly, pausing. "...Okay, fine...I...that lead I got, the guy I got it from..." His Adam's apple bobbed, looking down. "I killed him afterwards."

Dick's stomach lurched, gaze growing darker. "Why?"

A feral growl came out of his lips. "Because, he was a child-trafficking piece of shit, Dick!" he snapped. "You think just because I'm playing nice I'm gonna let scum like that keep breathing?"

The girl tensed in the corner, looking up at them with narrowed eyes as she ate the noodles. Dick fought the urge to grab the noodles off her and instead focussed on Jason, running a hand through his hair. This wasn't that much of a surprise; everyone relapsed every now and again.

"You shouldn't have killed him." It was an obvious statement but it was also the only thing he could say.

Jason's slumped, jaw slacked. "Yeah...I messed up, but you know what Batman's like," his voice grew strained. "He'll chain me up lock away the key if he finds out I relapsed."

Dick bit down on his lips, averting his gaze. Bruce would not handle Jason's mistake well. "...So, what are you going to do, play oblivious?" He looked over at the girl. "What's gonna happened when she's able to speak English and tell everyone the truth?"

"I...Okay, so maybe I haven't thought that far ahead," Jason admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "But come on, Dick, I...I really need this favour, and you're the one always pulling that big brother bullshit, so come on, help a guy out." His eyes widened, pleading.

*He really must be desperate.*

Dick gritted his teeth, scrutinising Jason for a long moment. Jason was like a little brother to him, and he'd already failed him once, and now he was coming to him for help for the first time in years.

"...You better not be screwing me over, Jason," he warned, jerking a finger at him. "Or I'll put your head through the wall."

Jason's lips formed a crooked smile. "I owe you big time."

"No, duh." Dick frowned, walking over to the girl. "B's gonna be asking a lot of questions about her," he said, bending down to her level. The girl tensed, withdrawing further away. "Hey, it's okay." He smiled warmly, waving. "I'm Richard." He pointed to himself. "Richard."

The girl frowned, lowering the Chinese box onto the floor. "...Rich-ard," she repeated slowly.
"Ula?" She pointed at him.

Dick nodded. "Yeah, I'm Richard," he said gently, pointing to himself.

The Jason hesitantly drew in closer, bending down next to him. "I'm Jason," he said, pointing to himself exaggeratedly.

The girl looked back and forth at them. "Richard." She pointed to Dick. "Jason." She pointed to Jason, relieving a nod from both of them. "Kara Zor El." She pointed to herself.

"Kara Zor El," Dick repeated, nodding. "From Krypton?" He pointed at her.

A small smile spread across her face as she nodded. "Kara Zor El opto Krypton."

Dick smiled, and now they were getting somewhere.

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Washington DC

10/22/2023

9:00

There was a room located at the top of a high rise, it had grey slabs of concrete for walls and flooring, with seven white holographic screens on display. The middle screen displayed a video feed from the Detroit Meta base.

"Pause frame," Vandal Savage's deep voice cut through the silence, his image displayed on the screen farthest to the right.

The video feed froze on an image of Virgil Hawkins touching Lilith Clay's inhibitor collar while the two of them were in the recreational gym.

"From the further analysis, it appears this is the moment the boy drained the power from her collar," Vandal elaborated.

Ra's Al Ghul sneered from the second screen. "And, how did such an offence go unnoticed?"

"The power was returned a minute later," Vandal replied. "The scientists failed to notice the boy's mutation."

"These are complex genes we're dealing with." Lex Luthor could be seen on the fourth screen, frowning. "Even with the Kroloteans, the technology still isn't accurate enough with Human DNA."

Queen Bee sighed, frowning from the first screen at the far end. "Then, we need better technology." She straightened up in her seat. "If the Kroloteans isn't up to standard, we'll need to consider looking elsewhere..."

There was a brief silence.

Vandal hummed, rubbing his chin. "Another contract is already in development, but we'll dwell on that later," he said somewhat dismissively. "Our main priority is protecting our assets, the Detroit base has the largest collection of Metas and Carriers.

The other three members nodded. "The chip is finally perfected, and Powers has begun distribution," Luthor said, reclining back in his chair.
Ra's al Ghul raised an eyebrow. "So I assume they'll be no more exploding heads?"

Vandal held back a sigh while Luthor narrowed his eyes at the other man.

Luthor smiled thinly. "...Obviously."

Queen Bee hummed lowly, drumming her fingers against the armrest. "What of Intergang?" she interjected smoothly. "I heard a rumour of a disturbance at their base." Her lips curved into a scowl. "Something escaped and it wasn't discreet."

Vandal's gaze narrowed. "They claimed it was faulty weapons..."

"Of which kind?" Luthor raised an eyebrow.

Ra's al Ghul's brow furrowed. "If they're hoarding Metahumans we can't let that stand."

"But, we risk jeopardising our contract with Apokolips if we act out against them," Queen Bee argued.

Vandal nodded in agreement. "For now, we turn a blind eye." He leant forward in his chair, waving his hand in the chair, triggering the middle screen to change to a biography of Rose Wilson's blood. "The next order of business is re-acquiring Ms Wilson."

"Is such a thing still necessary?" Luthor sighed, grimacing. "There are other test subjects."

"Yes, but none responded as well to the drug as Rose," Queen Bee argued. "If the drug is to be a success she must be further analysed."

Luthor paused for a second before he nodded. "I agree, but with the Justice League already suspicious, re-acquiring her may draw us further unwanted attention."

Ra's al Ghul nodded, grimacing. "Batman is already paying attention to us. Need I say more concerning the Artefact that is now in their possession," he remarked, clasping his hands together. "There is also another factor to consider, Deathstroke."

"He was willing to experiment on his daughter," Queen Bee reasoned.

"Oh, I have no doubt of his lack of paternal feelings." Ra's al Ghul flicked some dust off his sleeve. "But, the child is his flesh and blood. I'm to assume many of us would take grievance if our offspring was used as a lab rat?" He raised an eyebrow at Luthor. "Well, bar some..."

Luthor's jaw tightened, but he still smiled. "Point taken." He shrugged dismissively, glancing over at Vandal. "Deathstroke has yet to prove his absolute loyalty, but we mustn't be hasty unless we want a repeat of the Sportsmaster incident."

Vandal nodded, sighing. "Agreed. Deathstroke will be watched until he's proven his loyalty." He straightened up in his chair. "Which does raise the question of Kaldur'ahm's loyalty."

"He has proven himself so far and spilt blood for us," Queen Bee said, examining her sharp nails.

"But, is his loyalty absolute?" Vandal's lips thinned. "And, how much should he be made aware of?"

There was another silence as they all contemplated the question until Queen Bee spoke up. "Luthor, you made a point about the Artefact," she said, frowning. "If they knew about that then what else do they know?" She looked around the room. "If they have taken an interest in Rose
then we need to use that to our advantage."

A wryly smile curved onto Luthor's face. "And, how would Kaldur'ahm play into this?"

"Have him personally escort Rose to the base while we send a decoy van," she explained. "If he fails to deliver her without incident then he will be punished. We will monitor the transfer to see if the Justice League tries to take the girl."

"And, if Kaldur'ahm somehow aids them, then what?" Ra's al Ghul argued, frowning. "He shouldn't be made aware of the Metahuman base."

"He wouldn't need to escort her to the base in Detroit, only half-way," she replied, raising her chin up higher. "And, he wouldn't be made aware of his mission until the day of it."

"It would be a test for him and to see if the League do know of our plans with Ms Wilson," Luthor said, nodding in her direction. "He wouldn't need to be made aware of the actual base, only the half-way point."

Ra's al Ghul's eyes narrowed, but he still nodded faintly. "True… I suppose it would be an interesting test."

Vandal rubbed his chin. "I'm inclined to agree, but we will need to discuss this in further detail at the next meeting when Manta and Klarion are available."

"Very well." Queen Bee nodded, a frown flashing across her face. "In the meantime, what is the latest news on the Hive?"

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**Gotham City**

**10/22/2023**

**17:13**

Helena swallowed, her mouth felt dry, as she waited outside the door of the apartment. The hallway smelt of fresh peppermint with fancy ivory wallpaper decorating the walls, the brown carpet soft and clean. Her mom and Terry would be comfortable here and safe.

She let out a deep breath and hesitantly knocked on the door, staring at the tiny spyglass while she waited.

Helena licked her lips and folded her arms. There was some shuffling coming from the other side of the door, and the faint distinct sound of someone on the other side leaning against the door. A second later there was an urgent jittering of keys as the door was unlocked.

Selina basically flung the door open. "Helena?" She was looking her up and down like she couldn't quite believe it.

Helena frowned, looking her up and down. "Can I come in?"

"Of course you can." Her mother stepped back, smiling tightly.

Helena walked into the room, the door was shut behind her. "I just came to check on you guys." She looked over at Terry who was wriggling around in a simple bassinet next to the couch. "And… I know I said I didn't wanna talk but…"
Selina moved in closer, apprehensive at first. "I'm just glad you're here," she replied, smiling a little warmer. "How, how is everything?"

Helena shrugged, looking down at her baby brother. His blue eyes grew bigger, curious. "Fine enough, what about you?" She hesitantly reached out to stroke Terry's head, his brown hair felt soft.

Selina nodded, looking at Terry and then at her, her smile softening. "Yeah, we've been good."

"Good…" Helena's jaw clenched. "So, what are you planning to do to Powers?"

Her mother grew quiet for a moment, while Helena gripped the edge of the bassinet tightly. "…That's my mess to sort out, I don't want you getting involved," she said stiffly, narrowing her gaze.

Helena glared at her mom, lips twisted into a scowl. "You killing someone is my business." She moved away from her brother. "You can't keep making the same mistakes with Terry, mom, he doesn't deserve that."

Selina’s shoulders hunched up. "I'm doing this to protect both of you."

"And, how well is that working out?" Helena snapped, making Terry flinch. "Every time you try to protect us it blows up in both our faces."

Selina’s gaze grew harder. "You're alive because I've protected you."

Helena's anger grew; it was twisted and made her feel sick. "I know, okay, I understand that," she tried to calm down. "But, there's a line—"

"Of course there's a line, there's always a line!" Selina snapped, gaze fiercer. "Do you think it's easy?" her voice rose, marching over. Helena tensed, inching back ever so slightly. "Do you think it's easy always running, having to survive!? What do you know?"

*What do you know?*

The words felt like a spit in the face.

"No, you don't know!" Helena shouted back, feeling cornered. "You don't know a damn thing about me." She nearly pushed her mom, needing space. Terry started to make whimpering noises. "You didn't protect me, you put a target on my back!"

Selina faltered for a second, confused, taking a step back. "What are you talking about?"

Crap.

Helena's anger froze, as her face drained of colour. "I…you…" She moved away. "Sorry, I'm sorry I yelled. I didn't mean it, I just…"

The anger started to fade from her mom's eyes. "What… what do you mean I put a target on your back?"

Helena swallowed a bad taste in her mouth, clenching her hands into fists. "What do you think it means?" her voice was weaker than she'd intended.

The two of them stood in silence for a few seconds until Terry started to cry, it was a squeaky drowned sound that grated the ears.
Selina glanced at Helena before she walked over to the baby and picked him up, holding him like he was made of glass. "Shhhh, baby," she murmured, rocking him.

Helena watched them, feeling a sharp stab of pain in her stomach. "I need to go, okay."

"You don't have to," Selina said, hastily. "Just stay a little longer."

No

Helena shook her head, feeling cold. "I don't want to." Then she winced at her own words.

She might as well have slapped her mother across the face.

Selina looked like she wanted to say something, but she didn't. She just held Terry tighter and turned away.

The air in the room felt stuffy and the walls felt like they were shrinking.

Helena moved around the furniture, keeping a large gait between herself and her mom, as she walked towards the door.

She shouldn't have come here, what had she expected? To get some kind of closure and feel less… less angry?

Helena opened the door but then hesitated, looking over her shoulder at her brother and mother. Selina had turned her back to her and Terry was still crying, the sound seemed to just get louder.

Helena walked out of the door and shut it closed behind her, almost running away from the place.

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**10/22/2023**

**21:00**

Batman hated surprises, the unexpected that couldn't be predicted no matter how hard he planned.

For instance, right now there was a long lost Kryptonian sitting in his favourite chair eating a box of Chinese. The girl was a teenager with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and a pretty heart-shaped face. She called herself Kara Zor El, and apparently, she was related to Superman.

Batman crossed his arms, looking away from the girl to glare at Nightwing. All of his children were gathered around him, with Jason standing next to Nightwing, while Huntress and Robin were opposite.

"This info is pretty legit," Robin spoke up, balancing his laptop while he typed, the USB plugged in.

"I got a tip-off from my source," Nightwing said, casting Batman a look. "Saying Intergang was handling some more of the Lights purchases."

"You should have called for back-up." Batman's eyes narrowed further, feeling a small tug of wariness when he saw Jason shift on the spot.

Jason was being unusually quiet today.
Nightwing grimaced. "Too many people, it was easier getting in and out on my own..." He glanced over at Kara. "Well, until I ran into her."

Huntress frowned, looking over at the Alien. "She seems pretty..." she trailed off, watching Kara devour the entire box of noodles in one go. "...Normal." She shrugged. "Superman and Superboy should be happy about getting another family member...hopefully."

Batman's jaw tightened, he hoped so too, but Clark had changed a lot. Things may still be stiff between Clark and Conner, but Jon seemed to be the glue that kept things civil. "Well, need to keep an eye on her."

"She's the least of our problems," Nightwing replied, crossing his arms. "Intergang was importing these computer chips—"

"Computer chips?" Robin spoke up, diverting their attention. His brow was furrowed and his shoulders were stiff. "What, what did they look like?"

Nightwing's posture shifted, becoming stiffer, even though he tried to hide it. "It's hard to remember, they were small..."

Batman scrutinised him, feeling a further spark of suspicion. "Where did you see them?"

"In one of the vans, but I only got a look," Nightwing replied, frowning. "Isn't there any more details on that USB?"

Robin chewed his lip, staring back at the screen. "Just give me a sec..." he muttered, seeming off.

Huntress frowned, sharing a look with her dad.

"Could be for hacking," Jason said, speaking up after an unusual amount of silence. Batman glanced at him, watching him closely like a fly under a microscope. Jason tensed, crossing his arms tightly. "What?"

Batman's kept his face blank. "I think you raise a good point."

"Except it's wrong," Robin's soft voice carried across the cave.

Batman looked down at his young partner and grew concerned. Robin's head was lowered like a prisoner marching to the gallows, his shoulders hunched up defensively.

Nightwing frowned, shifting closer to him. "What's wrong, Squirt?"

"Tim?" Huntress placed a hand on the boy's shoulder, her brow furrowed.

Robin didn't look at them, but instead turned the laptop around, showing a small image of a computer chip. There weren't any speck details, just information about the shipping costs. "The chips aren't for computers," his voice was hollow. "They attach to the brain."

Batman held back a cringe. It wasn't a shock since the Light had done this previously, but it didn't take away the sour taste in his mouth or stop him imagining a slave army of teen Metahumans in the Light's control.

"How'd you know that?" Jason asked, narrowing his eyes, earning a hit from Nightwing.

Robin raised his head up but still didn't look at them. Huntress squeezed his shoulder, while Batman took a step closer; the boy looked so pale he might just throw up. "I've seen this design
before, the ceramics and the width are all specified for…I …"

"Robin." Batman tried not to sound demanding. "Take your time and then explain." The bad taste in his mouth grew worse when he wondered what had gotten Robin so worked up.

Robin took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders before he finally looked up to meet Batman's gaze. "This chip was designed by my dad," he said, his fingers dug into the laptop. "But it wasn't meant to be used like this!" he added quickly, almost frightened.

"How can you be sure it's the same chip?" Huntress asked hesitantly, lowering her hand from his arm.

"Because I know that design," Tim insisted. "The chip design had to be very specific because it needed to be attached to the cerebral cortex of brain so we could treat dementia…but it got shelved."

"Why did it get shelved?" Nightwing asked, patiently.

"It's too risky of a procedure," Robin replied, shaking his head. "The designs weren't developed further." His brow furrowed, looking away. "But if Powers…he shouldn't have been able to get those designs unless…"

"A mutual contact?" Huntress said.

"Did you guys find anything on his phone?" Nightwing asked.

Batman searched his memory, trying to find a name that had stuck out. "We have his contacts, I can run a match through the computer."

Robin's head jerked up, eyes wide like he'd been struck. "I already know who it is." He shoved the laptop in Huntress' arms and rushed over to the computer. "I'm such an idiot."

Kara's eyes widened warily when Tim rushed over, rolling away in the chair to keep her distance, but Tim didn't seem concerned by her and just started typing on the computer.

Batman walked over to the boy while the others followed, all of them gathered behind Robin while he started searching through the Batcomputer's files.

"So did some ex-employee sell Powers the specs?" Jason asked.

Robin nodded scowling as he brought up a photograph of a short, balding man with yellowish skin and a pudgy round face. "Dr Aiden Lynch." He balled his hands into fists. "His name was in Powers' contacts. He still works for my parent's company."

"So he could have stolen your dad's designs," Huntress argued.

Robin seemed to consider this but then shook his head. "Maybe…but he wouldn't have had access to the specs and the machinery, not unless my dad authorised him…" He grimaced. "My family's company are responsible for all of this, we're just as bad as Powers."

"No, you're not," Nightwing said firmly. "You don't know if your dad was responsible for any of this, Robin."

Batman placed a hand on Robin's shoulder. "Exactly, blaming yourself won't solve anything."

"Plus, at least now we can figure out how to counter its effects," Huntress said, her smile a little too
forced. "We can fix this."

"But, how quick can we fix this?" Jason argued, frowning.

"This isn't the first time the Light has used mind control chips." Nightwing glanced over at Batman.

"I'll notify the League." Batman looked down at his young protégé, the boy's shoulders were lowered like they were weighed down. "In the meantime, Nightwing, take Kara to the Watchtower," he ordered, removing his hand from Tim's shoulder."Jason, go finish up that drug bust. Huntress, I'll meet you on patrol in an hour."

Nightwing didn't move, frowning, but Batman shot him a look and he seemed to understand. "Right, got it, Boss." He turned around towards Kara. "Kara, come on, you're meeting Kal El."

Kara perked up, pushing herself out of the chair. "Kal El?"

"You bet." Dick smiled, walking over to her with an outstretched hand.

Batman was always curious how easily Nightwing earned people's trust, as Kara took the outstretched hand and let him lead her passed the others.

Kara paused when she passed Jason and smiled, letting go of Nightwing's hand she did something peculiar. Jason stiffened when she flung her arms around him, smiling as she hugged him. "Zedu."

What?

Batman's gaze narrowed suspiciously.

Jason was rigid and tried to detangle himself from her. "You mind giving me space, tuts!" he snapped, pushing her away.

"Come on, Kara!" Nightwing sounded flustered, dragging Kara away from Jason.

Kara frowned, looking at them both. "Lon?"

Nightwing pulled her away from them towards the Zeta-tubes.

"What was that about?" Huntress crossed her arms.

"Fuck I know." Jason dusted himself off, readjusting his jacket. "Freaking alien, ain't she?"

Strange, very strange…

"She seemed to trust you," Batman commented, staring at his second eldest intently.

Jason shrugged. "I gave her Chinese, she's probably just grateful or something." He started walking away. "I'm heading out, don't wait up."

Batman felt an uneasy itch at the back of his mind. "Alright then…" He looked over at Huntress. "Don't stay out too late, you have—"

"Homework, I know," Huntress interrupted, sighing. "I'll be back soon." Then she reassuringly smiled at Robin. "We'll talk later, Shrimp."

"Yeah…right," Robin murmured, forcing a small smile.
Huntress’ smile started to fade as she turned around and headed down towards her motorcycle.

Batman watched her go and waited for the sound of the Zeta-tube before he looked back down at Robin. "Get changed and go wait in the kitchen, we need to talk," he ordered, pointing towards the stairs.

Robin's expression became solemn and closed off. "Yes, Sir."

Tim was sitting on one of the stools, staring at the kitchen counter with a fierce intensity while Bruce prepared a fresh pot of coffee.

"Milk?"

Tim's head jerked up, tensing, he shook his head. "No, thanks."

Bruce nodded and kept both the coffees black, placing one steaming mug in front of Tim. "That should give you a boost." He sat down opposite him, sipping his own coffee.

Tim licked his lips and slid the mug closer inwards. "Thanks…" He could already sense the bad news coming, the inevitability of Bruce's disappointment. "I…" He trailed off when he looked up at Bruce, not sure where to begin. "I'm sorry."

Bruce lowered his mug to the side. "And why are you sorry?"

Tim forced himself not to cringe. "After we found out about Powers, I had a suspicion about my parents but I kept trying to ignore it." He felt a wave of guilt. "I should have looked into it but I was a coward."

Robin wasn't meant to be a coward.

"You are not a coward, Tim." Bruce lowered the mug onto the table, eyeing him sternly. "Past experiences can testify to that," he continued, while the boy shifted in his chair. "Second, you can't take the blame for something that was completely out of your control."

"But, if I had taken control of Drake Pharmaceuticals earlier on then maybe, maybe I could have…" Tim's words became jumbled. "...Fixed things or found out what Powers was doing before it was too late."

He'd avoided his responsibility and hid away.

Bruce sighed. "Tim, you were a ten-year-old boy who was grieving." He shook his head faintly. "None of this was your fault, do you understand? Stop trying to convince yourself otherwise."

Tim bit down hard on his tongue, unable to ignore the logic in that. "Sorry, Boss."

Bruce picked up his mug and took a large gulp of coffee. "You've received a shock, so I'm benching you for tonight."

Tim nodded dully, expecting it. "I understand…can I go now?"

Bruce sighed deeply, staring at him for a moment. "No, stay and finish your coffee." He drank his own.

Tim sighed and sluggishly lifted the cup to his lips; the warm taste of caffeine settled his nerves a little and made his shoulders relax. The two of them sat in silence, while Bruce looked at him like a
bug under a microscope.

Tim flicked his ceramic mug and sighed quietly. The silence was oppressive, making his stomach feel like there was a dead weight trapped inside. He glanced up at Bruce and opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it.

Bruce saw the action and frowned. "Yes?"

Tim chewed the inside of his mouth before he spoke. "...There's one thing that bothers me, that I can't stop thinking about." He pushed the mug away and sighed. "If my dad knowingly helped the Light, then I'll never be able to ask him why." He balled his hands into fists. "...I have to fix this."

Bruce's gaze seemed to soften. "And, we will, but shouldering the blame for your parents' actions won't help things, understand?"

He nodded hesitantly. The guilt lessened a little but it was still there stuck in his stomach. "I just want to take responsibility for it, Bruce, even if it wasn't my fault, it's still my company."

His mentor looked like he'd almost smile, but his lips only twitched up for a second before they lowered. "I know, and I'm proud of you for taking responsibility for your actions, not many would."

Tim couldn't help but grow a little at the praise, smiling tentatively. "Thanks, Bruce."

Bruce finished the rest of his coffee and stood up. "Just don't stay up too late playing those video games," he said, placing the mug next to the kitchen sink behind him. "They'll ruin your eyes."

Tim's smile grew. "So will staying up too long in a cave."

Bruce arched an eyebrow, moving around the counter towards him. "Just be asleep by the time I get back." A ghost of a smile flashed across his face, ruffling Tim's hair.

The gesture was like a warm security blanket. "Okay."

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**Zedu = thanks**

**Lon binto = what's this**

**Opto = from**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Freaking hell it's been a busy week, but still awesome and so far I'm loving my new job.

A lot of interactions in this chapter with Helena&Selina, Bruce&Tim, and Jason&Dick, so they were all fun to write.

With Selina I get the impression she sees her daughter as spoiled, and someone who has no idea of what real struggle is since she's been sheltered, which has some truth to
it. Despite everything, Helena's always had at least one parent figure around as a constant, and she's never had to fend for herself on the streets like Selina had at her age.
Superman was smiling and so was Kara, which was a good sign as any.

Nightwing watched the two long lost species greet each other for the first time, speaking their native tongue. It was just the three of them inside of one of the medical rooms.

"...Eron Kara Zor El," she said proudly, her eyes shining. "Tixone ter Zor El."

Superman's eyes widened. "Zor El?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Un elonda fax dislane!"

Nightwing arched an eyebrow, something Superman saw. "Oh, sorry!" Superman apologised, grinning. "Kara's my cousin from Krypton."

"Cousin?" Nightwing looked her over, her face wasn't that similar to Clark's, but they did have the same blue eyes, near exact.

"Older, if you can believe it." Superman scratched the back of his head as he looked back at Kara.
"Mizyrip ula patz Krypton?"

Kara's smile faded and her shoulders slumped. "Elondo wezo lendor lu yu qui gibsey jum ula…"

Nightwing frowned, watching them both as Kara started to reply, the words were fast and basically sounded like gibberish, but Superman nodded along patiently until Kara let out a deep sigh.

"…Intergang…" She broke off and glanced at her cousin warily, while Nightwing stiffened.

Superman's smile faded. "Lon—?"

Nightwing cleared his throat. "Kal, can I talk to you for a sec?"

Clark's brow furrowed. "…Um, sure." He forced a smile when he looked back at Kara. "Xavi wixx, Kara."

She nodded, folding her arms while she watched Nightwing curiously.

Nightwing pulled Superman away towards the side. "Okay, so a few things went down when Kara was rescued from Intergang…"

Superman crossed his arms, narrowing his eyes. "Like what?"

Nightwing tried to think of how to string this. From what he knew, Batman hadn't told any of the JLA Jason was back, so Superman shouldn't be in the know. "So there may have been a few details I didn't tell Batman," he said, hesitantly.

"Such as?" Superman's brow furrowed further.

Nightwing sighed. "I…" His thoughts strayed back to Jason. "…I was undercover when I went into Intergang, and Kara saw my face so I…I said my name was Jason." Shit, that sounded lame.

"Jason?" Superman just looked more confused.

"Jason?" Kara perked up, filling Nightwing's stomach with more dread. "Din'r u—"

"Yeah, so Batman doesn't know that bit," Nightwing interrupted.

Superman raised an eyebrow. "And, why doesn't Batman know this?"

"Because I had to use guns," Nightwing whispered quickly, wringing his hands. "The whole thing was reckless and he wouldn't understand."

Superman stared at him for a moment. "…Did you lie to Batman?" he lowered his voice like Bruce was listening (for a terrifying second Nightwing considered he might be).

"No, I just omitted the truth." Nightwing looked back at Kara, who was tapping her foot impatiently. "And, I would really appreciate it if you didn't mention it to him…"

"So, you want me to lie?" Superman shook his head, disappointed. "You know I can't do that."

Nightwing buried a swell of panic. "I'm just asking that you, and Kara, don't go into detail about the rescue…please."

Superman scrutinised him, grimacing. "…Is there something you want to tell me now, Nightwing?"
Nightwing felt like he was thirteen years old again. "Listen, I'm asking this as a big favour, I promise it's nothing bad." He tried to pull the puppy-dog eyes but Superman wasn't budging. "Things between me and Batman aren't in a good place right now…he can't know about the guns alright or…" he forced a shiver, ducking his head.

"…He'll find out eventually, whatever it is," Superman said, shifting on the spot.

Nightwing glanced up, rubbing the back of his neck. "I know…and, I promise I will explain everything, just no right now."

Superman hummed suspiciously, nodding. "Okay, fine…"

"Thank you." Nightwing sighed deeply.

"I just hope you know what you're doing," Superman replied, stiffly, stepping back he smiled at Kara. "E tiqul lokden olin ula firer Jon poq, Conner!" He walked back over to Kara.

Her brow furrowed. "Lin fo Jon poq Conner?"

Wayne Manor, Gotham

10/30/2023

18:20

Bruce tightened the pale grey tie around his neck while he stood in front of his bedroom mirror. Tonight was the Party Derek Powers was hosting, it'd be at the Promenade hotel in the diamond district.

There was a knock at the door. "Bruce?" Tim's muffled voice filtered through the thick door.

Bruce glanced over at the door, smoothing down his tie. "Come in, sport."

Tim opened the door, an iPad under his arm. He was already dressed in his suit, red tie in place. "Do you have a minute?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

"Sure." Bruce wondered over to the bed to pick up his blazer.

"I did a background check on the guest list," Tim said, holding up the iPad to show a number of photos. "Two of the guests are high ranking medical researchers who still work at my company." He frowned and lowered the tablet.

Bruce slipped on his jacket. "Did you run a trail on the latest batch of blood tests from your school?"

"Yep and all of them went to where they were supposed to," Tim answered. "So I'm thinking we should be focusing on what happens in-between transportation."

"Agreed." Bruce rubbed his chin. "The easiest way for the Light to gain access to the blood tests would be to have the doctors to copy and forward the info. It has to be an inside job."

"And, I think I found a way to bust some of them," Tim said, smiling crookedly. "I started off by checking Dr Lynch's finances, and apparently he bought cheap stock in a Tupperware company that's been a success." He raised an eyebrow. "In fact, the funny coincidence is that another ten
employees in the government health sector also made similar investments, buying cheap stock and benefiting when it paid off."

Bruce grimaced, smoothing back his hair. "So it's inside trading or money laundering."

Tim crossed his arms. "And, the last thing the Light want is the Feds involved."

Which was why this was a good weak point, but they'd need to be careful. Rush in too quickly and the Light would try and bury all the evidence.

Bruce nodded, slipping on his jacket. "Good work." He buttoned up his blazer. "Is Helena ready yet?"

"She's still putting on her makeup." Tim shrugged, rolling his eyes. "So, she'll be a while."

The corner of Bruce's lips curved upwards. "There's no rush." He shrugged and slipped his hands inside his pockets.

Tim sighed. "Yeah, well I just want to get this party over with," he muttered, scowling. "I say we give it an hour and then sneak out."

"I'll find an excuse, don't worry." Bruce smiled crookedly. "Then, afterwards we can head out on patrol."

Tim smiled, nodding. "Yeah..." His smile faded after a second. "Um, listen, there's going to be a lot of people giving me slack at this party so..."

Bruce placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'll be right by your side if you need me."

"Um, yeah and I appreciate that but..." Tim grimaced, causing Bruce to frown. "I need to show them I can hold my own, fight my own battles kind of thing, so..."

"Oh..." Bruce paused for a second, a little taken aback, but then he nodded slowly. "Yes, of course, I understand." He patted Tim on the back, earning a smile.

It was only natural Tim would want to be in the spotlight more, and he was getting older. Dick and Helena had been the same around that age, wanting to fight their own battles. It was fine, really, it was fine.

A sharp knock on the door diverted both their attention, as the door opened and Helena popped her head from around it. "Are we going yet?" she asked, pushing the door open. "Because I'm ready."

She was wearing a long glittery silver dress with a high neckline.

Tim raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were contouring?"

Her eyes narrowed, brushing a hair out of her face. "I did." She lightly dabbed her cheek where a fresh layer of makeup was layered on, making her skin have a faint glow to it. "Not that you'd notice, of course."

Tim shrugged, turning the iPad off. "I still have yet to see a point to it."

Helena scowled and crossed her arms, with a matching shiny clutch bag dangling from her hand. "Makeup is an art form, Tim."

*Good lord, not this again.*
"Okay, that's enough." Bruce sighed and grabbed his phone off the dresser. "Sweetheart, you look lovely. Tim, stop arguing about make-up—Now come on, let's go." He started ushering Tim towards the door.

Outside of Wayne Manor, hidden in the shadows of the trees that overlooked the massive mansion, where two men dressed in black clothing, with ops gear, slung over their shoulders and hooked around their waists.

"Sir, they've left the mansion," James said into his cell phone, while his colleague, Max, slipped on a black ski mask.

"Don't let the butler see you," their boss, Mr Powers, growled from the other end of the line. "And if you do see her, take her out quietly."

"Roger that," James replied, hanging up. "Max, you ready?"

Max was fiddling around with one of the electric disrupters. "Yep, this thing should work fine."

James nodded, readjusting his red night vision goggles. "Let's go." He slid down the tree, his boots scraping against the bark.

Max landed down behind him and moved in front. There was a faint buzzing noise coming from the tall thick hedge in front of them. "This'll be the electric shield, hold on." He prepared a small box.

Meanwhile, James looked over the Manor's security details, and then let out a low whistle. "This guy had better security than the Pentagon."

"Pretty impressive, I know." Max bent down at parted the leaves and stuck the black box in the shrubbery before he placed the blue button on the edge of the box.

There was a faint sizzle before the low buzzing noise stopped. "Nice, come on," James praised, taking out a large hunters knife from the holster on his belt. "We get in, we get out." He cut through the branches of the shrubbery, making a large enough girth to push his way through.

The branches themselves were thick and scraped against his protective layers as he moved through into the front garden, with Max close behind.

James brushed some leaves off his clothes, holstering the knife back in the holster as he surveyed the large open space.

There was a faint whizzing noise, like from an electric bulb. Most of the downstairs lights were on and the garden itself was well lit, with small outside lights highlighting the stylised shrubbery and flower beds.

"How thick is that hedge?" Max whispered, pulling some small twigs from his ski mask.

James started walking towards the Manor, light n his feet. "We'll need to get in from—"

"What the fuck are those?" Max pointed ahead, drawing out his silencer gun.

The whizzing noise grew louder as four helicopter mile machines emerged from the ground.

Those hadn't been on the security detail.
The helicopter devices started shooting orange bolts at them.

"Shit." James started running, while Max tried to fire at them.

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Gotham City

10/30/2023

20:05

One of the redeeming qualities of this party was the food, Helena had to admit the caterer had done an outstanding job, and the portions weren't even that tiny.

Helena swallowed a bite from her lobster roll, dipping the rest in some avocado butter. She hummed in delight as she savoured the taste.

"Helena, there you are!" It was the Brucie voice.

Helena discreetly rolled her eyes before looking over at the source, and low and behold there was her dad with two women latched onto both of his arms. He had a strained smile on his face as he dragged himself and the women towards her.

She swallowed her food and then smiled. "Hey, Daddy."

Bruce's grin widened. "I've been looking everywhere for you." Then he looked at the two women on his arm. "Tiffany, Marlene, do you mind?" he asked politely.

Tiffany, the blonde haired glasses wearer, pouted. "But we were making plans."

Helena raised an eyebrow. "Oh, that's okay, I can wait."

Dad's eyes narrowed for a second, earning a pleasant smile from his daughter. "Now, come on girls, you can't blame me for wanting to keep an eye on my little girl now can you?" he said brightly, chuckling.

Marlene, the blonde one with thin lips and no glasses, frowned and looked Helena up and down. "Well...I suppose," she had a heavily thick Dutch accent. Then she smiled coyly, stroking his chest suggestively. "We will wait at the bar."

Bruce gave them a wink. "I'll come find you," he replied, already slipping his arms out of their grasps.

Marlene and Tiffany shared a sly smile as they walked away.

"They seemed fun," Helena remarked, smirking.

He rolled his eyes, straightening out his jacket. "Weren't they just..."

She grinned and picked up another one of those Lobster rolls from off the table. "I was just thinking about how we should hire the caterer of this party." She dipped the roll in the avocado and then took a large bite of the roll.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "I'll look into it..." He looked over at the crowd of people, narrowing his eyes when his gaze landed on Tim who was smiling benignly at a group of well-dressed men. "Think we should intervene?"
Helena swallowed a chunk of her food. "Didn't you say he didn't want us to?" She carefully wiped away a stain from the corner of her mouth.

"I know…" Her dad sighed, glancing back at her. "So how's school been?"

She licked some leftover food off her teeth and shrugged. "Okay, I guess. I'm trying harder in class and I'm not behind on any homework," she replied, forcing a smile. "I'll be back on the honour roll in no time."

"Good, good." He smiled briefly, stuffing one hand in his pocket. "And, how's Jaime been?"

"It's been…good." Her smile softened, watching as a well-dressed couple filtered through the crowd. "He's sweet, really sweet." She traced the curve of her hand with her finger. "He makes me feel strange, but the good kind…it's hard to explain."

She wondered if her dad knew what that felt like, to have someone make you feel that strange kind of warmth every time you saw them.

Had he ever felt that way about her mother?

"Good," her dad's voice was quieter, less curt. She looked up and saw he was staring into space, unfocused."Just, just don't rush into anything."

Helena watched him for a moment, curious before she took a step closer and coiled her arm around his. "I won't." She smiled brightly when he looked down at her, making the corner of his lips curve upwards into one of those almost-smiles. "It still feels weird calling him my boyfriend." She shrugged, her smile turned crooked when his eyes narrowed. "Personally, I think he'd make a great addition to the family."

"Don't push it," he warned darkly.

She grinned, showing her teeth. "It's gonna happen someday, Daddy, maybe not with Jaime, but someday."

"Not for a very long time if I have anything to say about it," he said firmly.

"Bruce!"

They both stiffened when they recognised that voice.

Her smile faded as Madolyn Corbett came flouncing in towards them.

"For Pete's sake…" her dad muttered, avoiding Madolyn's sparkling gaze.

"Oh, boy." Helena sighed, unlatching her arm from her dad's. "This'll be fun…"

Madolyn came to a stop in front of them, smoothing her hands (were her fingers trembling?) over the skirt of her pink chiffon dress. "Bruce, it's been ages."

Her dad plastered on his fakest smile. "Madolyn, how are you?"

"I've been great." Madolyn moved in closer, gripping his upper arm. "I tried to call you."

Helena tried not cringe, as her dad's smile strained. "Ah, yes, well I've been busy," he said, chuckling lightly. "Especially with the kids, and Tim's been stressed with this whole business merger."
Madolyn's eye twitched. "Oh, no I understand," her voice sounded clipped.

"Right…" Helena shared a look with her dad.

Madolyn's smile strained a little at the edges. "I completely understand you're busy." She moved in closer and quite confidently wrapped her arm around his. "It just seems a little odd you'd play with a girl's heart like that."

Bruce laughed lightly. "Oh, no, never like that, Madolyn," he said smoothly. "You can't blame a man for wanting a little…ur, freedom, that's all. I need, uh, options before I make a commitment."

Helena swallowed a bad taste in her mouth. He was probably just being extra harsh so he could ward Madolyn off, and she knew it was all an act, but it still seemed a little too cruel…

"O-options?" Madolyn's eyes widened in alarm, the smile faded. Bruce smiled sheepishly, shrugging. "But, you really are a lovely woman."

"You…" Her nails dug into Bruce's arm, making the man's smile dim into a thin line. "Why, why would you say a thing like that?" her voice lowered, colder.

Helena's stomach grew queasy. "Um, hey, Madolyn—"

"You said you loved me," Madolyn's voice sharpened, trying to crush Bruce's arm in her grip. A group of people nearby broke off from their conversation to look at them.

"Madolyn, just calm down for a sec," Helena whispered, touching her shoulder.

"Stay out of this," the woman snapped, shoving her away, earning a glare from Helena.

"Madolyn!" Bruce hissed through gritted teeth. "Don't touch her." He yanked his arm from her grip, making her wince. "We're done here." He moved towards Helena.

"No, no, Bruce, please." Madolyn grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and tried to pull him back. "I didn't mean to, I just—I love you!" she started speaking too fast, tears gathering in her eyes. "You said you loved me."

Bruce's eyes narrowed, shielding Helena from view. "I never anything like that." He tugged his sleeve out of her grip. "I already told you I didn't think this would work out," his tone edged on hostile. "I already said no a doz—"

Madolyn slapped him across the face, silencing the guests when the loud slap reverberated across the room. "That bitch changed your mind, didn't she?!"

"That bitch changed your mind, didn't she?!" she screeched, the sound bounced off the walls.

"What the hell?" Helena exclaimed, pulling her dad away from the woman.

Tim hurried over to their side. "Are you okay, Bruce?" He stood next to Helena, eyeing Madolyn like she was crazy.

Bruce's eyes narrowed, touching his sore cheek. "I think you should leave."

"Y-you think she'll love you like I could!" Tears were streaming down Madolyn's face, her flushed skin a horrible pink colour. "Is the baby yours too? Is it?"
"What are you talking about?" Bruce's gaze grew harsher.

Madolyn's face scrunches up into an ugly snarl.

"How long were you fucking her behind my back!?"

"That's it, Security!" Derek Powers materialised behind Tim, clicking his fingers impatiently. "Remove her from the venue."

Helena and Tim pulled their dad further away from the woman, while security filtered through the crowd of guests that had formed a circle around the drama.

Madolyn's eyes widened. "No, wait, I was just—Bruce!" She tried to move away as the two security guards grabbed her, pulling her away. "Get off of me!" she was screaming and kicking while the rest of the room stood and watched. "Bruce!"

Helena grimaced, feeling bile in her mouth.

The doors slammed shut when Madolyn was carried out, leaving them all in silence.

The silence in the room was broken when Derek Powers laughed, it sounded forced. "You sure dodged a bullet there, Bruce."

The remark seemed to set the rest of the room at ease, even earning a few laughs. Bruce strained a smile, while the rest of the guests started to disperse, ignoring the faint sobs that echoed from behind the closed doors where Madolyn had been dragged through.

"We should get out of here," Helena urged, tugging his sleeve.

Her dad grimaced, nodding. "Agreed." He took a step forward, but then Powers blocked their path.

Derek Powers smiled apologetically. "So, sorry about that, Bruce, she wasn't even invited," he said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I hope she hasn't ruined the mood?"

Helena sighed quietly while Tim crossed his arms and scowled. Bruce spared them a glance over his shoulder.

"I just think it's best if we call it an early night." Bruce forced another smile.

"Early night? You?" Powers laughed again, grating Helena's nerves. "Come on, now. You're not that old. It isn't even nine yet?" He looked over at Tim. "Besides, lots of people have come to see Timothy over here, we can't let them down now can we?"

Tim tensed and looked over at the hundreds of guests. Helena caught a glimpse of guilt in his gaze and frowned. "No offence, Mr Powers, but that sounds a lot like a guilt trip," she remarked dryly, arching an eyebrow at the business man.

Powers looked shocked by the accusation. "I was merely stating facts, dear," his voice grew less pleasant. "Everyone is here for him." He looked over at Tim who stared back coldly. "You do have a responsibility, Timothy."

Dad's eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to force—"

"No, it's okay," Tim interrupted evenly, smiling. "Most of them did come here to speak to me."

Bruce hummed, eyeing Powers warily. "Are you sure, Tim?"
Tim shrugged. "Yeah, it'll be fine."

Her dad was barely holding back a grimace, so Helena shot him a reproachable look. If Tim wanted to fight his own battles then they'd need to respect that.

Dad looked at her briefly before he nodded, understanding. "Okay, then, I guess it is still pretty early."

"That's the spirit," Powers said cheerfully, slapping Bruce on the back. Dad's eye twitched. "Now why don't we get some ice for that cheek?"

A cold look flashed across Dad's face briefly, but then vanished and was replaced with a perfectly pleasant smile. "Thank you."

Helena narrowed her eyes at Powers before she looked down at Tim. "Mind if I join you?"

Tim half-smiled. "Well, I wouldn't mind the company."

She squeezed his shoulder, looking over at the guests. "Come on then." Helena started walking with him towards those old CEO members.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Powers fostering Dad onto a waiter when a security guard whispered something in Mr Powers' ear.

The Powers family apartment complex had been home to the whole family for nearly fifty years, with the older generation being two floors below and Derek Powers' wife and son being in the penthouse.

Selina had memorised the layout like the back of her hand, so getting in wasn't that hard. The only hard part was trying not to enjoy it.

She'd had to hire a sitter, under a fake name, and slipped on some black yoga pants and a dark top. She'd raided the night vision goggles from one of her old storage places, that and the lockpicking gear, grappling gun, est.

The balls of Selina's feet lightly touched the clean grey carpet of Derek Powers' office. It was an extremely tidy room, with lines of shelves which held photos and awards, as she walked passed them she saw pictures of the Powers family on various vacations, parties, and charity events.

Selina narrowed her eyes at the one photo of Derek smiling with his arm wrapped around his wife's hourglass waist, while his son (Paxton was it?) held up a large fish.

She tried to brush off her re-sent meant and remain focused, so she ignored the rest of the photos and walked towards the desk.

There were four drawers, two on each side, but the fourth one at the bottom was locked. She reached into her pocket and took out her lock-picking kit while she examined the desk and traced her finger over the drawer lock.

"What have we in here?" she murmured to herself, picking the lock, it didn't take too long.

The drawer was pushed open, it was a deep drawer with a silver laptop nestled on top of some paperwork.

Selina smiled to herself and took out the laptop, placing it on the desk. Her gaze flickered back to
the drawer and her smile faltered, there was a small pile of pictures on top of the paperwork, photographs of her.

She picked up the first photo on the pile, the one Mrs McGinnis appearance with red hair. Selina stared at the photo, feeling a dead weight land in her stomach like an anchor. The photo was a side shot, taken without her notice while her gaze focussed on something out of sight. It'd been the only snapshot she'd let Warren display on his desk at work when they'd moved to California.

Selina swallowed a lump in her throat and turned the photo over on the desk, looking back at the paperwork in the drawer.

She frowned as she read the crumpled pieces of paper, there were big X's in black ink. Selina narrowed her eyes at the writing, it looked like advanced biology. She looked through the rest of the papers, it was all more or less the same thing, but just different equations.

"Well, it's gotta mean something," she muttered, folding away the papers. She stuffed the information in the small back fasted to her thigh. "What else you got?" She opened up the laptop and turned it on.

The screensaver opened up with a photo of a beach. She went clicked on the reset password bar, while she pulled out a small loose note from her pocket which hopefully had the right secret answers on it. A lot of it had been through research since she needed to get answers to all the possible secret answers the computer would ask.

The secret answers bar popped up showing the security questions:

Where did you meet your spouse?

The answer he gave to the public was that he met his wife on a cruise ship touring the Caribbean. His former secretary said that was a lie, he's originally met the future Mrs Powers at the Vreeland's cocktail party and banged her in the guest bedroom.

Where is your favourite place to vacation?

Derek often said he favoured the fishing lakes of Boca Grande, Florida, with his family, which was another lie he told the public. Powers took regular business trips to Dubai on frequent occasions.

Selina typed in the answers and watched as they were approved. The rest was standard security procedure, and soon enough she was on the desktop.

She started searching through files, but a lot of it was focussed on stock, family photos, reports. "Come on, where would you put it," she murmured, drumming her fingers against the desk as she stared at the screen. "You're not half as smart as you think you are."

Selina paused for a second before she looked back at the unlocked drawer and bent down, using her hand to feel around in the drawer, pushing against the bottom of the drawer and the top, until her fingers traced the small gap at the end of the drawer and felt a small little rectangle stuck to the base of the wood.

"There you are." She smiled crookedly and removed the small USB stick, it was small at had a sticky grip on the face of it, tiny microscopic suction cups to keep it stuck.

Selina plugged the USB in and opened up the files.
What kind of place was this?

James stumbled down into the hallway, his clothes charred and burned, and his ski mask torn off along with his goggles.

He hurried down the hallway, limping as he leant against the wall as he rounded a corner—

"Uh hem."

James turned around—

A metal backing tray was whacked across the face.

His body fell to the floor with a hard thud.

Alfred emerged from the shadows, wrinkling his nose at the unconscious man, and then frowned when he saw the damage the blow had done to his baking tray.

"Well, that dent isn't coming out," Alfred remarked lightly, sighing as he examined the ruined tray.

Selina narrowed her eyes at the screen, looking through the different files, most of them were documents showing different diagrams of some kind of computer chip.

Then her hand stilled when she clicked on another document, it was a file on Warren. Her stomach lurched as she read it.

Name: Warren McGinnis

Age: 42

Ex-wife Mary Garr, current wife: Maria Lysin

Was involved in the beginning phase of project Evolution back in 2010 at Star Labs for three years, and then was scouted for our science department in 2013. Became involved in the Bio Chip's development in 2020 after he’d transferred to our facility in Detroit, but then quit after two years because of 'personal' reasons.

Selina frowned, scrolling down the document until she reached some audio files.

Audio file 02/14/2023 phone call to Silas Stone's residence.

She bit down on her lip, hesitating before she clicked the play button.

"Hello?" a deep voice spoke first, who she assumed was Silas Stone.

"Silas!" She froze at the sound of her husband's voice. "It's Warren, how have you been?"

"Oh, hey, long time no see."

"Yeah, I know, I know," there was a faint drop of tension in Warren's voice. "I was just looking through some old photos of the Star Lab days actually."

"Ah, right."

"Yeah, well I'm heading back to Detroit this weekend for a contract and I was wondering if you wanted to meet up for a drink? Just some catch-up on old times."
"...I'd need to check my schedule, my son has a football game coming up soon so..."

"No, no I understand," Warren's voice was lighthearted. "What position does he play?"

"Reciever. Never really saw the point of the game, but the boy loves it."

"That's kids for you." Warren let out a laugh that sounded forced to her ears. "But, yeah, if you could check your schedule then maybe we could make plans? Be really nice to catch up."

There was another pause, longer than the last.

"Yeah...yeah, okay, I'll see what I can do."

"Great, great, well thanks for chat. Catch up later?"

"Yeah, no problem. Take care of yourself, Warren."

"You too, Silas."

The recording ended.

Selina searched for more but she couldn't find any, and then the document went back to written format.

07/29/2023

Warren hacked into our files, he stole a pass card and broke into our facility in Detroit. Tech department isn't sure how much he knows now, but judging from the CCTV Warren may think he got in and out without detection.

Selina gripped the corner of the desk tightly, gritting her teeth as she read the passage. "Why didn't you tell me, you idiot?" she hissed, feeling a swell of anger.

If he had just told her then she would have been able to help, then maybe he'd still be—

There was a sound coming from the hallway beyond the door, it was muffled but loud enough to distinguish somewhat.

"...Mom...party?" it was a child's voice.

"Shit," she whispered, taking the USB out. Selina shut the laptop down and then closed the lid, as the voices grew louder.

Selina hid the USB in her bag and then shoved the laptop back in the drawer, backing away towards the window.

Madolyn Corbett was a pathetic sight, shivering on the steps of the hotel while she sobbed. Her makeup ruined and smudged and her reddish hair in a dishevelled state.

"Men can be cruel, Ms Corbett." Derek came to a stop next to her, his shiny shoes reflecting the light from the gleaming hotel behind him.

Madolyn looked up and sniffed. "I just thought...I thought h-he..."

"Ssh, now." Derek smiled kindly and crouched down to her level, taking out a green silk
handkerchief from his breast pocket. "Dry your eyes now."

Her hand shook when she took the handkerchief, sniffling as she wiped the tears from her eyes, staining the handkerchief black. "I'm sorry for ruining your party…"

Derek's smile tightened. "Well, perhaps I was too harsh, so forgive my earlier outburst," he said smoothly. "You did have all of us quite worried, though, raving about some woman and a baby…"

Her cheeks grew red hot. "I…" She looked away. "He—I just don't want her to hurt him."

"Excuse me?" He frowned, tilting his head to the side.

Madolyn scrunched the handkerchief up in her hand. "That woman he's been seeing, she's a liar, she'll only hurt him," she blurted out, as her eyes darted around. "And, and the baby might not even be his!"

Derek brow furrowed. "I see…" He held his hand out for her to take, catching her by surprise. "This does sound serious." He helped her to her feet, she stumbled a bit in her heels. "Now, this woman with the baby, tell me more about her."

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Chapter End Notes

Ah, well I can't wait for the next chapter.

Helena has been in the background lately, but now the plot is in the final stages the next five chapters will be focused back on her.

I also have a small headcanon that if Warren had told Selina the whole truth earlier on she would have solved most of their problems and gotten them both out alive.
Jaime was sitting on Helena's bed texting on his phone, while she was busy in her walk-in closet getting changed into her costume. He was already dressed in his, a basic black and white skeleton t-shirt with a plastic skull mask, but his mom had personalised it with some paint so it looked more like a Day of the Dead style.

/Tell mom I'll be back late/ he texted his sister.

A few seconds later she replied.

/WHY? Are you with your giirrrrrllfriend? Xxx/

There was an obnoxious amount of emojis attached to the message.

Jaime rolled his eyes, as Helena's cat jumped onto the bed next to him.

/HA. Mind your own business. Just tell her and dad I'll be late, they aren't picking up their phones/

He sent the text and then slipped his phone into his black jeans.

"Ey, Jefa! You ready yet?" he called, stroking the cat when it nuzzled his hand.

"Yes, how much longer will she be?" the Scarab sounded oddly more apathetic than usual.

Be patient.

"Nearly done!" Helena replied, shuffling around behind the closet door. "Actually, can you check under the bed? I think I left my boots there, the brown ones."

'Are we her errand boy now?"
He ignored the machine. "Sure."

Jaime slipped off the bed and looked underneath it; it was pretty cluttered, with old books, bags, and—was that a set of daggers strapped underneath the mattress?

'Do you really have to ask?'

Hmm, yeah, good point.

Jaime frowned, blinking before he dismissed it and went back to searching for the boots until he found them stuffed in a corner against the leg of the bed.

He heard her open the closet doors. "Okay, ready." She walked over to the bed while he grabbed the boots.

"When's this party meant to start anyway?" Jaime crawled out from under the bed, glancing up.

"Not for another half an hour, we'll be fine," Helena said, smiling as she fastened a hoop earring onto her earlobe.

She was dressed as a pirate, with a red bandana wrapped around her loose hair and a heavy layer of eyeliner on as well. The rest of her costume was just black leather pants, a loose white shirt, and a brown leather jacket.

He smiled and passed her the boots. "I'm just hoping we get there early enough that they'll forget about me halfway through the party," he replied, standing up.

"Not on your life, honey." She smirked, kissing his cheek. "Don't worry, my friends will like you, everyone else doesn't really matter." Helena sat down on the bed, pulling on one of the boots.

Jaime scoffed quietly, sitting down next to her. "They do if they have the power to ruin my life."

Helena shot him a look. "Like I'd let that happen." She shook her head and pulled on the last boot.

"If any one of those spoiled idiots tries to intimidate you, tell them where to go."

He raised an eyebrow. "Explicitly?"

Her smile grew more crooked. "In the politesse way possible." She lightly shoved him and got back on her feet. "Let's go."

"Don't you need a sword?" he asked, looking at the absent amount of weaponry.

She wrinkled her nose. "Too clunky..." Then, her brow furrowed. "But, glad you mentioned that." Helena tapped her chin. "We'll need to grab one of my spare belts from the cave."

He had a feeling she wasn't talking about one for her pants. "Is it necessary? I mean, we're just going to a party," he said, grabbing his mask from off the bed.

Helena raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. "It's Gotham on Halloween. If it were up to my dad, we'd be going out in bullet proof vests and gas masks."

Jaime thought for a moment, putting his mask on. "Okay, fair point." He shrugged, as she walked over to the door. "How bad was it last year?"

'Again, do you really have to ask?' the Scarab droned.
Helena frowned, walking into the hallway. "Well, last year the Scarecrow tried to turn a group of Trick or Treaters into gremlins."

Jaime's eyes widened.

'Huh...interesting,' said the Scarab.

Yeah, but Gremlins, really? I know it's Gotham but...still.

'Well, I'm sure your sister is perfectly safe.'

...Mierda.

A small seed of uneasiness grew in his stomach. "You do know Milagro Trick or Treating right now, right?"

She winced, raising her hands up in defence as she walked. "I said tried to, and it was one time."

"Right." Jaime took out his phone, walking alongside her towards the stairs.

/Milagro, tell Dad to go home lock the doors and stay inside./

Helena arched an eyebrow at his rapid texting, but he pretended he didn't notice.

The reply from Milagro was quick. /But I'm still getting candy!/

/Go home and lock the doors!/

The burn ward of Gotham General was eerily quiet, with only the sound of soft hums coming from the machines.

The curtains were drawn and the large room had 24 beds, with only eleven of them occupied with patients, with each patient shielded from view by the pale green curtains that drew around the bed.

Batman clung to the shadows as he slipped into the room and slowly made his way over to the bed nearest the window where the patient, Carlton Spencer, was resting.

Batman slipped through the curtain and looked over at the former henchman. The man was young, in his twenties, and used to have blond hair. Now his hair was gone and his skin was pink and dried up after healing from the burns. He looked frail in the hospital gown he was wearing, extremely thin.

"Carlton," Batman said in a low his, touching the man's bony shoulder, careful not to be too rough.

Carlton stirred restlessly, his brow furrowed, "Wh..." his voice was hoarse. Batman waited as the young man's eyes eased open.

"I have some questions for you," Batman said evenly, glowering down at the man.

Carlton's eyes bulged, fearful. "You..." he tried to shout but it came out in a whisper. He jerked away, his hands trembling. "No—"

Batman loomed over him. "I have some questions about the last Intergang shipment Black Mask ordered," he spoke calmly, staring down Carlton. "And, you're going to tell me the specs."
The main laboratory of the Watchtower was crowded more than usual; Nightwing leant against one of the counters. While Atom—a hero dressed in mainly blue and white spandex—presented the holographic diagram of the chips. The long time red android friend and a member of the League, Red Tornado, stood next to the scientist, his empty eyes vacant like he wasn't even home.

"It's still a bit tricky working out the reversal process without a physical chip," Atom spoke, frowning as he searched through the info on the screen. "But, judging from the original design and overall function of the machinery…" He zoomed in on the tiny circuit board. "The chips will be remote controlled, so we just need to find the main controller to deactivate them, but it's still risky."

Nightwing frowned. "So, no hope of creating a counter-chip instead?"

Atom shook his head. "Not with these, by the look of the design these things are meant to fuse with the brain, even removing them will take surgery."

"Disconnecting the bio chips from the main signal is the most logical option," Red Tornado said mechanically, not moving an inch.

"We'll need to trace the source of the signal." Nightwing nodded along, rubbing his chin.

"But, finding it'll be a problem," Atom replied, sighing. "Superman already did a scan of Detroit and didn't find anything; no cries for help, weird signals, or vibrations."

"They must be blocking it somehow," Nightwing muttered, scowling. If they were going to infiltrate the base when M'gann changed into Rose then the chips needed to be taken out fast. "The question is who would be the one holding the controller?"

Red Tornado took a step forward. "That is why I theorise the main control is in the underground facility." He turned his head towards Nightwing. "The children will be closely monitored, tested. The bio chips must be easily controlled by the scientists."

Atom nodded eagerly. "And, if we break whatever's stopping us from tracing the signal, then we'll know for definite."

Nightwing moved off the counter. "I'll incorporate that in the plan," he replied, smiling. "I appreciate the help."

"Just doing what we can to help get those kids back." Atom smiled, closing the holographic screen. "Already, heard you helped rescue Superman's cousin."

Nightwing's smile faltered, walking towards the door. "Oh, yeah that," he said, shrugging, avoiding their gazes. "Just doing the daily rounds, you know how it is."

"I do not believe investigating—" Red Tornado started to speak but was cut off when Nightwing laughed.

"It was nothing." Nightwing cleared his throat, earning an odd look from Atom. "Anyway, catch you guys later." He hit the button next to the door and walked into the hallway.
"...That was unusual," Red Tornado's voice could be heard as the doors closed.

Nightwing cringed, slipping around the corner, as he ran a hand through his hair.

Selina rocking Terry in her arms as she settled him down for bed, humming a lullaby under her breath. "Hm, hm, little baby don't say a word, Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird," she sang softly as she walked over to his bassinet near the sofa.

Terry mewed quietly and buried his face in her chest, snuggled up safe and warm in his soft race car onesie.

She smiled and went to put him down, but then froze. There was a sound, this creaking noise.

Her smile faded, holding Terry close against her chest as she moved to where her gun was hidden behind the TV. She grabbed it and clicked the safety off, keeping her eyes locked on the door.

Selina started edging towards the bedroom, as the noise grew louder.

The door creaked behind her, she tore her gaze away from the front door and looked over her shoulder, but the bedroom was empty.

There were louder footsteps coming from outside.

"Shit," she whispered. Her mouth was dry, feeling sick, she looked back at the front door as she backed into the bedroom.

The footsteps quietened behind the door.

Selina let out a shallow breath, stepping behind the threshold of the bedroom door.

A gentle breeze touched her skin. From the corner of her eye, just in sight as she got into the room, the window was cracked open.

Her skin prickled.

Fuck

Selina twisted her torso and elbowed the intruder in the face, but they grabbed her around the neck. It was a man, wearing some kind of suit, with large arms and long hair that hit her in the face when she tried to head-butt him.

The gun went off and made a hole in the wall.

Terry jerked away and cried. The door burst open and a group of six piled in carrying guns.

"No!" Selina dropped the gun to hold onto Terry when the baby started to slip from her arms. She held her baby tightly, as she was choked and struggled against the man who was holding her. "You son of a bitch!" She sunk her teeth into his arm but only scraped the fabric of his jacket.

The other intruders swarmed her. Terry was wailing, his cries muffled against her chest as her own struggles grew weaker when the man holding her squeezed his arm tighter around her throat.

A woman with a bleach dyed buzz haircut tried to grab Terry out of Selina's arms.

Selina kicked the woman in the face, knocking her backwards.
The guy holding pushed her onto her knees as her feet kicked and scraped against the carpet. She started seeing spots as his bicep squeeze the air out of her lungs.

"Don't kill her, George!" one guy shouted.

She couldn't hold onto Terry as tightly, his wailing grew fainter and muffled as her vision blurred. The intruders surrounded her and blocked out the ceiling.

Terry was ripped out of her arms.

Selina gritted her teeth and tried to reach out.

The man, George, slipped his arm loose from her throat and then smashed her head against the floor.

Her ears rung before her vision faded to black.

Helena's motorcycle stopped at the red light. Jaime had his arms wrapped around her waist, his large helmet resting against hers. Her cycle was in camouflage mode, the usual purple digital paint job was covered by a sleek black.

Jaime shifted, leaning back. "You know, this city is actually kind of beautiful at night."

Helena frowned, looking up at the huge skyscrapers that stretched towards the sky. They were in the more expensive area where there were less trash and a lot more expensive signs with new buildings. There were Broadway Musicals, Malls, massive screens showing shiny wistful advertisement and the latest news. All sorts of charm to hide the dirt underneath.

She smiled faintly, looking back at the traffic lights as they changed. "Yeah, I guess." She drove on ahead. "But, you should see it above, now that's beautiful."

"We should... out of costume, I mean." He rested his helmet against hers, his hands comfortably wrapped around her stomach.

"I'd like that." She resisted the temptation to touch his hand and kept a firm grip on the handles.

The monitor on her bike flashed red, it was Barbara.

Helena frowned and touched the screen, selecting hands-free. The built in Headset in her helmet beeped. "Problem with the Trick or Treaters, Babs?"

"Are you in costume?" Barbara's asked sharply.

Helena's frown deepened, rounding a corner. "What's going on?"

"It's... it's your mom, the alarm went off."

Helena's stomach lurched.

Mom was in trouble.

She dug her nails into the bike handles and did a U-turn on the road, nearly crashing into a car.

"Whoa!" Jaime jerked back from the sudden swerve.
"Watch it!" a woman driving a red mini screamed out of the window, beeping as she went passed.

Helena ignored them and zoomed down the road. "What happened?" she snapped, turning sharply down a street.

"Helena, what the hell?" Jaime said.

"Ssh!" she hissed, keeping her gaze ahead. "Babs, what happened?"

"I'm looking at the footage now," Barbara replied, shuffling about on the other end of the line. "There are two cars parked around the back of the building. I can see your mom, they're carrying her, and Terry—"

"I'm heading over." Helena tapped the screen and turned the camouflage mode off. "Jaime, get ready to suit up."

'Camouflage mode deactivated,' the computer spoke. The black on the bike was swept away by a wave of purple, the licence plate cleared.

"What's happening?" Jaime repeated, urgently.

"It's my mom," Helena replied, swerving through a narrow alley, hitting a trash can lid. "They have her and Terry."

"You can't just dive in there," Barbara argued. "Just give me a second to call Batman."

"I'm not waiting around for him." Helena bit down on her tongue, as she drew nearer to the house. "I know what I'm doing."

George loaded Selina into the back of the SUV, both her wrists handcuffed. His long dusty brown hair was dishevelled and his suit was partly ripped from the struggle she'd put on.

Tony sat down next to her on the other side, leaning against the expensive leather. He helped buckle her into the car.

"Are you gonna hold this thing or what?" Patricia asked, holding the screaming baby at arm's length.

George rolled his eyes. "Suck it up. The rich guy wants the baby dumped at the hotel," he said, getting in the seat next to Selina. "She's going straight to the tower."

Patricia groaned. "Fuck sake." She shook her head and held the baby under her arm, walking towards the second car.

George shut the door and turned to the Zhang who was driving. "Powers Tower, let's go."

Selina stirred in her sleep, her face scrunching up. Tony scowled and leant over to tighten the cuffs, George nodded in approval and shifted in his seat.

Batman didn't knock or tap the window, he just let himself in, creeping in through the window while Jason was washing some dishes.

His adopted son stiffened but didn't turn around. "...Oh, hey, Boss." He wasn't wearing any shoes and was just dressed in a vest and jeans, with a gun hanging on his belt and a knife holstered in the
back pocket.

Batman gave the apartment a quick look over, it was nicer than the other one, and cleaner as well. All the glass bottles were shoved in a bright green recycling bin next to the kitchen counter. The furniture was new as well, and the walls were a clinical ivory colour. There were even coasters on the coffee table.

"Like the new place?" Jason said, turning around, wiping his hands with a cloth. Batman stared at him blankly, feeling a white hot rage nestle in his stomach like a lump of coal. "I've been keeping it clean, even, uh, been cutting back on the drinking." Jason smiled crookedly. "Fucking sucks balls, but, uh, hey. Can't be dependent on the stuff, right?"

Batman remained silent, staring at him intently.

Jason shrugged, scoffing. "Oh, so we playing that game, huh?" He tossed the cloth to the side, looking away. "What's got you wound up?"

Batman took a deep breath before he spoke and took a step forward. "Black Mask's Intergang shipment," he said quietly.

Jason's shoulder tensed for just a second before he shrugged. "You wanna know how much I sold it—"

"You didn't sell it," Batman interrupted, not raising his voice. There wasn't a need to. Jason was struck silent, which would be unusual if he wasn't guilty of something. "You kept it all, didn't you?"

Jason balled his hands into fists, hesitating. "Okay, fine, I did." He shrugged again. "You think I'm just gonna waste an arsenal like that?"

Batman closed his eyes for a second and took in a deep measured breath, narrowing eyes. "One of those guns was a sniper, wasn't it?"

Jason's face twitched, his body trembled ever so slightly. "Yeah, so?" He shrugged a fourth time. The guilt was so obvious it looked like Jason would explode. Weeks or anxiety piled up high like decks of cards.

"Dr Silas Stone. Detroit." Batman took another step forward. "You were there, weren't you?"

"Are you fucking serious?" Jason touched his gun. "You think I would—?"

"Son," Batman's voice grew cold. Jason's mouth clamped shut like a child caught in a lie. "The next thing you say needs to be the truth," he said calmly, as his gaze darkened. "Don't make me ask again."

Silence swallowed the room. Jason didn't take his eyes off Batman, his hand still hovering over the gun. The false bravado cracked. Jason opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it.

"Batman!" Oracle's voice drummed in his ear.

Batman gritted his teeth, his anger spilling over the surface. "What?" he growled, making Jason stiffen.

"Selina's been kidnapped."
Batman's anger was dampened by an ice cold splash of fear. He looked away from Jason. "Where?" he snapped.

"At the safe-house. They've shoved her and Terry in separate cars. Helena's already at the scene."

Batman ground his teeth, nearly cracking his jaw. "I'm on my way."

"What's going on?" Jason spoke up, his knuckles turning white.

Batman sent him a glare. "We'll continue this later." He moved back towards the window, all the while keeping his gaze focused on Jason who just remained stoically silent.

Helena stopped around the corner of the houses where a long private road stretched.

Two black SUV's started to drive off.

She gritted her teeth. "Jaime, suit up," she ordered, reaching into her jacket to grab her folded up utility belt.

Jaime got off the bike and shoved his helmet on the ground. A low whizzing sound came when he armoured up behind her. "What about you?"

The two cars were already getting away.

She grabbed a small com-link from her belt and passed it to him. "Oracle will instruct you." She folded his fingers around the piece, glaring at him when he looked like he'd protest. "I'll take offence, you hang back and tail the second car."

Jaime's lips thinned. "Okay, just be safe."

Her glare softened. "You too." She fastened the belt around her waist and then zipped up her jacket to hide it.

Blue Beetle sighed and flew in the air while she turned around and revved up her engine. The two of them gave chase.

"Oracle, you there?" Blue Beetle clicked the small earpiece in place and then covered his face with his armour.

"Loud and clear, Rookie."

Blue Beetle flew high in the air, tailing the second car while Huntress went for the first. "Tailing number two. You got eyes in the sky?"

"Navigating CCTV now," Oracle replied, an excess amount of typing could be heard in the background.

The two cars headed for the main road where a set of traffic lights were coming up ahead, a group of civilians pressed the button at the crossing.

'You can disengage the vehicle there,' the Scarab advised.

Jaime nodded, going lower. "Good idea."
"What are you doing?" Oracle's voice sharpened.

"Traffic lights up ahead, I can intercept the car there," he explained, keeping cover behind the many tall buildings as he started to close in. The traffic lights changed to amber.

"With what manoeuvre?" That made him hesitate. "Are you just going to go in and throw some punches or blasters?"

"No, I…"

"There's a baby in one of those cars, Blue."

Jaime's stomach lurches. Helena's been teaching him some fighting moves, but just martial arts, nothing too sneaky, and this is his first hostage situation.

"Then what am I meant to do?"

'Attack—'

Shut up.

"Huntress is coming up to the lights, wait for her to make the first move."

Blue Beetle nodded, feeling his cheeks flush. "Right, got it. Sorry."

The lights were on red, forcing the two SUV's to stop,

He flew lower and saw Huntress pulled up next to the cars.

Huntress touched her motorcycle helmet, feeling too exposed without her costume. The only protective gear she had was her helmet and her leather jacket, but it wasn't much and the Halloween costume she was wearing would rip easily after a few scrapes.

She took out two thin discs and stuck one to the bumper of the first car as she crept in-between the traffic towards the second car. The SUV's windows were blacked out so she couldn't see inside, but she could hear a faint cry coming from the car.

Helena bit down on her tongue and held the handles tighter. *Stay focused.*

She stopped next to the first car but didn't stick a disc on, not with the other car directly behind.

"Huntress?" Oracle drummed in her ear. "Plan?"

"Stick-discs," Huntress whispered, narrowing her eyes at the traffic lights when the one in front changed to red. She edged more in front, eyeing the passengers in the front. "Activate when once civilians are clear."

"Roger that."

Huntress bit down on her lip and made a move, pretending to fiddle with the long heel of her boot she lost her balance and nearly fell off her bike. She hit the SUV, grabbing onto it for support.

The window wound down. "Watch it, idiot!" the driver snarled; he looked middle-aged, Chinese, with a scruffy black beard and bald head. "You'll ruin the paint job."
Huntress slipped the disc under the tyre bumper. "Sorry!" She waved her hand apologetically, pushing against the car to steady herself.

The driver shook his head. "Stupid bitch," he muttered.

Huntress ignored him and revved up her engine as the lights in front of them turned orange. "Oracle, discs in place," she said under her breath. "Tell Blue to wait."

"He's on standby."

The lights turned green.

The cars moved forward but she hung back a little behind the second SUV, but, then the two cars parted, one going right towards the Diamond district, the other heading left towards the other side of town.

The traffic on both roads was moving, more spaced out. That'd mean less chance of casualties.

Huntress gritted her teeth. "Damn it." Her gaze darted back and forth between the two cars, a four-second gap between them. "I'm tailing left," she snapped, turning to the right. "Get ready." She pulled out the trigger from her belt.

"Blue's two clicks away. Robin and Batman are on their way too."

"Okay. Three, two." She pressed the trigger. "One."

The discs triggered the first and second car. A burst of electricity caused the two cars to screech and skid, the engines shut off by the pulse.

She could see the second just with her sights, it swerved and screeched.

"What the fuck?" Zhang hit the wheel with his fists. The car battery was completely dead.

In the back seat, George took out his gun. "Don't just sit there, idiot!" he growled, looking over his shoulder. The girl on the purple motorcycle was coming towards them, looking like she'd crash into them. "What the hell is she—?"

The motorcycle came to a sharp stop just before it hit the bumper. The girl jumped off the cycle and flipped onto the roof.

George's eyes widened, looking up at the roof, hearing her body roll against the metal.

"What is she doing!?!" Zhang looked around in alarm, aiming his gun at the roof.

The girl landed on the bonnet and punched her fist through the window, a pair of knuckle dusters shimmering in the light.

George fired at her while Zhang shielded his face from the glass.

Selina was jerked awake by the noise. "Terry?!" she looked around and froze when she saw the girl smash her way through the window. "Sweet Jesus."

Tony was trying to find and opened, jerking his gun back and forth to see passed the front seats. George tried to avoid shooting Zhang, his bullets hitting the front seats when the girl kept dodging.
The girl slipped a knife out of her sleeve and stabbed it into Zhang's shoulder "Fuck!" he screamed, cradling his bleeding shoulder.

George fired at her, finding an opening.

The bullet hit her helmet visor, breaking a large part of the glass, the bullet got stuck in the helmet surface.

A cold blue eye glared briefly before she was forced back when Tony started firing dangerously close to her. Her black hair slipping out of the helmet.

Zhang pulled the knife out of his shoulder and swiped at her, cutting the front of her jacket. The girl jerked back and then punched Zhang in the face two or three times until there was blood dripping from his mouth and nose.

George grabbed Selina and kicked opened the car door, dragging her outside. They had a better chance on foot than in the confined space, less chance of getting hit by stray gunfire at least.

Selina kicked him and tried to overpower him.

He gritted his teeth and aimed his gun at her head.

"Listen, you bitch!"

The girl jumped onto the car roof.

Fuck

Then from the corner of his eye, he saw something land on the ground.

"Car trouble?" said a kid.

George looked down.

A kid dressed in a red jumped up and kicked him in the face with the tip of a sturdy metal capped boot, which broke George's jaw.

Blue Beetle ripped the car door off and threw it across the street.

There were two people in the back with a baby. A blonde woman with a buzz haircut was holding the sobbing baby in her arms, pointing a gun at him. The driver got out of the car.

Blue Beetle felt a spark of fear, but he smothered it and reached forward, morphing his right hand into stun cannons.

The second guy started shooting at his chest, but the bullets bounced off the armour. Blue Beetle stunned him, a bright flash of blue blinding the woman. She tried to shoot him, but he grabbed her wrist and twisted it.

The gun fired at the roof, denting it. The baby cried louder.

Blue Beetle gritted his teeth, trying to aim for her with his stunner, but the baby was in the way.

'Behind you!' the Scarab warned.
Blue Beetle looked over his shoulder just as a taser was stabbed into his back. "AH!" He yelled out, the electricity burning his spine.

"Take this, freak," the driver hissed, digging the device in harder.

The woman aimed the gun at his face.

The Scarab beeped loudly and released a couple of blue metal tentacles from his back, shoving the driver backwards onto the floor, pinning him down.

*Thanks, Hermano!*

'*...Just stay focused, Jaime Reyes.'*

Blue Beetle pushed the woman's arm up so the bullet hit the roof again and then he punched her in the face, breaking her nose.

He grabbed the baby, but she tried to pull back, so Blue Beetle head-butted her in the face and knocked her out.

Blue Beetle cradled the baby in his arms and flew up into the air, glancing behind his shoulder at the driver.

He smirked down at the man and then kicked him in the face.

'*Police up ahead.'*

His smile faded, grimacing when he saw the group of police cars heading towards them. "...Uh, oh."

---

Robin kicked the man with long hair to the ground.

Huntress grinned and dived for the other man, the one still trying to shoot her.

"Damn it," the second man hissed, getting out of the car to shoot her on the roof.

Huntress ducked out of the way, rolling onto the ground to avoid the bullets while Robin was busy fighting the man with long hair.

Huntress slid a disc bomb under the car, it hit the second man's feet and exploded, creating a large mass of grey smoke.

She jumped onto the roof, rolled over through the smoke and kicked the man in the face with a firm side-kick. The force of the kick sent the man smashing into the railing on the road as Huntress landed onto the ground.

The sirens of the police could be heard, as civilians, who hadn't already abandoned their cars, made a run for it.

"Terry!" Selina coughed from the smoke, looking around urgently for her son.

Robin ducked out of the way when the long-haired man parried one his punches and started boxing with him. The boy wonder ducked and dived, using his smaller size to an advantage. The man was in bad shape and was bleeding heavily from the mouth, his jaw disjointed.
Huntress moved over to Selina and grabbed her arm, receiving a shove. "Ma'am, we need to get you to safety," she said gruffly, trying to hide her voice.

Selina stopped and stared at her for a second, narrowing her eyes, but then she looked over Huntress' shoulder. "Look out!" She shoved the both of them out of the way.

The driver, the Chinese man she'd stabbed in the shoulder, was leaning against the bonnet of the car shooting at them.

Huntress' stomach seized up, she shoved Selina behind the boot of the car. A bullet hit the side of her helmet dead on, the force of the bullet sent a ringing in her ears and knocked her off balance.

Meanwhile, Robin used the car as a propeller to jump up and kick the long-haired man in the face and then reversed the kick to kick him onto the ground in a full body slam. Robin landed on the man's chest and then flipped backwards. The Long-haired man was bleeding and out for the count.

Huntress ran towards Chinese man holding the gun, stepping light on her feet so she could dodge the bullets. She executed Nightwing's manoeuvre; zig-zag and duck, keeping the body low but fluid while you counted the bullets.

Another bullet hit the top of her helmet, nearly knocking her off kilter again, she could feel the helmet crack. The black visor covering her eyes was completely gone, her hair had come loose and was dangling limply over her shoulders.

The guy was out of bullets, he dropped the empty gun and reached into his jacket for another.

Huntress attacked before he got the chance, punching him in the stomach, he tried to hit back with his one good arm but she grabbed it and twisted it behind his back, slamming him into the car.

"Oi! We need to get out of here!" Blue Beetle was flying above, holding (to her relief) her baby brother in his arms.

The man in her grip twisted his torso around to kick her in the stomach while she was distracted.

The blow winded her, he didn't waste an opportunity and broke loose from her grip. He grabbed a piece of glass from the bonnet, she held her guard up to protect her heart, but he cut her stomach.

"Ah!" she hissed, clutching her stomach, she pushed herself away from the man when he tried to cut deeper.

"Huntress!" Jaime flew down to help.

Huntress keeled over onto her knees, the cut was deep, but not fatal. She cradled her stomach with her hand, blood leaking over it.

With a whoosh of a black cape, Batman came flying in, letting go of his grappling hook to land on the car, smashing it further.

The man who'd cut her turned around, pale like a ghost. "Shit!"

Batman lunged for him, knocking him in the jaw with his elbow.

"Hold on, kid." Selina dragged her out of the line of fire, pulling her towards the back of the car.

Huntress cradled her stomach, swallowing a thick lump of saliva. "I'm fine," she said firmly, trying to move away, a spike of fear trailed down her spine. Her mom was too close.
"Just let me…” Selina grabbed her helmet and looked at her.

Huntress’ insides turned to ice, staring back at her mother. Everything else seemed to stop as a spark of realisation shone in her mom's eyes.

"Oh my god," Selina's eyes widened, gripping the helmet tightly like she was going to yank it off.

"Huntress!" Blue Beetle touched down on the ground. "Are you okay?"

Robin flipped over the car to Helena's side. "H! I got you." He tried to push Selina away, nudging the woman, trying to shield Helena from view, but it was too late for that.

Selina let go of the helmet, and fell back, hands trembling from shock, while Batman knocked out the Chinese man.

"Huntress," Blue Beetle shook Helena's shoulder, his voice nearly drowned out by Terry's sobbing. Helena's throat was dry, her gaze locked on her mother's.

"We need to move, now," said Batman, approaching them. The police were closing in, which was fine for them but not for her mom and Terry.

Like a spell broken, Selina tore her gaze from Helena's to look up at Batman. The shock faded and was drowned out by a dark frigid glare that cut into Batman like a red hot knife.

"You're right," Selina's voice was like ice, as she stood up (as gracefully as she could while handcuffed) and walked over to him. Batman's jaw tightened and his shoulders grew hunched. "Bruce."

Chapter End Notes

And, finally, she knows.
Helena touched her bandaged stomach underneath her top, sitting on the medic table while Alfred tidied away the soiled equipment. Her arms were a pattern of fresh bruises and her upper lip was cracked.

"See, I told you Alfred would fix you up," Jason reassured her with a fake smile, his mask was off but he was still in his uniform.

Batman grimaced. He was still in his uniform but his cowl was lowered and he'd removed his gloves and utility belt. "How do you feel, Helena?" he asked, forcing himself to move closer.

She glanced at Jason and then back at him, unsure."…It still hurts."

Batman's stomach churned, keeping his expression blank while he stared at her.

Jason's forced smile faded. "Yeah…it will," he said, a hint of bitterness leaked into his voice. "But, it's not so bad, and besides, scars are cool." He ruffled her hair and smiled tightly.

Helena smiled a little and nodded. "I guess…" Then she looked at Batman and the smile disappeared. "Why didn't you tell me about…well, this?" She rubbed her arm, narrowing her gaze at him.

Jason shifted uncomfortably. "I…we wanted to, Sis," he said quietly.

Batman sighed, folding his arms. "There never was a right time…"

Alfred looked up from the tray, giving them all a quick glance over before he cleared his throat. "Master Jason, I'd be grateful if you helped me sanitize the equipment," he instructed curtly, smiling.

Jason glanced over his shoulder at him, then at Bruce who nodded. "Yeah, sure," he replied,
shooting Helena one last smile before he straightened up and followed Alfred away from the table.

Alfred ushered Jason along as he carried the gleaming silver tray.

Batman watched them leave until they were out of sight, and then looked back down at his daughter. "...I'm sorry I didn't tell you," he apologised, coming to stand next to her.

Helena kicked her feet in the air, a sour look on her face "Did Mom know?"

He shook his head. "No, I...Batman never got that close to her."

Helena clenched her small hands into fists. "You locked her up." Her voice lowered, almost bitter.

Batman swallowed thickly, feeling a twist in his stomach. "She was a criminal, I had to." He stroked some hair out of her face and rested his hand behind her head. "I didn't know she was pregnant...if I had..."

Her eyes widened, hopeful. "Yeah?"

He looked away, grimacing again."Your mother made bad choices and they had consequences."

He bent down to her eye level, holding her hands in his.

"But, she wasn't a bad person, Dad," she argued, but then she hesitated. "I mean yeah she was a criminal but...she was..." she trailed off, looking down. Helena chewed her bottom lip, slouching. "You, you still loved her though, right?" She stared at him searchingly. "At least in the beginning, right?"

Bruce's gaze shifted away briefly. It wasn't something he'd thought of much, preferring to forget, but had he loved her? He'd loved a great many women in his lifetime, but Selina held a special place in his heart that he used to reserve for Talia.

"At some point, yes," he said gently.

Helena grew silent, staring at him intently, squeezing his hand. "No more secrets, okay?" Her brow furrowed, squeezing his hands extra hard.

He hesitated. "...Alright." Batman nodded, standing up properly. "No more secrets."

She nodded firmly and then stared at the ground. "And, you'll keep Professor Pyg locked up, won't you?" Her voice grew quieter and her shoulders tensed.

Batman felt bile gather in his mouth. "Yes," he answered firmly.

She nodded, but her gaze seemed distant. "I thought Jason was gonna kill him," she mumbled, stroking the bandages underneath her top. "He looked..." Her voice cracked. "And Pyg was...he was going to, he was gonna..." Her eyes scrunched up tight, watering.

"Ssh, I know." Batman soothed, sitting next to her on the table he wrapped his arm around her. "It's okay you don't have to talk about it." He kissed the top her head as she buried her face against his chest. "You're safe now."

His thoughts turned to seeing Robin beating Professor Pyg on the floor while Helena watched from the distance, frozen while Jason had been consumed by rage. By all rights, Batman knew he should have scolded the boy for his brutality but he couldn't bring himself to do it, not when he'd come close to breaking Professor Pyg's neck.
He was still tempted to go to the Pig-face man's cell and finish off the job.

"There were cages," Helena started speaking again, holding onto him tightly. "It was cold and dark and h-he took the other kids and..." She started sobbing, making it impossible to form a coherent sentence.

"Shh, calm down," he said softly, resting his chin on top of her head. "It's over now." He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, trying to smother his anger.

Her shoulders shook as she cried, while he stayed silent and held her close. Eventually, her sobbing started to quieten and grew fainter. "...I thought I was gonna die there," she whispered. "When, when he put me on that table…"

Batman ground his teeth so hard it hurt, his stomach lurched. A small part of him wished she wouldn't say any more. He didn't want her to say any more.

"I'll always save you," he promised, cupping her jaw to get her to unbury her face from his chest.

Helena wiped her eyes before she looked up at him. "But…" Her eyes flickered to the ground briefly before they looked back up. "I wanna be able to save myself, Dad…" She frowned and gripped his arm. "I wanna be strong like you and Jason…"

His brow furrowed, feeling a sharp twist in his stomach. "Sweetheart…" His voice strained.

"If I was stronger, then you wouldn't need to save me," she said quickly, wiping away the last of her tears. "Then I could help you—"

"Helena, that's enough," he interrupted firmly, fixing her with his sternest glare.

"But…" Her shoulders sagged, eyes wide. "I wanna be able to protect myself."

Batman stared at her thoughtfully, noticing how her lips drooped. He softened his glare. "I'll teach you how to defend yourself," he promised, stroking some hair out of her face, making her smile."But, that's it."

Helena's smile wavered. "But, Dick and Jason—"

"Are special cases," Batman said sternly, sighing quietly, he shook his head.

"But, Dad—"

"No." He levelled her with a cold look. She opened her mouth but he shook his head."Not another word."

Her hands curled into fists, glaring up at him, to which he glared back in return. "...Fine," she muttered, tearing her gaze away to glare at the ground.

Batman watched her for a moment. She was just still shaken from the incident and the revelation, he tried to rationalise, and that's where all this talk had to be coming from.

It was just the shock... he hoped.

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**10/31/2023**
The only sound in the cave was Terry's gurgling noise, and the soft clink of metal as Alfred finished bandaging Helena's stab wound.

Helena chewed her tongue as she was sitting on the medical table, her nails digging into the sides of the table while she watched her parents.

Her mother was standing opposite, holding Terry in her arms. Selina's gaze was scorching and had been focused on Helena throughout the whole bandaging up process.

Batman was standing more to the side and out of the way with his arms crossed. His cowl was down but he still wore his costume.

Robin was the furthest away, sitting on the metal railing above, completely silent.

Jaime was the only person who was the closest to her, and was sitting next to her on the table, armoured down into his Halloween costume; minus the mask.

No one had spoken a word since Alfred had started tending to her injuries.

With a soft clink, Alfred threw the soiled bandages in the bin.

Then, Jaime glanced around, cleared his throat, and looked at Selina. "So..." He smiled, a little too brightly. "You're Helena's mom."

Selina raised an eyebrow and then frowned. "Sorry, but who are you?"

Helena sighed quietly while Jaime rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh, yeah, I'm Jaime Reyes," he said. "Helena's boyfriend."

"Oh, okay." Selina nodded along, looking away. "News to me, but..." She cast a withering sidelong look at Batman. "What else is new?"

Helena cringed, while her dad cleared his throat. "Robin, Blue Beetle. Why don't you take Terry upstairs for a moment, while we all... talk," he ordered, but then glanced at Selina warily. "If that's fine with you, Selina?"

Selina raised an eyebrow. "Oh, it's fine, just don't indoctrinate him before breakfast," she remarked dryly.

"Mom," Helena scolded, narrowing her eyes.

"What?" Her mom shrugged.

Batman sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Alfred cleared his throat and walked over to Selina's side. "Rest assured there will be no indoctrinating," the Butler said, smiling politely. "May I, ma'am?"

Selina pursed her lips and glanced down at Terry before she nodded. "...Just come get me if he starts getting fussy," she replied, handing him over to Alfred.

Terry whined quietly but Alfred held him close. "Of course, ma'am." He nodded dutifully and ushered Jaime and Tim along. "Master Tim and Jaime, if you would be so kind as to follow me."

Tim slipped off the rail to follow the Butler, but Jaime didn't move. Helena smiled softly and
kissed his cheek. "It's okay, go," she said, squeezing his hand.

Jaime frowned and briefly glanced at her parents before he looked back at her. "Talk about it later?"

Her smile wavered, not really wanting to. She'd already spilled enough of her troubles on him lately.

"Yeah, sure." She gave his hand one last squeeze.

He nodded and got off the table, following Tim and Alfred out of the cave.

Helena swallowed a lump in her throat, looking back at her parents. "So…"

Selina crossed her arms and glared at the ground while Batman looked grim.

There was a long tenuous silence that seemed to stretch on and on—

Batman cleared his throat. "I knew you'd react badly if I told you the truth," he spoke to her mother.

Selina's eyes narrowed. "Oh, yeah, I bet it just tore you up inside," she sneered. "Or was that your kink?" She placed her hands on her hips, while Helena cringed. "Batman gets to flirt with Catwoman while Bruce fucks her in the mansion?"

"Mom!" Helena recoiled in disgust, trying to block out the images.

Dad bristled. "I never knew it was you until you got caught," he argued, narrowing his gaze. "So, don't play that card with me."

Mom's eyes narrowed as well. "Oh please." She shook her head in disdain. "You have the gall to lecture me on parenting when you've done all of this." She gestured to the massive cave, her voice echoed. "How old is the new Robin? Ten, nine, eight? Stop me when I hit a number."

"Don't bring him into this," Batman said, defensively.

"And, to top it all off you tried to keep it a secret," she continued, crossing her arms. "Do you think I'm stupid or something?"

"And, how were we meant to tell you?" Helena argued, running a hand down her face. "You wouldn't have understood."

"Well, gosh, I wonder why?" Selina exclaimed, shaking her head. "I didn't go through ten hours of labour to have you get stabbed on a street corner, Helena."

"I wouldn't have let that happen," Batman said sharply. "She's trained more than well enough to handle herself out there. I trust her."

Helena felt a small pinch of pride at the praise, but her mom buried her face in her palm.

"She's sixteen," Selina stressed, glaring at him.

Helena sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "It was my choice, Mom."

"Helena, every choice you make until eighteen is going to be stupid," Selina gritted her teeth, keeping her gaze fixed on Batman. "Your father has no excuse."
Batman's gaze narrowed. "Helena had the same choice that we did."

"Except, I sent her to you to keep her safe." Selina ran a hand through her hair.

"Mom, I never was gonna be safe," Helena snapped, standing up. They both looked at her. "And, I wasn't going to sit back and wait to be saved."

Selina's glare softened. "Self-defense is one thing." she said, moving in closer. "But, you're spending every night heading straight first into danger."

"Yeah, but it's my choice," Helena shot back, feeling her temper spark. "It's been my choice for the last four years."

Selina paused, taking a deep breath. "Your choice?" She looked over at Batman. "I kind of find that hard to believe."

"It was her choice, Selina. She chose this life because she needed to do this." He looked at Helena; her anger simmered a little. "She needs to be able to stand her own ground."

Selina tore her gaze away from him and turned her back to them, her arms folded.

Helena sighed quietly. "...Mom, the only reason Dad let me do this is because I kept pushing," she said, taking a step forward. "I want to help people."

Her mom uncrossed her arms and clenched her hands into fists. "What happens when it gets you killed?" She turned around, gaze piercing. "Am I supposed to just accept that you died for a good cause?"

Helena felt her anger grow, feeling a sharp twist in her stomach. "...Yes, you should." Her voice wavered. Selina flinched. "This is my choice and I know the consequences—"

Her mom stepped closer. "You're six—"

Helena ignored her. "You don't get to come back after all these years and tell me I'm making bad choices!"

"Helena," Batman interjected, walking to her side. "Calm down..."

She moved out of his reach. "I'm fine."

He narrowed his eyes. "We've all made mistakes." He glanced at Selina then back at Helena. "None of us can change what's happened," he continued evenly. "Selina, Helena made her choice, and nothing you say is going to change that."

Selina's jaw clenched. "This wasn't the life I wanted for her."

_It isn't about you!_

Helena's eyes flashed, feeling her temper spill over the surface. "Then you shouldn't have left me with him!" she rebuked sharply—Batman tensed—Helena balled her hands into fists. "What did you think was going to happen, Mom?" She threw her hands in the air. "That you go kill yourself and I just shrug it off? I was seven!"

Her mom froze, the colour draining from her cheeks.

"Helena..." Her dad tried to reach out.
"Just stay out of this, Dad," she snapped, smacking his hand away, glaring at her mom. "You think you can just turn up after nine years and lecture me on how to live my life?" Her eyes watered. Selina's face grew closed off. "How do you think I feel about your choices, Mom?" Her voice cracked in the middle. "You lied to me about everything!"

"Well, what the hell was I supposed to do?" Selina shouted, throwing her hands in the air. "Do you think I wanted any of this?" She ran a hand through her hair. "I gave up everything for you." Helena's stomach churned horribly until the words spilt from her mouth like vomit. "Well, I'm sorry—"

"No, shut up," Selina snapped, marching over to her.

Helena backed away a little while Batman stepped in-between them. "Okay, Selina, that's en—"

Selina ignored him. "How the hell do you think it felt watching my daughter grow up on a tv screen?" She sounded out of breath. "Or, that after I left you, I actually contemplated making myself disappear for good? Because, hey I already failed you twice! Why not just end it all and do the world a favour?" Her voice hitched, while Helena and Batman remained silent. "Do you know how much I would have given to have someone give a damn about me when I was your age?"

Selina ran a trembling hand down her face. "I spent a year living in a goddamn dumpster when I was thirteen." She shook her head, returning her gaze to Helena's. "All I wanted was to keep you safe."

Selina paused, biting down on her lip, avoiding their gazes. "...Yes." She let out a forced laugh. "Not my proudest moment, I know." She forced a smile, shaking her head, and turned away from them.

Helena's temper softened at the edges, feeling a swell of guilt tug at her chest. "You were thirteen?"

Selina let out a deep breath, running a hand through her hair until it was a dishevelled blonde mess. "Christ sake." She shook her head, looking at Helena with a glimmer of desperation. "God damn it..." Her gaze moved towards Batman, shaking her head still. "...Of all the people I could have had a kid with..." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "It just had to be you."

"I'm...grateful for her as well," she admitted, glancing at Helena sadly. Then, Selina looked away and rubbed her eyes. "...This is such a mess."

"Of course not," her dad said reassuringly.
"Wanna bet?"

"Selina." Batman's eyes narrowed at her again.

Selina rolled her eyes and walked over to Helena. "I'm still not okay with this," she said, stopping in front of her. Helena grimaced. "But, even if I made you quit you'd still do it behind my back, wouldn't you?" Her mom raised an eyebrow, while Helena rubbed the back of her neck and smiled uneasily. "The point is, I'm still pissed off, but so are you so… can we just try to get along?"

Helena still felt a small pull of reluctance and there was still some resentment coiled around her chest. "…Okay, we can try." She smiled hesitantly and reached out, pulling her mom into an embrace.

"Damn, that was intense."

Tim lowered his headphones, sitting on the kitchen stool.

Jaime was sitting next to him, eating some oatmeal cookies. He'd changed out of his Halloween costume and back into his regular clothes. "I can't believe you listened to the whole thing."

"Agreed," Alfred said, frowning as he shook his head. He was busy entertaining Terry, who was laid down on a cushion on the kitchen counter, while Alfred dangled a set of shiny bells in front of him. "I shall be having words with Master Bruce about this."

Tim shrugged, turning his tablet off. "Bruce spies on us all the time, Al." He picked up a cookie and took a large bite of it.

"Yeah, I noticed," Jaime commented, wiping some crumbs from his face. "I'm scared to answer my phone sometimes."

Alfred sighed and shook his head. "Two wrongs don't make a right, Master Tim."

Jaime smiled in amusement, but then his phone vibrated. He swallowed the rest of his cookie and took out his phone from his pocket.

His mom had sent him a new message.

/What time are you coming home?/

Jaime frowned, glancing over at Terry who was reaching for the shiny bells.

He was tempted to stay over to make sure Helena was alright or was that too clingy? His frown deepened. Maybe she'd want to be alone for a while?

Although, Mr Wayne might not appreciate him staying over for a whole night…

'You are over thinking this,' the Scarab said irritably. 'Simply wait until you receive confirmation that you are needed.'

Yeah, but what if I make things more awkward?

'If that is your fear then I suggest not engaging at all in the situation and returning home.'

Jaime sighed quietly, staring at the counter while Alfred and Tim chatted in the background.
...I'm trying to get Helena to open up more. She's going to want someone to vent to...

'This discussion is pointless if you will not acknowledge my advice.'

Jaime's eyes widened. I didn't mean it like that, Hermano. I just… listen, I'm just trying to be a good boyfriend, and Helena isn't in a good place right now—

Tim poked him. "You okay there, Jaime?"

Jaime jerked his head up, inching back from the boy. "Oh… yeah. Just thinking about… stuff."

Tim raised an eyebrow, propping his chin up on his fist. "You going to reply to that text?" He glanced down at Jaime's phone that was still in his hand.

Jaime looked down, brow furrowed. "Still debating something…" His eyes lifted up when he heard some footsteps.

Helena and her parents walked into the kitchen, and none of them seemed to be sporting any fresh injuries prior the fight.

Selina looked over at Terry and smiled a little. "Thanks for watching him, Alfred," she said, walking over to them.

Alfred gently picked the baby up. "It was no trouble at all, ma'am." He passed Terry to his mother. "I also did some shopping for yourself and the little one." He picked up a large duffle bag from off the floor. "Some spare clothes and nappies, and a few pacifiers."

Selina smiled, cradling Terry in her arms. "Thank you, Alfred."

Jaime looked over at Helena, fiddling with his phone. "Hey…" He smiled warily. "Hey." She smiled back, looking a little less tense as she walked over. Her eyes flickered towards Tim's tablet and the headphones. "Tim been keeping you entertained?" she asked lightly, raising an eyebrow.

Tim smiled sheepishly, slowly sliding the headphones out of view. "What?"

Jaime's smile widened a fraction. "I've just been eating cookies…"

"Right, sure," Helena replied dryly, sitting next to him. "Did your parents call?" she asked, glancing at his phone.

"No, but, uh, my mom was wondering where I was," Jaime said, glancing briefly at her parents before he looked back at her. "I head back home or…?" He shrugged, trying o sound nonchalant.

Helena brushed some hair out of her face and shrugged. "You can stay over if you want."

"Yeah, sure."Jaime felt warmth grow in his chest, but then Mr Wayne cleared his throat, so he quickly added. "If that's okay with you guys of course!"

Jaime looked back and forth at Bruce and Selina, not sure which one to seek approval from.

He heard Helena chuckle, while Selina just raised an eyebrow at him.

Mr Wayne stared at him blankly. "It's fine."
Jaime's shoulders relaxed, smiling sheepishly. "Thanks, I'll text my parents."

Helena reached over and stole a cookie from his plate. "Just borrow some pajamas in the locker room, if you want." She paused thoughtfully. "I can take you to school tomorrow."

"So..." Selina cradled Terry in her arms, glancing at Bruce. "I guess we'll be staying here for a while until the heat dies down?" she said, kissing her baby's head.

"It's the safest place right now," Mr Wayne replied, folding his arms.

Selina raised an eyebrow. "Fair point, but Terry will need some kind of crib to sleep in," she told him, as Terry snuggled closer against her chest.

Mr Wayne nodded, surveying the rest of them, pausing on Jaime and Helena for a second before his gaze rested on Tim. "Tim, you can help me prepare the room for Selina, I'll need to get some stuff out of storage."

"Okay." Tim kicked his feet in the air.

Jaime's phone vibrated again, he quickly looked down to answer the text.

/Hijo?/ It was his mom again.

He quickly replied. /Sorry. Listen, is it okay if I stay over at Helena's tonight?/

"Terry, needs to sleep, so what room are we in?" Selina asked, uncomfortably.

"Room at the end, second floor," Mr Wayne answered curtly.

Jaime frowned at his phone when he got a reply from his mom.

/It's a little last minute and it's a school night./

/I can get a lift to school, and my bag's already here./ He typed back. /We were going to watch this movie. Please, mom."

"Near the third bathroom?" Selina started to walk away from the counter.

"Yes, that one. Tim and I will be up there with a crib soon."

/I don't mind, but it is last minute. You should tell us beforehand./

Jaime sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes. /Sorry. It was last minute. Can I still stay over? They have a spare room and spare clothes for me./

"I'll show you to your room, ma'am," Alfred offered, stepping ahead.

"...Night, Mom," Helena spoke up, hesitantly, shifting in her seat.

Selina's hung back. "Night, sweetie... I'll see you in the morning..."

Jaime glanced up and noticed Selina had a small smile on her face, while Alfred waited in the doorway. Helena was smiling a little as well, but she wasn't looking directly at her mom.

His phone vibrated again, distracting him.

/Yes, but give us time in future./
Jaime smiled to himself and typed back. /Ok, thanks! Love you./

"Did your mom say yes?" Helena nudged him.

Jaime looked up from his screen; Alfred and Selina had left the room with Terry. "Oh, yeah she said it was cool."

She smiled and leaned in closer, resting her arm against his. "Good."

He smiled crookedly, and then his phone vibrated. "Hold on…" His brow furrowed, looking down at the screen.

/Just remember, if you're going to fool around, use protection./

Jaime's eyes widened and his cheeks flushed, his finger furiously typing.

/WHAT THE HELL MOM?!/

"Uh, are you okay?" Tim asked, making Jaime jump.

Jaime quickly hid his phone in his hand. "Yeah, great…" He forced a smile and caught Mr Wayne's gaze.

Then, Jaime's phone vibrated again in his hand, unable to resist temptation, he took a peek.

/Oh relax, I'm JOKING…but still, take it on board./

He could feel Helena staring at him. Jesucristo, what if she read the text…shit, what if they actually could see everything that happened on his phone?!

Jaime's eye twitched, he quickly locked his phone and shoved it in his pocket. He cleared his throat and looked back at the Waynes. "Anyway, thanks for letting me stay, Mr Wayne…” He shifted to the edge of his seat. "I, I better get ready for bed."

Bruce's brow rose. "Isn't it early?"

"It's only ten." Helena arched an eyebrow.

Jaime's blush grew. "I'm not gonna sleep, just chill…"

Her lips quirked upwards, looking him up and down, amused. "Right, well, come on then, we can chill in my room." She slipped off her seat.

Holy shit.

Jaime tensed, glancing fearfully at Mr Wayne who'd narrowed his eyes dangerously. "Uh…I…” He choked on his own words.

Helena rolled her eyes. "Not that type of chilling, Jaime," she said dryly, grabbing his hand. "Come on."

Jaime nearly knocked over his chair, trying to regain his composer and not look like an idiot. "Right, right, gotcha."

"Alfred will come show you to your room later, Jaime," Mr Wayne said tightly, watching him intently. "Don't stay up too late."
Jaime tried not to cringe and avoided the older man’s gaze

"Better hide the pom poms then," Tim muttered slyly, smirking as he took a bit of his cookie.

_Uh, what was that supposed to mean?_

Jaime opened his mouth but Helena was already dragging him out of the kitchen.

Jaime sighed, collapsing on Helena's bed while she leant against the headboard.

"I think your Dad's plotting to have me disappear," he mumbled, rolling onto his stomach so he could look at her. "And, Tim's helping."

Helena smiled. "Don't be a baby, I already said he likes you."

He scoffed, sitting up. "Yeah, sure, I'll believe it when he stops glaring at me."

"He glares at everybody." She waved her hand dismissively and lay down on the bed. "Don't take it personally."

Jaime sighed, shuffling closer to her. "Come on, though, you have to admit it isn't like I'm fully in know right now," he said, leaning against the headboard. "It's like I have New Kid written on my forehead."

"You've only been doing this a few months," Helena's brow creased, snuggling in closer. His eyes widened at the closeness but he didn't edge away. "I don't want to sound patronising, but you still have a lot to learn."

He sighed, scratching the back of his head. "...Still, sucks."

She smiled sympathetically. "I know..." She propped herself up and kissed his cheek. Jaime smiled and shifted, kissing her tenderly. Helena leaned against him and rested her head on his chest. "Can we cuddle for a bit?" She closed her eyes, her smile wavering. "I'm tired."

"Yeah, sure." His smile grew softer, shifting his weight so they were comfortably snuggled together. He wrapped his arm around her and stared up at the ceiling.

They both laid like that for a long moment, and it was nice, really nice. Even the Scarab was being pleasantly silent for a change.

'What is the point of this?'

Nevermind.

Jaime sighed and closed his eyes. _Can't you just enjoy the moment?_

'This is pointless.'

_Everything's pointless with you... Listen, this is just how people express affection, alright. They do it because it feels nice._

Jaime glanced down at Helena; she'd closed her eyes and looked peaceful for once.

_And, they want to be close to the people they care about._
The Scarab became silent, which suited Jaime just fine.

He looked down at Helena and kissed the top of her head, earning a faint smile. "What?" she muttered, keeping her eyes closed.

"Nothing, just thinking...." He trailed off, chewing his tongue. "...So, how did things go with your mom and dad?"

Helena sighed, shifting her head. "Well, they didn't kill each other."

"Small blessings, I guess."

She hummed in agreement."Yeah, I guess."

Jaime paused thoughtfully. "So... how do you feel about that?" She seemed okay but it was hard to tell sometimes.

Helena's brow furrowed and her eyes blinked open. "What?"

He straightened up a bit more. "Well, are you okay with your mom now?" he asked, phrasing it a bit better.

She lifted her head up, propping herself up on her elbows. "Sort of..."She shrugged, looking away. "It's still complicated, but we're both willing to make it work, so I guess things are getting better."

Jaime nodded along. "Cool... so you're not upset?"

Helena sat up properly. "Are you wearing a wire or something?" She cocked an eyebrow.

"No, no." He quickly sat up properly. "I just wanna know if you're okay."

She frowned, looking him up and down. Then her frown faded as she shook her head. "Well..." she said, leaning against the headboard. "... If I wasn't fine, I'd tell you."

Jaime brow creased. "You're not exactly the easiest person to read, Helena."

"Which is why I'd tell you if something was wrong," she replied, turning on her side to properly face him. "You don't need to worry, Jaime."

He glanced away, tensing."...But, you don't always tell me what's wrong."

Helena's gaze narrowed the tiniest bit, confused. She rested her head in her hand. "Well, sometimes..." She paused, picking at the purple bed covers. "Sometimes, I don't like telling people my problems." She shrugged, looking back at him. "It's too... co-dependent for me."

Jaime stared at his hands in his lap."My parents always share their problems with each other..." He glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. "It's healthy."

Helena sighed, rolling onto her back. "Well, we all can't have a nuclear family," she muttered, gazing up at the ceiling.

"Hey, come on." He frowned, sitting up straighter. "I'm serious." Irritation itched at his chest.

Her gaze shifted back to him, but her face was passive. "You can't force me to suddenly start spewing out my feelings, Jaime." Her eyes narrowed from agitation this time. "It doesn't work like that."
Jaime's irritation faded a little, avoiding her gaze. Okay, so maybe it did sound like he was trying to force her to confide in him but… okay, it was basically that.

"...I just want you to able to confide in me," he voiced his thoughts, hoping that would explain things.

Helena's frown softened. "I do." She moved closer to him, holding his hand. "But, some things… it's hard for me to share." She stroked his hand, easing the tension from his shoulders. "Even if I trust… you."

He picked up on the small hesitation, a prickly feeling travelled up his spine. "...You don't trust the scarab, do you?" he said quietly, a large lump of guilt in his stomach.

Her grip tightened, averting her gaze. "...That thing nearly killed me."

Jaime's chest stung, wincing. "I'm sorry." He lowered his head in shame, curling his hands into fists. "I don't know what happened that day."

And, nobody would ever trust him because of the Scarab.

Helena's grip grew gentle, resting her head on his shoulder. "It's okay, we'll figure it out."

"I'm keeping it under control," he said, staring down at her hand that was holding his. "But, I still can't block him out."

'It would be inefficient to mentally block me, it would give our enemies an advantage.'

'Couldn't you just give me some privacy?'

'It is too much of a risk.'

Jaime sighed, glaring at the ceiling.

All I'm asking is that when me and Helena are alone together, you give us some privacy.

'No, the female would take advantage of the situation.'

'She wouldn't even know when you'd be offline!'

'You would be foolish enough to notify her.'

"It's talking to you right now, isn't he?" Helena interrupted, her voice quiet and resigned.

Jaime's shoulders slumped, mentally kicking himself. "...Yeah, he is."

She sighed deeply. "It's okay." Helena kissed his cheek. "And, I guess if it wasn't for the armour, my little brother wouldn't be safe," she added, smiling tightly. "So… thanks for that…Scarab," she said with some difficulty.

'...Why is she professing… gratitude?'

Jaime sighed, rolling his eyes. "He appreciates the thank you." He smiled and kissed her. "In his own way at least…" he shrugged and deepened the kiss.

Then, there was a knock at the door, causing them to quickly break away.
"Master Jaime, are you ready to be shown to your room?" Alfred's muffled voice called from behind the door.

Helena's cheeks grew pink, clearing her throat, while Jaime coughed. "Uh, yeah, I'm ready, Mr Pennyworth," he answered back quickly, edging off the bed.

"Very good, sir."

Jaime sighed, sitting up properly. "I better go…"

Helena reached over and pulled his arm back, kissing him one more time before she pulled away and smiled coyly. "Pleasant dreamed." She shoved him teasingly. "And, remember to get up on time, or you can walk to school."

He smirked, standing up. "Okay, Jefa." He ruffled her hair, earning a smack on the arm.

Chapter End Notes

I know there was some hype for the fight scene, so I hope I did it justice. I didn't want to go overboard.
Jason had been pacing up and down his apartment for nearly four hours.

Fuck

Batman knew what he'd done… did Helena already know?

He didn't know what to do. It had been hours since Batman left and Jason still had no fucking idea how to get out of this.

"Oh, fuck…” He swore, burying his face in his hands. "I'm so fucked."

Jason collapsed on the bed and curled up on himself.

What was he going to do? Go running to Dick again?

He cringed and sat up, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"What the fuck am I gonna do?" he muttered, staring at his hands.

He could fight or run, neither of which he wanted right now, but he didn't have many options.

Batman needed time to calm down, so the best thing to do was keep a low profile… just for a little while. That way Jason would be able to properly talk his way out this…

His phone started ringing, making him tense.

Jason stared down at the cell phone while it vibrated on the coffee table. He grimaced when he saw the caller ID: Helena.

"Fuck me," he muttered, running a hand over his face, as the phone kept vibrating persistently. Jason sighed and picked up the phone. "Hey…"

"Hey, you free to talk?" Helena asked from the other line.

"Uh…” He looked at the window apprehensively. "Your dad still home?"

"…Yes…why?" Her tone shifted to wariness. "Did you guys have another fight or something?"

"No." Jason started pacing back and forth, while he scratched his neck. "Just wondering…"

"Right…” she said slowly. "You sure you okay?"
He scowled and stopped pacing. "I'm fine," he replied stiffly. "Anyhow, why'd you call?"

Helena sighed. "Well, to keep it short, my mom and baby brother nearly got kidnapped," she began, making Jason frown; distracted from his main problem for a second. "So, Jaime and me tried to save them…but I was out of costume…"

Jason groaned when he started to piece it together. "Please, tell me she didn't find out."

"…Well, she hasn't killed Dad so it's not that bad," Helena replied uneasily.

"Are you kidding me?" Jason buried his face in his hand.

"No… but, we had a long talk so I think things are okay… sort of." She sighed again. "I don't know, it's messed up."

Jason grimaced. "Yeah, it sounds pretty fucked up, Sis."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she said dryly. "…Listen, I can't sleep…would you be able to come over for a bit? We could watch a movie or something."

His stomach lurched, looking around anxiously. There was no way in hell he was confronting Batman about this, not now…

"Not tonight, Sis… I… I can't right now."

"Why?" she asked warily.

Fuck sake.

He thought quickly. "There's a mission I gotta do, just a small one," he lied quickly. "I'll be out of town for a few days…" Jason started walking towards his bedroom.

"Dad didn't mention anything."

Jason licked his lips, fidgeting. "Yeah, well last time I checked I wasn't thirteen anymore." He shifted on the spot. "It's covert, so don't say anything, okay."

"…Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" Her tone grew more suspicious.

He narrowed his eyes. "Just… Just trust me, just this once…" He sighed, pressing his head against the wall. "Please."

There was a pause. "…You're in trouble, aren't you?"

"I'm fine!" he snapped, losing his patience.

"Clearly. Is it Dad?"

"No," he replied sharply. "Listen, I have it under control, okay. Just trust me," he insisted, clenching his hand into a fist. "I'm fine."

"Jason—"

"I'll call you later," he interrupted, hanging up on her.

Jason let out a long sigh and slumped against the wall.
A few seconds later his phone started vibrating again.

He scrunched his eyes up and gritted his teeth. "Just shut up," he growled, throwing his phone across the room.

Jason marched over to his double bed and pulled a duffle bag out from underneath.

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**11/01/2023**

**20:00**

Selina crossed her arms and leaned against the railing, while the others, Huntress, Blue Beetle, and Robin stood nearer the computer.

Oracle's green logo appeared on the Batcomputer. "Oracle, online."

Batman nodded stiffly, standing in front of the computer. "Nightwing?" He clicked one of the keys.

Nightwing's face appeared on screen with a grey wall behind him. "Loud and clear, B."

"Then, let's begin the meeting," Batman said evenly, sticking the black USB in the computer. "Combining our current information and the new info gathered by Selina…" Different files popped up with reports and chemical compounds. "We can verify that Detroit is the main lab for Metahuman experiments, but its exact location is still unclear."

Robin's eyes widened when he saw more data pop up. "Advanced experimentation," he said, frowning. "This kind of drug development is still ten years in the works."

"Alien tech must have given them a boost," Huntress commented. "Can your Scarab make sense of it, Blue?"

"I think so," Blue Beetle replied, narrowing his gaze at the screen, stepping closer. "Not that I understand what it means."

"I can recognise some of the chemical components," Robin said, stepping closer. "So, I'm guessing they're using the drug to mutate the gene and the chip to control them."

"Correct." Batman nodded in approval.

"But, how do we use it to take down Powers?" Selina spoke up, frowning. "Don't get me wrong, great we found more info on finding those kids, but Powers is still a problem." She walked over to Batman. "Not to mention we need to find out who's pulling his strings."

Huntress' brow furrowed, rubbing her chin. "I'm suggesting a full interrogation, he'll squeal in an hour."

"I gotta agree on this one," Nightwing commented, sighing. "We need to act quickly if we're gonna nail this guy."

"Yeah, but I don't think Powers will break easily," Robin argued, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "He'll be more afraid of the Light than us."

Batman paused, humming quietly. "We can still acquire information from what he doesn't tell us."
Robin's brow furrowed. "...I might be able to loosen him up first," he said, meeting Batman's gaze. "Send me in first, as a civilian."

"He won't trust you." Nightwing frowned deeply. "Not with the close connection Selina has with Bruce."

Batman heard a faint scoff from Selina which made his eye twitch.

"But, he'll want to manipulate me," Robin argued, crossing his arms. "And after finding about those chips, I'm pretty sure he wants me to support the Light or at least manipulate me into helping them." His voice grew colder. "Plus he doesn't know what I'm capable of."

Blue Beetle snorted. "Clearly." He smiled crookedly at the boy, earning a smirk in return. "You could also wear some spy tech, more evidence to prosecute the guy."

Batman nodded in agreement. "It would help. We can prosecute him for selling illegal tech, but it might not hold up if the Light interferes," he said, grimly.

"Unless we plant false evidence to back it up." Selina drummed her fingers against the chair. "It's not like it's untrue."

Batman's jaw tightened, a bad taste in his mouth. "That would be a last resort," he reprimanded flatly, earning a glower from her. "False evidence is faulty... and it isn't the way I do things."

Anger flashed in Selina's gaze. "Are you serious?"

Nightwing let out a low sigh. "Oh, boy..."

"The law isn't on your side for this one," she challenged. "You said it yourself that he might walk free if the light interfere."

"Dad just doesn't want the case to collapse," Huntress interjected, stepping closer. "We need as much solid evidence as possible for this one if we're going to jail him."

"It isn't about just locking him up." Selina rubbed her eyes, scowling. "It's about ruining his image, permanently."

"This isn't just about your own revenge, Selina." Batman narrowed his eyes.

Selina's gaze became frigid. "If this was revenge he'd be dead." Her tone lowered. He gritted his teeth, while Huntress tensed. "We need to ruin him," she stressed, sweeping her glare across the room. "We need to plant extra evidence; guns, heroin, murder. Hey, let's even throw in child pornography."

Their collective silence as they stared at her.

"Mom..."Huntress pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head.

Nightwing raised an eyebrow while Robin grimaced but looked thoughtful. Blue Beetle looked mildly disturbed, and Oracle sighed quietly in the background.

"He murdered my husband," Selina snapped defensively. "And, tried to kidnap me, if we can't find the evidence then we'll make it."

Batman let out a deep sigh, meeting Selina's hardened gaze. He felt more annoyed than angry, it was hard to be angry when he empathized with what she was saying. "...If we have to...we'll plant
false evidence, but only to build on what we have," he said stiffly, keeping his eyes narrowed. "But, no Selina, you're going too far."

Selina rolled her eyes. "Get off your high horse, Bruce," she remarked dismissively. "I wouldn't be surprised if he was a pervert."

"Um, getting back to the evidence we have," Robin spoke up, drawing her attention. "We're also trying to uncover the scientists and doctors that are copying the blood sample information for the Light."

"And, if we're not careful..." Oracle spoke up. "...Wayne Enterprises could get dragged into this mess as well."

Selina's brow furrowed, glancing at Batman. "Why?"

Batman's lips twisted into a deeper scowl, as his eyes flickered to Robin briefly.

"...Because my family's company helped create that tech," Robin divulged hesitantly, sighing. Huntress smiled reassuringly and wrapped her arm around his shoulder, easing some of the tension from his posture. "Wayne Enterprises is now heavily linked to Drake Pharmaceuticals, WE will take a hit but it'll survive. My family's company on the other hand..."

Selina's lips drooped for a second before she looked away. "Can't we destroy the link between Drake and Powers, bury the evidence?" she reasoned, folding her arms. "You could even say Powers stole the specs and design for the tech."

Batman nodded, considering her point. "I have considered that, and there are ways to lessen the damage. "But, there were a number of DP employees, some with heavy links to WE, who he suspected worked for the Light, unearth that and you opened Pandora's Box on the company. "Firing employees that work for the Light is one step."

Robin frowned stepping out of Huntress' hold. "But, we're still unclear on how many there are." His forehead creased. "And, what we don't want is DP taking the blame for all the illegal activity." He sighed. "We also need to find out where the drugs and chips are being manufactured."

"The drugs might be manufactured in another state," Selina pointed out.

"Most likely," Batman concurred, he surveyed them for a moment. "We'll discuss the matter further later on," he said, looking over at Oracle. "There's the second matter of business we need to focus on which links back to Detroit. Oracle?"

"Right," Oracle replied, bringing up some footage of Lobo attacking the Senator.

Blue Beetle frowned. "Who's the KISS reject?"

"He's called Lobo, an intergalactic bounty hunter," Batman answered.

Selina raised an eyebrow. "And, here I thought you just chased clowns and penguins."

"Trust me, he's the least of our problems," Nightwing commented, grimacing.

They all watched the screen as it showed Lobo ripping apart the Secretary-General Tseng to reveal a small green alien inside.

"Whoa..." Blue Beetle's eyes widened.
"That's one word for it," Robin muttered.

"That is a Krolotean," Nightwing informed, pointing at the bottom of the screen where the video was paused. "And, there's more of them."

"Are they linked to the experiments?" Huntress asked.

"It's heavily implied," Nightwing said grimly. "The hijacked version Secretary-General Tseng's has been pushing to incorporate cybernetic technology for medical use."

"I'm guessing it wasn't for the good of the people?" Huntress remarked dryly.

Batman turned to the computer fully and brought up some more footage. "The Mayor of Detroit has been pushing for changes as well," he said, showing some footage of Mayor Linna opening the renovated research facility; he had a thick brown beard and a dazzling smile on his chubby face. "Mayor Joshua Linna has exhibited some minor changes in behavior in the last two years."

Selina's gaze narrowed, walking over to Batman's side. "I know him," she stated, leaning against the dashboard.

Huntress eyed her mother warily. "How?"

The corner of Selina's lip curled upwards as she cocked an eyebrow at her daughter. "We met at a party once."

Batman looked away and scowled while Nightwing cleared his throat.

Huntress' face scrunched up in disgust. "Ew, Mom!" she scolded, but Selina just shrugged.

Batman cleared his throat. "Moving on," he said gruffly, shooting Selina a sharp look, which she promptly matched with one of her own. "Superman and I will be investigating him." He turned to address them. "Each of you will have assignments. Robin, Huntress, Blue Beetle," he addressed the younger members as they stood to attention. "You'll be heavily working with Nightwing over the next week to prepare for Intercept mission involving Rose Wilson and the lab in Detroit."

"Wait, you mean a real mission?" Blue Beetle's face lit up.

Nightwing grinned. "Even more intense than the Speedster Assignment."

Robin smiled crookedly, sharing a look with Huntress.

"Not too intense, I hope?" Selina glared at Nightwing warningly.

The grin was wiped off Nightwing's face. "Nothing they can't handle of course," he added quickly.

Huntress groaned, her cheeks tinting pink. "I can handle it, Mom." She shot her a faint glare.

Selina narrowed her eyes. "Just checking." Her voice was clipped.

Robin cleared his throat. "Anyway," he interjected, looking over at Batman. "You were saying, Boss?"

Batman tilted his head in approval. "Selina, I'll need your help gathering info in Detroit," he said evenly, earning a raised brow from the woman.

"You want my help?" Her brow was raised and her hands rested on her hips.
"Yes." Batman eyed her blankly, fighting the urge to smirk at the surprise written across her face. "Depending on whether you want to or not."

Huntress looked back and forth at them, frowning.

Selina stared at him for a moment, guarded. "...Alright then. Can't say I haven't been itching to get out." She crossed her arms. "When do we head out?"

"Not for another 48 hours," Batman replied, bringing up the drug sheets again. "Oracle, I want you to find out where you'd import the chemicals needed to create the Metahuman drug."

"I've already made a copy of the chemical notes," Oracle said.

"Good." Batman nodded and then glanced at Nightwing when he saw him frown. "Yes?"

Nightwing's brow furrowed. "We should get Jason in on this. He has better connections with these kind of people."

"Jason?" Seline spoke up, as her forehead creased. "Who's—?"

"It's a long story." Batman tensed and curled his hands into fists, narrowing his eyes at Nightwing. "And, Jason's currently unavailable at the moment."

Nightwing's eyes widened a fraction before he schooled his features. "Has he gone AWOL again?"

Batman's mouth set into a thin line.

"I did call him last night," Huntress said hesitantly, shooting her dad a look. "He seemed a little… off, more so than usual."

"Did he say where he was going?" Nightwing asked, beginning to look worried.

Batman met his daughter's judging gaze as his eyes narrowed. "...Not really," she replied curtly, crossing her arms. "But something was definitely wrong."

"Wait a second." Selina rubbed her eyes, scowling. "This Jason guy, he isn't..." She looked at them questionably. "He isn't the one who…?" She faltered, shifting uneasily.

Batman gritted his teeth, looking away from his daughter. "I already said it was a long story," he said through clenched teeth. "We need to stay focused on the mission."

"...Yes, Sir." Huntress' voice was clipped.

Batman's chest tightened at her tone, but he tried to brush it off and looked over at Blue Beetle. "Huntress, you and Beetle will investigate Dr Aiden Lynch; find out what he knows." He glanced at Huntress. "He leaves work at ten on Wednesdays."

How much trouble was Jason in this time?

Huntress frowned, standing in the locker room while she attached her crossbow to her thigh. The white lockers made the lights too bright and too clinical, like a lab. It didn't make her feel comfortable.

Her thoughts drifted back to the conversation with Jason, rethinking it over and over. Something must have happened between him and Dad, not that Dad would tell her of course. She sighed,
fiddling with the belt.

What did you do Jason?

She fastened the crossbow in place and then sighed, running her hands down her costume to smooth out creases that weren't there.

Huntress paused when she heard the faint tread of footsteps, her mothers.

She swallowed and stood up straighter. "Mom…" The footsteps stopped. "Everything okay?" Huntress asked lightly, looking over her shoulder.

Huntress shrugged, looking away. "Not too much, that tends to be Dad's territory, I guess." She shrugged again, adjusting her gloves. "He thinks I'm pretty good at it, though."

"…Right." Mom stopped behind her, keeping some distance between them.

Huntress sighed quietly and turned around. "I'll be fine, Mom, really," she said firmly. "It's my choice."

"So you keep saying." Her mom sighed and shook her head. "You might think I'm being unreasonable—"

"I don't—"

"Let me finish." Selina gave her a pointed look, quietening her. "But, you don't know what I would have given to have someone worry about me." She apprehensively reached out and held her hand.

Huntress stared at her thoughtfully, glancing at her hand briefly. "I know…" Her stomach twisted. "You didn't have it easy, I ….I understand."

Mom smiled grimly, squeezing her hand reassuringly. "That's one way to put it."

Huntress swallowed thickly, chewing on her tongue. "...What was it like…?" She hesitated when her mom looked at her curiously. "...When you were thirteen…how long did you…?"

"Live on the streets?" Mom asked lightly, frowning. Huntress nodded, trying not to shift on the spot. "I told you, it was only a year." Mom shrugged dismissively. "I stole to survive, got good at it quickly, then I got stuck in foster care."

"...And, then what?" Huntress asked quietly, growing uncomfortable. She'd heard rumors and gossip…

Selina frowned for a second, but then her face smoothed out. "Oh…" Her smile tightened. "You mean the prostitution?" She shrugged again like it was nothing. "I started that when I was eighteen, made easy money…"

Huntress grimaced, averting her gaze. "Right…"

Her mom touched her shoulder. "It wasn't *that* bad," she said nonchalantly. Huntress looked up and forced a smile. "It wasn't exactly an ideal job but…it made money." Mom raised an eyebrow. "Does that make you uncomfortable?"
"No, no." Huntress raised her hands, shaking her head. Mom crossed her arms, frowning. "...Well, I guess I'm still a prude... blame the nuns." Huntress rubbed the back of her neck. "You sent me to Catholic school."

Mom's jaw clenched briefly but then loosened when she shrugged. "It was a good education," she said evenly. "At least you learned something... I got kicked out of so many schools it's a miracle I passed high school." She laughed, a little forced. "I gather Bruce was horrified you'd been indoctrinated?"

Huntress' smile softened. "He never said much about it," she replied, thinking back, smiling in amusement. "But, I'm pretty sure he thinks most Catholic schools in Gotham are just fronts for cults."

Selina snorted, smiling crookedly. "Why am I not surprised?"

Huntress smiled a little wider. "Yeah, I know."

Her mom watched her for a moment, looking her up and down like she was assessing her costume. "I'm guessing that's where the cross comes from?" Her voice was almost teasing.

"Well, it was more unique than an R symbol." Huntress shrugged, rubbing her arm.

Her mom smiled faintly. "Well, you look great..." She clenched her hands into fists briefly before she apprehensively placed her hands on Huntress' shoulders. "Just... just be safe."

Huntress nodded slowly, feeling uncomfortable. "I will don't worry..."

Her mom's shoulders wilted, sighing she pulled Huntress into a hug.

Blue Beetle hung back while Huntress slammed Dr Aiden Lynch against the stone wall. They'd ambushed the man in the parking lot and hauled him under the shadowy bowels of an interchange.

"You're making this a lot harder than it has to be, Senor," Jaime remarked dryly, crossing his arms.

"Do I need to start breaking fingers?" Huntress snarled in the doctor's face, earning a sharp flinch from the man; he was short, with yellowish skin and a round face, and also a receding hairline. He reminded Jaime of a rabbit caught in the headlights.

"If I tell you anything I'll be signing my own death warrant!" Dr Lynch hissed, breaking out into a sweat.

Huntress' eyes narrowed and twisted Dr Lynch's arm around his back. "

"Ah!" His face was smashed against the wall.

"How did you end up working for Derek Powers?" she snapped, pressing his face further against the wall.

"We have enough evidence to convict you, doctor," Blue Beetle warned, meeting the man's gaze with a glare. "Maybe not for the stolen computer chips, but illegal trading should hold up enough."

Dr Lynch gritted his teeth and let out a low groan. "I didn't do anything."

Huntress twisted his arm tighter. "Say that again and I will break your finger," she hissed in his ear. Dr Lynch winced.
Blue Beetle tensed. "Dr Lynch, did you or did you not steal information from Drake Pharmaceuticals and—"

Dr Lynch tried to shout. "I haven't done—!"

Huntress broke one of his fingers.

Blue Beetle winced at the sudden crack.

Dr Lynch screamed through gritted teeth, a fresh coat of sweat on his brow. "You bitch," he snarled, scrunching his eyes closed. "You crazy—"

Huntress yanked his other finger warningly. "Go ahead and finish that sentence."

Blue Beetle frowned, stepping forward to touch her shoulder briefly. "Huntress…"

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, scowling, but nevertheless loosened her hold on the doctor. "We know you're Powers' rat," she hissed in Dr Lynch's ear, making the man cringe. "Tell us what we want to know and you won't go down with him. Keep silent and…" She bent his finger far back, getting another cry out of him. "…You'll be going to prison in a body cast."

Blue Beetle grimaced; he had to wonder how easy it was for her to flip a switch. "Yeah…what she said."

Dr Lynch tried to twist away from her. "I didn't…Okay, fine," he snarled. "Powers approached me, a few years ago. He wanted, he wanted design sheets on the bio chip project Jack had shelved."

*Is he lying?*

'His heart rate is accelerated but that will be caused by fear,' the Scarab replied. 'I cannot detect deceit in his tone.'

Huntress frowned. "Why you?"

The doctor scowled deeply, glaring at her as best he could. "He tried to get Jack Drake in on it years ago, I overheard them… Jack wasn't playing ball…"

Blue Beetle frowned. "What were they talking about?"

"Powers wanted Jack to continue developing the bio chips but Jack said it was too risky," Dr Lynch told them gruffly. "That's all I know."

"It better be." Huntress narrowed her eyes and shoved the doctor to the ground.

"Hey!" Dr Lynch yelled, clutching his broken fingers. "What are you—?"

Huntress bent down and punched him in the face, knocking him out. "Now we can hand him over to the police," she said, straightening up.

Blue Beetle let out a deep breath, the tension faded from his shoulders. "On the upside, I think we mastered the good cop bad cop routine."

She looked up and raised an eyebrow, as the corner of her lip lifted up. "Yeah, I feel like you didn't come on too strongly this time." Huntress glanced down at the doctor and grimaced. "And, I didn't have to break all his fingers, so it's a win win situation."
Well, that was one violent way to think about it.

"Yeah…” He smiled briefly but then frowned, rubbing the back of his neck. "So, this stuff with Jason…?"

Huntress narrowed her eyes for a second before she looked away. "…It's nothing." She glanced up, he folded his arms. "…Okay, fine," she muttered, scowling. "I'm just worried about him." She sighed and crossed her arms.

Blue Beetle stepped over the unconscious Dr Lynch and walked over to her side. "Why don't you look for him?"

She chewed her lower lip, shrugging uneasily. "…Because I have a feeling he'll slam the door in my face." She sighed, running a hand down her face. "I guess I'm used to members of my family disappearing for days when they're emotionally constipated."

"Uh, yeah, not sure if that's always a good idea," he replied dryly. "Just talk to him."

Huntress grimaced. "…I've tried, he doesn't want to open up."

He gave her a look, smiling faintly. "And, you're just gonna give up that easily?"

She frowned, staring at him for a moment. "…No." She straightened up more, pursing her lips briefly. "He's just a pain to find."

"Do you know where he might have run off too?" he asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Huntress shook her head. "I already ran a tracer on his phone, he left it in Gotham, and Oracle hasn't seen him at all," she said, looking up. "And, if he's smart he would have checked for any hidden tracers before he left."

"He had to have missed one though." Blue Beetle frowned, rubbing his chin.

Her brow furrowed, activating the holographic computer on her wrist. "…Maybe one that hadn't been activated…" she murmured, she started searching through the database.

"Like remote control activation?" He edged closer, looking over her shoulder at the computer.

She nodded keeping her gaze fixed on the screen. "We do have a few remote ones but they're mainly Robin's."

He shrugged. "We could call him and ask."

She scoffed quietly. "And, have him rat me out to my dad? No thanks." She narrowed her eyes at one thin strip of five numbers. "Robin, won't like the idea of me trailing after Jason, not after last time."

Blue Beetle's brow furrowed. "…What happened last time?"

She didn't seem to hear him. "I just need to…" Her eyes widened when another screen opened up and a red dot blinked and remained stationary. "I think I found him." Huntress zoomed in on the map, while Blue Beetle leaned in closer.

"New York?" he said, glancing at her.

"It's worth a shot," she replied, closing the screen.
Blue Beetle stepped back. "But, what about your parents?"

Huntress paused, rubbing her chin. "...Well, I guess I'll just have to say I'm staying at your house."

He stared at her for a second, before he sighed deeply. "Your dad's gonna bite my head off when he finds out we lied."

She smiled sympathetically and patted him on the back. "It's a lot easier to beg for forgiveness than asking for permission," she chimed, smiling.

He arched an eyebrow. "And, how often does that work out for you?"

Huntress pursed her lips and shot him a look. "...Let's just get this guy to the station."

He took that as a not very often.

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**The Bronx, New York**

**11/02/2023**

**01:35**

Jason's hand was unsteady when he lit the cigarette, sitting down on a flea bitten couch in a dark apartment. He glanced outside the broken window at the apartment opposite. The neighborhood reminded him a lot like the narrows, but with the empty buildings.

He inhaled the smoke deeply, trying to relax, while his guns lay next to him on the couch cushion.

Jason swallowed the ashy taste in his mouth and rubbed his eyes, sighing quietly.

Then, there was a crack, a small sound that he might have missed if he wasn't semi-sober.

His hand curled around his gun—

There was a knock on the door.

He froze, frowning... people didn't normally knock when they visited him.

Jason slowly stood up with his gun in hand. He flicked the cigarette into the ashtray and approached the door.

There was another knock.

He narrowed his eyes and clicked the safety off the gun as he undid the latch at the top, and then listened for a second—

"Jason, just open the door already." That was Helena.

Jason blinked and then frowned, pulling the door open.

Helena was wearing her costume and that boyfriend of hers, Blue Beetle, was dressed up to the nines in blue armour.

She shouldn't have been able to track him! He'd already dusted for trackers before he left.
Jason's gaze narrowed. "I told you not to—"

"Save it for later." She walked into the room, brushing past him.

Jason stepped aside and glared at her, feeling his insides twist. "Does Batman know you're here?"

"Nope. Blue, flew me up," she replied, surveying the dim room, narrowing her gaze at the cracked bulb.

He scowled and looked over at Blue Beetle. "Well, thank fucking you," he said scornfully.

"Don't be a jerk." Huntress reprimanded sharply, glaring at him. "You're the one who skipped town without so much as a note."

"I gave you as much info as you needed," Jason growled, digging his nails into his palm. "You're just roping yourself into something you don't get, okay."

From the doorway, Blue Beetle raised his hands up. "Your sister is just worried about you, Ese."
His brow creased, glancing over at Huntress briefly. "You don't have to bite our heads off for it."

Jason bristled, clenching his jaw, squaring up to him. "Since when was this any of your business?"

Blue Beetle tensed but then narrowed his eyes. "Since you decided to ditch your sister."

Jason's free hand curled into a fist. "Watch it—"

"Enough," Huntress snapped, clenching her hands into fists. "I came here to find out what's wrong, and I'm not leaving until I get an answer," she said firmly, scrutinizing Jason.

Jason gritted his teeth, feeling his chest constrict, staring at her in silence. She jutted her chin out and kept her eyes narrowed while Jason grew tenser.

Blue Beetle cleared his throat."...I'll wait on the roof." His footsteps clunked against the thin worn out carpet.

Jason bit down hard on his tongue and broke off his glare, shutting the door behind him with too much force. "You shouldn't have come." He avoided her stare and walked towards the window, clicking the safety back on his gun.

Huntress' gaze followed him across the room. "Blue convinced me," she said, folding her arms.
"Got me thinking that maybe I'm a little too accepting of your need to brood."

He scowled, as his fingers twitched. The room started to feel too small as he looked out of the window and tried to think of what to say. How could he explain this? Just say another lie and see how long it held up?

"How did you even find me?" he said sharply, looking over his shoulder at her. "I already scanned my bike for trackers."

Huntress reached into a small slit in her gloves and pulled out a tiny button shaped tracker. His fingers dug into the windowsill. "It was near the wiring of that hi-tech computer you put in, confused the scanner." She tossed him the tracer, he let it fall to the ground. "Maybe if you had been nicer to Robin, he might not have stuck it on your bike."

That little shit.
Jason gritted his teeth hard, turning around to face her. "There's a reason I told you not to come."

"I'm your sister, Jay." Huntress curled her hands into fists.

He felt a spark of anger. "That doesn't mean you're entitled to know my business."

Her eyes flashed dangerously. "Well, I'm sorry if that's inconvenient for you, but I can't let this go when you're acting out like this and running off!"

"If I wanted a shoulder to cry on I'd ask," he snapped, feeling his temper spill over. "This is just something between me and Batman, okay."

"Batman already knows whatever it is that's bothering you!" Huntress ran a hand over her face and shook her head. "Why can't you just be honest with me?"

There was a sharp heat prickling his skin. "Sis, just leave it alone." His tone strained at the edges. Jason ran a hand over his face and turned away from her, feeling a heavy weight on his chest.

She sighed deeply, sounding tired. "...Jay, please...just talk to me." Her voice softened.

None of them said anything for a long while as Jason felt and overwhelming waiver of exhaustion, like all the shit, was piling up higher and higher the longer he stayed silent.

He felt like a coward.

Jason gritted his teeth and buried his face in his hand. "...I can't tell you because...you won't..." He sighed, forcing himself to turn around to face her. "I fucked up, Sis. I fucked up badly."

Her brow furrowed, walking over to him. "Jay, I'll understand." She touched his arm, staring at him intently.

He glanced at her hand and then at her face, tensing. "...There..." He cleared his throat. "I was trying to get information out Intergang. I do some jobs for them, they give me money and I get some info on the side," he said levelly while Huntress nodded along slowly. "...But, uh...like how I got Black Mask's shipment, that kind of product, uh, it means I needed to do them a favor..."

Her grip on his arm tightened. "How big?"

He bit down hard on his tongue before he answered. "I didn't know the specifics, just that he'd pissed the Light off, or he'd fucked up—"

"Jason," she said gravely, digging her fingers into his bicep. "Just tell me straight."

Jason swallowed thickly, meeting her hard gaze. "...I shot Silas Stone."

"...What?" Her grip went lax and her lips parted liked she wanted to speak but couldn't. It made his stomach twist into a knot as he watched her.

"I should have told you guys and the longer I left it harder it was to say something," he added, hating the silence. "But Batman... he wouldn't have given me a second chance, it would have...he wouldn't have forgiven that!" His voice grew louder the longer she stayed silent. "I know I fucked up, okay, I know that but...but I wasn't thinking of the consequences or..." His words were getting jumbled.

She didn't make a sound, not even when he stopped speaking. The two of them stared at each other as Jason's heart rate increased each second.
Then her expression shifted and grew angry. "You idiot!" She shoved him hard, making him nearly trip. "Why would you do that?"

"I didn't want to kill him!" He moved back, raising his hands to defend himself just in case. "I was trying to get info out of Intergang."

Her mouth twisted into a snarl. "And, how well did that work out?"

"I know, okay, I know!" He tugged at his hair anxiously, stepping back. "But, I wasn't...I was in a bad place, I couldn't...You gotta understand, Sis."

Huntress ran a hand through her hair, shaking her head. "Understand what? What, that you killed an innocent man and then tried to cover it up, is that what I'm not understanding, Jason?"

"No, it's not..." He groaned, burying his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, okay." He looked at her earnestly. "I'm sorry."

Her lips thinned, looking at him like he was a piece of shit. Her face scrunched up like the tension as wrapping around a coil, until she looked away. "Idiot," she hissed under her breath, shaking her head in her hands."You're such an idiot."

He sat down on the couch, the overbearing guilt feeling like slabs of concrete on his back. "That's why I didn't want you to know..."

She glared at him. "I can't imagine why," she said snidely, shaking her head again. "How long did you think you could keep this a secret?"

Jason sighed quietly and stared at the worn out carpet. "...Maybe a few more years...I didn't like thinking about it much." He rubbed his eyes, shaking his head.

Huntress gritted her teeth and started to pace. "...Damn it," she hissed under breath, running a hand through her hair. "And you thought running away would help?"

"I didn't run away," he snapped instinctively, standing up, but then he faltered when she raised an eyebrow. "...Look he seemed pretty pissed off, so I thought it'd be better to face him when he calmed down."

"Pfft, great idea," Huntress remarked dryly. "Because it's not like Batman would ever hold a grudge. Right?"

He felt a sharp burn in his chest. "I just needed time to clear my head." He placed his gun on the floor as his gaze lingered on it for a second. "Try and clear my head...figure out what to say."

Her eyes seemed to grow frostier and her whole body was stiff. "...I guess I'm more naïve than I thought," she said tonelessly, making him shift uneasily. "For a while, I actually thought you'd be more honest with me when you came back. Stupid, right?"

He cringed, standing up again. "I wanted to..." He trailed off, clenching his hands into fists. "No... no, you're right." His shoulders slumped. "I should have said something, okay, that's on me." He stepped closer. "I'm sorry."
Huntress gave him a hard stare, assessing him with a sharp gaze. "...You're sorry?" Her stone
sounded flat.

He swallowed a bad taste in his mouth. "Yes."

Huntress paused for a long moment, keeping her eyes on him. "Batman's going to find you," she
said coolly, taking a step closer. Jason dug his nails into his palm. "And, he won't do it quietly.
You lost that chance when you ran away." She stared at him coldly, making his stomach tug like a
jump rope.

"I figured," Jason replied steadily, tensing. "You think I'm afraid of a stupid lecture?"

Her expression remained calm. "Cut the act, Jason." She shook her head slowly. Disappointed. He
felt sick. "It doesn't fool me and it won't fool Dad." She stepped back. "You can't keep running
away..."

A sharp pain stabbed him in the stomach. "Hey, wait..." Jason tried to grab her arm."Don't be like
that."

She smacked his arm away and leveled him with a glare. "Save it. I'm going home," she said
rigidly. "Either come with me or don't." Huntress sighed softly, walking over to the door.

Jason's eyes widened and he felt a sharp pain in his chest. He knew she'd be upset but fuck... fuck.
What was he even meant to say?

If he kept avoiding Batman then he was a coward, and she was right to be ashamed of him.

"Just wait," Jason called out. He moved towards her, and to his relief, she paused halfway towards
the door. "You're right. I need to face him."

Huntress looked over her shoulder, and then after a second or two, she nodded.

This past month has been beyond busy.

I kind of damaged my good eye (my other eye is a lazy one) so I couldn't read or write for a
week, and then there's my newborn niece and things have just been hectic.

Next chapter should be out with two or three weeks.
Jason parked the bike against the steps of the manor while Blue Beetle touched down on the ground next to them.

Helena took off her helmet when Jason stopped the engine; she'd taken off her costume and shoved it in a backpack. "You go on ahead," she told her brother, getting off the motorcycle.

Jason scowled when he took off his helmet. "You got a key?" he grumbled, glaring at the ground.

She narrowed her eyes and reached into her pocket. "Just wait in the study." She tossed him the house key and then turned to Blue Beetle.

The armour around Jaime's face receded. "Fun night, right?"

Helena sighed, shoving her helmet under her arm, while Jason opened the front door. "Tons," she remarked dryly.

Jaime smiled grimly, glancing behind her shoulder as the door slammed shut. "So, are you okay?" he asked warily.

She chewed the inside of her mouth, shrugging. "No, I'm…" She held back the curse. "Disappointed with him."

Jaime's brow creased. "What did he do?"

Helena sighed, looking around briefly. "…He killed Silas Stone."

He winced. "Mierda," he cursed, shaking his head in his hand.

"Yeah, I know." She rubbed her eyes tiredly as she shook her head. "He kept it from us, like with everything he does."

"Why'd he do it?" Jaime looked disturbed.

"Intergang called in a favour and Jason followed through," she replied, rubbing her arm, feeling cold. "I thought at least he'd never go that far," she said, holding her helmet tighter. "Like there was a line…"
Naive

Jaime scratched the back of his neck before he moved in closer. "Do you wanna stay at mine tonight?" he offered. Helena's eyes widened at the implication. "I have a sleeping bag!" he added quickly, raising his hands. "If you just wanted some space."

The corner of her lip curled, feeling some of the coldness leave her. The offer was tempting, but she didn't feel right leaving right now.

"I need to be here in case things get loud and turn into a fist fight," she replied grimly.

The blush faded from his cheeks, nodding. "If you're sure."

She sighed, shrugging. "I'm good at playing mediator…most of the time." Helena pulled him into a hug, the plates of his armour felt solid and oddly reassuring. "Thanks for convincing me to go after him."

He hugged her back. "You do tend to need a kick up the butt occasionally," he quipped, smiling against her neck. "And, you and your family probably should take some kind of therapy."

She smothered her laughter against his shoulder. "Not gonna happen."

He shrugged, pulling away. "Or you know, just beat up criminals, whichever works best."

Helena smirked, kissing him. "Get home safe."

Jaime smiled briefly. "I'll try not to get shot down," he said, stepping back, looking at the manor behind her. "Just be careful…" Concern clouded his face. "If things get too heated between Jason and your dad—"

"It'll be fine, Jaime." She touched his arm and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry about it."

He stared at her for a moment, not looking convinced. "Right, of course." He smiled, but it was too forced. "Well, adios."

She nodded, holding the helmet close to her chest. "Te veré mas tarde, Carino."

His smile grew softened as the armour covered his face again, as he flew off into the air.

Helena stared up at the sky until he was out of sight, and then look back at her home and sighed, walking towards it.

Bruce folded his uniform away neatly so Alfred wouldn't complain. He stifled a yawn and stepped out of the locker room, scratching the back of his head. After everything that had happened these past few days, for once, he was eager to call it an early night and sleep.

Tim was still sitting at the computer, dressed down in civvies, while his eyes stayed glued to the screen. He was examining Powers' financial records again.

Bruce sighed and walked over. "I thought I told you to head up?"

Tim didn't look away from the screen. "I just need five more minutes." He frowned and continued to type.

Bruce frowned and was tempted to let him stay up late, but then he saw Tim's eyes start to droop
and how the light from the computer illuminated the bags under his eyes.

He imagined Alfred's disapproving frown and sighed.

"Tim, Bed. Now," Bruce ordered sternly, crossing his arms.

Tim's brow furrowed, as he blinked owlishly and looked over at him."But, I just—"

"Upstairs, now." He pointed toward the stone staircase.

The boy scowled and shoved himself away from the computer. "Fine." He pressed one of the keys to close the taskbar. "But it's not like you don't stay up late," he mumbled, walking towards the stairs.

"I don't have school in the morning," Bruce said evenly, following behind him.

Tim raised an eyebrow at him as he trudged up the stairs. "So does sleeping through business meetings count as being productive?"

Bruce narrowed his eyes. "Do I need to set a curfew?"

Tim grimaced, raising his hands up in defeat. "Okay, I'm shutting up now," he said in exasperation as the two of them approached the two-way door into the study.

Bruce's lips twitched upwards. "That's what I thought." He stepped ahead and pushed the door open. "Any complaints can be directed towards Al..." He trailed off when he stepped into the study and saw Jason and Helena waiting by the desk. "...fred..."

Tim stopped alongside him while Helena looked at them both solemnly, and Jason glowered at the ground. Bruce's shoulders stiffened when he laid eyes on Jason, as his face became grim and cold.

Helena held herself taller. "We were waiting for you..." She folded her arms and glanced at Jason briefly before looking back at Bruce. "You and Jason need to talk."

Jason curled his hands into fists and raised his head to meet Bruce's harsh gaze.

Bruce clenched his jaw, trying to keep his composer in check. He shifted his gaze away from Jason and glanced at his daughter and then Tim. "Tim, go upstairs," he ordered, looking back at Jason.

"...Right." Tim shifted uneasily as he surveyed them all for a second longer before he apprehensively walked over to the door, but paused when Helena didn't follow.

Bruce's gaze flickered to Helena when she didn't move. "You too."

Helena narrowed her eyes challengingly, but then cast a cold look at Jason that made him tense. "...Alright then," she said tightly. "I need to talk to Tim anyway."

Jason's knuckles were white, glaring intently at the wall.

Bruce watched Helena leave the room with Tim, and then looked back at Jason when the door clicked shut. He looked the younger man over, analysing his tense posture and lack of guns.

"...If you're worried about me shooting the place up, don't be." Jason looked up and crossed his arms. "She confiscated my guns..."

Bruce considered him for a moment, closing the door to the cave behind him. "Good." He took a
step forward and met Jason's glower. "Now, let's start with the truth." He narrowed his eyes and folded his arms. "Did you kill Dr Silas Stone?"

Jason didn't speak straight away, but he didn't break off his glare either. The two of them stood in silence for a long moment. Until Jason's eye twitched and his jaw locked, baring a slither of gritted teeth.

"Yes."

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Pacific Ocean

11/02/2023

05:35

Artemis stared out of the porthole of Black Manta's submarine while she stood in the hallway and watched a cluster of fish swim past. Being underwater was calming and the echoing sounds were a welcomed trade of that from the city.

She sighed and crossed her arms, feeling older than she was.

"You'd get a better view from the south side of the ship," Deathstroke spoke from nearby.

Artemis gritted her teeth and tensed. "I prefer this one." Her eyes narrowed at him through her mask as he approached her. He was in his full gear with his black and orange mask in place. "Can I help you with something?"

Deathstroke stood next to her, looking out the window like he hadn't heard her. "You can barely see anything from here," he commented, sighing. "Kaldur'ahm is looking for you. It's about your next mission."

She swallowed a bad taste and nodded. "Are you a messenger now?" she couldn't help but take a jab at him.

His lose eye narrowed and glinted coldly. "My, aren't we snippy today," he remarked lightly, and then paused thoughtfully as Artemis ground her teeth. "Is something on your mind?" There was a tremor of amusement in his voice.

You know damn well you sack of shit.

Artemis clenched her jaw, smothering her anger. "Now you mention, I was wondering about something," she said lightly, meeting his hard gaze with her own. "Your daughter, she's being transported soon isn't she?"

His eye was like a shard of ice. "Yes, she is," He tilted his head. "It'll be good to have her monitored again." His eye gleamed darkly. "Nothing's more disappointing than a wayward daughter."

Bastard

Artemis smiled tightly while she bit down on her tongue. "Well, hopefully, that'll be rectified once the facility…softens her up a bit."

His shoulders twitched like he was straining his muscles. "I'm sure they'll take good care of her."
She turned to him and cocked her head. "You sure about that?"

Deathstroke stepped closer."Yes, I am," he said lightly as he loomed over her.

Artemis stared at him intently for a moment and then shrugged like the conversation hadn't meant anything.
"Thanks for the message." She unfolded her arms, keeping her gaze locked on his. 'I'll go find Kaldur'ahm." She looked ahead and walked passed him.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

**11/02/2023**

**01:05**

Jason hated feeling like a stupid kid in Bruce's presence.

Bruce hadn't said a word and just let Jason do the talking, which was never a good sign.
"...Then I wiped the footage," Jason finished, swallowing thickly. "I didn't know how to tell you so...I didn't."

Bruce continued to stare at him.

Jason straightened up and narrowed his eyes. "I know I messed up, Boss. I made a mistake." He clenched his hands into fists. "I should have told you."

Bruce narrowed his eyes. "But, you didn't." His voice was cold.

Jason gritted his teeth, feeling his temper spark. "Can you blame me?" He raised his arms in the air. "I couldn't—how the hell was I supposed to talk to you about it? How?"

"So, you tried to hide it." His tone stayed the same.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

Jason's face scrunched up. "Oh, fuck you, just..." He shook his head and buried his face in his hand. "I was trying to change, Bruce."

"Yet you still ran away when I confronted you," Bruce said, taking a step closer.

_Coward_

Jason's stomach lurched, but he gritted his teeth harder and tried to hide it. "What'd you want, Bruce?" He glared at him, watching Bruce's lips grow thinner. "I fucked up." Just another disappointment. "I always fuck up." His voice cracked. "So, tell me what you want."

Bruce was silent, as the coldness in his gaze softened. "I want to be able to trust you." He took another step closer. "But, I can't can I? Not when you try and cover up killing an innocent man." He grimaced, shaking his head. "His blood is on your hands, Jason."

Jason started to feel sick, feeling his skin get clammy. "Then lock me up." The guilt gnawed painfully at his chest. "You'd be doing both of us a favour."
I should have stayed dead.

Bruce's gaze was intense, never leaving his. "I don't trust you locked up, not with your state of mind."

Unstable

His temper flared up again. "I'm not crazy," he snapped, backing against the desk. "I'm not 100% okay but... but I'm not crazy."

"I know you're not crazy," Bruce replied calmly. "But, that doesn't mean you're alright, Jason." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I don't trust you, and I'm not covering this up. You'll confess to this and the authorities and League will be made aware of your actions."

Jason looked away and dug his nails into the edge of the desk. "And, when I get arrested?"

"I won't arrest you but if you get caught, don't expect me to help get you out of it," Bruce answered evenly.

"I don't want your help." Jason felt a heavy weight on his shoulders, refusing to meet the other's eye. "I can look after myself."

"Clearly," Bruce's voice grew cold again.

Jason became tenser, wanting to be sick. "Okay, glad we cleared that up." He turned around and face Bruce properly. "I'll stay out of your way from now on."

Better off out of everyone's way.

Bruce's brow creased. "Is that what you think I want?"

Jason stared at him, resisting the urge to shift on the spot. "Maybe...I don't know." He crossed his arms, swallowing a lump in his throat.

Bruce was silent for a moment, staring at him. "If you want to earn my trust back you'll stay and abide by my rules."

Jason's chest tightened, looking away. "...You won't stop me if I try to leave?"

"...No." Bruce sighed, shaking his head faintly. "I won't stop you, so it's up to you whether you want to earn back my trust or go and leave things how they are."

Jason swallowed again, clenching and unclenching his fists. "...Do you want me to leave?" He couldn't quite meet Bruce's eye, staring over at the grandfather clock instead.

Bruce didn't answer straight away, and his lips were set in a stubborn thin line. He looked at Jason, hesitant.

"...I don't want to lose you again, Jason," Bruce said quietly.

There was a lump in Jason's throat, but he tried to cover it with a cough, averting his gaze. "I'm not gonna get myself killed again if that's what you're afraid of..." His was tone was more strained rather than mocking. "I don't know, maybe I should leave..." Jason shrugged uneasily. "I'll just keep fucking everything up if I stay."

Helena was already angry with him, it wouldn't be long until she grew sick of him. It was only a
matter of time. Same with Alfred and Dick, they'd all grow sick of him eventually.

Bruce sighed again. "Jason..." he trailed off, clamping his mouth shut like he was scared of saying the wrong thing. "Nobody wants you to leave."

_That was a fucking joke._

"Helena's already pissed off with me," Jason said, shrugging again, shifting on the spot. "Dick will be too, and Tim already hates my guts. Not that I blame him but, yeah...better if I go."

Bruce stayed stiff like a board. "You leaving won't make things better, Jason."

Jason bit down on his tongue hard before he let out a deep breath, "Yeah it will. I'll own up to what I did and then I'll leave and, and if I get locked up then fine." His stomach twisted. "Whatever happens I'm making less trouble for you guys."

Everyone wins...

Bruce stared at him for a while, before he shook his head. "Is that what you want?"

_It isn't about what I want._

Jason gritted his teeth. "Everyone's better off if I—"

"Jason." Bruce levelled him with a look.

Jason's jaw slacked, looking anywhere but his direction. "Things aren't gonna go back to how they were," he muttered, scratching his fingers against the desk, focusing on the pot of pens.

"No," Bruce sounded remorseful, moving towards him. "And, that's alright." He placed a hesitant hand on Jason's shoulder, which made him tense, but he didn't pull away. "I don't see you as a burden, Jason."

Jason let out a strained laugh. "Yeah, right..."

"Jason, look at me," Bruce ordered. Jason swallowed and apprehensively shifted around to face him. Bruce placed both his hands on his shoulders, and Jason looked at him; they were almost the same height now. "I'm glad you came back, don't ever doubt that, but I won't lie and say I'm not disappointed and angry about some of the things you've done," he said gravely, making Jason tense more. "But, you are not a burden to any of us. Do you understand?"

He's lying, that tiny voice niggled at the back of his head.

But, Bruce's gaze was genuine.

The thought of leaving again was...well, it didn't feel like freedom, it just felt like the easy way out. He'd already avoided coming back for six years (two of those years being a nightmare). Helena had grown up so fast and he'd missed it all...

Jason's mouth was dry and he couldn't swallow properly, so he just nodded, feeling a stupid warm spark in his chest. "Yeah, Boss." His tone was quieter than he'd meant. "I'll... I'll stay."

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**Pacific Ocean**

11/02/2023
When Tigress entered Kaldur's quarters, it was a grey all around and reminded her of a prison. He was on the floor reading a holomap of some mainland. He looked up when she stepped into the room.

"Tigress." He smiled faintly, closing the map.

Artemis stopped and crossed her arms as the door slid closed behind her. "You sent Slade to come get me," she whispered fiercely once the door was closed. "On the day he killed Sportsmaster of all days."

Kaldur's smile faded. "I was having words with him beforehand," he said as he stood up. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have had him send for you." He shifted uncomfortably. "...Are you alright?"

_No, I'm not fine. I have to work with the bastard who killed my asshole dad and pretend I don't want to stab him in the throat._

Artemis narrowed her gaze further for a moment but then sighed, loosening up. "I'm fine... just forget about it." She walked over to him, narrowing her eyes. "I would have probably bumped into him at some point anyway," she murmured. "So, what's the situation?"

He didn't answer straight away, looking tense, or at least tenser than usual. "You're being transferred, temporarily."

Her eyes bulged. "What?"

He sighed, running a hand through his blond buzz cut hair. "The Light has requested you supervise the Metahuman base in Detroit, as an added security measure," Kaldur said, shaking his head. "I did advise against it, but I was ignored."

"Shit." Artemis grimaced, pacing back and forth. "Do you think they know?"

She looked around the room, despite him assuring her countless times of its safety, she still couldn't help but suspect they were being listened too.

Kaldur paused for a second before he shook his head. "We've given them no reason to..." He rubbed his chin. "But, this might be a test of some kind."

"What makes you say that?" She frowned, crossing her arms.

He rubbed his eyes, sighing. "It has been a while since they tested my loyalty. They are aware Batman is investigating them, which will put on them on edge." He leaned against the wall and scowled. "And, if they suspect another covert team is being assembled then now would be a good time to test me."

"What makes you say that?" She frowned, crossing her arms.

He rubbed his eyes, sighing. "It has been a while since they tested my loyalty. They are aware Batman is investigating them, which will put on them on edge." He leaned against the wall and scowled. "And, if they suspect another covert team is being assembled then now would be a good time to test me."

Artemis mulled that over and scowled. "It could provide an opportunity or get us killed. Not many options there."

Kaldur slumped against the wall, letting out a deep breath. "Something I'm constantly aware of."

She watched him with concern and walked over. "Don't worry, we'll get through this," she reassured, placing a hand on his armoured shoulder.

He managed to smile. "I have every faith," he replied, even though he didn't look like he believed it
Wayne Manor, Gotham

11/02/2023

01:20

Helena gauged Tim's face for a reaction. The two of them were sitting on the edge of her bed with her cat curled up sleeping in-between them.

Tim clenched his hands into fists, resting them on his lap. "It could mean my dad was innocent," he muttered, brow furrowed.

She smiled. "If he wasn't willing to hand over the biochip designs then yeah, it's likely." She reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

He tried to smile when he looked up. "Yeah, that's true…"

Helena's brow creased, removing her hand. "You don't sound optimistic…"

Tim sighed, picking at a hole in his jeans. "Don't get me wrong, I…I loved my parents, but… I didn't know them." He chewed his lower lip and shrugged. "I mean I tried to, but they were always busy."

Helena felt a spark of anger on Tim's behalf, but she kept it at bay. "Your dad still went against Powers, though, that's gotta count for something."

Tim nodded faintly. "I guess it means there were some lines he wasn't willing to cross," he said, frowning. "But, I've been thinking about their deaths, about when the Light caught me hacking…" He lowered his gaze to the floor.

Her gut twisted, nodding. "Yeah?"

"They assumed it was my dad, and putting that into perspective now, it implies they might have fought he'd gone rogue," Tim said, his knuckles white. "Which makes it more logical why they'd assassinate a high ranking businessman because he already knew too much, right?" His voice cracked in the middle.

Helena grimaced, avoiding his gaze. "Well…" She trailed off, sighing. "I don't know, Tim." She looked down at him trying to gauge his expression, but it was closed off and his whole posture was stiff. "I'm sorry…"

He shrugged mechanically, staring at the floor. "Doesn't matter anyway, they're dead."

She cringed, biting down on her tongue. Apprehensively she reached out and wrapped an arm around him, disturbing Benny; the cat moaned and moved out of the way.

Helena sighed and held him close, trying to think of the right thing to say. "Tim, I'll tell you something I used to tell myself when I was your age," she said quietly, pulling away so she could look at him. "You don't owe the world an apology for what your parents did." She smiled faintly. "And, anyone who tries to blame you isn't worth two cents."

The corner of Tim's lips twitched upwards. "Thanks."
"Anytime, Squirt." She patted him on the back. "Things will work out, you'll see."

He raised an eyebrow. "Right..."

Her gaze shifted to the door when she heard a knock. "Yeah?" Had dad and Jason finished arguing already?

The door was pushed open, revealing her mom on the other side. "Hey..." Selina said, re-adjusting her dressing gown collar when she saw Tim. "Can we talk?"

Helena frowned and shared a glance with Tim. "...Yeah, sure," she replied.

Tim got off the bed as Selina stepped into the room. "Yeah, well thanks for...you know." He smiled faintly.

"Anytime, bud." Helena smiled warmly, watching him leave.

Her mom closed the door behind her once Tim was gone. "I finally managed to get Terry to sleep"
She wandered over to the bed and crossed her arms. "He doesn't like being left alone much."

"That's good," Helena replied, rubbing the back of her neck. "So... what did you wanna talk about?"

Her mom sighed. "Alfred mentioned something about your grades."

Helena grimaced, furrowing her brow. "Oh, right that."

"Uh, huh." Her mom raised an eyebrow and sat down next to her. "So, what happened?"

"Nothing." Helena shrugged, avoiding her mom's gaze. "It doesn't matter anyway. I'll be getting straight A's by the end of the semester." She sighed and looked over at her mom. "I already talked about this with dad anyway."

"And?" Mom raised an eyebrow. "Honey, just tell me what's wrong," she said, frowning. "Come on."

Helena chewed on her tongue before she let out a deep breath. "It's nothing. I just...I got too obsessed with the whole superhero thing," she replied uncomfortably, folding her arms. "It was stress and stuff... but I'm better now. I know School's important."

Mom's frown didn't let up, not even when she reached out to stroke Benny behind the ears. "What kind of stress?"

Helena's stomach twisted uncomfortably, tensing. "...Do we have to talk about this?" she muttered, ducking her head.

"Yes."

Helena scowled at her mom but was met with an unimpressed look. "...Dad's a hypocrite."

Mom snorted. "You don't say."

A smile tugged on the edges of her mouth. "He always puts being Batman first because that's what's important," Helena said, feeling a weight on her chest. "But he won't let me put being Huntress first even when lives are in danger. Like studying for an algebra test is more important than finding a murderer or saving someone." She clenched her hands into fists while her mom kept
silent. "Even if I end up graduating with a C average; who cares if it's because I devoted more time to saving people?"

Her voice had risen towards the end, making the room feel suddenly silent when she finished speaking.

Helena dug her nails into her palms, refusing to look at her mom.

The two of them remained silent for a while, with the only noise coming from Benny who was purring from Selina's affection.

"Things aren't that black and white, Kitten," Mom said gently.

Helena looked up, eyeing her mom's calm expression curiously. "I know I just meant—"

"I know what you meant." Mom ushered the cat off the bed and shuffled in closer. "Listen, your dad is a hard ass, but I think I get what he means," she told her patiently. "You're sixteen, and these years when you're young, they shape how you grow up."

Helena chewed her lips briefly. "I know it's important to be normal sometimes..." She shrugged, shifting uncomfortably. "But, being Huntress is exciting and... being me is just... predictable."

Mom reached out and brushed some hair out of Helena's face. "That's a dangerous kind of thinking, honey." Mom smiled grimly. "Have you tried not thinking of Huntress as a separate person?"

Helena's cheeks flushed. "I know Huntress is me. I'm Helena. We're the same person, I know that." The last thing she wanted was her mom thinking she had a split personality.

Selina didn't seem fazed. "Well, if that's the case, why is being you so predictable?"

"It's not..." Helena pursed her lips, narrowing her eyes. "Nevermind."

Mom smiled crookedly. "If there's one thing your father and I have in common, it's that we grew up too quickly," Mom said sadly, as her smile dimmed. Helena's gaze softened. "And, we spent too long with the mask on."

Helena swallowed a lump in her throat. Her thoughts drifted to Jaime, and then her friends. There was volunteering, trying not to fall asleep during Mass, late night movie nights, and dessert places. The things she'd miss if she had to be Huntress every day.

"...Dad's still a hypocrite," she muttered, raising an eyebrow at her mom.

Mom rolled her eyes, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "Yep, afraid so, Kitten."

Helena's mouth twitched upwards, as she let her mom pull her into a hug. "...Thanks, mom."

---

**Finally dished this out. Lotta talking in this one, family feelings.**
Derek squeezed his stress ball excessively while he was sitting at his desk in his large office. His teeth were ground together and his face was scrunched into a deep scowl, everything seemed to be falling apart and it wouldn't long until Luthor made him pay for his inefficiency.

"Those idiots," he hissed. His stomach churned, crushing the ball in his hand for a moment before he threw it away. The ball bounced off against the grey wall and rolled under the desk.

Derek buried his face in his hand and dug his nails into his scalp.

If the reports were correct then Batman had custody of Selina Kyle and her child, everything had dissolved so fast he'd barely had the chance to get his head around it.

The bitch had stolen evidence and most likely blabbed to Wayne and Batman. He didn't have the power to take them both out, he needed Luthor's help.

Derek cringed, shaking his head.

Then, his intercom beeped. "Sir?" his secretary, Marcus, called.

Derek ground. "What?"

"That Tim Drake boy is at the front desk asking for you. He seems quite distressed."

Derek's head snapped up. "Send him up," he ordered sharply, getting to his feet.

Now, what did that little brat want?

Tim's hair was windswept and his shirt was un-tucked. One of Alfred's most important lessons in acting had been in appearance, painting the right picture was vital, as was not overdoing it.

Tim did his best to make sure his face wasn't too distressed when he saw his reflection the impossibly shiny ceramic walls in the hallway, finding a balance.

When he stepped into Powers' office the businessman was looked like he was trying to hide how on edge he was. Powers smiled too stiffly and held himself like every one of his senses was on high alert.
"Tim, what brings you here?" he asked brightly, moving in front of his desk.

Tim smiled nervously. "…Um, yeah I just…" He rubbed the back of his neck, looking down. "I'm not really supposed to be here but…" He let his sentence trail off, trying to reel Powers in.

"Is something wrong?" Powers asked, stepping closer. "You know you can tell me." He smiled at him too brightly.

Tim observed him for a second, finding the cracks in his armour. "It's just…" He looked down. "Bruce has been acting, well, kind of weird."

"How, how so?" Powers was barely hiding his curiosity.

Tim kept it casual and shrugged. "He's keeping secrets." He balled his hands into fists. "And, going behind my back with the business…"

Powers swallowed deeply, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Like what?"

Tim licked his lips, feeling his stomach twist a little. He needed to get this next part perfect. "A few days ago I caught him on the phone…and the way he was talking…"

Powers squeezed Tim's shoulder. "Do you know who he was talking to?"

Tim chewed his tongue, shifting on the spot. "Um…yeah, but…"

Powers gripped his shoulder tighter and bent down to his level. "Tim, it's alright," he reassured, smiling placidly.

Tim met his gaze hesitantly and swallowed thickly. "…He was talking to Lex Luthor."

Powers' eyes flashed, digging his nails into Tim's shoulder too hard, for just a second.

"Got you."

Powers quickly composed himself. "And, what's wrong with that?" he asked lightly.

Tim's eyes widened. "Mr Luthor hates Superman!" he exclaimed, raising his arms to add effect. "And, have you met the guy? He's a creep." Tim scowled, crossing his arms. "Plus Luthor's involved in weapons dealership—I don't want Bruce involved in that kind of stuff."

Powers chuckled blandly, straightening up. "Oh, Timothy." He patted him on the head, causing Tim's scowl to deepen. "I'm sure it's nothing serious."

Tim's shoulders slumped. "Yeah, right…"

Powers forced another laugh. "Is there anything else bothering you?"

Tim looked up and sighed. "Besides Bruce treating me like an idiot?" He shrugged. "I don't know…things are just really different living with the Waynes."

"Yes, they will be," Powers replied, nodding understandingly. "But, I'm sure they're taking care of you best they can?" he phrased it like a question.

Tim shrugged, looking away. "I guess..."He curled his hands into fists. "...Did my dad like the Waynes, sir?" Tim looked up earnestly.
"Powers' smile stiffened. "They seemed to get along, yes…why do you ask?"

Tim sighed, lowering his gaze. "Bruce doesn't think my dad treated me right."

"What?" Powers said, confused.

Tim chewed his bottom lip, scraping his foot against the ground. "He thinks dad spent too much time working and not enough time raising me…" He shrugged. "He isn't that far off the ball…"

Powers was quiet for a moment. "Well, yes…your father was busy most of the time." He placed a hand on top of Tim's head. "But, I'm sure he meant well."

Tim resisted the urge to roll his eyes, and instead frowned up at the man. "Did, you think he was a good guy, sir?"

Powers brow creased briefly, a flicker of annoyance in his dark eyes but he covered it with a smile. "Yes, of course." He ruffled his hair. Tim dug his nails into his palm and smiled. "I admired him for it," Powers said lightly, smiling. "Now, I think I should have my assistant drive you home."

Tim's face fell. "...But, I don't wanna go back yet." He moved out of his hold, making Powers' smile fade. "Weren't you listening,"

"I understand you and Bruce have your differences, Tim." Powers was quickly losing his patience. "The last thing either of us wants is for me to be accused of kidnapping."

Tim scowled and walked over to the desk. "But, you said I could always come to you if I had a problem," he whined, moving behind the desk as he slipped the small transparent square between his fingertips.

Powers clenched his jaw and walked over. "Tim, this isn't up for debate."

Tim sat down in the chair and spun around, and with a slight trick of the hand, he stuck the transparent listening device underneath the desk. "Bur, sir—"

"No," Powers interrupted, coldly, as he reached out and grabbed Tim's upper arm. "When I said you could come to me I didn't mean it like this." He roughly pulled Tim out of the chair.

Tim frowned, letting himself get dragged along. "You aren't mad are you?"

"Of…of course not." Powers forced another smile, loosening his hold. "I just. We can't have Bruce getting the wrong idea now can we?" He stopped in front of the door.

Tim paused, staring at him thoughtfully. "Yeah…" He sighed, looking down. "I guess so."

"Feel free to call me if you need to." Powers opened the door and ushered him out of his office.

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**Wayne Manor, Gotham**

**11/03/2023**

**21:00**

Helena turned off the recording. "Tim, you're brilliant," she praised, ruffling his hair.

Tim smiled crookedly. "I try my best."
Barbara wheeled her chair closer, with the whole family gathered in the living room near the fire. "That or an evil genius in the making," she remarked teasingly.

Tim grinned and looked over at the others. Jason was sulking in a corner behind Bruce, while Dick was flopped out on the couch next to him. Selina was holding Terry in the second armchair opposite Bruce while Alfred stood a little behind her, and Jaime was leaning against the mantelpiece above the fireplace. All in all, the room was a lot more cramped than usual despite its size.

"So, we know Luthor's pulling the strings on this one," Dick said. "Not much of a surprise but..."

"So, where's Powers right now?" Selina asked, frowning

Oracle adjusted her glasses and looked at her phone. "At home after making a call to Metropolis." She smirked. "That bug in his phone is a goose that just keeps on giving." She showed them the phone screen where a small red dot blinked.

Tim shrugged. "He's desperate which means we have the advantage." He shot Bruce a smile. "Is all the evidence filed up?"

Bruce nodded, a glint of pride in his eyes. "Gordon has the file and a majority of the suspects are in private custody." He glanced over at Selina. "Selina and I are going to Detroit to scope out the area before Nightwing's team make their strike."

"Which they'll execute brilliantly." Dick gave Tim, Jaime, and Helena a grin.

Selina's frown deepened, looking over at her daughter warily. Helena saw the look and sighed, walking over to her. "I'll be fine, mom." She leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "Promise."

Selina hummed, still frowning. "We'll see..." Then she stood up. "I need to go feed Terry."

"I need to start heading back as well," Oracle added, smiling at Alfred. "Thanks for the dinner, Al."

Alfred smiled and nodded. "A pleasure, Ms Gordon."

Helena smiled and held Jaime's hand. "Want me to drive you home for real this time?" she said. "I could use one of those Banana fritters."

Jaime raised an eyebrow. "My curfew's at eleven."

Helena kissed his cheek. "We can take the long way around."

"Keep it PG, kids," Selina said dryly, re-adjusting Terry in her arms as she stood up.

Helena scowled. "Mom..."

Bruce stood up and glanced at Jason who hadn't moved. "Dick, Jason, could you stay? I need a word."

The others stopped and looked over at Dick who raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Uh...okay, sure," Dick replied, smiling as he sat back down.

Helena pursed her lips and looked away. "Come on, Jaime..." She tugged him towards the door.

"Uh, right, sure..." Jaime frowned, glancing over his shoulder.
Oracle patted Dick on the knee as she rolled past. "Good luck," she muttered.

Tim kept his gaze glued to the ground as he followed Selina and the others out of the room.

"Don't take too long, sir," Alfred said wryly, closing the doors behind him.

Jason's Adam's apple bobbed. "Fuck sake..." he whispered.

"So, what's this about?" Dick said, leaning forward.

Bruce narrowed his eyes. "The both of you lied to me."

"What?" Dick stood up, looking at Jason.

Jason shifted, scowling. "He knows I was the one who rescued Supergirl from Intergang, Dick."

Dick's shoulders slumped, looking back at Bruce. "Hey, come on Bruce, I was just looking out for Jason."

Bruce's lips stretched into a thin line. "I know, but Jason didn't tell you the real reason, he went to investigate Intergang," he replied coolly.

Dick frowned. "Huh?"

Jason stiffened when he stepped forward. "Intergang hired me to kill Silas Stone."

Dick grew pale. "What?"

Jason swallowed, meeting his gaze. "I went to Intergang to erase any evidence they had against me," he said, curling his hands into fists. "I found Kara by accident..."

Dick's jaw clenched. "So you lied to me?"

"Well, how the hell was I supposed to explain the truth?" Jason said defensively.

"Oh, I don't know, how about being honest from the start?" Dick snapped, closing the distance between them.

"Boys," Bruce warned, crossing his arms. "Keep it civil."

Dick scowled. "I am." He glowered at Jason. "I gave you plenty of times to come clean to me."

"Oh, fuck off," Jason replied irritably. "Like you're Mr Honest all the time, Dickhead."

"All right, both of you calm down," Bruce said sternly. "Jason you're still in the wrong, and Dick you shouldn't have lied to me."

Jason's scowl deepened. "Hey, he only lied because I guilt tripped him!"

"Jason, don't." Dick shook his head and raised his hand. "Listen, I'm sorry I lied, Bruce. But..." He looked back at Jason. "What happens now?"

"Helena, Jaime, and Tim already found out what Jason did," Bruce replied, shooting Jason a look. "I wanted you to know before Barbara found out and told you." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Jason and I will...explain what happened to the Justice League soon enough."

"Can't wait..." Jason muttered, sighing. "Listen, Dick, I know I messed up," he said, rubbing the
back of his neck, while Dick kept scowling. "I'm sorry, okay." Jason's gaze flickered to Bruce and then back to Dick. "I was grateful you, you know, had my back even though I didn't…well, don't, deserve it."

Dick's scowl softened a little, glancing at Bruce briefly before he looked back at Jason. "…Right." His brow furrowed. "Yeah, well, I'm not covering for you again."

"Wasn't expecting you too anyway…" Jason shrugged, kicking his foot on the floor.

Bruce eyed them both for a moment before he sighed. "Whatever differences you two have, don't let it get in the way of your work," he told them.

Dick's jaw tightened while Jason glared at the wall.

"Yeah, sure," Dick said, walking towards the door.

"Jason?" Bruce said, looking over at the young man.

Jason shrugged stiffly and dragged his feet when he walked over to the door. "Fine with me."

Dick opened the door with too much force, but then looked over his shoulder. "And, you still owe me that Chinese."

"Fuck you," Jason snapped, flipping him off.

Dick slammed the door behind him.

Bruce sighed, massaging his forehead. "What did I tell you about keeping calm?"

Jason glared at the ground and shrugged. "I was calm..."

Bruce narrowed his eyes, shaking his head. "You need to earn Dick's trust just like you need to earn mine back, remember?"

"Yeah, I know," Jason said, keeping his gaze on the floor. "I'm sorry, alright."

Bruce scrutinised him for a moment longer before he sighed. "Come help me make some more Batarangs down in the cave," he told him, walking past. "We still have a long night ahead of us."

Detroit
11/04/2023
12:00

Bruce put on his winning smile for the cameras as he cut the ribbon for the newly refurbished hospital while the Mayor stood at his side on the stone steps. There was a crowd of civilians and eight reporters held back by a barrier and a heavy set of ten security guards.

"Thank you for giving me this honour," Bruce said, shaking the Mayor's hand

Major Linna grinned. "It is always a pleasure to have you in our City, Mr Wayne."

The two of them smiled at the cameras with their hands interlocked.
Then Clark Kent pushed his way to the front. "Mr Wayne!" he called, re-adjusting his glasses, smiling a little too slyly. "How do you respond to the rumours of Miranda Tate beings spotted in Switzerland last Month?"

For God sake, Clark.

Bruce's smile grew, releasing the Mayor's hand. "Well, as I say to the ladies back in Gotham, no comment."

The Mayor and a few others chuckled. "Very good, yes," he said, clapping Bruce on the back. "This ceremony signifies a brighter day for our city and improving the medical care of our citizens. Now, if you'd excuse us."

The reporters started talking at once.

"Sir, what about the overspending on this year's budget?"

"How are you tackling the new Class A drug being introduced onto the streets?"

The Mayor smiled as he waved at them, walking down the steps with Bruce as his bodyguards surrounded them. "They won't stop until they get a good story," Mayor Linna said through his tight smile.

Bruce smiled pleasantly. "They do tend to get aggressive when I'm around."

The Mayor laughed, patting him on the back. "I guess it can't be helped."

Bruce nodded, catching Clark's eye before he entered the limo.

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**The Watchtower**

**11/04/2023**

**12:30**

"...So, this will be a training exercise," Nightwing said, facing the five of them. "The aim of the exercise is to retrieve the hostage..."

Blue Beetle couldn't keep still, not when they were on the secret Justice League Watchtower of all places. They were in some kind of giant arena or something, but the walls were completely grey and the floor was cushioned.

Huntress cast him a sidelong glance and smiled wryly. "Do you need the bathroom or something?" She whispered.

"No." He nudged her. "But, this place is awesome," he whispered, grinning. He looked over at the others in the large room.

Robin was standing next to Huntress, and next to him was that Speedster called Tornado, except he looked more kitted out.

Don's costume was a yellow jumpsuit that also attached to the mask around his eyes, with large black lightening stripes running down the sided of his costume and a black lightning bolt insignia on his chest.
The boy next to him was called, Beast Boy? He looked around 14 and was bright green like the rest of him, which was an eyesore. His costume was a simple red and white jumpsuit, and he hadn't bothered with a mask. His tail was pretty cool though.

'My scan indicates he is some kind of hybrid,' Scarab said. 'A mix of human and Martian DNA.'

Then finally the last person was a green woman with dark red hair and a tight costume where she had a prominent red X in the centre, and a long blue hooded cape draped over her shoulders. Nightwing had called her M'gann.

'She is fully Martian, but not Green.'

Oh, are there different races?

'Correct.'

'Okay, so any questions?' Nightwing asked.

Blue Beetle frowned, looking over at the others. He opened his mouth but then closed it, rubbing the back of his neck.

Don't be the rookie.

'Good,' Nightwing nodded. "M'gann will be your eye in the sky, but bear in mind her main objective is to observe." He stepped back as M'gann moved forward.

"Alright, guys, let's all get into position," she said, smiling.

"I'll leave you guys to it." Nightwing smiled and headed towards the exit.

"So how does this thing work?" Tornado asked, looking around the large space.

M'gann's smile widened. "You'll see." She turned around and looked up at the ceiling. "Computer, activate training program Beta45."

The lights dimmed as Nightwing left the room, as the floor started to lower.

"Okay, this is new..." Huntress said, frowning.

Then the arena transformed into to a city landscape.

"Jesucristo..." Jaime murmured, looking around in awe.

The city looked run down, and weird New York/San Francisco aesthetic to it.

"Okay, I'm linking us all up...now." M'gann's eyes glowed green.

'The Martian is invading our head! Respond!'

"Hey, cool it!" Jaime's eyes widened. "Just relax!"

"Uh, who are you talking to?" Beast Boy's mouth hadn't moved but he was looking at Blue Beetle oddly.

Blue Beetle blinked. "Uh..." He touched his head "This mind link is kind of strange."

"Pfft, no shit, man." Tornado scowled. "I feel violated."
Robin rolled his eyes. "Save it for social services." He looked over at M'gann. "We ready to go?"

M'gann nodded hovering in the air. "Remember this mission is a level 7 hostage retrieve, so treat it seriously." She surveyed them all. "Huntress and Blue Beetle will go to position C on the rooftop." She ordered. "Robin and Tornado go take position A near the bridge while Beast Boy and I take position B near the downtown area. Everyone ready?"

"Aye, aye, Sis." Beast Boy did a quick salute before he ran to her side and transformed into a Hawk and flew off with M'gann.

"Let's go," Robin said hurrying off ahead.

Tornado smiled slyly. "Just try and keep up, Boy Wonder." He zoomed off in a flash.

Huntress smiled and started running towards the Skyscraper on their left. "Don't wanna get left behind," she chimed, taking out her grapple gun.

Blue Beetle nodded, releasing his wings. "Already ahead of you." He started to fly up towards the roof while Huntress zoomed through the air on her hook. He slowed down a bit so he didn't leave her behind, just in case.

Then his thoughts drifted back to the mission and frowned. "Psst, hey, Scarab refill me in of the mission specs…"

"You know we can still hear you right?" Beast Boy's thoughts protruded his mind. "Who's Scarab anyway?"

"Not important right now." Helena sounded annoyed, flying through the air with ease. "And, Blue, you don't have to stick so close."

"I'm not!" He flew to her side while she was in mid-air.

Huntress cast him a look, as the corner of her lip curled upwards. "Right sure." She released the hook as gravity took effect and then swung when it nestled into the thick slab of concrete on the roof edge.

Detroit

11/04/2023

13:10

Bruce readjusted his large sunglasses as he walked over to the park bench. He was wearing a fake nose which looked broken at the bridge and had also replaced his expensive suit with a pair of jeans and a loose hoodie, it garnered a few disapproving looks from some mothers, but it did its job in making sure no one recognised him.

He sat down on the nearest empty bench just as a blonde haired woman pushing a stroller came into view.

Bruce caught her smiling at him from the corner of his eye and pointedly looked straight ahead.

"Is this seat taken?" Selina's silky voice filtered into his ears.
He glanced up and shrugged. "Go right ahead."

Selina put on the strollers break before she sat down. "Why thank you," she chimed, smoothing down the silk scarf wrapped around her neck. She'd opted for blue contacts instead of wearing sunglasses, but it did the trick and went well with her blonde hair.

Bruce eyed her over longer than necessary, the disguise (besides the blonde hair and contacts) reminded him of something similar she'd worn on their second date; it had been a picnic near the peak of the hill that overlooked the city.

"Uh, hm?" Selina cleared her throat, arching a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "So did your friend get a good look at the Mayor?"

"Yes." He grimaced. "It's what we suspected."

She grimaced. she said."Do you think the real him's alive?"

Bruce shifted. "We don't know."

"I see." Selina's brow furrowed, as a flicker of concern glinted in her eyes. "Shame...I liked him."

Bruce eyed her for a moment before he looked away."Did you get anything from the orphanage?" he asked, staring at the playground up ahead.

She smiled, fiddling with Terry's blanket while he slept. "Not anything too incriminating, but the manager was very forthcoming," she said coyly.

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "And?"

She spared him a brief glance before she looked back down at Terry. "The Orphanage has a bad record with runaways, a couple of kids go missing every year or so," she told him, frowning. "Victor Stone, unsurprisingly being one of them." She straightened up and looked over at the playground. "Now, the manager started to get tight-lipped after that, but after I loosened him up he started giving me a little more..."

Bruce's eye twitched. "And?"

She crossed her arms and sighed. "He started gloating about how he knew important people," Selina said, rolling her eyes. "The kind that hangs around near Greektown at Got Luck's casino."

Bruce made a mental note, nodding. "Anything else?"

She shifted, crossing her legs. "Not anything you'd wanna hear," she said dryly. "So, what now?"

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "We let Dick's team lead the rescue and do the switch."

Selina's hand curled into a fist. "If something goes wrong—"

"It won't," Bruce said firmly, looking at her. "I promise."

Her eyes narrowed coldly. "Don't try to bullshit me," her voice lowered warningly. "We both know you can't guarantee that." She tore her gaze away and looked down at Terry, smoothing down his blanket methodically. "I won't lose her."

Bruce's chest tightened, feeling a spark of guilt. "I worry about her too."
She scoffed softly, shaking her head as she stared down at her son. "Not enough to make her stop…"

He swallowed a lump in his throat and fixed his gaze on the ground. They were both silent while the children played and laughed in the park.

Selina sighed quietly, looking over at the playground. "...I know you love her," she said calmly. "But..." She sighed again, uncrossing her legs as she shifted on the bench.

Bruce looked at her while he clasped his hands together. "I know I'm not good at being a parent, you don't need to tell me that," he replied faintly, sighing. "I'm not a good listener and I can be... overbearing."

"I noticed." The corner of her lip twitched upwards when she glanced at him. "But, you could be worse, God knows I've been with worse men," she added grimly, shrugging. "You did the best you could...you're a son of a bitch, but you did the best you could and...she turned out good." She smiled fondly for a second. "Even if she is a pain in the ass at times."

Bruce felt a tiny bubble of laughter rise up from his chest, but he kept his face passive. "Thank you." He straightened up, watching her eyes narrow. "And, if anything, she gets being a pain the ass from you so don't go blaming me."

Selina snorted. "Excuse me?" She was smiling in amusement. "All that stubbornness is you, so don't even try to pin that on me—Do you have any idea what she was like as a baby?" she whispered fiercely, while Bruce raised an eyebrow. "She refused to eat green food until she was four." She shook her head at the memory. "Oh, and when she was three she used to poo her pants, every time." Selina sighed and ran a hand through her hair, making him smile. "Even after I'd just taken her to the bathroom. She had to waddle home."

The laugh came out before he could stop it and turned into a chuckle. "I can imagine..." He smiled fondly, and then looked over at the park where a girl was crying at her dad saying she didn't want to go home. "You know I tried to send her to boarding school once," he said, as his smile dimmed.

Selina frowned, leaning against the bench. "Why?"

He watched the dad lift the small girl up and put her over his shoulder. "It was two months after Jason had died," his voice was flat.

"Oh..." Selina shifted uncomfortably.

He held his hands together tightly. "I wasn't...I didn't feel like it'd be good for her to be around me at the time so I sent her away." His brow creased at the memory. "It was a good school upstate, she'd be safe." He smiled sadly. "She wasn't happy, but..." Bruce sighed. "I thought she'd be better away from me."

Selina watched him intently. "Safer?"

He nodded, frowning. "That and it was easier for me to not be near her." He smiled grimly. "I dropped her off Monday, then a week later she ran away."

Selina's eyes widened. "Back home?"

He nodded. "I searched for 72 hours until Alfred called and said she was sleeping in her bedroom." He shook his head. "She travelled through three states just to get back home."
"Jesus…” Selina sighed, shaking her head. "How mad were you?"

Bruce gave her a look. "Very." He sighed, scratching the back of his neck. "I wanted to yell at her, but then I saw her asleep and I couldn't do it."

"You know she was probably pretending right?” Selina shot him a glance, smiling down at Terry when he stirred.

"I know.” Bruce's stomach twisted at the memory. "But then she said she left because she missed me.” He heaved a heavy sigh. "I let her off easier than I should have. I felt guilty, and clearly sending her away wasn't going to work so I kept her close."

Selina stared at him for a moment. "And, here I thought we were sharing happy memories…” She smiled faintly.

"Do you think I should have still sent her away?” Bruce asked.

Selina paused, swallowing. "I know I should say yes but Helena wouldn't have wanted to be abandoned by another parent.” She smiled grimly. "Leaving her behind was the worst pain I've ever felt.” Her smile tightened. "Sometimes it would hurt so much I couldn't sleep or eat.” Her smile faded. "And, then when I saw her and you on the news and in the tabloids…” she trailed off, letting out a shallow breath. "I hit my lowest point."

Bruce was tempted to reach out and squeeze her hand gently but he stopped himself.

"That…must have been a difficult time for you,” he replied stiffly, looking away.

"To say the least,” Selina remarked dryly. "The point is that's not the kind of thing I'd wish on you…”

He looked up and met her sharp gaze. "Thank you."

Selina held his gaze for a moment before she sighed deeply and looked over at Terry. "Helena's made her choice, and now it's our job to keep her from getting killed.” She tucked Terry's blanket under his chin. "Think you can handle that?"

"I've been doing it the past nine years,” Bruce replied evenly.

Selina arched an eyebrow and gave him a look. "Of course you did."

"If anything everyone keeps telling me I'm too overprotective," he said, shaking his head.

She smiled slightly. "Oh, really?” she replied. "To be honest I'm surprised you haven't scared her boyfriend off yet.”

Bruce scowled. "I'm keeping an eye on him."

Selina's smile grew slanted, looking ahead. "He seems nice.” She shrugged and cast him a sidelong glance. "...Have you given them the Talk yet?”

He narrowed his gaze at her. "Don't you have more information to gather?”

"Why are you such a prude?” She rolled her eyes. "It's going to happen eventually.”

Bruce stood up promptly. "Make sure you get more information from Greektown."
Selina raised an eyebrow. "Was that an order?"

He held back a sigh and shot her a look. "Just do it." His tone grew weary. Her eyebrow rose higher. "...Please."

Her brow lowered as she shrugged. "Well, since you asked nicely."

Bruce grimaced and walked off before she could change her mind.

**The Watchtower**

**11/04/2023**

**13:40**

The kidnappers were firing at them from inside their heavily armoured moving cars.

Tornado leapt through the air towards the middle car. "I'm latching on!" He hit the back window and winced, scrambling to hang onto the boot as the car jerked harshly. "SHIT!"

"Wait for me!" Robin jumped onto the first car and threw a Birdarang at the gunmen sitting in the passenger seat. The man's gun was knocked out of his hands and hit the road. "I can break the window—Move, Tornado!" He jumped into the air and threw another Birdarang which cracked the middle of the rear view window.

Then the middle car slowed down harshly and tossed Tornado backwards into the air.

"WATCH OUT!"

Tornado whacked straight into Robin while the two of them were in mid-air, knocking them both of them onto the pavement.

"Are you two okay?"

M'gann's thoughts were agitated as she flew down close and tried to salvage the situation.

"Get off!" Robin shoved the speedster off him.

Tornado pushed him. "It was an accident, asshole."

"Guys, cut it out!" Beast boy turned into a falcon and swooped down at the gunmen. "We need to get the hostage out of here."

"Well, this is a disaster..." Huntress scowled, avoiding the gunfire by taking cover with Blue Beetle behind a mashed up car. "We need a solid plan."

"We only have five minutes before they're out of range," M'gann warned them.

"Damn it." Huntress punched the car door.

"I can shatter the glass if I get a few good hits in," Blue Beetle said, peering over at the vehicles that were getting away. "But I can only take on one at a time."

"Tell that to, Tornado." Robin fumed.
Huntress looked over at saw Tornado was trying to take on the middle car that had the hostage in, but he had to avoid the gunfire from all three cars. "Tornado, you're just putting a target on your back."

"You need to wait for your teammates to help!" M'gann scolded.

Beast Boy flew in the sky tailing the cars. "Come on, guys, give me some orders!"

Huntress growled, running a hand through her hair. "None of this is going to work unless we work together."

"We need to adapt the battle plan." Robin stressed.

Jaime looked at her pointedly. "Come on, Jefa."

Huntress chest constricted. "I know, I know!" she hissed. "But why the hell do I have to come up with the plan?"

"Hey, we don't have a lotta options." Tornado drawled.

"The first thing you guys need to do is fall back." M'gann advised.

Tornado objected. "But we don't have enough time!"

Huntress sighed. "No, but we'll fail otherwise. Fall back two blocks."

There was a pause and for a second she was worried he hadn't listened.

"Okay, fine." Tornado grumbled.

"Yeah, on my way." Beast Boy fell back.

Huntress smiled and stood up on the car to get a better look at the others. The three cars were still in sight but Robin, Tornado, and Beast Boy had hung back.

She scrutinised the cars in the distance. "Okay, we need to distract and take out the two cars that are surrounding the middle one." She glanced over at Blue Beetle. "Robin already weakened the rear view window of the hostage's car."

Blue Beetle scratched his chin. "The four of us could take out the two cars while Robin goes for the middle one."

Huntress smiled and lightly punched his arm. "Now you're thinking like a strategist."

He grinned, rubbing his arm. "I have my moments."

"If we attack all at once it'll be easier for me to sneak into the middle car." Robin piped up.

"Good idea." Huntress nodded. "Tornado and Beast Boy, you guys take out the guns on the third car up front while Blue and I take out the first one at the back." She looked up at the Martian in the sky. "That sounds good to you, M'gann?"

M'gann smiled. "Sounds like a plan." She narrowed her eyes at the cars. "Come on."

Blue Beetle turned his left arm into a canon. "You want me to go front?"
"No, I'm good." Huntress leapt onto a car and used it to catapult herself into the air. "Try and keep up!"

Blue Beetle smirked. "You are having way too much fun with this."

"...Only a little."

Huntress flipped in the air and landed on the roof of the third car while the other assaulted the other cars.

She dodged the guns that were peaking out of the windows and slid down the car until she was safely underneath it and hung on for dear life as her head hovered dangerously above the tarmac.

Huntress stuck the bombs in place. "Moving to the rear now." She started to move towards the rear of the vehicle when it gave a harsh jerk. "How are you doing, Blue?"

Up above Blue Beetle shot at the rear window. "Back window's weakened, I'm going in. Huntress, you need to—"

"Don't worry, I'm coming."

"Left turn is coming up, guys." Beast Boy warned them.

Huntress lunge for the rear of the car, wincing when the tip of her boot scraped the road briefly. She gritted her teeth.

"Huntress—"

"I'm coming!"

"Hey! Watch where you throw that goon, Robin!" Tornado snapped.

"Move faster then."

"Boy!"

Huntress rolled her eyes and clambered up onto the boot as Blue Beetle smashed the rear view window open.

"Nice." She grinned and threw a smoke pellet into the car.

Blue Beetle smiled crookedly and flew to the front of the car as grey smoke encased the inside. "End of the line, Hermanos!" He dug his heels into the ground to slow the car down.

Huntress slipped on her breather and jumped into the back seat where the kidnappers were struggling to aim their guns. "Everything alright at your end guys?" She punched the first two guys in the face and elbowed the other when he tried to strangle her.

"Car three is shut down!" Beast Boy had transformed into an elephant and was sat on the crushed front of the car.

Tornado tied up the passengers on the sidewalk. "And, it's cleared."

"Robin has the hostage." M'gann's voice filled all their ears.

The middle car crashed into the pavement while Robin swung by with the hostage (a rubber
dummy) under his arm.

The car slowed to a halt as Huntress bashed two of the kidnapped heads together as Blue Beetle shattered the front window open with a solid blast from his canons.

The driver pulled out a gun and aimed at her, so she grabbed it and punched him in the face with it as he shot the car ceiling.

Blue Beetle grabbed the driver by the cuff of his neck and yanked him out of the car.

Huntress moved to the front and got onto the car bonnet, slapping a Stick-disc on the side. "Car one is down."

She jumped off onto the pavement as she flicked the switch near her palm to activate the disc. A spark of energy emitted and shut down the car abruptly.

Robin had already taken the hostage to safety behind one of the cars parked by a shop.

'Hostage retrieved.' A female robotic voice echoed throughout the chamber. 'Mission objective achieved.'

Huntress looked up as the city landscape disappeared in a serried of pixels and the kidnappers changed back into cold docile robots.

"Nice job," Nightwing's voice came from the speakers above. "Despite a bad beginning you guys still managed to salvage the situation."

Huntress sighed in relief as the others gathered back together and M'gann settled back on the ground.

Beast Boy transformed back into his human form and fist-pumped the air. "Nice!" he yelled, running over to them.

"But, next time you guys need to work together more," M'gann said, looking at Don pointedly; the speedster scowled and crossed his arms. "You can't afford to waste time on the real mission."

"Which is why we're going to re-run the exercise two more times," Nightwing announced.

"Aw, man…" Don muttered, slouching.

Huntress sighed quietly and then forced a smile when she addressed the others. "Don't worry, guys, we just need to review where we went wrong."

Robin grimaced. "Well, it didn't help that someone went off on their own."

"We're still mind-linked, asshole!" Tornado tensed, glaring at him.

Robin stiffened but met Don's glare with one of his own. "Well, it's true."

Don gritted his teeth and moved towards him. "What was I supposed to do, sit around and wait for orders?"

"Yes, you were!" Robin snapped.

"Hey!" Blue Beetle stepped in-between the boys. "We have to be a team remember."
"Doesn't feel like it..." Beast Boy's thoughts were quiet.

Tornado's cheeks flushed. "He's the one being an asshole!"

Robin scoffed. "Look in a—"

"Robin, stop." Huntress interrupted, making him freeze. "Blue's right, fighting won't help."

"Exactly." M'gann frowned, eyeing them both. "If you can't work together then you're off this mission."

Tornado scowled and crossed his arms while Robin curled his hands into fists.

"Will there be a problem?" Nightwing asked them evenly.

"...No," Robin said, sighing.

Tornado's scowl deepened, glancing at Robin. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Listen, let's just forget this happened okay?" Huntress proposed. "We all fell short and need to improve. There, done." She looked over at M'gann. "Now, can we re-try the mission?"

M'gann glanced over at Tornado and Robin briefly before she nodded. "If you're all good to go then yes, we can."

"Let's do this." Beast Boy transformed into a wolf.

"What's the battle plan, Jefa?" Blue Beetle asked, smiling.

"Wow, guys, no pressure." Huntress swallowed a lump in her throat when the others looked towards her, but she forced a smile. "Okay, so I think I know a quicker way to take down the other two cars..."

Chapter End Notes

This is the longest I've taken to update this story; I had a bad case of writer's block for three weeks.

But, we're nearing the ending so that should be easier to write. I'm hoping to go back to updating every two weeks.
Bruce stared at the screen as Oracle sent over the audio files.

"This is an extract from the phone call he made yesterday." Her voice feed came from the green face icon in the top corner of the screen. "It doesn't give much away but there's definitely something interesting about it."

Bruce played the audio.

"I need to speak with Mr Luthor." Powers' voice came out curt and crisp. "There's a business discussion we didn't get to finish."

"I understand, but Mr Luthor is away on business right now." The person on the other line was male, so most likely one of Luthor's other assistants. "You'll need to make an appointment."

Bruce smirked faintly at the dismissal.

"I need to speak to him at the latest tomorrow." Powers' voice grew more firm.

"I'm sorry, but he isn't back in the city until next week."

"Then schedule a video call," Powers replied stiffly.

"Mr Luthor isn't accepting any non-private calls until he gets back from his trip. But, I can pass on a message and notify him you called."

"Will you just..." Powers trailed off before he lost his composer. There was a short pause as he let out a sigh. "Fine. Notify him I called. It's a serious matter..."

"I understand. Is there anything else, sir?"

"Yes," Powers said evenly. "Thank him for the Tulips. It was a kind gesture. That's all. Goodbye."

The line went dead.

"So, Tulips," Oracle said, as Bruce hummed. "I checked it out and there have been no flower deliveries to their residence."

"Hm...Tulips." Bruce frowned and steeped his fingers on the edge of the panel.
"I'd wager it's a cash deposit, but Tulips seems too random," she commented. "If it's to do with computer chips, I'd guess it might have something to do with the shipping?"

Bruce hummed in agreement, replaying the recording.


"The Tulips does originate from the Middle-East," Oracle said. "Maybe there's where he's making the computer chips."

Bruce's brow furrowed further. "No, it's too far...they'd want to keep manufacturing close," he murmured, rubbing his chin. "Close but..." His eyes widened. "Indiana. The state tree is a Tulip."

"I'm doing a search on the factories now," she replied, typing quickly.

Bruce thought for a second. "Search the ones Drake Pharmaceuticals closed down." He leaned back in his chair. "Powers could have bought one through another company."

"Comparing now...hm." Oracle showed a list of buyers. "DP only had one factory in Indiana, and it was bought a year ago by Phillip and Co, a woodwork company based in Texas—and you'll never guess who owns the majority of the holdings..."

Bruce grimaced. "Powers."

"Bingo!" Oracle exclaimed. "If we play this right Drake Pharmaceuticals will get spared a hit," she added. "Though, I doubt the media will be kind."

"It's the best we can do right now," Bruce replied. "Which means the next thing I need to do is try and break Powers."

"If he fears Luthor more than you then it won't be easy," she warned. "But, I'm assuming you view that more as a motivation than a deterrent?"

Bruce grimaced. "I'll keep you updated."

"Okay, well I'll do some more digging and send everything over," she said evenly. "Then hopefully I'll have enough time to make dinner for once," she remarked dryly. "Have a good night, Bruce."

He grunted and hung up the line.

---

The Watchtower

11/04/2023

17:45

The lunchroom in the watchtower was mostly empty, minus Plastic Man and Captain Marvel eating in the far corner.

Huntress took the opportunity to drink some coffee near the window, which had the best view of the Earth.

She tapped her finger against the ceramic mug and sighed quietly.

"You doing okay, Squirt?" Nightwing called out, heading towards her.
She smiled and shrugged. "That training session may have knocked more out of me than I thought it would."

He smirked and sat down next to her, unwrapping a protein bar. "That's part of the fun." He smiled easily, but his gaze was a little less carefree. "Listen, leading a team takes time," he said, making her tense. "Don't sweat it if it feels… different."

Her hand curled around the mug. "It's not… Okay, I guess it is." She sighed, resting her cheek in her other hand. "I know how to work with Blue and Robin but Beast Boy and Tornado are trickier." Huntress drank her coffee. "It's like I'm not sure how to keep track of them."

Nightwing’s smile grew more understanding. "Yeah, I know, I had the same problem," he replied. "Bottom line is it's mainly just multi-tasking." He used the protein bar to draw a circle on the table. "Yeah, I get that." She scratched the back of her neck. "Dad talks about it being like a chess board."

"Well, it is a little…" Nightwing ate a piece of the bar. "But, people aren't pawns," he said while chewing. "So, your job is to reign them back in when they go off track." He swallowed. "But, Bats isn't too far off the mark, a part of leadership is understanding and predicting your teammate's actions."

Huntress brow furrowed, nodding. "I know, and I can do that…" She smiled and shrugged. "It's just the pressure."

"You'll be fine, just remember to stay whelmed." Nightwing smiled reassuringly and ate the protein bar in one big mouthful.

She smiled warmly. "Thanks, Wings."

Nightwing’s smile. "Right now, focus on understanding your teammates."

She nodded, but then her gaze shifted to behind him when familiar footsteps echoed in the cafeteria.

"What's dad doing here?" She frowned, looking over his shoulder.

Nightwing looked where Batman was walking over to them. "Not too sure…"

Huntress straightened up in her seat when her dad stopped in front of them. "Everything okay, Batman?" she asked, brow furrowed.

Batman's lips thinned. "Where's Robin and Blue Beetle?"

"Robin's in the training room. Blue went home," she answered, standing up.

"Call them," Batman ordered sternly; Nightwing raised an eyebrow. "You have a mission in Indiana."

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**Batcave, Gotham**

**11/04/2023**

**20:21**

"I'm coming with you."
"No." Batman scowled as he slipped his cowl over his face and turned around. He tensed when he saw Selina was dressed in one of the old Catwoman costumes. "And, where did you get that?"

She sauntered over to him in the very tight costume—he averted his gaze and gritted his teeth—and raised a thin brow at him.

"Considering I found this buried in your evidence locker, I should be the asking you," she replied dryly, crossing her arms. "Any particular reason you hoarded my old costume?"

Batman's cheeks felt warm all of a sudden, as he gritted his teeth hard. "Evidence." His gaze narrowed. "Selina, you know I can't trust you out there."

She scoffed, grimacing. "Save the self-righteousness for the kids, Bruce," she replied, as her eyes darkened. "This bastard killed my husband" Her voice lowered, taking a step closer. "I'm not going to rely on you to make him talk." Selina shrugged. "Besides, the place will be swarming with security and since our daughter and Robin are busting that factory, and Jason is off at a bar—"

"—He's meant to be scoping downtown." Batman scowled.

She rolled her eyes and pointed at herself. "The bottom line is that I'm all you got."

Batman's glare didn't waiver, but his grimace did stretch out into a thin line. "...What about Terry?"

Selina straightened up. "He's asleep, and Alfred offered to babysit him."

"You could get arrested. If anyone sees you—"

Her jaw clenched. "Then I'll make sure that doesn't happen," she told him firmly, levelling him with a glare of her own. "You keep going on about people making choices, well this is my choice, Bruce," she saidcoldly, folding her arms again. "So you can either respect it, or get out of my way."

The cave was silent while Batman stared down at her intently, but, as expected, her glare never wavered once.

He scowled deeply and turned on his heel. "...Just get in the car."

He could practically feel her smirking behind him.

---

**Fort Wayne, Indiana**

**11/04/2023**

**20:23**

Huntress scoped out the factory from the building opposite, perched on the edge of the roof with Robin next to her.

"Night vision on." The white lenses of her mask flashed green for a second and touched her earpiece. "Blue, you in position?"

"Si, I got eyes on two deliveries coming in."

"Good." She looked over at Robin who had his binoculars up. "Robin are we clear?"
"They’re about to change guards," Robin replied.

Huntress nodded, letting out a deep breath. "Go now, but stay high."

"Roger." Robin put away the binoculars and swooped down the building as he released his grappling hook.

"Blue, remember, be careful." Huntress said, swallowing a lump in her throat. "Some of those workers aren't there by choice, so we need to disarm the overseers quickly."

"Don't worry, I know," his tone bordered on exasperation. "Trust me."

_I do trust you… but not enough._

She sighed, shaking her head faintly. "I do, but just be careful. That's an order."

There was a small pause. "…You're the boss."

She grimaced, sighing softly.

Down below Robin took out the two guards at the front.

"Okay, remember. Once the power goes off we have five minutes before the generators kick in."She took out her grapple gun. "Roger?"

"Roger!" they replied in unison.

---

_Gotham_

11/04/2023

21:00

Mercy's passive face stared back at him from the laptop screen.

"I'm sorry, but Mr Luthor is unavailable at the moment." Her voice sounded like an automated voicemail.

Powers gritted his teeth. "Already said it was urgent!" he snapped, gripping the screen with both hands. "I know he hasn't left the coun—"

Mercy's eyes narrowed a fraction. "All meetings must be arranged through appointment unless Mr Luthor makes other arrangements."

"I know that—"

"Then, would you like to book an appointment?" Her voice had a taunting flatness to it. "The earliest available is in two months."

Powers' eyes flashed with rage. "For Christ sake!" His hands shook as he buried his face in them. "Just…" He took in a deep breath and glared at the screen. "Just make sure Mr Luthor knows that I called."

"Will that be all?" she asked lightly.
"Yes—"
"Goodbye."
"Wait—"

The screen cut to black.

Powers nearly gripped the screen too tight it almost shattered. He snapped the lid down and growled into his hands.

"Luthor isn't tolerant of failure."

Powers stiffened in his seat and looked around widely. "What?—who?" The colour drained from his face when Batman emerged from the shadows. "Get out!" He hit the button under his desk, getting out of his seat. "Security—"

"Has already been dealt with," Batman replied coldly, pausing in front of the desk. "Let's talk."

---

The factory was an open space with bridges running along the side on two other levels, and the ground level was overcrowded with machinery. The whole place smelt metallic with a strange mix of latex added on top.

There were workers on the ground level were manning the machines in plain blue overalls, a mixture of races from different backgrounds that all got duped or willingly got into working for an illegal operation.

The only thing in the factory that was shiny and new was the small glimmering computer chips on the conveyer belt, ready to be boxed up and loaded onto the blank white trucks.

The machines filled the room with their humming until the lights went out.

She was silent as she ambushed the skinny guy patrolling level two with only an automatic in his hand; Powers didn't arm these guards very well, but she put that down to arrogance.

Just as he turned around she lunged forward and punched him in the crack of his collarbone.

"Uh!" He stumbled for a second, giving her an opening to reach around and cover his mouth as she twisted the arm holding the gun.

"Hey!" A Latino man was on the same platform as her and wasn't too far away. He spun around widely pointing his gun. "What the fuck is going on?"

She slammed the skinny guy she was holding hard against the wall and dodged out of the way.

In a bright light of blue, the Latino man was stapled to the wall.

"You really shouldn't be waving that around, hermano," Blue Beetle warned, smirking in the darkness.

Don't give yourself away! She wanted to shout.

Down below Robin was firing Birdarangs at the men and women carrying guns, while the workers started to panic in the darkness, huddling together for protection.
The boy ran over to the workers. "Come on," his whispered carried across the factory.

The doors below rattled and someone fired up in the air but missed Blue by five metres or so.

*See!*

Huntress gritted her teeth and jumped onto the railing and kicked the man below against the wall.

Then the lights came back on.

---

Powers reached into his jacket to grab his gun but in a flash, a Batarang hit his hand. The gun knocked to the floor.

"Ah!" He winced and clutched his bruised hand as Batman moved around the desk towards him. "You have no right to be here."

Batman's gaze narrowed. "Luthor will throw you under the bus the moment he finds out your mistake."

Powers gritted his teeth, feeling a chill run down his spine. "What are you even talking about?" he sneered, walking around his desk while Batman stalked his movements. "If you're here to make threats, then bring a warrant."

Luthor was more of a threat than Batman, and Powers would be damned if he ended up in a body bag because of a costumed freak's interference.

"I had a few words with a friend of yours." Batman lifted something up to view, a holographic image of the computer chips. "He provided some interesting insight."

Shit.

Luthor would kill him.

Powers was pale and nearly lost his footing, grabbing the edge of the desk.

Was there any point of denying it?

No, don't give him anything.

"And, what friend would that be?" Powers composed himself.

Batman clenched his hand, making the hologram evaporate. "Is that your final answer?"

Powers stepped away from the desk, feeling his nerves grow. "I'm being set—"

"Have it your way." Batman knocked the desk over.

Powers jumped back. "Don't you dare—!"

Batman grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him over to the window.

"I didn't do anything!" Powers struggled, kicking his feet to the ground. "It was Jack Drake!. He threatened me!"

Batman kicked the window open, bringing in a harsh wintery breeze.
"And, yet he's the one dead."

Fuck.

"Jack designed the chips!" he clung to Batman's arm.

"And, you stole the design."

"I didn't—Christ!"

Powers was held out of the window with only Batman holding his collar to keep him from falling. Oh, god.

His heart thunder against his ribcage, as his feet flailed limply with no ground to touch. He'd never felt so helpless in his life, it was like everything had stopped. There wasn't a Then or Later there was only a Now.

"I didn't have a choice!" Powers snapped, digging his nails into Batman's wrists. "Luthor wanted Drake Pharmaceuticals but Jack wasn't playing ball." His voice cracked as the bitter cold hit his skin like a slap. "I took over."

"And?"

Batman loosened his grip.

"I stole the designs!" Powers' face was dripping with sweat. "Luthor had me cornered."

"Where are the children sent to?" Batman growled, holding him out further.

"I don't know!" Powers held onto Batman's arms in a vice grip. "I just made the tech."

Batman's gaze narrowed briefly, but then he threw him back inside the room.

Powers breathed heavily, clinging to the carpet for dear life as he looked around frantically for some kind of escape.

His gun was too far away but if he could just get to the alarm—

"One more question." A cold voice came from the shadows. Powers froze when he saw a woman dressed in a skin-tight catsuit walk out of the shadows.

"Selina?" Powers swallowed a lump in his throat.

"I told you to wait outside," Batman said stiffly.

"I wanted to watch." She kept her gaze focussed on Powers, and then lowered her cowl. "I don't think we've had the pleasure of meeting in person."

Powers rushed to get up but Selina kicked him, shoving him onto his back as her heel stabbed into his chest.

"Catwoman," Batman's tone was a warning.

"Don't worry, I won't kill him," she said softly. "You killed my husband."
"Ah!" He cried out when she dug her heel in harder into his chest.

"You ruined my last chance at a normal life," Selina hissed, kicking him. "So I'm gonna return the favour."

Powers fritted his teeth, meeting her harsh gaze with a glare of his own. "Luthor will kill you before you have the chance."

Her lips twisted into a cold smile. "Oh, honey, I already started." The smile tightened. "That factory wasn't that hard to find."

His breathing stopped for a second and his skin lost its colour.

If they had the factory then…

He let out a shallow breath.

Everything was ruined because of one stupid wife of a low-level employee.

"Oh, sorry, are you trouble?" she mocked, smiling with too much satisfaction. "Revenge is a bitch isn't it?"

His fear twisted into anger that coiled around his chest.

"Your husband was a rat," he told her coldly, raising his chin higher, gaining satisfaction when he saw her eyes flash dangerously. "And, he had just as much blood on his hands as me," he said scathingly, trying to prop himself up on his elbows. "Do what you want, but he's still dead."

She crushed her knee into his chest and punched him in the face.

The pain came quickly as his mouth filled with blood.

He leant down close and curled her hands around his ruffled collar. "The only reason you're not dead is because I made a promise," she said with barely restrained fury. "But your name, your family, everything. I will rake that through the mud."

A raw hatred built up in his chest and spread like a weed.

One thought burned in his skull. If she took everything from him, then he'd return the favour tenfold.

Powers spat on her face, making flinch when red spit hit her face. "I'll return the favour," he said out of spite.

She wiped the bloodied spit from her face with one hand while the other retracted and punched Powers square blank in the face, knocking him out cold.

With the lights on people tried to open the doors, but they were sealed shut, and the machined remained off.

Huntress dodged an incoming blow, but her gaze kept wandering to Blue Beetle every now and again.

Huntress ducked as a gun was fired. She parried around an attacked the blonde woman that had tried to shoot her.
She punched the woman in the gut and then flipped her onto the ground.

Blue Beetle piled up the unconscious or tied up overeaters at the edge of the room. When he saw her fighting he flew down to her side and knocked out a bearded guy who tried to hit her with a crowbar.

Huntress whipped around with a kick but froze when she saw him. "Oh, sorry," she said quickly, turning around to front kick a knife out of a tall man's hand as all of the guards attacked at once.

"It's okay." Blue Beetle blasted a guy on his left, while a woman on his right pointed her gun at him.

"Blindspot!" Huntress threw a Batarang at the gun and jammed it when it fired.

"Ah!" the woman cried when the failed fire ricocheted back and knocked the gun out of her hand.

"Thanks," Blue Beetle said, creating a windblast to knock three of guys back.

There were only six left standing out of the 45.

"All workers are accounted for and Rocket and Zatanna are now on the scene," Robin's voice buzzed in their earpieces.

"Let's wrap this up then." Huntress smiled, grabbing a guard by his hair she punched him in the face. "Blue, do the thing!" She jumped onto a muscled man's shoulders and then flipped over him.

Blue Beetle grinned and hovered in the air out of reach; a couple of bullets bounced off his armour, as Huntress moved out of the way and climbed onto one of the conveyor belts.

"Move!" a guy shouted as the others tried to disperse.

Blue Beetle released a sonic vibration in a wave, which knocked them out in one clean swoop.

Huntress smiled and jumped down. "Nice!" She ran over to him as he descended back to the ground.

"Not bad for a rookie, right?" he said, smiling crookedly.

She raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms. "Well, we still need to work on your hand-to-hand combat," Huntress replied. "And, when in stealth mode no sassy remarks, please." She poked him lightly. "It gives away your position."

He sighed, shoulders slumped. "Right…"

The corner of her mouth edged upwards. "But, overall not bad," she told him, leaning in for a kiss. Huntress felt his lips curl into a smile as she cupped his face. "Some more training and you might even beat Robin," she murmured when their lips parted.

"And, then you?" he remarked coyly, smiling.

She arched an eyebrow. "That would be interesting." She kissed his cheek again before she pulled away and slid her hand into his. "Keep trying and we'll see."

---

Wayne Manor, Gotham
Selina's eyes felt heavy and she was still nursing few bruises from her fight with Powers' security team, but Terry wouldn't sleep; it looked like he'd caught a cold while out.

"Sshh, baby," she whispered, pacing around the bedroom while she held him in her arms. "It's okay."

Terry cried, snot dribbling down his nose.

Then there was a knock at the door.

She sighed loudly. "Yes?" she snapped, re-adjusting him in her grip while his cries grew louder.

Bruce popped his head around the crack of the door. "Selina?"

"Yes?" she repeated testily, narrowing her eyes.

He held up a simple white Nasal aspirator. "Alfred said this should help clear the…snuffles?"

She almost snorted when she heard the fearsome vigilante of the night actually say 'snuffles' in a sentence.

"That's fine, thanks," she said, gesturing for him to hand it over.

Bruce closed the door behind him and walked over to her. "I could get Leslie to come over and check him," he offered.

Terry's cries became hoarse whimpers as she gently bounced him in her arms.

She accepted the Nasal aspirator and shook her head. "It's fine, he just…he hasn't had his immunisation so he's sensitive to colds," she admitted, feeling a swell of guilt. He needed those injections soon, especially with the pollution in the city. "...But, maybe she could give him his injections?" It hurt to ask but she couldn't risk Terry's health because of her own pride. "I'd appreciate it."

Bruce just nodded. "I'll make arrangements."

Selina swallowed, nodding stiffly. "Thanks..." She went and sat down on the bed, re-positioning Terry in her arms. "He'll be fine," she said mostly to herself, trying to remove some of the snot from his tiny nose.

Bruce placed his hands in his pockets and watched her briefly before he looked away. "...Tonight went well."

She looked up warily as Terry's crying softened as his nose was slowly unblocked. "In other words, you're surprised I didn't kill him?"

His lips thinned. "I'm just saying you showed a good level of restraint."

"Right." She shook her head dismissively. "I'm not one of your kids, Bruce. I don't need the praise."

Bruce bristled. "I was just..." He paused and then sighed quietly. "I wasn't patronising you."
Selina's eyes narrowed a fraction. "…Alright then, in that case…thank you," she replied curtly, rocking Terry in her arms. "I just wish I'd had more time to really wipe that smirk off his face."

"He'll answer for what he's done," Bruce said.

She smirked bitterly, staring down at her son. "But, Wallace is still dead and I'm…still…" she trailed off. "I'm still here, somehow."

Bruce was quiet for a moment, with Terry's sad whimpering filling the room.

"Powers was wrong," he said, hesitantly resting a hand on her shoulder; it was a stiff sort of comfort but she appreciated it in some form."Wallace gave his life to try and do some good, and protect you. He was a good man."

Selina eyed him shrewdly for a second but found nothing but sincerity.

"That's nice of you to say." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "He was good, and it was a good life." Selina felt like a stone was stuck in her stomach, weighing her down. "It was boring as hell but..." It hurt when she laughed. "But, it was enough, and he was so..." Selina stopped herself, feeling tears prickle her eyes. "But...Well...I, I guess it doesn't matter anymore." She quickly dried her eyes.

Bruce squeezed her shoulder before he removed his hand. "I can't bring your old life back, Selina." His voice was oddly gentle."…I could help you start again with a new identity," he said with clear apprehension.

Selina was silent, smoothing Terry's thin hair back with her fingers. "And, what happens to Selina Kyle?"

Bruce remained silent, but she knew what he wanted to say.

Selina Kyle stayed dead which meant Helena stayed in Gotham.

No official custody agreement or law that meant she'd always have some contact with her.

Whatever relationship she had with her daughter would have to be secret, back in shadows again.

No parent-teacher meetings, or PTA meetings, Science fairs. Only Bruce would be able to proudly attend out in the open.

"…If Selina Kyle came back, she wouldn't be free," Bruce said evenly. "Not unless she served time."

She smiled dully. "Only three years if I'm good, right?" she replied flatly, feeling cold when he didn't reply. "You know I'm not so easily satisfied, Bruce."

He looked remorseful. "But, for the time being, it's all I can do."

Selina sighed and stared down at Terry.

Why did it feel like she was picking one child over the other?
It's bloody snowing in England! I know I know I have no right to complain, BUT STILL! Anyway, it gave me chance to finally get this chapter finished. It had to be re-written twice but I'm happy with this end result.
Unsurprisingly no one was asleep yet in the whole house, so Jason had to be quiet as he wandered back to his room.

The big crime bosses in Gotham were being quiet since Bruce's little takeover—or more specifically his pseudo— but, it wouldn't be long before they all started making moves to overthrow him, which was fine with Jason. Bruce didn't really suit the mob life, even if it was only a means to the end. Pus covering up all these fake murders was more work than it was worth.

Jason rubbed his eyes, feeling still a little sluggish from the few drinks he'd had at the bar earlier.

He paused at his door when he saw the light was on and frowned.

Is Helena back or something?

Cautiously, he opened the door and looked inside.

Kara Zor El was lounging on his bed, wearing denim overalls with a small white tee underneath. She had a Music Magazine in her hands, squinting intently at the opened page.

Jason tensed. "What are you doing here?" he hissed, shutting the door behind him quickly.

She glanced up curiously and then smiled. "Hi, Jason." She spoke in English but her accent sounded weird, almost Swedish. "I was waiting!" She grinned and sat up on the bed. "You take… took, a long time."

She learned English quickly, but then again, Kryptonians were Super for a reason.

He blinked in surprise but then shook it off. "What are you doing here?" he repeated sternly, walking over to her. "And, how did you even find me? Hell, how did you even get in here?"

She sighed, tossing the magazine back on the bed. "You have a strong smell, so I followed." She smirked. "The old man… Alfred? Let me in." Her smirk widened. "He makes good cookies."

Fuck sake, Alfred. You could have warned me.

Jason gritted his teeth. "Glad you had fun. Now, get out." He pointed to the door.

She frowned, standing up. "I want to help," she said seriously, placing her hands on her hips. "Kal El… is protective, too much." She scowled, crossing her arms. "I can help, but he will not let me."
Jason groaned, rubbing the back of his neck. "Listen, kid, I understand the whole wanting to rebel or whatever," he replied, making her scowl grow. "But, you need to go home before I get accused of kidnapping."

She raised an eyebrow. "You could not kidnap a dog, never mind me."

"Uh, was that meant to be a joke?" he said dryly, rolling his eyes. "Listen, your cousin's probably worried—"


"Uh…" Jason's eyes widened. "Wait, Superman—"

"Is very secretive." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "But, I am not stupid." She pointed at herself. "I understand science better than him or you."

Ouch.

Jason's eyes narrowed. "Well, good for you, Sherlock," he replied coolly. "But, you still need to go home."

She sighed, running a hand over her face. "I remember things," she said, frowning. "When I was captured by… Anyway, I remember conver…conversations," she struggled with the word, flustered a little. "They talked about the computer biochips all the time."

He stopped, raising an eyebrow. "You mean that Bruno guy who had you?"

She nodded. "Yes, but also an old man."

Old man?

Jason's brow furrowed. "Wait, you mean that old guy I knocked out?"

"Yes," she insisted. "And he was…” She scrunched up her nose. "He was creepy. Don't you remember?"

"I didn't get a good look at him…” He frowned, scratching his chin. "He had weird robes on right?"

"Yes!" She nodded. "Like a…you call them priests?"

"He nodded. "Yeah, he looked kinda like that…” Jason's brow furrowed, folding his arms. "Do you remember his name? I mean creepy old guys are dime a dozen."

Her forehead wrinkled, sitting down on the bed. "What is a dime a dozen?"

"It doesn't matter." He sighed, running a hand over his face. "Listen, I just mean there are nearly eight billion people on this planet, so you're gonna have to be more specific, so I need a name."

She closed her eyes and scrunched up her face. "Perhaps…” She gritted her teeth. "I was chained up…they talked…but…” She hugged herself tightly, opening her eyes. "He wanted me. Creepy old man." She touched her cheek. "Looked at me strange."

Jason cringed, shifting on the spot. "Yeah… that, again. There's a lotta—"
"But, Bruno said no." She stood up, rubbing her chin. "He said...You can't have her, Blood. Blood." Her eyes widened. "That's it!"

Blood?

Jason's eyed her warily. "That's..."

He remembered the greying hair and white robe...

Priests

Blood

Creepy

That old man... there was something familiar about him.

Jason looked away, muttering the three words under his breath. "There might be someone..." He pulled out his new phone and went online. "Blood..."

"Yes." She nodded, walking over to his side.

Jason pulled up a bad quality video of an old man preaching to a crowd. "He look familiar?"

Her eyes widened, grabbing the phone. "Yes." Her face twisted in worry. "That is his voice."

Jason grimaced, scrutinising the video. Yeah, that was him....

Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Fuck." Jason ran a hand through his hair. He took the phone and did a quick Google search to confirm his dread.

"Who is he?" she asked.

Jason sighed, shaking his head. "He's...well, did anyone tell you about cults?"

Kara stared at him blankly. "Cult?"

"Of course not," he muttered in exasperation. "Basically, it's a group of people who believe in something."

"Religion?"

"Uh...kind of, but a little...different." He sighed, wishing he had Helena here to explain. "So, this guy is Brother Blood," he tried to explain simply. "He's been a big cult leader for years, but he also is shady...which means not a good guy."

She crossed her arms. "Then, why hasn't he been arrested?"

"Pfft, yeah, it isn't that simple." Jason shook his head. "Legally speaking his cult isn't illegal and he's never been prosecuted. FBI's been trying to jail him for years."

Her eyes narrowed. "He was in contact with Intergang, I was a witness."

Talk about naïve.
"You're also an alien and it's still not enough evidence," he replied, shaking his head. "Our Justice system is fun like that."

She scowled. "We still need to stop him." Kara clenched her jaw. "What is his cult's name?"

"The Cult of Blood."

She looked at him in disbelief. "How does that not sound evil!?"

"Freedom of speech."

Kara growled in frustration. "This is stupid. We need to take him down." She buried her face in her hands. "He has the computer chips!"

Jason stiffened. "You know that for sure?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it. "Uh…yes." She cleared her throat. "I do know… for sure."

His eyes narrowed. "Did he say why he wanted you? Like specifics?"

She paused for a moment but then nodded. "Student…he patted my head and said I…." She frowned, struggling to remember. "I would have made a good student."

Creepy fucker.

Jason grimaced, shaking his head. "Right…okay, so he's clearly interested in Meta-humans joining him—no surprise there."

"We need to follow him," she said firmly. "Find evidence."

Jason clenched his jaw, debating. "I'll investigate it, but you, no way."

"Why?" Kara exclaimed, narrowing his eyes. "I want to help."

"And, how long have you been using your powers for?" he asked, crossing his arms.

She blushed, pursing her lips. "…Long enough."

"Two weeks doesn't qualify," he rebuked, scowling. "You're in over your head."

Her lips pursed. "Let me help," her voice wavered. "…Please."

Jason's chest tightened, feeling queasy.

Then someone knocked on the door.

"Ms Zor El." It was Bruce.

"Damn it." Jason sighed, running a hand over his face.

Bruce took that as an invitation to open the door.

Kara's expression became guarded in an instant. Bruce narrowed his eyes fraction when he saw her, not looking pleased.

"Your cousin is on his way to come get you," he told her curtly.
She scowled, crossing her arms. "He won't listen to me."

Bruce arched an eyebrow and glanced at Jason briefly. "Even if that were true, I appreciate it when guests tell me when they're visiting."

"Um…" Kara's cheeks flushed, a sheepish look overshadowing her scowl.

The corner of Jason's lip twitched upwards, while Bruce remained unimpressed. "Please go wait downstairs," Bruce replied evenly, gesturing to the hallway.

Her eyes widened. "But, Brother Blood—"

"Will be investigated by the League," Bruce said sternly, glowering. "End of discussion."

Kara matched his glare with one of her own, clenching her hands into fists.

Oh, come on, don't make this worse!

Jason shot her a sharp look.

She broke Bruce's gaze and glanced at him briefly. The tension rolled off her shoulders when she sighed. "I apologise."

Bruce raised an eyebrow. "It's no trouble."

Kara glanced over at Jason before she grimaced. "Jason, goodbye," she said cordially, and then brushed past Bruce.

Jason waved uncertainly. "Bye then…."

Bruce sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose while Kara went downstairs.

"I swear I didn't invite her," Jason said, crossing his arms, earning a withering look from Bruce. "Seriously, she was the one who stalked me!"

Bruce grimaced, shaking his head faintly. "The League will handle this," he said, narrowing his gaze, sniffing the air. "You were out drinking again."

Fuck sake.

Jason glared at him. "Yeah, what of it?"

"You were meant to be scoping downtown," Bruce lectured, exasperated.

"I was!" Jason argued, raising his arms theatrically. "Why do you think I was in a bar?" He shrugged. "You can lecture me on the killing, but drinking? Seriously, do I look sixteen?" He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Save the concerned parent crap for Helena, Bruce."

Bruce sighed deeply, showing his age. "Jason," he said calmly. "I'm trusting you take care yourself —"

"Oh, come on, Bruce!" Jason groaned, running a hand over his face. "I'm 22 for Christ sake!"

"— You told me you'd cut back on the smoking and drinking," Bruce continued, maintaining the same self-righteous calmness as earlier.
Meanwhile, downstairs he heard the front door open and shut.

Jason sighed wearily, resisting the urge to roll his eyes again. "Yes, I remember," he replied testily, narrowing his eyes. "I'll try my hardest to better myself in future, Bruce," he added dryly. "Anything else? Or do you wanna check my room for drugs or something?"

Bruce's lips thinned, humming disapprovingly. "Make sure you keep a clearer head next time." Then he turned on his heel out of the door.

Jason snorted. "You sure you don't want a look?" he called after him, but Bruce ignored him. "I got plenty of weed under my mattress!"

"What are you yelling about now?" Helena interrupted.

He stiffened and looked around the corner where Helena was leaning against the doorway of her room, with her arms folded and wearing her dressing gown.

"Oh… nothing." He rubbed the back of his neck, avoiding her gaze. "Kara stopped by."

"I noticed." She frowned, glancing over at the stairs. "Why?"

"Brother Blood; turns out he's shadier than we thought," he replied, straightening up. "You know, besides being a cult leader and everything."

She sighed, shaking her head. "Figures." Then, she turned around to head back into her room.

"Hey, wait," he said, reaching out, this had been their first conversation in nearly days.

Helena stopped and looked over her shoulder. "What?"

"I…" He lowered his arm, swallowing thickly. "I… could use your help… with mission stuff."

Mission stuff? Oh, yeah that sure sounds convincing!

Her brow furrowed, narrowing her eyes a fraction. "It's late," she replied evenly, turning around she walked back to her room. "I'll see you tom—"

"Oh, come on." His voice was louder than he'd wanted. "I can handle you being pissed at me, but don't avoid me," he said, following her into her room and shut the door behind him. "Say what you want and get it over with."

Her shoulders tensed as she turned around. "And, why would I want to make this easier for you?"

His chest tightened. "What do you want me to do?" He wrung his hands out. "I can't un-kill him."

Helena curled her hands into fists. "I know that."

Jason felt a tinge of frustration slither up and wrap around his chest. "Then, how do I fix things between us?"

Why can't you be honest with me again? I mean can't you see I'm trying to be better?

She gave him a hard look for a while, making him get more on edge. "I don't know, Jason."

Jason's throat felt dry, the two of them lapsed into another silence.
"...There has to be something."

She let out a deep measured breath. "Maybe there isn't," Helena said calmly. "You can't bring Dr Stone back, you can't fix what you did to Gotham, and you can't make things like how they used to be."

His stomach lurched. "I know that."

"You don't act like it," she retorted meaningfully.

Jason tensed and felt cold, biting down on his tongue. He felt smaller than he was. Why did she have to be so cold sometimes? It was too different, like everything else...

When he kept silent, Helena looked over at the door. "It's late," she said curtly.

Jason didn't move.

She looked at him this time. "I said, it's late."

He swallowed and looked over his shoulder, contemplating. Then, he glanced back at her and felt a confusion that made him angry.

"You're a hypocrite."

"What?" Her brow furrowed.

"You wanna fix things just as much as I do," he carried on. "You keep talking about moving on but you just want things to be like before as much as I do!"

Her jaw clenched. "Jason—"

"Or maybe I'm wrong right?" His throat hurt. "Maybe you didn't want me back."

Old dark thoughts crept back and weighed down on his chest.

You were better off dead.

SHUT UP!

He tried to brush the thoughts away quickly.

A hot rage flashed in her eyes. "You have no idea what I want."

"I know you."

"No, you don't." She looked and sounded like she'd never been more certain of something.

Jason's chest prickled unpleasantly, stepping back.

Helena crossed her arms and looked like she expected him to leave.

Whatever image he still had of her as a smiling little kid slowly started to disappear.

What happened to you after I died?

"Fine, maybe I don't know you as much as I used to." His voice was strained. "But, you're still my sister, that hasn't changed." He hesitantly took a step closer. "So if you want me to be honest with
you, then you gotta do the same."

She kept silent, maintaining his glare.

*Please just say something.*

Jason gritted his teeth and brazenly sat down on the bed while her gaze followed him.

"So what, are you gonna sleep on the floor all night?" she said dryly, scowling.

He smiled tightly. "Well, you can if you want."

"Why are you doing this?" she snapped, losing some composer. "I'm not the one you should be apologising to." She balled her hands into fists. "Jason, *I'm* not the hypocrite here."

His eyes narrowed. "...You said you were upset because I came back different," he said, looking down, beginning to pick his nails. "...But, that's, that's fine. I mean, I already told you, you can't fix me, Helena..."

"Jason, I want to help you, but it's..." Helena sat down next to him but didn't look at him. "It's not you, it's everything else," she muttered, sighing deeply. "Everything is just—"

"Shit?" he interrupted, feeling a strong urge for a cigarette.

"No." The corner of her lips curled faintly. "It's not that, it's just not what I expected." She looked at him thoughtfully. "Is any of this what you expected?"

Heh. *No,* this is *totally* what he expected.

Nothing but smooth sailing, sis.

Fuck's sake.

Jason subconsciously reached into his jacket and pulled out a loose cigarette. "I didn't think that far ahead," he answered dully. "My foresight kind of went when I got blown up." He frowned, staring at his lighter in his hand. "I thought of you a lot, though, when I came back."

Helena apprehensively reached out again and held his hand. "Me too..."

There was a lump in his throat. "Are you disappointed?"

She held his hand tighter. "Why do you want to talk about this?"

"Because, Bruce and Dick can bullshit me all they want," Jason said, crushing the cigarette in his hand. "But, you've always been honest with me."

Helena let go of his hand. "Stop it." Her voice was quiet but firm.

They both stared at each other for a moment.

"...Sorry." He shifted away. "I just want you to be honest."

Helena's lips were set in a thin line for a while, and after a moment he wasn't sure if she would speak.

She looked down. "I'm disappointed with everyone."
His brow furrowed. "Like with your parents?"

Helena gave him a look, before glancing away with a sigh. "It's late." She got to her feet and looked down at him meaningfully. "You can't sleep on my floor, Jason."

Jason remained silent, feeling her close off again. "Fine." He dragged himself off the bed and slipped the lighter back in his pocket. "Don't talk."

He kept silent while he walked towards the door.

Batcave, Gotham

12/24/2017

23:00

Helena hadn't understood how giant her dad's house really was until Jason died.

Dick didn't like visiting the Manor anymore, and Alfred and her dad were so quiet, even when they were all gathered for dinner.

Even she couldn't help but tiptoe when she walked around at night, afraid of making too much noise...since technically she wasn't meant to up past her bedtime but...well, her dad did it all the time! Besides, it wasn't like she was a little kid anymore, a few hours less sleep wasn't going to kill her.

Helena swallowed a lump in her throat and walked down the stairway with a small present in her hand, making her way to the main bit of the cave; she could see the glow from the monitor up ahead.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs she looked around the corner. "Dad?"

"...You should be in bed." Her dad's voice echoed around the cave.

Helena smiled and took that as an invitation, but when she looked around, her smile faltered. Her dad was hunched over on a medical table. His chest was bare, revealing a nasty set of fresh cuts and bruises.

He was in the middle of trying to sew up a large cut on his arm, while a First Aid kit sloppily lay next to him.

*Why didn't you ask Alfred for help?*

She forced the smile back on her face. "I wanted to give you your present," she said, holding the gift out as she walked over. "You should open it now!"

Her dad just stared at the box blankly. His skin was paler than it should be and he had dark bags under his eyes.

She felt her uneasiness grow, but she tried to hide it by cheerfully waving the gift in his face. "I promise you'll like it," she sang, smiling brightly.

Dad's brow creased, putting down the needle and thread. "You shouldn't open gifts before Christmas," he said flatly, accepting the gift.
Helena shrugged, looking around the cave. "I'll be in Bludhaven tomorrow, so I won't get to see you open it…" She watched him stare at the present. "Alfred helped me pick it."

Her dad glanced at her briefly before he slowly ripped off the red shiny paper. She felt on edge while he unwrapped it and kept scrutinising his face for a reaction.

*Please like it.*

The wrapping paper fell to the floor in one heap. Her dad was left holding a brand new DVD Special Edition box set of the Gray Ghost TV series.

"Alfred said it was your favourite," she said quickly, moving in closer. "It has episodes that didn't even air on TV!"

Dad stared at the present with a strange look on his face. "...Thank you." His voice still sounded flat and disinterested. "It's very considerate." He placed the DVD next to him on the table.

Her smile wavered, looking away. "Yeah…" She looked at his damaged arm. "Who was it this time?" she asked, looking at the pattern of bruises and cuts.

Her dad picked up the needle and thread. "Killer Croc."

Helena felt a wave of worry. "Why isn't Alfred fixing you up?"

"I don't want to bother him tonight," he replied, trying to sew shut the large cut, but it was too far back. "I'll be—" He hissed, frowning. The needle had gone too far in. "Fine…"

Helena scowled. "Let me see." She clambered onto the table.

"Helena," Dad objected.

She shushed him and crawled over to his back. "It's fine. Alfred's been teaching me." Helena smirked, taking the needle out; a thin ribbon of blood leaked down his arm. "I can do it."

Her dad's frown deepened. "Why is he teaching you?" he asked curiously, his voice finally altering from its dull tone.

Helena shrugged. "Because, I asked him too—hold still," she ordered as she carefully stitched the skin together. "Alfred won't be happy if you get stains everywhere."

Dad snorted, shaking his head.

She felt a swell of happiness at the sound, smiling. "Hold still or you'll bleed out," she told him, sewing the cut neatly. "Did you catch Croc?"

He nodded faintly, staring at his bruised knuckles. "He's in custody."

That would explain the still faint smell of sewage water on his skin.

"What was he trying to do this time?" she asked lightly.

Dad went quiet again and just stared at his hands.

*Wrong question.*

She swallowed a lump in her throat. "Never mind I guess…" Helena quickly tried to think of
something to say. "Hey, whatever happened to Kite Man?" she said brightly. "Barbara said the last she heard of him he fell off a building!"

Dad hummed quietly, looking at the giant penny across the cave with an unusual amount of intensity.

Helena looked down and quickly went back to sewing while her dad stayed silent throughout.

It didn't take long to close up the cut. "Finished," she muttered, picking up the scissors to cut away the excess thread.

Her dad reached over and traced the wound with his forefinger, as a curious look came across his face. "Good job," he commented, frowning as he examined her handiwork.

Helena smiled briefly. "Alfred says I'm a quick learner." She shifted to sit next to his less injured side. "Do you really have to do Watchtower duty tomorrow?" she asked, feeling a weight in her stomach. Her dad sighed and still didn't look at her. "You don't have to spend all day with us," she added quickly, clutching his arm. "Dick's friends aren't coming over until dinner, so you could see us at lunch or—"

"Helena." Dad's voice was flat again. She clung to his arm tighter. "I…" He buried his face in his hand and sighed deeply. "I can't."

You're not even gonna try!

Her throat hurt, and she felt tears prickle in her eyes. "Why not?"

Dad looked up, grimacing. "It's just what's best for everyone," he said, placing a hand on her head. "You'll have more fun with your brother, you'll see." He patted her on the head before he stood up.

She felt like screaming.

Helena gritted her teeth. "No."

Her dad kept his back to her, sighing. "Helena…"

"I don't wanna go without you!" she snapped, wiping her eyes quickly as more tears gathered. "I'm not going."

"Helena..." He walked over to her and crouched down to her level. "Don't." Her dad gently uncovered her hands from her face. "Please."

Helena coughed, trying to choke back the tears and compose herself. "Why can't we spend Christmas together?"

We're still a family, aren't we? Even if Barbara and Dick hardly ever visit anymore, and Alfred seems more reserved than ever…

Her dad let go of her arms and wiped away a few of her tears with his thumb. "…It's complicated." He looked at her softly. "You'll have more fun with your brother, trust me."

No, I won't!

Why can't you and Dick just forgive each other?

I want you to go back to how you used to be...
Helena tried to dry her eyes with her pyjama sleeve. "I miss Jason too, dad," she whispered, looking down.

Neither of them even had to glance at the particular uniform that hung nearby.

*But that was the wrong thing to say again. Wasn't it?*

Her dad was silent, looking down at her slippers. Then, slowly he placed his hand behind her head and actually looked at her in the eye this time. "You should go to bed," he told her quietly before he rose up and kissed her forehead. "It's late."

Helena opened her mouth to speak but hesitated; what could she possibly say to make things how they used to be?

*What's the point?*

She closed her mouth, biting down on her tongue, and then slid off the bed. "Are you going out again?" she asked, looking up.

He nodded. "Just a little longer..."

*You're gonna get yourself killed.*

Helena curled her hands into fists, feeling a fresh wave of dread. "Okay..." She nodded and then embraced him tightly. "Just be safe."

Her dad held her closer this time, in a warm hug that reminded her of how things used to be.

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**Gotham City**

**11/05/2023**

**20:00**

"Jaime! Dinner's almost ready." His mom called from the kitchen. "Call your dad."

'Why are we always sent out?' the Scarab protested. 'Milagro is more capable.'

*Try telling her that and see how far we get.*

Jaime glanced up from where he was sitting in front of the TV. "What?"

His mom popped her head around the archway, scowling. "Don't 'what' me, Hijo," she chided, raising an eyebrow. "You know what I said."

He groaned and dragged himself off the sofa. "Okay! Lo Siento!" he said loudly. "Geeze..." he murmured, walking to the back door. He opened it and winced when the cold air hit him. "Dad!" he called, shielding his face from the cold.

"I'm 'round back!" his dad called from the garage.

Jaime sighed, grabbing his thickest coat off the hook, and ventured outside into the cold.

'You'll need to adjust better to colder climates if you wish to be the best,' the Scarab told him. 'Gotham's temperatures are hardly hazardous.'
You can't even feel how freezing it is!

'Five Celsius is hardly freezing.'

His dad was in the garage wearing a massive coat to keep him warm. It looked like he was working on his old truck again, while his walking stick rested against the bonnet.

Jaime frowned, walking over. "You need any help?"

"Maybe!" Alberto's voice strained. "Just...help me with this. It's stuck."

Jaime rushed over to see, scrutinising the inside. Under the bonnet a flashlight was resting on the side, giving some light.

Jaime arched an eyebrow after a second. "Is that your wrench?"

His dad chuckled sheepishly—his gloves were coated in oil and dirt. "Well…uh, don't tell your mother, okay?"

Jaime smirked. "Right… sure." He leaned over to get a better look. "I think I can get it," Jaime replied, leaning in further.

"Careful." Alberto's hand hovered over his hood in case he needed to pull him back.

"It's fine." Jaime reached out further and managed to grab the wrench, resting his knees on the edge of the bonnet. "Just gotta...angle it." He gently shifted the tool around until he could get it out.

"There, easy!" Even though his hand needed washing now. "Here."

His dad smiled. "Gracias," he said, taking a soiled cloth from off the floor, but he hissed in pain. "Ah…"

"Hey, it's okay, let me." Jaime quickly picked up the cloth and passed it to his dad. "You okay?"

'He'll be fine. Don't overreact,' the Scarab sounded bored. 'He should know better than to strain himself.'

Will you shut up for one... No wait, let's be daring. How about you be quiet for five whole minutes? Or is that too much for you.

The scarab went silent.

Alberto smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm fine, Jaime, relax." He took the cloth to wipe some of the dirt off his hands. "Dinner's ready I take it?"

Jaime shrugged, leaning against the car. "Eh, she said dinner was almost ready." He wiped his hand on his jeans. "I don't think she'd like us going in like this though." He shot his dad a quick smile. "Did you fix the AC Compressor?"

His dad shrugged, wiping his hands with the cloth. "I just had a look...the parts need replacing but...we can deal with it in the New Year."

"Oh, okay." Jaime frowned, thinking it over. "I could ask Helena is she has any spare parts..." He shrugged. "They have a lot of cars."

His dad sighed, shaking his head. "No, it's... it's fine, Hijo," he replied a little less jovially. "How are you two anyway?"
"Oh, we're good," Jaime said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "She's... definitely different from most girls." He smiled crookedly. "But, in a good way."

Alberto looked at him curiously for a moment, smiling warmly. "She sounds good."

"Yeah..." Jaime's smile dimmed faintly, feeling something niggling at the back of his head. "But... did mom ever..." He tried to find the right word. "Treat you like a rookie?"

His dad raised an eyebrow, smiling slyly. "In what context?"

...What kind of context do you think, dad?

Jaime scrunched his nose up. "In a...I know better than you overprotective kind of way?"

"Oh..." His dad's brow furrowed. "Hm, well, she can be bossy." Alberto scratched his chin and shrugged. "To be honest, I don't think it's good to compare your girlfriend to your mother, Hijo."

Jaime sighed. "Yeah, it is kind of weird..." he replied, scratching the back of his neck. "I don't know. I like Helena but she... she's really closed off, like nearly all the time."

Alberto hummed. "Well..." he slapped him on the back good-heartedly. "She must have her reasons," he said, shrugging. "Sometimes women need time. It's just the facts of life."

"I'm not used to it though," Jaime replied, thinking it over. "And, how am I meant to know when it's the right time to talk? Does she expect me to be psychic or something?"

His dad grinned. "It gets easier, trust me," he reassured, ushering him towards the door again as he removed his hand. "Come on, if we don't go clean up now we won't hear the end of it."

"Ey, true." Jaime smiled and passed his dad the walking stick.

You think he's right, scarab?

...Scarab?

Jaime frowned and followed his dad out of the garage.

...Wait, are you seriously giving me the silent treatment?

...Please, let it last forever.

'You requested five minutes of silence, I obliged,' the Scarab spoke smoothly. 'You are welcome.'

Jaime closed the door behind him, sighing in exasperation.

Well, sorry if I offended you, but do you think he's right about Helena? From a logical detached perspective...

'...If you wish to waste your time trying to understand her, then that is your folly, Jaime Reyes,' the Scarab replied cordially. 'It is my opinion that she will continue to treat you in a condescending manner, as it's her nature.'

Jaime felt a small tug of discomfort.
You can’t be certain about that.

'You're correct, I'm only 93% certain, but the percentage rises every day.'

Jaime grimaced, pinching the bridge of his nose.

How is it you became even more of an asshole?

If there was one minor detail Tigress hated about her undercover, it was having to deal with the annoying B grade villains every day.

The villain of the day being Jinx.

The pink haired biker styled girl had a bad superiority context that just rubbed her the wrong way.

"The dryer in the laundry room doesn't give change right now," Jinx babbled on as they walked towards Lab 15. "But, they're getting it fixed in two days."

"Great," Tigress remarked dryly. " Anything else?"

Jinx smiled crookedly and paused outside door 15. "Nope, now it's just time for you to meet the special cases," she said, placing her palm on the red touchpad next to the door. "They're a lot more fun than the others."

'ACCESS GRANTED.' The computer said, opening the doors.

Tigress cocked an eyebrow and walked in. "Sound interesting…" She followed Jinx into the lab and looked around.

The place was clean and sterile but a lot brighter than the other rooms, so bright it hurt to look up at the lights. There were glass cells lined along the wall, with a corridor that seemed to never end, and nearly all the cells were full.

The first one had a girl inside, sitting docile in a chair with wires stuck in her head.

I'm gonna be sick…

"They were all a success with chips," Jinx said, smiling. "Which is a relief—do you know how messy things used to be?"

Tigress swallowed her uneasiness and looked into each cell. "I heard a few heads exploded."

Jinx's smile twitched just for a second. "Yeah, I heard that too…"

Tigress looked at the others—there was a cell with an Indian girl lying in a fetal position on the floor.

"So, I take it the troublemakers were all dealt with?" Tigress asked casually.

"Oh, them?" Jinx shrugged. "Most of them were put in isolation… the chips wouldn't work on two them, unfortunately…"

And, why is that?

Tigress frowned. "Was it their powers?"
Jinx sighed, stopping near one of the cells. "Well, one of them can manipulate electricity so...you put two and two together." She grimaced, looking inside the cell. "Luckily we got the leader under control."

Tigress looked inside and nearly recoiled.

The guy was silently sitting on a bench opposite them, with no sign of life. Half of his body was a silver metal armour, with only half his face and parts of his arms still having visible skin.

"You did this?" Tigress said quietly, touching the glass.

"No." Jinx looked unfazed and shrugged. "There was an accident during the escape." She crossed her arms. "In fact, if it wasn't for us he'd be dead."

Tigress slid her hand from the glass. "And, you're sure he's fully under your control?" she said, glancing at her. "The machinery could interfere with the chip."

Jinx's lips set in a thin line, narrowing her eyes. "Nothing's come up."

Tigress shrugged and gave the Cyborg another look. "Let's hope it stays that way."

*For your sakes.*

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone is enjoying the holidays!
Dinner was always a quiet affair when Kaldur dined with his father, but he didn't mind it. It was actually quite peaceful.

Kaldur chewed his salad, sitting opposite his father. They were both still wearing their black armour but their helmets were resting near their feet. The dining room itself was mostly like the rest of the ship, with plain metal walls, but the table was made from solid wood and there were a few paintings decorating the wall.

Black Manta wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I have some news for you," he said, placing his cutlery on his empty plate.

Kaldur placed his fork down. "Is it a mission?"

His father's eyes crinkled in amusement. "Yes." He nodded, tossing the napkin on the plate. "The Light has requested you supervise a cargo transfer, tomorrow morning."

"This cargo must be of great value?" Kaldur arched an eyebrow.

His father hummed. "Yes, it is." He reached for his glass of wine. "You'll be given the detail when you arrive."

Kaldur felt uneasy but nodded along anyway. "I see…Where will I be picking up the cargo?"

"Philadelphia," his father said, sipping his drink.

Kaldur nodded, eyeing his father intently. "Very well, then I look forward to the challenge."

His father watched him for a moment. "When you receive the cargo make sure there are no traces of our involvement."

Kaldur's stomach curdled at the implication, but he kept his expression passive. "Yes, of course." He eyed his father carefully. "But, if I could be so bold, I am curious about the nature of this mission." His eyes narrowed. "How much longer will I be tested relentlessly until I have proven myself?"

His father sighed softly. "Patience, son." He picked up his cutlery again. "Your labours will be rewarded soon enough."
And, the price that came with those labours?

Kaldur took a bite of his food and felt the taste sour in his mouth.

The streets of Gotham were hardly ever ever quiet, which was something that Blue Beetle actually was starting to like.

Like how right now he was chasing down a guy who had just robbed a convenience store.

Blue Beetle flew around a corner, hovering above the streamline of cars. "Scarab, you still got an ID on that licence plate?"

'The black car three rows ahead,' the scarab replied. 'Plate number BV6 65S.'

Jaime scrutinised the row of cars until he saw it. "Got it!" He chased after it; the car turned a corner past the lights.

He weaved through the traffic and closed in on the vehicle. "Mind giving me a hand, hermano?"

'Activating Alpha mode.'

The armour on his shoulders and arms grew bulkier like a heavy set of biceps. "Gracias!" He laughed, slowing down to grab the rear bumper of the nearest black car. He dragged the car towards the sidewalk, trapping it in-between two parked cars.

Blue Beetle grinned and let go of the car to fly on top of the bonnet. "End of the—Oh…"

There was a terrified family of three staring back at him; to women at the wheel, with a baby boy in the back seat.

"…Um…” Jaime gaped, feeling a giant rush of humiliation. "…Sorry!"

He hastily flew up into the air and out of sight.

"What the hell, Scarab?" he snapped, while he hurriedly tried to scan the streets for the car. "Why didn't you tell me that was the wrong car!"

'I already informed you of the licence plate.'

There are a hundred cars out here!

'It is not my fault you made an error.'

Blue Beetle groaned. "We need to find that car. Do a scan," he ordered, scrutinising the streets.

'Scanning…'

Blue Beetle flew high above the buildings to get a better bird's eye view of things.

'Take a right on Miller's street, and then take a left into the back alley.'

"Thanks…” He sighed and flew back down, following the directions.

He saw the black car first with its tyre punctured with Batarangs, abandoned on a curb.

Oh, crap…
When he turned into the alley, the robber was tied up and gagged, hanging from a fire escape.

"HMMFF!" the tied up man was struggling.

"Huh?" Blue Beetle frowned, getting closer.

"Beetle."

Blue Beetle tensed and looked to the side.

Batman was standing on the apartment building's roof with a worn duffle bag at his feet.

_Mierda…_

Blue Beetle forced a smile. "Oh, hey, Batman," he said, hovering closer to the roof. "Thanks for the help…"

Batman continued to glare.

_Deactivate Alpha mode!_

...'Deactivating Alpha mode.'

Blue Beetle felt his armour become lighter as he landed on the roof in front of the Dark Knight.

"So, has anything interesting happen tonight—?"

"You need to pay attention to your surroundings," Batman interrupted sternly.

Blue Beetle swallowed a lump in his throat. "Oh…yeah, I…I know I screwed up back there with that family car but…” He trailed off when Batman's glare intensified.

"You can't rush into the situation. Always have a plan," Batman lectured.

Blue Beetle cringed, lowering his gaze. "I'm sorry…” He clenched his hands into fists. "…But I promise I'll get better," he said, looking up at him with determination. "I mean you saw me! My flying, the different modes I went in!” He grinned. "I'm a fast learner."

Batman remained silent, eyeing him intently. "I noticed." He picked up the duffle bag and gave it to Jaime. "Stay and watch the perp until the response team gets here," he ordered, walking past him. "Then go home. You have an early start tomorrow."

Blue Beetle stomach twisted. "With the mission?"

Batman kept his back to him and pulled out his grapple gun. "05:00 hours sharp." He released the hook and then jumped off the building.

Blue Beetle was left staring, holding the bag of money.

"…Well, he didn't yell at us," he said, shrugging. "I'd call that a win."

...'Just be silent for once.'

—

Bludhaven

11/06/2023
Dick gave the pasta another stir, leaning over the stove to get a whiff of the smell. "Perfecto!" He grinned, tapping his bare foot against his kitchen floor. Once dinner was done he could suit up and head out for patrol—

His phone buzzed on the counter.

He glanced at the caller ID; it was Officer Machida. A man who Dick always got an extra coffee when he went on his lunch break so he'd cover his shifts.

If he was calling, it wasn't good…

Dick buried his worry and answered the phone. "S'up, Match. How are you doing?"

"I got shot, Grayson."

Fuck!

Dick tensed. "Jesus! Are you okay?"

"Relax, it was in the leg. Some fucker high on who the hell knows what…" The man sighed tiredly. "I'm at the hospital," he replied flatly. "They say I'll live."

Dick let out a deep sigh. "Good to hear…" His stomach sank. "...So, you're not gonna be able to cover my shift tomorrow, are you?"

Shit…

This would cause some issues…

"Bingo. Sorry, kid."

Dick held back a swear. "No…no I understand." He shifted on the spot. "Just focus on getting better…take care, okay?"

"You too. Bye."

Then he hung up.

Dick buried his face in his hands and groaned.

Oswald Moore Juvenile Prison, Philadelphia

11/07/2023

07:00

A grey prison van was parked outside, with five guards surrounding it.

One of the guard, a man with a moustache was tapping his foot impatiently. "Come on, how long is she gonna take?" He kept checking his watch. "We can't keep these guys waiting."

"Relax, Mitch." His colleague, a guy with short bleached blond hair, rolled his eyes. "If they want her so bad, they can wait, right boys?"
"Well, I want lunch so not too long," one of the guards joked, garnering some laughs.

Mitch scowled and leant against the truck. "Yeah, yeah, whatever…"

The bleached blond grinned. "Well, after this I want—" He flinched when a gush of windswept underneath his arm. "What the…?"

"What's up, Lewis?" one of the guards asked, frowning. "You got a twitch or something?"

Lewis paused, frowning as he looked around. "Uh…nothing…"

Then opposite them, the thick metal door was unbolted.

The guards quickly straightened up and touched their weapons.

Rose came out of the door in an orange jumpsuit, with her ankles and wrists handcuffed. Her white hair was long and more unkempt than before, but her eyepatch remained in place.

"Prison transfer!" the guard at the door announced.

Further away Tornado zoomed into the woods that overlooked the prison. He pressed the com attached to his wrist. "Tracker in place!" he told them. "I'm moving to position B, seeya."

He signed off and ran out of the woods in a blur.

Mitch got inside the van and looked outside. "Is everyone in position?" His eyes flashed green, revealing it to be M'gann.

"Robin here, I'm with Beast Boy," Robin thought, zooming across the road on his motorbike.

"Beast Boy here with eyes in the sky!" Beast Boy had transformed into a hawk and was tailing Robin.

Up further ahead Huntress and Blue Beetle were hidden behind an old abandoned water tanker. She was sitting on her bike while Blue Beetle stayed hovering in the air.

"Transport should pass here in ten minutes," she said, reading from her GPS.

Tornado ducked behind buildings and wall as he tailed the van at super speed.

"I'm keeping tabs on it." He grinned, watching as two cars came out of a side street and started following the van. "And their little bit of back-up has arrived."

Robin checked the GPS on his dashboard. "We just finished making the diversion," he said, looking over a bridge at the mounting traffic. "We'll be at point A in twenty-five."

"Good job." M'gann/Mitch sat down with two other guards.

Rose growled when one of the guards bolted her wrist to the wall of the van, while the other patted
her down. "Hands off, shithead!" she snapped, glaring at the guy who had been too touchy-feely.

The man she'd called 'shithead', or better known by his real name, Jordon, just smiled crookedly. "Can't have you concealing any weapons now can I, sweetheart?"

Her face scrunched up. "Like I'd need a weapon to beat your pasty Munchkin ass."

Jordon's face scrunched up, grabbing his taser.

Mitch/M'gann quickly stood up. "Leave it, Jordon, the bitch ain't worth it." He placed a hand on Jordon's shoulder.

Rose sneered, glaring Jordon down.

Jordon gritted his teeth, but eventually removed his hand from the taser and back off. "Bitch," he hissed, brushing Mitch/M'gann's hand off.

Mitch/M'gann shot Rose a warning look while the others sat down.

"Everything okay in there, sis?" Beast Boy tuned in again.

Mitch/M'gann sighed quietly and sat down opposite the other two. "Just too much testosterone…"

"What?"

"Nothing, Beast Boy. Just stay focussed…"

Wayne Manor, Gotham

11/07/2023

07:15

"Master Jason?"

Jason groaned when someone tried to stir him awake.

"Ugh…fuck me…" he groaned, burying his face deeper into his pillow.

"How charming," Alfred's dry tone drifted in his ear. "Sir, you have a call."

Jason scrunched his eyes up tight and kicked his sheets. "What…?"

"A young lady wishes to speak to you."

Jason's eyes popped open. "What?" He sat up, rubbing his eyes.

Alfred stood next to his bed with an unimpressed look on his face, holding the cordless in his hand. "Ms Zor El is on the line," he told him, raising an eyebrow. "She was quite insistent."

What the hell did she want now?

Jason blinked rapidly, frowning. "What does she want?"

"I haven't a clue, sir," Alfred replied, handing the phone over. "Breakfast will be ready within the hour." He walked over to the door.
"Thanks," Jason said, pressing the phone to his ear as Alfred left. "What do you want?"

"I joined Brother Blood's cult," Kara answered curtly.

"What!?" Jason started choking. "What the hell is wrong with you!?

"I want to help!" Kara insisted firmly. "And, I will, so you may either come help or tattle on me, but I am still going to investigate."

He raked a hand through his hair. "Fuck sake, Kara. You're gonna get yourself killed."

She huffed. "I am in Jump City in California. Come or don't. Your choice."

"Kara, listen—"

He groaned, getting out of bed to pull his pants on.

Huntress looked up when she felt Blue Beetle start to pace back and forth.

"You okay?" she asked.

He stopped pacing and turned around. "Yeah, completely!" he replied quickly, balling his hands into fists. "Just trying to stay focussed….focussed…" He let out a deep breath.

_He must be feeling the pressure…which is not good timing._

Blue Beetle tensed, hearing her thoughts. _I'm not stressed!_

Huntress narrowed her eyes. _Excuse me?_

"Uh, oh…" That was Robin.

Jaime quickly backtracked. _Sorry…I just don't want to screw this up._

"Well, I was just worried," she said, crossing her arms. "You didn't need to snap at me like that."

He sighed deeply and ran a hand over his face. "I know, I'm sorry." He walked over to her side. "I'm just sick of feeling like a rookie all the damn time." He scowled, making her feel uncomfortable. "Even that little asshole has more experience than me."

"Wait, who's the asshole?" Beast Boy cut in. "You're not talking about me are you?"

Robin snorted. _I'm pretty sure he means Tornado._

"How do you know it isn't you, Bird-brain?" Tornado shot back.

"Hey, boys stop it!" M'gann tried to intervene.

"Oh, wow, how original! Did you Google that all by yourself?" Robin mentally sneered.

"Boys!" Huntress groaned, slapping her hand against her face. "Stay focused."
Blue Beetle groaned. "Okay, seriously, we're trying to have a conversation here!"

"Everybody needs to calm down," M'gann ordered. "Stay on mission."

"Right...sorry." Robin sounded embarrassed.

"Apology NOT accepted," Tornado remarked.

"I wasn't apologising to you, asshole!"

"Jesus please give me the strength and patience I need to get through this mission..." Huntress despaired, burying her face in her hand.

"Uh, does she know we can still—? Wait, the prison van went a different way!" Tornado started to panic.

Huntress glared through her fingers. "What?!

Mitch/M'gann tensed, looking over at Rose. "What do you mean we've changed directions?"

"I'm following it but it's going a different way, it went right instead of left."

"Did it try and take the blocked route?" Robin asked.

"No, dude, it went further, like the opposite the direction!"

"Crap, he's right," Huntress said.

"M'gann can's you see?" Tornado asked.

"There are no windows." Mitch/M'gann glanced over at the other guards. "And I'm being watched." She grimaced. "We could really use Nightwing right now."

"Okay, don't panic," Huntress stayed calm. "This could be just a security measure to try and shake off any followers."

Mitch/M'gann smiled faintly. "Exactly. Tornado keep tailing the van."

"What about us?" Robin asked. "Should we still head to point A?"

"If they're still taking her to Detroit we'll need you guys in position," Blue Beetle said.

"Yes, so stay on mission." Huntress ordered. "Tornado, keep us updated so we can act quickly."

The van jerked to the side noticeably.

"Are we still on the main road, Don?" Mitch/M'gann asked. "Things are getting kind of bumpy in here."

"Yeah, you've gone down a side road, but the two cars are stilling following."

"I can see you guys," Huntress said. "The road you're going down leads to a dead end...to a factory building."

"They could be changing vehicles," Blue Beetle suggested.
Huntress agreed. "Most likely. We need to act fast."

Mitch/M’gann stared at the ground, grimacing. "If we change vans, I can get a read of the plate, but that might not do much…"

“If they’ve changed their plans last minute, then we’re in the dark,” Huntress pointed out.

“For all, we know they could have set up a teleporter,” Robin added.

Mitch/M’gann thought quickly. "Tornado, you need to race ahead and find out what’s at the end of the road, but be careful!"

"I’m on it."

"You okay, Mitch?" Lewis asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mitch/M’gann smiled weakly. "Bad pasta last night…think it’s catching up with me…"

"Oh, shit," Don’s thoughts resurfaced.

Her smile was stiff. "What is it?"

Kaldur stood waiting at the end of the road, with his helmet on to protect his skin from the harsh sunlight.

His men were behind him with two black vans waiting to be loaded.

Jinx came to stand near him. "Won’t be long now."

From behind his mask, he frowned. "I am still wary of why I cannot know the contents of the cargo?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm just obeying orders." Jinx shrugged, crossing her arms. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with a few surprises."

Kaldur turned his head in her direction, levelling her with a sharp look.

She may not have been able to see the glare but the blankness of his helmet was enough to mirror the effect. Jinx tensed and backed away. "Or not…" she trailed off, moving away from him.

Kaldur sighed quietly and turned away, it was times like this he really missed Artemis’ companionship.

Mitch/M’gann dug her nails into her palms. An old hatred coiled around her chest like an infection, scratching at old wounds.

"Don, stay back."

"What about the mission?" Tornado argued.

She looked over at Rose and felt her stomach twist.

"Blue and I aren't too far away," Huntress said. "We can meet up with Tornado."

"Yes…" Mitch/M’gann bit down on her tongue, staring at the ground. "But, don't engage until we
have a plan formed. We can still salvage the situation."

"I'll call Nightwing," Robin said, with a hint of nervousness. "…Just to keep him updated."

Bludhaven

11/07/2023

07:25

His phone vibrated.

Dick's hand was twitching to look at his phone again so he could check on the others, so he couldn't help but keep eyeing his pant's pocket.

Was everything okay?

He gritted his teeth and tried to be discreet when he took his phone from his pocket.

"Grayson, are you still with us?" Chief Svoboda said coldly.

Dick looked up, cringing when he saw all eyes on him in the briefing room. "Uh…"

Chief Svoboda arched an eyebrow, crossing her arms. She was at the front of the room presenting them with new information on the new Class A drugs on the streets.

His phone kept vibrating; a quick glance at the Caller ID showed it was Tim.

His chief's eyes narrowed. "Another family emergency?" she asked coldly. "Has Timmy fallen down the well again?"

The other officers laughed unkindly, while his partner, David, shot him a sympathetic look.

Dick grimaced. "Chief…"

Her gaze became (if that was even possible) icier. "Put the phone away."

Shit.

He swallowed a lump in his throat. After taking all of those unauthorised absences, she'd been very clear that he was on thin ice for the next five months.

But, the team…

…Could handle itself, they had M'gann, another part of him reasoned. He had to trust they were capable of handling their own.

"Grayson, do I have to confiscate that?" Chief Svoboda threatened and held her hand out. "Or are you gonna turn it off?"

Some more of his colleagues chuckled

Damn it…

Dick reluctantly rejected the phone and turned it on Airoplane mode. "Sorry, Chief…” He slipped
it back in his pocket.

She scoffed and shook her head. "Now, where were we?" she exclaimed, turning back to the board.

Don nearly tripped over when he skidded behind the back of the factory.

The bad guys out front looked like the real deal and everything.

"How are we gonna be able to take on Black Manta's crew?!" He grimaced, ducking back behind the wall.

"Don't do anything until we get there," Huntress ordered. "Robin, any word from Nightwing?"

"No...his phones off," Robin replied apprehensively.

"Pfft, great!" Don scowled. "How are you two even gonna get here without them seeing?" Don argued, scowling. "This place is deserted. They'll hear your engine a mile away."

"We're not driving," Blue Beetle said. "Flying in is quicker and easier, so just sit tight until we get there."

"Easy for you to say..." Don swallowed a lump in his throat, tensing.

"M'gann, maybe Beast Boy and I should come to." Robin's thoughts sounded anxious. "We're nearly at the pick-up point."

"If we fail this then you guys will need to pick-up where we left off," M'gann told them.

Huntress clicked a control on her wrist to keep her bike further back and out of sight. The whole grounds surrounding the factory were pretty much just grass and a few trees on the edges of the road.

Blue Beetle was carrying her bridal style in the air as they flew.

She glanced up and wrapped her arms tighter around his neck. "If it's Black Manta's group then things will get heated if we're not careful," she said, feeling her stomach twist. "They're highly trained operatives and they outnumber us."

"So move quick. Got it," Jaime said, flying closer to the scene; you could just make out a splash of black amongst the green grass.

"Not just that." She sighed deeply, controlling her next thoughts carefully. "We need to attack side by side and be aware of all our surroundings. We need to fight like a real team."

"I know that." Blue Beetle didn't look at her. "Don't worry, I'm trying. I'll watch your back."

She felt her chest tighten. "But make sure you watch your back as well."

He grimaced faintly. "I know..."

Tornado rolled his eyes. "I'd love someone to watch my back." He thought bitterly, tapping his foot anxiously.

"Calm down," Huntress ordered sternly. "We're one minute away."
Tornado gritted his teeth, but then stiffened when he heard an approaching vehicle. "Shit." He looked around the corner and felt his gut twist when he saw the two cars escorting the white van. "You better get here quicker than a minute!"

"Tornado stay in position," M'gann instructed firmly.

"Wait for the others," Robin's thoughts spoke up.

Don's feet started itching. "Then hurry up, guys!"

The van came to a stop right near Kaldur.

"Finally," Jinx muttered, advancing forward.

Kaldur narrowed his eyes as the drivers got out of the vehicle.

The Driver was a skinny man with wryly brown hair, hesitantly stepped forward while the freckled man behind him kept back.

"She's all ready to go, sir," he said nervously.

"Her?" Kaldur masked his alarm and just nodded. "Let me see."

"Of course!" the Driver replied, stepping to one side.

While Kaldur walked over to the van, some of the drivers in the black car got out—Jinx approached them first.

"You were meant to be here ten minutes ago, Jonny," she snapped, marching over to the driver.

Jonny was a black haired, grey-skinned, bulky man with a heavily muscled body and strange black tattoos along with his biceps. "Shut up, Jinx," he retorted dryly, leaning against the car. "You don't pay me."

Jinx's eyes flashed at them. Then she clicked her fingers.

"OW!" Jonny received an electric shock from the car.

Kaldur raised an eyebrow at their antics as he stopped in front of the truck as the Driver opened the doors.

Kaldur's chest tightened when he saw Rose Wilson inside that van with three other prison escorts were inside.

This will be a problem…

"Please tell me you have a plan," Blue Beetle whispered as they hovered over the factory, high in the sky just out of sight.

"Relax, I have a plan," she replied, setting her feet on the ground. "It's just a work in progress…"

"What?"
Blue Beetle both gave her a look.

She cringed. "I mean...don't worry! " have a plan."

"Yeah, you keep saying!" Jaime's eyes narrowed. "So, what do we do?"

She felt a rise of frustration, but she couldn't answer him. "M'gann?"

They could see the blurry shapes of three people escorting Rose out of the van with the others.

"I can still impersonate Rose if I ditch the others and get on Kaldur's transport," M'gann told them.

Mitch/M'gann kept her face passive as she handed a shackled Rose over to Kaldur's men.

Kaldur stared at the Prison drivers for a moment as one of his men whispered something to him.

She gritted her teeth and probed their minds.

"Sir, Black Manta did say—" was what the man was whispering.

"I know what he said," Kaldur's voice strained from anger.

Anger?

She brushed it off and focused on what was being said.

"But, there has to be another way," Kaldur thought.

"What?" Her brow furrowed. "Another way for...oh, no." Her eyes widened.

"What is it?" Beast Boy's thoughts screamed at her. "Are you still okay?"

"They're going to—"

Kaldur's tinted red lenses stared at her with a sharp intensity.

Mitch/M'gann's stomach lurched.

"We need to get out of here!" Tornado's thoughts cried out.

"Stay put!" Huntress ordered as she and Blue Beetle landed on the ground.

Don was hopping on the spot, tenser than a coil of wire.

"Sir...?" one of Kaldur's men spoke up.

"Get Ms Wilson in the van," Kaldur ordered sharply.

"We better go too," Lewis said anxiously, slowly backing away. "We have another job."

"But, what about the money?" Jordon spoke up indignantly.

His friend grabbed his arm. "Not now."

Jinx walked to Kaldur's side and smiled crookedly. "Yeah, that payments going to be delayed, boys."
Kaldur's men grabbed the five of them from behind.

"Hey!" Lewis yelled, trying to rip his arm free.

"M'gann!" Beast Boy called out.

"We have a deal!" Jordon tried to kick the guy who was pressing a strange gun to his head.

"Wait," Kaldur raised his hand, stepping forward.

"H, we need to—" Robin was trying to talk.

"Screw this!" Don interrupted.

"Don, don't!" Huntress cried.

Her heart raced. "Don, wait!" Mitch/M'gann gritted her teeth when her hands were locked behind her back. "Guys I have this—"

In one second she was trapped, in the soldiers who were holding her and the others were on the ground unconscious.

Jinx glared at them. "Kill them!" She clicked her fingers.

The ground cracked beneath them like the land was splitting apart.

Mitch/M'gann jumped out of the way and narrowed her eyes. "So much for covert." She used her mind to throw Kaldur, Jinx, and a majority of the men back. "Mission objective changed. Retrieve Rose and get out!"

Chapter End Notes

I was juggling a lot of mental conversations here, so I hope it wasn't confusing.
Blue Beetle ducked a blow from one of Black Manta's men.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how screwed are we?"

He stunned one behind him, as Huntress flipped over and kicked another in the face.

"I'd give it a solid Eight right now!" she replied, dodging some gunfire as she flipped in the air to roundhouse kick another bad guy.

"Look out!" Blue Beetle tried to yank her out of the way when Jinx sent a quake their way.

Huntress unbalanced and bashed into his chest. "Careful!"

"Sorry!" He aimed his cannon over his shoulder to blast another Black Manta henchman. "But, we could all really use a plan right now!"

"How about getting out of here alive for a plan!?" Tornado mentally screamed, ducking a sucker punch from Jonny Rancid. "Hang in there, guys!" M'gann flipped one of the black cars over and used it to tackle six of Black Manta's men to the ground. "Focus on retrieving Rose."

Huntress looked over the van. "We're on it." She blocked an attack from Black Manta's men and rushed forward. "Blue, cover me!"

"Got you." Blue Beetle blasted away another goon and followed her lead.

Tornado jerked around and jumped to avoid a sudden giant pothole. "What the—!?!"

Jinx came out of know where and clicked her fingers, creating a bolt of pink lightening that stretched out like a whip and curled around his feet.

With one catalysed wrong step, Tornado tripped and hit the ground.

A Black Manta guard threw a net over him and then clicked a switched, electrocuting him with a flash of blue light.

"Agh!" Tornado trembled violently.

Rose had taken cover behind one of the black cars and was trying to pick the locks of her cuffs.

"Need a hand?" Huntress took cover behind the car while Blue Beetle watched her back.
Rose edged back but then scowled when she got a good look at her. "You're still alive?"

Huntress narrowed her eyes. "You're a lousy shot. Now come on!" She dragged her to her feet. "I have Rose."

"Get her out of here. I'll handle the rest." M'gann focussed her attention on Kaldur who had his water swords drawn. "You shouldn't have come here, M'gann."

She felt her rage build up in her chest. Her eyes glowed green as she penetrated his mind, sending him flying back onto the ground.

"Argh!" He scrunches his eyes up and tried to block her, but it was like blocking a knife with paper.

M'gann tore in, shoving Conner's words of warning away as she ripped through.

"Ms Martian, look out!" Blue Beetle shouted.

M'gann jerked back just in time to see a black car hurtling towards her. She raised her hand out in a flash to stop it from hitting her but was then blasted by one of the soldiers.

She hit the car and bounced off it onto the ground like a rag doll.

"M'gann!" Huntress' gaze widened and shoved herself and Rose behind the tossed black car. "Damn it…" She gritted her teeth, looking over at Tornado who was being handled by the enemy.

"Great rescue mission!" Rose snarled, pulling at the chains on her feet. "Get me out of these before we end up dead!"

Blue Beetle was flying in the air trying to shoot the soldiers below.

"Huntress! Anyone! Come in!" Robin's thoughts pierced her mind. "What's going on?"

M'gann winced, clutching her scorched waist. "Huntress, you need to—"

"You don't look so good, Martian."

Jinx grinned and clapped her hands together with pink sparks igniting.

The car next to M'gann exploded, knocking the Martian back with a fiery blast.

Blue Beetle summoned a force field to block the debris and rushed over to where Huntress was sheltering Rose. "I can't take them all out—"

"I know!" Huntress looked around quickly. "Robin, Beast Boy, fall back!"

"But, we're at the edge—We can help—" Robin protested.

M'gann was already being tagged and bagged by the soldiers.

"Fall back," Huntress ordered, looking over her shoulder as the guards closed in. "Take Rose and go!"

"Are you crazy!" He snapped, ducking to avoid a firing shot. "I'm not leaving you."

"You're not strong enough to carry two passengers—just go!" She shoved Rose towards him.
"Not without—"

"For fuck sake!" Rose yelled, shoving Huntress' grip off her. "We'll both be dead at this rate if—"

Jonny Rancid flipped the car over to expose them.

"Shit!" Rose swore, scrambling out of the way.

Huntress threw a smoke pellet. "Move!"

Blue Beetle grabbed Rose and hoisted her over his shoulder.

"Hey!" Rose yelled.

Huntress leapt forward and attacked Rancid, aiming for the man's jaw. Rancid was knocked back from the blow but then quickly blocked her second attack and tried to grab her.

Blue Beetle fired at Kaldur as the soldiers closed in.

Jinx grinned when she saw him firing energy blasts. "I don't think so, sweetie." She clicked her fingers with a crackle of magic.

Blue Beetles arm-gun overloaded and turned on him, blasting him to the ground.

Rose rolled out of his grip and into the dirt. "Fuck!"

A net was thrown over Blue Beetle.

Kaldur narrowed his eyes and pressed a button on his wrist.

The net electrified.

Huntress looked over her shoulder, the colour drained from her face. "Blue!"

Rancid socked her with a sharp punch in the shoulder.

Jaime was screaming out.

She dug her heels into the ground and raised her guard, fighting the urge to look back over at Jaime. "Blue Beetle, are you okay?"

The screams behind her intensified.

Don't look. Don't look.

"Huntress!" Robin's thoughts had lost their composer

Huntress dodged Rancid's attack and kicked him in the stomach. "Blue, can you hear me?"

The screams faded along with the faint buzz of electricity.

"Blue?" Her eyes widened, struggling to block her opponent's punches. "Jaime? Jaime, are you there?!

"I got a bird's eye view!" Beast Boy called, flying above them. "I could try and take maybe Kaldur out or a few of the soldiers."
"Argh!" That was Rose screams this time.

Huntress swerved behind Rancid to dodge. Her gaze shifted over to Jaime, but he was unconscious and covered in a net as Black Manta's soldiers closed in around him.

"Huntress!" Beast Boy called out.

Her gaze flashed back to her opponent before he could land another hit. Huntress clenched her jaw and withdrew a knife. "Get M'gann—"

A blast hit her from behind and burned her back.

Huntress' body when rigid and she was knocked to the floor, holding the knife in her hand still.

Rancid knocked her out with a swift Scorpion kick.

Jason pulled up his jacket collar and re-adjusted the hem of his jacket to make sure the glimmer of his knife wasn't exposed and did a quick sweep of the area.

Five security cameras, with a blind spot in the far left corner.

Jason sighed and stayed in the shadows of the old buildings. The place was void of life but…was strangely very clean. There was barely any trash on the ground and the buildings didn't have any graffiti. It looked like something from those 1960's commercials.

He kept his eyes peeled for a girl, but the place was quiet since early morning rush hour was over.

*Hopefully, Bruce'll sleep til noon so he won't notice the missing jet… It wasn't like he was using it.*

"You came!"

Jason tensed when her arms wrapped around him in a tight hold.

*Fuck, she's fast.*

Kara smirked up at him, with her arms wrapped around his stomach; she's was actually kind of short in comparison, with her head only coming up to his chest.

Jason scowled. "Get off me!" He snapped, pushing her face away.

Kara raised an eyebrow, releasing him. "I am just glad you came…"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever—come 'ere." He tugged her further into the shadows. "There's cameras."

He did a double-take when he got a decent look at her. "What the hell are you wearing?"

She looked like something from a Disney Channel kids' show

"What?" She frowned, fiddling with the end of her brunette wig.

He blinked a few times so his eyes could adjust to the brightness level, with a cheap neon pink jacket with an *orange*—fucking pumpkin orange—tank top underneath, and a green skirt to make the clash even more nauseating.

"Clark bought them…" Her cheeks flushed pink. "Does it look ugly?"

He stared at her for a moment, but then shook his head. "I've seen worse." He looked over at the
cameras. "Listen, we can't just go in there alone without a plan."

"I have a plan." She crossed her arms stubbornly.

He narrowed his eyes. "Oh, really? Sounds great, but this isn't a good idea."

Kara sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Blood is dangerous. He needs to be stopped." She gave him a look. "I already disabled cameras, see?"

Jason stiffened. "You what?"

She pointed up, looking very pleased with herself. "I damaged wiring. That is good."

_For the love of…_

"No, it's not!" he snapped, glaring at her. "Now they'll be on high alert—there's a way of doing these things, Kara!"

Kara frowned, averting her gaze. "We…we don't have much time then?"

"No, and who knows how—"

Her gaze narrowed. "There are people trapped beneath," she told him gravely. "I can hear them."

He held back a groan of frustration. "Fuck…" He raked a hand through his hair. She had a point, they couldn't just rely on the Justice League to fix their problems, but… Shit needed to get done and taking the backseat really wasn't his style. "Fuck it…" He took out his helmet that was hidden underneath his jacket. "Fine, but we do this by my rules. Understand?"

Her lips curled into a smirk, nodding. "I understand."

Jason sighed deeply, slipping on his helmet. "You better not get me killed again."

"What?" Her brow furrowed.

"Just don't mess this up," Jason grumbled, taking out his gun. "Follow my lead."

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**Bludhaven**

**11/07/2023**

**08:00**

Dick practically ran out of the meeting the second it was over and pulled out his phone to turn it on.

"Come on…" He gritted his teeth, ignoring the others when they came out.

"Don't let the chief catch you, Grayson!" Cormac laughed, patting him on the back as he passed.

"Might get a detention!" another joked.

"Yeah, hilarious," Dick replied tightly, moving around a corner so he could get some privacy.

He had 28 missed calls and 10 messages.

"Shit."
A/N Dear Lord, it's been a while! This MA has literally consumed my whole life! I've barely had the chance to eat, so Fanfiction had to take the backburner, unfortunately. But, the semester is nearly over, so I'll have more free time and I'll be able to actually get this story finished.
This Masters has killed me.
I am so sorry for the delay, I honestly just haven't had any time. Luckily my Masters is nearly over so there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Issue #39

In the Thick of It

Philadelphia

11/07/2023

08:00

Robin ducked behind an old billboard that had paint chipped off. Beast Boy was at his heel as a wolf.

“Crap…” Robin watched as his teammates were loaded up into a beat up looking van.

“They took out M’gann?” Beast boy reverted back to his human form. “We gotta save them.”

“Yeah, I know,” Robin snapped, swallowing a thick lump in his throat. “But we need to be smart about this. We’re badly outnumbered right now…” He narrowed his eyes as Helena was shoved into the van. “Huntress has a tracker on her, but they might end up separating them all…” He grimaced, looking over at Beast Boy. “Follow them.”

Beast Boy stiffened, looking over at the opposing party. “…Okay, got it.” He stepped back, glancing at Robin. “What about communication?”

“We’ll have to play it radio silence, just wait for me to contact you,” Robin replied, opening up his communication channel. “I’ll get back up and try and intercept, and if that doesn’t work then… I’ll find you,” he said, firmly. “Right now, you need to go and follow them and try to protect them without getting captured. Understand?”

Beast Boy nodded. “Okay…good luck.” He smiled warily. “Hopefully this works out.” He turned into a fly.

Robin watched him buzz around. “Just try not to get killed.”

Beast Boy buzzed in his face deliberately, earning a smack, and then he flew off towards the vehicles.
Robin watched him and let out a deep sigh. “Agent A, you online?”

“Yes, sir. Is everything alright?” Alfred Voice came through.

Robin cringed. “Not exactly…” He glanced over his shoulder as the vehicles started to drive away.

Bludhaven
11/07/2023
08:06

Dick grabbed his coat and Motorcycle keys when he rushed past his desk.

He needed to find out what the hell had just happened.

“Dick, where are you?” someone tried to speak to him.

Dick ignored him and pushed through the doors and stepped into the corridor. He scrolled through the messages on his phone and felt his chest tighten.

“Grayson!” Chief Svoboda’s voice stopped him in his tracks. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

Dick held his phone tighter and turned around. “Chief, I swear if—”

“I’m gonna stop you there.” She gritted her teeth, marching over to him. “I have put up with you crap for months, Grayson. Or do you think the streets get patrolled on their own?”

His jaw tightened. “I understand, and I’m sorry, ma’am,” he replied in a measured tone. “But I need —”

“Grayson, enough,” she interrupted coldly, making his tense.

Dick swallowed a lump in his throat, maintaining his chief’s iron glare.

“…I need to go.” He started to back away. “I’m sorry…”

The chief’s gaze hardened, as he lips thinned. She shook her head. “You’re an idiot.” She turned her back to him and walked back into the office.

Dick’s stomach lurch and his hands shook slightly. If he left now he might not…no, he probably would not have a job after this. “Damn,” he swore quietly, closing his eyes he shook his head. “Damn it.”

He walked towards the exit every instinct telling him not to.

“Stop floating,” Jason hissed, yanking Kara back down onto the ground. The two of them were at the back entrance of the building, hiding behind dumpsters.
“Sorry,” Kara whispered, looking over his shoulder.

Two guards came out of the building.

Jason took a deep breath and turned to her. “Okay, I need you to take out the guards as quietly as possible,” he told her quietly, while he loaded his gun. “You think you can do that?”

Annoyance flashed across her face. “Yes.”

“Good,” he nodded slowly, looking around the corner. “When I say go—”

Kara rushed again with a rush of wind and sent the guards slamming against the wall.

She stood above them when their bodied slumped onto the concrete.

It took Jason’s brain another second to catch up with what had just happened. “What the hell?” he snapped, standing up.

Kara shrugged. “You said go.”

“No I didn’t!” he hissed, marching over to her. “You didn’t let me finish.”

Kara tilted her head, as a sly smile crept onto her face. “Sorry. Learning Earth language…So hard still…”

He glared at her. “Fuck you.”

She smirked and watched him go over to one of the guards and take their keycard.

“No, come on,” he ordered gruffly, taking their radio and guns as well. “And do as I say.” He opened the door with the keycard.

Kara rolled her eyes and followed him inside.

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**The Watchtower**

**11/07/2023**

**08:16**

Wonder Woman brought up a map of Detroit which had a flashing red dot in a location on the East Side. “This matches up with the Information you gave us.”

“Activity?” Batman nodded, analysing the map. The two of them were alone in Section B’s Data room that overlooked the Earth.

“Faint, but there,” Wonder Woman replied, folding her arms. “Superboy, Flash, Atom, and Black Canary are checking it out.”

“Good.” Batman replied curtly.

Wonder Woman raised an eyebrow. “We’re still trying to get him released into our protective custody, but his Lawyers are getting in the way.”
“Are you even surprised?” Batman commented dryly.

She sighed. “Luthor will be after him soon…”

Batman grimaced. “M’gann should be arriving at the base soon,” he said briskly. “I need to check in on them.”

“Fair enough.” Wonder Woman eyed him for a moment. “I was meaning to ask you about that actually.”

Batman raised an eyebrow beneath his cowl. “Is there a problem?”

“No.” She crossed her arms. “But a few of us have been curious about Nightwing’s activity.” She looked back at the screen. “I’m aware that you’re supervising his mission, but a few of us are concerned about the secrecy surrounding his informat.”

“The information is classified for a reason,” Batman replied.

“I know that.” She rested a hand on her hip and sighed. “But it’s been five years, a few of us are worried about him.”

Batman tensed a fraction. “Nightwing is more than capable leading this mission.”

“Well, Clark’s worried about him,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “And Jason as well.”

Batman’s gaze grew cold. “I see.”

She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I understand why you wouldn’t want to tell us about his resurrection, and no one else knows.” She looked at him warily. “I know it’s a private matter… but after hearing some rumours about the Red Hood, we’re starting to worry that this—“

“Jason is my responsibility,” Batman interrupted coolly as he turned away towards the door. “The same goes for Nightwing. I may listen to whatever concerns you may have but I’ll be the one to decide to take action on them.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Do we understand each other?”

“I’m not trying to be hostile, Bruce.” Wonder Woman raised an eyebrow at his tone. “But, I’ll respect your wishes,” she added, turning back to the screen.

This wasn’t the end of the conversation, but that was expected.

Batman walked out of the room.

It was the sudden jerk that stirred her awake.

Her head was throbbing, but the pain would pass soon enough. She tilted her head back and tried to move but her whole body was locked in a metal type of net that sealed her in.

When she opened her eyes she realised she was lying on the ground along with the others, but they were still knocked out and there were four Atlantion guards talking to one another.

Her stomach plummeted when she remembered what had happened.

Huntress closed her eyes and grimaced, she could feel her belt was missing and her wrists which
were stiffly bound and jammed against her chest by the net. She opened one eye again to steal a quick glance at the others.

Rose was unconscious opposite her, but she couldn’t see anyone close in her peripheral vision.

Huntress closed her eyes and clenched her jaw tight.

*Where were Jaime and the others?*

The vehicle jerked harshly, making her flinch and open her eyes a crack.

The vehicle had come to a stop, and one of the guards opened the for a fraction to talk to someone outside.

The guards were still walking about, but her gaze trailed past their feet and towards the doors where something green suddenly scuttled in and passed the guard.

Huntress quickly closed her eyes when the door was closed and a guard grew close, tensing her shoulders. She only relaxed when she heard some of the guards started fumbling about with a large metal case at the corner of the vehicle.

She opened her eye a fraction and hastily looked around, but she couldn’t see the green bug anywhere at first, to until she felt something crawling on her shoulder. Huntress shifted slightly, knocking the bug onto the ground near her face.

It was a small green ladybug, making her smile when it transformed into a tiny spider and crawled up her arm; she’d never been so happy to see the little green hero. Her smile dropped and her eyes shut once more when she heard the guards approach.

Huntress tried to twist her thumb to feel what kind of lock was on the cuffs, but the metal was thick and seemed to have runes or some kind of pattern engraved on the metal. Her body tensed slightly when the net was pulled away from her briefly as a metal collar was clicked into place around her neck.

In the next second, she was being dragged out of the van with her bound feet dragging across gravel as the outside air hit her face with the net tightly pressing against her mask again. She felt Beast Boy hide beneath the collar of her costume, tickling her neck faintly.

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