Don't Call it a Comeback

by Boosterrific

Summary

Dick isn't talking to anyone anymore. Bruce sends Barbara to bring him home. What follows is the two of them struggling to not fall back into old habits in the city that wants them apart.

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Chapter 1

Even as her taxi flew through the streets at an unreasonable speed and narrowly avoiding a collision at every intersection, Barbara could still scarcely believe that Bruce had convinced her to come to Blüdhaven by herself. The concept was surreal and only slightly ridiculous.

She wished that she had been able to convince him to send Jason instead, especially since the uneven sidewalks and lack of wheelchair ramps made the city generally handicap inaccessible. Jason was conned into doing it once before, only to find an empty apartment and a passive aggressive note. He cursed a blue streak at Bruce for sending him to another state only to turn around and come right back. Jason absolutely refused to aid in any future efforts to bring Dick home.

Blüdhaven itself was known for being even more dangerous than Gotham, but that didn't bother her; she was too busy running impossible scenarios about Dick through her head. Had Dick known she was coming he would have picked her up from the airport without a second thought. Probably. Of course, he couldn't know. Dick had been screening everyone's calls for weeks now and Bruce, though generally stoic about the whole thing, insisted that someone check up on him "just to be sure". This visit had to be a surprise in case he decided to skip town like he did last time.

To Bruce's credit, he tried his hardest to convince Jason to go but the kid was nothing if not obstinate. He called Wally, Zatanna, and Conner before pushing the task upon Barbara. Bruce was obviously hesitant to send his wheelchair-bound ally into an unsafe and unfamiliar city, but he was also constantly trying to show her that she still had value in his crusade. It was the closest she'd ever seen Bruce come to showing genuine concern.

Bruce also knew that Dick and Barbara hadn't been talking much since Dick's brief engagement to Koriand'r (brief in part because Dick continued to sleep with Barbara, Helena, and who knows who else during their relationship) and subsequent leaving of the Titans a little less than a year ago. But Bruce insisted that Dick would listen to Barbara over him.

Barbara knew that most people needed their space once in a while, but Dick was never one for isolating himself. He thrived in social environments. Barbara did her best to not assume the worst of Dick. After all, she had been shunning social duties only a few months earlier. She was always worried when Dick didn't act like Dick, even if she wasn't so sure what Dick acted like anymore.

She hadn't seen him since right after she was shot. He was there, at her side, when she woke up in the hospital.

It wasn't her father and it wasn't Bruce. It was Dick.

The outline of his body and face were cast in shadows, so Barbara wasn’t totally sure who it was at first. The fluttering of her eyelashes must have tipped off that she was awake and the figure leaned in closer. It was Dick.

She tried to speak, but her lips were too heavy to form words. He nodded his head gently when he saw the unspoken questions on her face. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was a mess, the drugs made her groggy and everything was blurry, but there was no denying it was Dick. He sang quiet songs while stroking her hair and kissing her forehead. Relaxation enveloped her like a warm blanket and eventually the morphine took her to sleep once again. She dreamt of songbirds.

When she woke up however many hours later, she found a note beside her bed -- "You are strong
enough to overcome this.” -- attached to a small plush bat. Not even Bruce had known about Dick’s visit until after he had disappeared. Knowing that he had been there to support her filled her with positivity and optimism… right up until the point where the surgeon walked into her room looking like Death’s messenger.

That was nearly six months ago. She was back on her feet, figuratively, and far from bound to a hospital bed. Her recovery rate was leaps and bounds over average. Her confidence was back up to pre-Joker levels. She felt almost invincible again.

But the streets were looking less and less friendly as she got closer to her destination. Everyone looked near-death and half-crazy. This city was the antithesis of Dick Grayson. The cab driver had barely said a word, and the radio was playing music from decades earlier. Her eyes slipped shut and before long the taxi was slowing to a stop.

"Alright, missy. That'll be $26.50."

Frowning, Barbara handed him her Wayne Enterprises credit card and began to maneuver herself out of the car. The driver begrudgingly handled her collapsible wheelchair and unfolded it in the most inconvenient possible way in front of her door. She lifted herself into the chair and flashed a sarcastic smile at him before wheeling herself away from the taxi.

"This building?" she asked, gesturing a building that was on the verge of crumbling to pieces.

"That's the one." The door slammed shut behind him and the taxi sped away.

She squinted skeptically at the decrepit building and began towards it. The concept of Dick living in, let alone owning, a building in this condition was beyond her understanding.

The elevator looked like something out of a horror film, like it was haunted by angry spirits that would cause it to tumble from the highest floor. She was hesitant to even use it, considering maybe just turning around and going home.

An idea only halted by the fact that it was late and the odds of her getting a flight back to Gotham at this hour were pretty much nil.

The elevator wailed like a thing possessed as it went up, each floor forcing Barbara to consider her life and how embarrassing it would be to die in an elevator after all she had been through. It squealed to a stop and she let go of the breath she didn't know she was holding. She got off the thing as quickly as she could, forcing the fact that she would have to use it again later out of her mind.

Dick's apartment was at the very end. She paused before knocking on the door. Given the hour, there was a decent chance that he wasn't even home and was out Nightwing-ing somewhere. If that were the case, who knows how long she would be stuck outside.

Her lips twisted into something between determination and self-loathing and she knocked firmly on the door. Faint stomps could be heard from inside before the door swung open.

Dick Grayson, naked from the waist-up, was standing in the doorway looking like a goddamn movie star. The flickering hallway lights cast dramatic shadows over his chest and arm muscles. His freshly-washed hair glistened in the light from the TV in the room behind him. Her heart skipped a beat. His eyes widened briefly before he stepped out of her way and allowed her to wheel into his apartment.

"Well you're not Thai food," he said after a moment.
Humor as a misdirect was common enough from him that it barely registered. It was how he maintained his happy-go-lucky façade while still looking cool.

"Sorry for the disappointment." She smirked, narrowly avoiding rolling over his shoes that lay in a half-hearted attempt at a pile next to his doorway. There was no way men were supposed to own that many shoes.

The apartment was about as worn and aged on the inside as it looked on the outside. Dick also appeared to have adopted the cleaning habits of a frat boy. There were empty pizza boxes, all from different pizzerias, stacked on the kitchen table and a dozen different cereal boxes on the counter tops. The place could definitely use a loving touch. Or an afternoon with Alfred Pennyworth and a box of steel wool.

"No, this is way better. I'm not even hungry." He grabbed a sweatshirt from a nearby chair and pulled it on. Barbara was only a little disappointed to be robbed of the view. "What are you doing here, Babs?"

"Wow, rude," she said, rolling her eyes. “Bruce sent me here to check on you. No one's heard from you for weeks. He was worried."

"So why couldn't he come himself?"

"You know why."

They hadn't talked much since he quit and moved away, with conversations becoming fewer and further between. Bruce and Dick basically spoke through Alfred and Clark these days. It felt like an improper use of Superman's friendship. Everyone between them was always telling them to talk to one another, but no one tells Batman what to do. Someone raised by Batman could only resist in the same way.

"How is he?" Dick asked flatly. He already knew how Bruce was: Bruce was the same way he always is.

"He's..." She spotted a pair of crumpled women's underwear on the floor and paused briefly. "Do you have company?"

"What? Oh." He grabbed the panties off the ground, balled them up and tossed them into his bedroom. He didn't appear apologetic or even a little embarrassed. "Sorry. Those must be from yesterday. She left in kind of a hurry."

"Mm."

She stopped judging Dick's sexual appetite not too long after their breakup, but he used to be more discrete than this. There was no way he just missed a pair of underwear that didn't belong to him unless he was seriously distracted.

"She probably won't be back for them, so you can relax."

Her face must not have adequately expressed that she was feeling reassured, because Dick moved them into the living room and invited her to sit on the couch, which thankfully did not look as dilapidated as the building. She carefully lifted herself onto the couch, turning down his offer to help her.

"You seem like you're doing really well, considering..." He looked at her legs, then the floor, then back to her eyes.
"Thanks. It hasn't been easy, but I'm managing fine." She wasn't in the mood for the pity party her condition usually invited and tended to cut people off before it got too weepy. It worked better than playing the victim, which got more tiresome every time it happened.

"How are you, um..."

"What?" Here? Moving around? Alive?

"Still working... with Batman?"

She sighed. That was a fair question, given the sheer amount of jumping-off-of-buildings she used to do on a regular basis. It had to be hard to imagine working with Batman in a capacity that didn't involve backflips and swooping off of gargoyles.

"I guess you could call me ‘IT personnel’. I've got a pretty amazing set-up in the clock tower, courtesy of Wayne Enterprises. They're calling me Oracle now."

"Sounds neat. I should come check that out."

Barbara shifted. Bruce had asked her to try to convince Dick to come back to Gotham, at least for a day or two. This was as good of a set up as any.

"You should. It would be fun."

"Do you miss me?" he asked, grinning ear to ear.

"Alfred misses you," she said quickly, dismissing his smile. "Bruce does, even if he won't admit it."

"But do you?" He leaned closer. He smelled like aftershave and gunpowder.

"Dick, I..." She bit her lip, considering her choice of words. "It's just not the same without you."

"Good enough. I'll think about it." He seemed satisfied enough and relaxed her shoulders in the sofa. "So what else is new on the home front?"

"We just upgraded the computers in the Cave. That was a pretty huge ordeal."

"I've been telling him to do that for years."

"Well, Jason made it kind of a necessity."

"He didn't..."

"Broken. All of it. With a baseball bat."

"He never would have put up with that kind of stuff from me. I would have been grounded and fired."

Barbara sensed a hint of indignity in his tone and had to keep herself from smirking. It was true that Batman had picked Dick's polar opposite as his new protégé, so he obviously had to make some big changes in his parenting and mentoring style. Things that Dick Grayson would have been severely punished for were now just the everyday facts of life with Jason Todd.

"He didn't have to. You were a model child." Barbara patted him on the back. "It doesn't mean you're defunct."
"So tell me about Robin 2: Red and Green Boogaloo. I have been hearing the worst things about him."

"He's giving Bruce grey hair faster than Joker. He swears and hits too hard and skips school and I actually caught him smoking once." Barbara sighed. Her hands were tense. "If we're not careful, he's going to end up hanging out with Roy."

"Wow. Why is Bruce even keeping him around?"

"He... he's talented and motivated. He's really strong for his age and well on his way to being taller than Bruce." She paused and cast her eyes downwards. "After what happened, he tried to go after the Joker on my behalf. Bruce caught him before he even left the Cave and tore a strip off of him. Hoodlum with a heart of gold, I guess."

It still made her sore to think about Jason trying his hardest to avenge her. It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for her, but if Bruce hadn't stopped him then who knows what the Joker might have done to him. Despite her gripes with the kid, she still had very strong big sister-type feelings for him. She wanted to protect him from his impulses, but she couldn't anymore.

Of course, she would never admit that she actually loved the little shit.

"Sounds like a handful."

"Understatement of the year. It's a good thing he's so cute."

"Whoa whoa whoa. Whoa. Slow down."

Barbara stifled a laugh. "What?"

"So I skip town and you hop on the next underage boy in a domino mask?" Dick raised an eyebrow. "We should just start calling you Bat Cougar."

"He's the same age you were when we started smooching on rooftops. I figure that's old enough for him too."

"Wait, are you --" Dick coughed. "I was joking! I didn't-- Are you actually---"

"Calm down, ex-boy wonder. It's a joke. I'm way older than him and most of the time I actually want to strangle him." She shook her head with frustration. "Bruce said he’d ‘even out’ after a while. But it’s been FOUR YEARS, BRUCE. FOUR YEARS. He’s not ‘evening out’!"

Yeah, she loved the little shit, but that didn't stop him from getting on her nerves every single day. She hadn't been able to vent to Bruce about his delinquent ward and it always seemed rude to lay it all on Alfred. Getting it out to Dick felt good and Dick seemed to be enjoying himself.

Dick exploded into laughter. "I cannot wait to meet this kid. I've never seen anyone make you this crazy."

Barbara groaned. "Just... just don't let him get to you. He’s good at getting on people’s nerves. And he's got anger issues. He sort of resents being compared to you all the time."

"No wonder he acts out. No kid could ever be as perfect as I was."

She roughly shoved him in the shoulder. "That attitude won't help. Unless you want him batarang you in the ass, you should probably humble up."
"Babs, darling, there are many words one could use to describe me. Statuesque, Casanova, epitome of manhood, perfectly-sculpted abs... Humble is not in that lexicon." He somehow managed to keep a straight face throughout the flexing and posing.

Don’t think about his abs. Don’t think about his abs. Don’t think about his abs.

"I hate you so much," she said between giggles.

"I bet you do." He had moved closer and had his arm over the back of the couch, just behind her shoulders.

Barbara noticed how close he was and leaned back a little. There was no way this was going to happen. Not tonight. The last time he pulled this move, she ended up exhausting her supply of condoms and in need of a new headboard. Then he invited her to his wedding. It was the last time they had slept together and she was still a tiny bit grumpy about it.

"Getting a little cozy there, Grayson."

"Come on, we're friends. Relax."

A police officer's uniform sat in a crumpled mess on an armchair across the room. At first, she wasn't even sure if it belonged to Dick. Then she remembered what Bruce had told her.

"Like I'm letting my guard down around Officer Seduction."

"Oh, you noticed the uniform." Dick casually glanced over at the chair. "Yeah, it's no big deal. Just acting as the thin white line between civilization and anarchy."

Police officer was not a career move that Barbara had even expected from Dick, especially while still acting as a vigilante himself. Her father was a cop and that was already weird enough for her own good. The idea of living a dual life to that extent seemed exhausting, but if anyone had the energy and determination for it, it was Dick Grayson.

"Bruce had mentioned you were working in law enforcement. I assumed it was a polite way of saying mall cop."

"Mall cop?" he sputtered. "Mall cop! Does this look like the body of a mall cop?"

She cackled with delight. "You could do security at Abercrombie & Fitch with that body."

"I am a legitimate officer of the Blüdhaven Police Department." He fished for his badge in his back pocket and held it to her face. "See?"

He looked genuinely hurt, like she had called him a liar. She recognized the look from many years ago when she first accused him of cheating on her. She felt a little bad. He was obviously very proud of what he had accomplished in such a short time. This was the form his atonement was taking and it was hard to deny that it suited him.

Her laughter slowed down. "I believe you. I believed you the whole time. You're too easy to rattle."

"I know. I just... kind of hoped you'd be impressed. A little bit." He fidgeted bashfully as he put his badge on the end table. "I got a real job and everything."

"Aw, Dickie... I am impressed. It's just a little weird that you'd choose to uphold the law during the day while actively breaking it every night." She rested her face on her hand and leaned
forward. She was just a tiny bit impressed. "Plus being a superhero is a real job."

"It doesn't pay the bills."

"No, your dad does, trust fund baby."

"Pretty sure my dad pays your bills too."

"Well, he is sort of technically my employer. And all the equipment I use belongs to his company. And I live there." She shrugged. Being funded by Wayne Enterprises had never felt like a hand out.

"You're the best paid 'IT personnel' in the world," he said. "And you'll never have to coach some poor idiot through power cycling his computer."

"I could never work for less."

"You might never have to."

"How much money does Bruce even have?" Barbara wondered aloud. "Like, I don't even think Forbes knows."

"Infinite," Dick said, raising his hands over his head. "Bruce has infinite money. Every time he spends a dollar, that dollar is automatically replaced by two more dollars."

Her eyes widened. "That totally makes sense. I bet he's got some kind of reverse gypsy curse."

The two sat and joked and laughed until their sides ached. Dick was clearly in dire need of some relaxation that didn't involve taking his pants off and needed someone to talk to that actually knew him. He didn't seem to have a lot of friends in Blüdhaven, and even fewer people who knew what he did at night.

After a while Dick stood up and walked to the kitchen. "I'm going to grab a beer. You want something?"

She rolled her head back and smiled. "Do you have wine?"

"I think I've got some Riesling left over from New Year's."

"That sounds great."

He returned with a wine glass and a pint glass, both fuller than necessary, and placed them the coffee table.

"Coasters, Master Dick!" Barbara barked in her best Alfred impression.

"Pssht. No one under 70 actually owns coasters. It's a myth."

"I own coasters."

"And you're 80."

Barbara picked up her glass and sipped its contents. Unsurprisingly, it was delicious and tasted suspiciously like it was $500 a bottle. She threw a sideways glance his way, wondering who he'd bought this wine for initially. He'd never liked white wine.

"This is good," she said simply.
"I know." He took a long drink and put the glass back down. "Thanks for coming. It's been really nice seeing a familiar face. I didn't realize how much I missed Gotham until now."

It was obvious that he was flirting (because his lips were moving), but she ignored it. "Well, we’re all worried about you. Why have you been ignoring everyone's calls? Is everything okay?"

"To be honest, no. It's not great." His tone shifted to something slightly more solemn, but still distinctly casual.

Her brows knit together with concern. "What's wrong?"

"I just... I feel like I screwed everything up, you know? I never should have left Gotham to run the Titans. I should have stayed there and worked with Bruce."

He sighed and slumped his shoulders a little. "It was never worth it. Everything I've done has just made my life worse. I should have listened to you before, when you tried to get me to stay. Things would be different. And better."

"Don't say that. Everyone makes mistakes. You thought it was a good idea then, and no one is going to hold it against you. You can come back now."

"No, I can't. I let everyone down. I don't deserve to come back to the Cave."

"Of course you do. And we all want you to come back." She leaned forward and stroked his hair gently. He tensed under her fingers but didn't move away.

Dick was silent for a few moments.

"It’s my fault you can’t walk anymore, Babs."

"What?" she said, breathlessly. "Of course it isn’t! You--"

"I wasn’t there. If I had been there... he, the Joker – I could have stopped him!" Tears had started forming in the corners of his eyes. "If I had been there to stop him, you would still be Batgirl."

"I don’t blame you for this."

The memory was still fresh, but she didn’t let herself get emotional. "This was bad luck. Wrong place, wrong time. He would have shot you too."

"I just… if I had stayed and we’d gotten a place together, we could have lived somewhere with better security and… he would never even have gotten in."

"We might not have been together anymore."

"We would have. I just know it."

"Dick…"

"We could have gotten m--"

"Stop."

"I’m sorry. I don’t mean to, I just… you know."

"I know."

He’d let a few tears drop but had resigned himself to staring at his socks and breathing slow, deep breaths. He buried one hand in his dark hair and rubbed his scalp. Despite being the injured one, Barbara felt overwhelmingly sorry for him. She had no idea that he blamed himself for her
"Come back to Gotham with me tomorrow. Just take a couple days off work. At least check in so Alfred can stop worrying about you."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm totally sure. If staying at the manor is too weird, then you can stay with me." Barbara wished she could pull those last words into her mouth, but they were out now, so she had to stand by them.

"I- I mean..." Dick still looked unsure.

"Come on. Show that little brat what a real Boy Wonder looks like."

He nodded. "Okay. I'll do it for you."

Barbara was suddenly aware that her wine glass was already half-empty and how she was already beginning to feel light-headed. She was also aware of exactly how close Dick had moved towards her in the last couple of minutes.

"Dick..." she said, leaning away. His tendency to move close to her no matter the situation lingered long after their break-up, and it seemed to be subconscious.

His eyes flicked upwards and he chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. "Sorry. Old habits die hard," he said bashfully. "You look really pretty, though."

She put her glass down and slid back from him. "I can't do this right now."

Piling raw animal attraction on top of an emotional hang-up was not her idea of seduction. She hadn't so much as kissed anyone since she lost her legs. Even though she swore that she wasn't going to let her handicap get in the way of anything, she still found herself using it as an excuse to not have to go on the dates that Kara and Dinah kept trying to set her up on.

The worst part was she didn't even know whether she'd enjoy it when she finally made it back to that level of intimacy. She was scared that she would never enjoy sex again. She was even more scared of making that discovery with Dick.

"I'm sorry. I really am." Dick stood up and walked to his DVD rack, immediately grabbing one without really looking. "Here, let's watch a movie instead."

"Sure. Sounds good." She leaned back against the arm of the sofa and smiled. He sat down at the other end of the couch, as far from her as possible and pressed play.

Two hours later, however, the credits rolled and Dick found himself with his head on Barbara's lap while she gently played with his hair. It had happened so gradually and naturally that neither one had noticed until they'd been brought back to reality by the end of the movie. But neither one stopped.

"Babs..." he said softly after the credits finished.

"Yeah?" she said.

"I miss you."

A lump formed in Barbara's throat and she couldn't force it back down. It was as genuine and
sweet as it had ever been. He meant it. She knew he meant it. Random phrases and declarations of love from years ago bounced around her head. She could feel the fear rising in her chest and she wanted nothing more than to jump out the window and disappear from this situation. She looked around the room for a way out of the conversation and all she could think about was the underwear on the floor and the movie and the empty wine glass sitting on the coffee table.

She panicked.

"I miss you too."

She meant it too. Dick knew she meant it. Without hesitation, he pushed himself back up, lifted Barbara into his lap and kissed her. She moaned once against his lips before kissing him back, hard. His arms wrapped around her back and he pulled her closer. She smiled at the closeness and opened her mouth a little to let his tongue in. He enthusiastically accepted her invitation and stroked her palate with his tongue.

Before she knew it, he'd flipped her onto her back and had worked his way down to her neck. He knew his way around Barbara's body and was soon leaving little marks on her shoulders and nape of her neck. She groaned appreciatively, arching her back against his chest. After leaving a sizable hickey on her left collarbone he returned his lips to hers. She nipped at his lower lip and pulled him down harder on top of her.

His smile kept creeping back up and he had to force it down, lest he look goofy. He couldn't remember the last time he was this happy.

"Mint..." she muttered absently.

Her voice pulled him out of his trance. "What?"

"You still taste like mint..." she said, kissing him again.

He smirked and kissed her softly on the cheek. Her skin was warm and flushed and her cheeks were just as soft as they'd always been.

"And you still smell like oranges." He nuzzled her neck again. "You're just as beautiful as I remember."

"Dick..." she breathed as he slid his hand up underneath her shirt, lingering briefly around her waist before continuing upwards.

This felt right. Not even the most logical centers of Barbara's brain could deny that fact. Kissing Dick was like coming home after spending months at sea. She was comfortable and happy. There was nothing that could ruin this.

Her wheelchair beeped. Dick stopped kissing her and looked across the room.

"Was that what I think it was?" Dick asked.

"Yes..." Barbara put a hand to her face and groaned loudly. "Can you please pass me my communicator?"

He sighed, only a little disappointed. "Of course." He grabbed the device from her bag and handed it to her.

She sat up and held it to her mouth. "Hello, Batman," she said, hoping he wouldn't notice her less-than-rhythmic breathing.
"Oracle. You haven't checked in yet. Is everything okay?" Nothing killed the mood like Batman's demanding voice. They both knew that from experience.

Dick took the communicator from her hand. "Everything's fine, Bats," he said casually. "She's here with me."

"Nightwing." Batman sounded a little surprised, which was obviously unusual for him. "Good to hear from you."

"Same," he said. "It's been a long time."

"It has."

Awkward silence filled the air on both sides.

"I'd better go," Batman said. "Take care of yourself."

"I will," said Dick. "And I promise I'll have her home safe tomorrow."

"Fine. Batman out."

The line went dead. Dick smirked triumphantly and put the communicator back on her chair. "That went well."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why did you do that? I don't want him to get the wrong idea."

"The wrong idea about what? You having your tongue down my throat and about to take advantage of me?"

She pursed her lips together and punched him in the arm. "Stop it."

"I'm sorry, babe." He rubbed the back of his neck with mock regret. "Let me make it up to you."

"And how do you plan on doing that?"

Without a word he gathered her in his arms and lifted her off the couch with ease. He cut off her protests with a quick kiss and carried her into his bedroom. He gently put her down on the side of his bed so she was sitting up with her legs hanging off.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He pressed a finger to her lips to hush her and slowly began to work his way down her body. "Just relax. I'm going to make you feel amazing."

He planted dozens of feather light kisses on her ears, jawline, and neck, making a longer stopover on her lips before moving down again. Warm butterflies started gathering in her abdomen and spreading to her whole body. He kept going down. He pulled her shirt over her head, lavishing attention on her clavicle and shoulders. He skimmed gently over her breasts, still leaving her bra on, and trailed kisses up and down her waist and hips. Barbara let out a low moan, to which Dick responded by rubbing small circles into her hipbones with his calloused fingertips.

If the way her body was responding to Dick's touch was any indication, she would be able to feel everything he did. Her skin exploded with sensitivity as he caressed and kissed every part of her. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so good and suddenly couldn't bear the thought of being without his lips, his hands... everything. She wanted him.
As he slid his fingers along the fly of her jeans, she shook herself back into reality.

You promised yourself this wasn’t going to happen, remember?

"Dick..." she said between breaths.

"Babs..." he moaned into her skin.

"Stop."

"Hm?" He planted a kiss on her belly button and looked up at her with clear eyes. "Why?"

Because you knew he was going to take advantage of you like this. It's why you didn't want to come in the first place.

He's not taking advantage of me.

It sure looks like it.

But I want him, too.

"I..." She fell back onto the bed and covered her face with her hands. "We should stop. This is exactly why I wanted Jason to come. I told Bruce this was a bad idea."

Dick sighed and sat back on the floor in front of her. "I get it. This is weird."

Barbara shook her head. "It's not weird at all. It's the most natural I've felt in a long time. But..."

"You're not ready," he said.

"Yeah."

He sighed and pushed himself to his feet. "I understand. Let's go to sleep."

"Thank you."

"You get comfy." He grabbed one of the pillows from his bed and tossed it into the living room, then took a t-shirt from his closet and handed it to her. "Do you need anything? Should I bring your chair in here?"

"I... I'm fine. You can sleep in here if you want. I'll sleep on the couch."

"Over my dead body." He put a hand on her shoulder and kissed her forehead. "Sleep tight."

"Good night."

The door closed behind him. Barbara pulled her legs onto the bed and unbuttoned her jeans. She laid on her back and tapped her hips, suddenly feeling the effects of separation from his warm hands and lips. Her breaths slowly went from ragged to even as she took off her pants and changed into his shirt... which smelled like him. Her heart rate went up again and the warm feeling returned to her abdomen.

"Dammit..." she muttered, slamming a fist into the empty mattress next to her. This was going to be a long night.
Chapter 2

You really screwed it up this time, Grayson.

Dick sat on his balcony, looking over the living ruins of the suburb and playing with his old communicator. He hadn’t touched it, let alone turned it on, since his brief trip to Gotham months ago. It was still where he’d left it: at the bottom of his closet underneath two jackets and a pair of boots. He had no doubt that it still worked. He thumbed the activation switch for a moment before putting it down beside him.

Somewhere in the distance, there was a crash and the sound of car horns. Dick briefly considered suiting up to see if he could help out, but the sirens were uncharacteristically fast to respond tonight. In truth, he just wanted an excuse to go out. Barbara’s visit was quickly becoming too much to deal with and his limited coping skills had only gotten him up to his elbows in unintentional sexual tension.

Seeing Barbara on his doorstep had been a real surprise, no doubt. Dick knew that Bruce was going to send someone to check up on him, but he figured it would be Jason again. Or maybe Wally. She was honestly one of the last people he expected to be here, especially considering her condition. He wouldn’t have skipped town if he’d known Barbara was coming this time. Probably.

He really did blame himself for what had happened, and truly believed that his presence could have stopped it from happening. He chose to live in denial about the severity of the damage, hoping that maybe it hadn’t been as bad as her charts had read. Barbara was strong; how could something like this happen to her? Surely with all Bruce’s money he would be able to hire someone to fix her. Hell, he could buy her a new, better spine. Just think of all the ass she could kick if she had a bionic backbone.

But no. She arrived in the chair. She couldn’t move her legs. And it was all Dick’s fault.

If only he had come back to Gotham after things went south with Koriand’r. If only he’d never hooked up with her in the first place. If only he’d never moved away from Gotham to coordinate the Titans. If only he’d never become friends with Kid Flash, Speedy, Wonder Girl, and Aqualad and they’d never founded the Titans in the first place.

Then maybe he could have been there to save her from the Joker. That was his job, wasn’t it? To protect Gotham and her citizens from twisted scum like the Joker. But no, he put his sense of independence ahead of his sworn duties and moved to bloody California to play sexy teenage superhero squad with his friends. And as a result, his first love ended up like this.

And, of all people, Jason was the one who tried to avenge her. Dick couldn’t be bothered to do much more than buy her a ‘Get Well’ card, but his replacement was the one who was serious enough to try to do something about it. He’d never felt like Jason was outshining him in his own role until now. A trip back to Gotham was exactly what he needed; he was going to show Bruce and that kid that the original was still the best.

More importantly, he was going to show Gotham what she was missing.

The self-loathing was replaced with focus. He twirled an escrima stick around his fingers, but found the motion to be unsatisfying. He needed to hit something.

He grabbed his suit from the hall closet and pulled it on. Barbara’s chair sat where she left it next
to the couch and he thought better of just leaving. What if she needed it? What if she needed him? He grabbed the chair and very quietly left it next to his bed, with her communicator sitting on the seat. She stirred but didn’t wake up. He kissed her softly behind her ear before closing the door quietly behind him. Hesitantly, he switched on his communicator before sliding it under his glove. He hoped that she wouldn’t have to call him.

Blüdhaven being Blüdhaven, it didn’t take long for Nightwing to find criminal activity. He was only a few blocks from his apartment when he spotted a man in a balaclava and hoodie smashing the window of a storefront. Normally, he would have taunted the man with a few quips before knocking him out and tying him to a nearby streetlight. But this was not a normal night for Dick. He was going the Bruce route and doing it all without making a sound. It took him about thirteen seconds. There was certainly an appeal to being a stoic hero instead of the wise-cracking type.

When he was finished, he moved onto the next street and the next quick take down. Then he did it again. And again. And again.

He’d lost track of the number of 911 tips he’d called in before he found himself standing on the roof of a warehouse on the other side of town. Through the skylight, he saw the lieutenants, each with a couple goons, of two small-time gangs negotiating a deal involving the large crate of guns beside them. Only six men in total. It wouldn’t be difficult. All he had to do was drop on the guy with the biggest gun and knock him out before the guy next to him could shoot. Then wing-ding, handspring and kick, kick, kick. All the men would be down in less than 15 seconds. Easy-peasy. He’d done this a thousand times before.

And save for the bullet that went through his left shoulder and left a small hole in his costume, it went exactly as planned. He winced and knocked out the last man with an elbow to the face before making his last call for the night. He’d been unexpectedly productive, especially considering he wasn’t even planning on going out tonight. He sat on the roof, holding gauze to the wound on his shoulder until he heard sirens.

It wasn’t until he noticed the sun peaking over the horizon and staining the sky pink that he realized that he should get back home. He didn’t want Barbara to be alone when she woke up and she had always been an early riser. He booked it back through the streets below, where all the regular citizens were just beginning to wake up and begin their day. They didn’t know what he’d done, and it didn’t matter one bit.

He managed to get back to his apartment quickly, but Barbara was already awake. All the empty boxes had been cleared from his counter tops and neatly piled on the floor by the door. Coffee was brewing and Barbara was digging through various shelves and cupboards.

“Jeez Babs, it’s 6:30,” Dick said, taking off his mask and putting it on an end table.

“I noticed.” Barbara looked up from the cupboards. “Why don’t you have any food?”

“Because I’m a sexy bachelor living a bachelor lifestyle in my bachelor pad?” Dick shrugged and grinned. He pushed off his gloves and boots before stepping into his room to change.

“Well, sexy bachelor, I was going to make you breakfast. But I can’t do that with mustard and crackers. At least you have coffee.”

“I didn’t even know I had coffee. That’s gotta be... maybe from the guy who lived here before me,” he called from his bedroom.

Barbara wrinkled her nose. “Gross.” She grabbed the pot and dumped its contents down the sink.
“Nngh...” He grimaced and cursed quietly as he peeled off the top half of his suit. The bullet had been a through-and-through and didn’t hit any bones or major blood vessels, but it still hurt like hell.

“What’s wrong?” She wheeled herself towards his bedroom. “Are you hurt?”

“Nothing major.”

“Let me... just...” She slowed down as his bare back came into view. No matter how many times she saw the sweat beading in rivulets down the curvature of his shoulder blades or his back muscles flexing when he lifted his arms, she still went a little slack-jawed. She was only human. And his muscle definition had only gotten better since she last saw him. Then she saw the smear of dried blood on his shoulder. “You got shot.”

He looked back at her. “Oh. Yeah. But it’s not that bad.”

She frowned. “Sit down. Let me take a look at it.”

“I’m really fine, honest. Didn’t hit anything major. Nothing’s broken.”

“Sit. Down.”

He sighed and grabbed his first aid kit before sitting on the edge of his bed.

She cleaned the entry and exit wounds with a little alcohol before looking closer. The holes were small, obviously fired from a handgun, and already beginning to clot.

“Well, you’re going to need stitches... but no real damage. Looks like that old Grayson luck kicked in again.”

“Yay, stitches...” Dick twirled an unenthusiastic finger.

“Oh stop. It could have been a lot worse.” She patted him firmly on the head. “You got stuff for sutures in that kit?”

“Of course.” He handed her the kit and took a deep breath. “You know, I haven’t needed field stitches for years.”

She smirked. “Yeah. I guess actual danger doesn’t come up much with Teen Squad, does it?”

“Babs, please. How long are you going to hold that over me?”

“Forever. Now, get ready for a reminder of how much field stitches suck.” Her deft hands expertly threaded the needle and tied off the end. Field sutures were something every member of the Bat Clan was trained to do, but Barbara had been especially good at it. Her stitches always left minimal scarring. “Let’s do the back first.”

Dick turned away from her and grabbed a pillow for squeezing. The crisscrossing of scars all over his torso and legs said he was no stranger to emergency treatments. That didn’t mean he had to enjoy it. “Do it.”

He expected her to warn him or maybe count backwards from 3. Instead, she just started poking.

“Goddamn it, Babs.”

“Don’t be such a baby.” She finished the first and moved on to the next.
“I’m not a baby.” He pouted and gripped his pillow tightly. “It just hurts.”

“You’re lucky,” she said. “You’re only going to need three stitches. On this side at least.”

“Good.”

She finished the next stitches in silence. She cleaned the area again and taped gauze over it. She placed a hand between his shoulder blades and rubbed gently. A smile crawled across his lips as he relaxed.

“Time for the front, tough guy.”

“Boo.”

“If it’s so bad, then don’t get shot next time.”

He chuckled. “Wow, I never thought about it that way.”

“Amazing what a change in perspective can do.” She smiled back. Dick turned around and leaned forward a little. Barbara looked closely at the hole and tapped the skin next to it. “This one’s probably gonna need four or five stitches.”

“Fine. I can deal with it.”

Despite the circumstances, Dick was actually enjoying spending so much time this close to Barbara. Her hair was a little messy from sleep and she was still wearing his Gotham Knights shirt with no pants. The whole atmosphere reminded him of their old post-patrol ‘sleepovers’ when he would sneak her into his bedroom and Bruce and Alfred would pretend to not notice.

The thoughts soothed him while Barbara administered his stitches. He barely noticed her bandage him up until she gave him a soft thump on the chest.

“All done. You’re ready to spend another sleepless night jumping between rooftops and getting shot at.”

“Thanks, doc.” He grinned. “You know, I think it would heal a lot faster if you kissed it better.”

“Oh really?” She smirked before raising a hand and flicking the bandaged area.

Dick flinched. “Ow!”

She laughed once before rolling backwards. “Get dressed and pack a bag, ex-boy wonder. We’re going to the Cave.”

Considering how long it usually took Dick to get dressed, he was ready to go in next to no time. By the time Barbara changed and pulled her hair into a ponytail, Dick had showered, gotten dressed, and had stuffed a duffel bag.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were excited to go back,” she mused.

“Nah. I’m just psyched to take a few days off work.” He grabbed his mask off the table and jammed it into the bag.

“You’re bringing your costume?”

“May as well. It’s not like you guys have a crime deficit.” He pulled on his sneakers and grabbed a jacket from the pile. “You ready to go?”
“Since I got here.”

“Very funny. Let’s get out of here.”

Dick tried to push Barbara’s chair but she refused. The elevator of terror seemed significantly less menacing in the daytime, even if it still screeched like the tormented souls of the damned. The taxi ride to the airport was silent, but punctuated with the stifled giggling of Dick trying to get an arm around Barbara’s shoulders and getting punched for it. He spent most of the short flight to Gotham trying to accomplish the same thing, but ended up with her bending his index finger backwards until he surrendered.

“You’re too rough.” He pouted and cradled his finger.

“That’s part of my charm,” she said, shrugging softly. Barbara put a hand on top of his and rubbed the index finger she’d just finished torturing. They smiled quietly one another before she spoke again. “You know that going to Blüdhaven was my first time flying since...”

She didn’t need to finish. He knew. “Oh yeah? Am I that special?”

“As if,” she snorted. “First class round trip, all paid for by my generous employer? And all I have to do is talk my ex-boyf-- colleague into coming home for the weekend? No arguments here.”

“Really? All it takes is a fancy little plane ride and you’ll visit a city with a crime rate so bad it makes Gotham look like Metropolis?”

“What can I say? I’m a sucker for the legroom.”

He didn’t laugh until she started laughing. For anyone else, those kind of jokes would be off the table. Barbara seemed to make it part of the healing process.

“Is there anything I should know? Before I see him again?”

Dick would never admit that he was anxious, but he hadn’t seen Bruce for a long time and their last interaction hadn’t exactly been cordial. He was considering apologizing before they even started talking. His fingers were steadily drumming on the armrest and a ginger ale sat, untouched, on the table in front of him. He wished he’d brought sunglasses or a scarf or something to cover part of his face with.

“Why? Are you nervous?”

“No, no. It’s just... been a really long time. I’m not sure how to act.”

“Don’t act any way. Just be yourself.” She rubbed the back of his neck in a soothing rhythm. He leaned back a little and sighed. “Bruce will just be happy it’s you.”

“Are you sure?”

“He can’t wait to see you again. But you didn’t hear it from me.” She winked

“Think he’ll give me a hug?”

“You’d be lucky to get a handshake.”

He tilted his head. “Think he’ll give me a handshake?”

“Eh...” She wiggled her hand a little. “Just go in expecting to get grounded.”
“He can’t ground me. I’m an adult.” Barbara raised her eyebrow and he thought better of it. “Well, maybe he can.”

“Just wait until you’ve got a sidekick. Then you’ll know what you’ve put him through.”

“Well maybe I don’t want a sidekick.”

“We both know that’s a lie. You’ve got mentoring fatherly instinct oozing out of every pore. I’ve seen you form meaningful connections with children you’ve known for five minutes.”

Dick laughed. “I can’t help it. Kids are fun.”

“As long as they’re someone else’s kids.”

“Don’t you want a sidekick?”

“In my field, I think they prefer to be called ‘interns’.”

“What about training a new Batgirl? Jason could probably use a girlfriend.”

“Ha ha. But only if Bruce says it’s okay.”

“Why does Bruce get a say in it? Batgirl is yours, not his. It’s your mantle to give away.”

“Yeah, but... Bruce doesn’t need someone else to take care of. What happened to me really affected him, even though it wasn’t his fault. I don’t want to throw that on him again. Maybe one day. But not now.”

“You’d be a great mentor, you know.” Dick smiled warmly. “You’ve got the instinct too.”

She leaned forward and looked out the window beside him. Gotham. “We’re almost there,” she said.

“Finally...” He stretched his legs out in front of him and cracked his back.

“Finally.” Barbara rolled her eyes. “It’s a one-hour flight. You spend more time waiting for your luggage.”

“We can’t all enjoy air travel as much as you.”

“Grounded bats gotta fly somehow.”

Alfred was waiting for them at the airport and smiled gently as they approached him. He helped Barbara into the car before turning to Dick and pulling him into a hug.

“Welcome home,” Alfred said.

“Thank you.” Dick’s hands shook with something between fear and elation.

During the ride back to the manor, Barbara kept silent while Dick told Alfred about his activities in Blüdhaven and Alfred told Dick about what had happened in Gotham since he’d left. Neither one spoke with much intonation or enthusiasm, but the camaraderie was clear in their voices. The rapport was comforting and so familiar.

It was hard to not be overwhelmed by the sheer size of Wayne Manor, especially after not seeing it for a long time. It tended to shrink in memory, because there was no way anyone owned a house
that large and only kept three people in it. Surely, a man as practical as Bruce would have no use for a dozen bedrooms and a kitchen large enough to feed an army when all he ever really used was the basement.

Barbara allowed Alfred to help her back into her chair, but insisted, as always, on wheeling herself up to the house. She noticed the curtains on the second floor moving and glanced upwards slightly. Jason was peering intently out the window, his eyes locked on Dick and brows furrowed together in a determined glare. Jason noticed Barbara looking at him and disappeared behind the draperies in a blink. She tutted softly as Alfred held the door open for her.

Dick was tense. He looked to Barbara for help, but all she did was take his hand and pull him into the house behind her.

Bruce was not, as Dick had dreaded, standing in the foyer with his arms crossed and a harsh look on his face. In fact, Bruce was nowhere to be seen. Dick was somewhat relieved, but still overwhelmingly tense. Barbara squeezed his hand reassuringly.

“Relax,” she whispered.

“I can’t,” he whispered back.

“Well then,” said Alfred. “I believe it’s time for me to begin preparing lunch.”

“Wait. Where’s Bruce?” Dick hesitated a little over his words.

“Master Bruce is at the office for the morning. He will return early this afternoon for lunch.” Alfred smiled. “Don’t look so nervous.”

“I’m sorry. I just... you know.”

“Of course I do.” Alfred put a comforting hand on Dick’s shoulder. “You’ll find your room exactly where you left it.”

“Thanks... thank you. So much.”

“Think nothing of it.” Alfred walked down the hallway.

Barbara put a hand in the small of Dick’s back. “You look like you’re going to come undone.”

“This is so much more tense than I thought it would be. I wish Bruce were here so we could get the awkward part over with.”

“Aw, relax. Alfred is so happy to see you. That alone should make you feel better.”

“Honestly, I wasn’t worried about whether Alfred was going to be happy to see me. That seemed like a given; he doesn’t hold grudges like Bruce does.”

“Bruce will be fine. Stop worrying about it.”

“I just want the weird part to be over.”

“One step at a time. Let’s go to your old room. Maybe that’ll help you relax.”

“Fine.”

The elevator to the second and third floors were not a new addition, but it had gotten more use in the last six months than in the 40 years since it was installed. It squeaked a bit, but not as badly as
the elevator at Dick’s apartment. And Barbara barely ever had to use it, which she greatly preferred.

The doors opened on the second floor to reveal an angry fifteen year old boy, who began sizing Dick up the second he stepped off the elevator. The kid was tall, like Barbara had said, and had a definite air of street sense about him, like he’d spent the first half of his life in a gang. Sensing the potential threat, Dick pushed his shoulders back and kept solid eye contact with Jason. To Barbara, the situation was not dissimilar to peacocks showing off their plumage in some elaborate display of dominance.

Barbara moved herself between them before either could say a word. She wanted to be in a position to interrupt any inevitable fights that might break out.

“So you’re him, huh?” Jason raised an eyebrow and looked Dick up and down.

“I am. And I guess that makes you my substitute.” Dick crossed his arms, unconsciously mimicking Jason’s body language.

“Replacement.” Jason said evenly, only smirking a little. “It’s not like you were coming back.”

“Well here I am. Back.”

“I can’t say I’m impressed,” Jason said. “The way people talk, I thought you’d be taller.”

“So they talk about me?” Dick asked. “I can’t blame them.”

“Only to tell me how much better I am at the job. But looking at you, I guess that’s not a hard feat to accomplish.”

Dick’s eyebrows shot to his hairline before knitting themselves together with restrained fury. “I guess a brat is better than nothing.”

“Definitely better than a deserter.”

“You little--”

“Oh my god, stop.” Barbara said, exasperated. “Dick, you’ve been home four minutes. Don’t pick a fight with a teenager. And Jason--”

“I didn’t do anything.” Jason turned to her, not angry but peeved. “I just--”

“You were going to. Just knock it off.”

“Baaaaaarb--”

“Save it, Jason.”

“Just let me--”

“No. Stop picking a fight. Your job isn’t being threatened. He’s just visiting.” Barbara spoke flatly, in a tone that she knew Jason couldn’t argue with.

Jason puffed a cheek and stared at her for a moment, hoping for some kind of sympathy. After receiving none, he stomped to his room and slammed the door behind him.

“You weren’t kidding. That kid is a monster,” said Dick once the coast was clear.
“He’s showing off. But he’d never argue with me.”

“He likes you.”

“Well duh.”

“Do you like him?”

“In a surrogate big sister kind of way. And he swears at me less than he does at Bruce.”

“Adorable.”

Dick’s old bedroom had been left virtually untouched. He’d taken most of his possessions when he moved, but the various books and knickknacks he left behind were still in their places. His bed was made and the shelves were freshly dusted. It still held the faint smell of Dick beneath the cleaning products and mothballs (only Alfred would still use mothballs). Happily, Dick dropped himself onto his bed and stared at the room around him.

“This is... this is amazing. I can’t believe how familiar it all is.”

“You spent ten years in this room.”

He smiled in a way that Barbara hadn’t seen since he was in pixie boots. “I know, I know. I just never thought it would feel so much like home.”

“Welcome home, former boy wonder.”

Dick caught himself laughing, and tried hard to calm down. He was worried he might cry a little. Barbara watched him with a small sense of pride. She let him take it all in while she moved around his room, looking at what had been left behind. She hadn’t been in here for almost as long as Dick had. It was almost as nostalgic for her as it was for him.

A framed photograph sat on one of the small bookshelves. There was a crack in the glass, as thought it had been forcefully slammed down by someone. She lifted it up to her face and took a good look at the picture. It was one of the rare photographs that had been taken of Dick and Barbara not by the paparazzi, depicting the two at a Wayne Winter Gala (the year, however, was not clear). She looked about 15 or 16 in the photo, which meant Dick was probably 13 or 14. She smiled maturely, wearing something her father had purchased specifically for the event, while Dick looked bashful and a little stifled in his tiny tuxedo. Now that she thought about it, this was the first picture they’d taken together. And Dick had kept it all those years.

All that time she spent in his bedroom and she’d never noticed it before. He probably hid it when she came to visit.

“Hey Dick, look at this.”

He lifted his head and looked at her holding the photograph. “Hey... you weren’t supposed to find that,” he said with mock outrage.

“This is adorable. Look how tiny you are.” She held the picture up and giggled a little.

“Let me see.” Dick stretched out a hand but made no effort to get up. Barbara placed the frame in his hands. “Oh yeah, I remember this year. It was the first year you were Batgirl.”

“Why is it broken?” She sat down on the bed next to him.
“I, uh… I threw it into a drawer when I snuck you into my room for the first time. I didn’t want you to see it.”

“But it’s so cute!”

“And I was a teenager sneaking my girlfriend into my room. I clearly didn’t have ‘cute’ on my mind. I had to look cool.”

“Aww, teenage Dick was embarrassed to have a crush on the girl he was secretly smooching.”

“Secretly nothing, Bruce totally knew. I got an updated version of The Talk so fast after that.”

A loud guffaw escaped her lips and he soon followed suit.

“World’s Greatest Detective.” Barbara held her hands up.

“You don’t exactly have to be The Question to figure out your teenage son wants to have sex.”

“How did he tell you?”

“He didn’t say anything. Not a word. He walked up to me while I was eating breakfast and patted me once on the back. I just knew.”

“You’re pretty lucky in that regard.”

“Grayson luck.” He rolled his eyes.

“What else have you got in here?”

“All kinds of embarrassing treasures, no doubt.”

They continued looking around his bedroom and reminiscing about what they found until there was a rapping of knuckles on his door frame. Alfred stood there, almost beaming at the sight of them.

“Yes?” Dick said, still half-laughing.

“Lunch is served,” Alfred said. “And Master Bruce has returned home.”
Chapter 3

Alfred stood back and admired his handiwork. Everything, from the china to the table cloth and even the silverware had been chosen with the utmost consideration of this particular lunch's importance. In front of each chair sat a bowl of golden shrimp bisque garnished with crème fraîche and basil leaves, and an immaculately-prepared salad topped with poached pears. In the center of the table, between two vases full of orchids, was a sliced loaf of bread and various aged cheeses. A tray of marzipan petit fours and black currant tarts sat in the kitchen, waiting to be served with the coffee and tea after lunch.

It had been a very long time since Alfred put this much effort into a single meal, let alone a lunch. Truth be told, he couldn't help himself. Beneath his refined exterior was a proud man who was all too ready to have his family back together. Even though the effect would be destroyed as soon as Jason started eating, the perfection effect would last until then. He knew he couldn't control what would happen once they started talking, so he could at least control the mood when they arrived.

The first one to sit down at the table was Jason. He wore a dark red hoodie (over presumably nothing) and his hair wasn't even brushed. He looked as though he'd only just rolled out of bed moments earlier. He picked up a fork to begin eating, but Alfred tsked once and Jason dropped it immediately. Barbara and Dick arrived shortly after. Alfred gestured to Barbara's place setting, and Dick sat at his usual spot across from her. There was only one person missing.

Everyone kept silent and looked at Alfred, either too nervous or, in Jason's case, indifferent to say anything. He stepped into the kitchen and pressed the cave button on the intercom.

"Master Bruce, lunch is served."

"I'll be a few minutes, Alfred."

"You'll be no more than two minutes to get from the Cave to the dining room." Alfred released the button and turned toward the table. "Well then, can I offer anyone a beverage before we begin?"

Barbara leaned forward, looking at the glass of water in front of her. "I think we're all fine, Alfred."

There was no way of knowing how anyone would react when Bruce entered the room. Jason stared at the food in front of him, waiting for the go-ahead from Alfred to start eating. Dick briefly considered jumping out the window, anchored to reality by the feeling of Barbara's reassuring smile. He wished he could hold her hand.

As Alfred stood to page him again, Bruce's intimidating shadow filled the doorway. Even without the bat ears on the cowl, that silhouette was unmistakable. It struck as much fear into the hearts of misbehaving children as it did criminal scum. Every hair on Dick's body stood on end.

"Good afternoon," Bruce said evenly as he sat in his chair at the head of the table.

Jason grumbled something indignant about the time, but Bruce didn't even glance at him. He kept his eyes forward, looking at Alfred, who was seating himself at the other end. His movements were careful, measured, and he took great care to make sure that he didn't look Dick in the eye, which Dick noticed. No one else would have noticed how nervous his movements actually were. Alfred must have had a talk with him about his manners. He began to work his way around the table.
"Are you done your homework for the weekend, Jason?" Bruce asked rhetorically.

"Yes," Jason lied. He hadn't been to class in a week and Bruce knew it.

"Glad to hear it," Bruce lied back. "Here's hoping I don't get another call from your school."

"I can't see that happening any time soon," said Jason. "I've been downright honor student material this term."

Their relationship seemed to hinge on lies. Bruce had long since given up on 'polishing' Jason into what Dick used to be and was now trying to be happy with the fact that he was at least off the street. The kid was brilliant, but he was barely scraping by at school. Every time Bruce tried to discipline Jason, Jason ran away. It was just easier to ignore the problem.

"That's great." Bruce let the topic go as easily as he could and turned to Alfred. "This all looks lovely. Thank you."

"It was my pleasure, Master Bruce." Alfred smiled warmly. "Having this many people home is certainly worth the effort."

"I agree." Bruce nodded. "Barbara, it's been a while since you were in the house."

Barbara smiled. "I don't often have much cause to go anywhere but the Cave. Sometimes I forget how much space you have."

"You know you're always welcome."

"Of course, Bruce."

Finally, he turned to Dick. "Welcome home," he said. It almost sounded rehearsed, like he'd run a thousand things through his mind and finally settled on the most simple option.

Dick widened his eyes a little. Bruce's borderline genuine cordiality was more than a little unnerving. He was expecting brooding silence, not Wayne Gala smiles. He was even using the voice he used to address the press or make speeches at parties. He felt more like a business associate than a son. "Thank you... It's nice to be here."

"Let's eat before this gets cold."

The first half of lunch took place in relative silence, save for the clinking of silverware on china. Jason finished first, of course, and pushed himself away from the table. Alfred side-eyed Jason sharply, and the teenager folded his hands and sat quietly. Dick grinned a little at Jason, appreciating his healthy respect for Alfred and confused by his total lack of respect for Bruce.

Alfred, quite tired of the silence, spoke up first. "Miss Gordon, how is your father?"

Barbara caught on quickly. "He's doing great, Alfred. Crime's way up since the last breakout, of course, but he's in good spirits."

"That's good to hear. I hope he's not overworking himself."

"No, no. He's got a lot of people he trusts to help him out."

"Ah, yes. That's very important."

They nodded firmly at one another and repressed their grins.
“Master Dick, how are things in Blüdhaven?” Alfred turned to Dick. “I understand you’re working for the police as well.”

Jason snorted.

“Yeah…” Dick said, ignoring Jason and skewering some greens onto his fork. “It’s great.”

“Well, tell us more. It’s not every day a masked vigilante goes legitimate. Do you think you’re making an impact?”

Dick laughed half-heartedly. “I… I’m not really sure. When I got to Blüdhaven, it was so awful. I’ve been to prisons less infested with criminals.”

Barbara tilted her head. “Sounds like you were just what the doctor ordered.”

“Honestly, I don’t think I could’ve done much of anything as just Nightwing. Officer Grayson lets me pull double shifts on crime. I can even fight corruption on the force, which is definitely not something you can do on the graveyard shift. It’s like having a guy on the inside, but you’re still doing all the work.” Dick half-smiled, half-grimaced. “I’m still not sure how much I’ve actually accomplished, but I’m fairly certain the entire League couldn’t fix this place.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’m glad you’re achieving so much.” said Alfred, picking up dishes from the table and stacking them neatly in the kitchen. He disappeared briefly to put on the kettle before returning to his seat.

“I’m starting to get the appeal of working alone, I guess. No liabilities, no distractions. I can be out as late as I want. And last night I stopped a weapons deal all by myself. It’s freeing, you know?”

“I understand the feeling,” said Bruce, who had stopped using his socialite voice and was talking more like Batman. “But I’ve seen the statistics for Blüdhaven: it’s almost unsavable.”

“It kinda seems that way, yeah.”

“So I don’t see any reason why you can’t come home.”

“What!” shouted Jason.

“Bruce!” Barbara stared, mouth curved into a petite frown.

Dick leaned across the table and touched her hand to calm her. He turned to Bruce and winced a little. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m happy where I am. I just came back for a visit.”

“You know I don’t like you living there. It’s not the same as when you moved to San Francisco. You don’t have any allies there.” Bruce looked Dick up and down. “And you were shot in the left shoulder sometime in the last 24 hours. You know how difficult it is to do emergency treatments on your own.”

Dick knew that he shouldn’t have been surprised by Bruce’s apt perception, but he still was. He swallowed. “Then I guess it’s a good thing Babs was there to stitch me up.”

“She won’t be next time.”

“Now, hold on—” Barbara began.

“I’m sorry, Barbara. It was a bad idea for me to send you there alone.” Bruce twisted his lips. “I see that now.”
“Excuse me?” she half-shouted. “We were completely mature about the whole thing!”

“No, I don’t mean… never mind.” He shook his head and looked at Dick again. “Dick, please. Understand that I want you to be safe. Come home. You can still be a police officer here if you want to, I’m sure Jim would appreciate the help. I just need to know that you’re among friends.”

Furrowing his eyebrows together, Dick drummed his fingers on the table. “Since when do you care so much about who I’m with?”

“What do you mean ‘since when’? I’ve always wanted what’s best for you.”

Bruce’s voice was getting deeper by the word. Barbara had begun shrinking away from him and so had Jason. Alfred stood when the kettle started whistling and stepped into the kitchen.

“Oh right, how could I forget all those times I’ve thrown off buildings or had bombs strapped to me? Silly me, you just wanted what was best for me!”

Bruce slapped his hands down on the table and pushed himself to a standing position. He didn’t say a word but his eyes were ice cold. Instead, he just turned around and walked towards his study.

“Fuck…” Dick muttered, leaning backwards. He covered his face with his hands.

“Yeah. You really blew that one, dick-for-brains,” Jason chuckled. He went into the kitchen, grabbed a clumsy handful of desserts and walked back to his bedroom.

“Dick…” Barbara came around to his side of the table.

“Why did I say that? Ugh…” He put his hands over his face and groaned loudly. “I didn’t mean it. I… dammit.”

Barbara put her hand over his. “I know. You just got a bit upset. But you had to have known that he was going to ask you to come back.”

“I thought he’d at least wait until after lunch. Or ask me to go on a patrol with him. You know, baby steps. Not just spring it on me like that.”

“That’s fault, I’m afraid,” interrupted Alfred, setting a tea pot and three cups on the table. “I insisted that he get that bit of unpleasantness out of the way as quickly as possible.”

“Why? You had to have known that would turn out like that.” Dick reached for a cup, filled it, and handed it to Barbara.

“Because once we got that bit of unpleasantness out of the way, we could discuss your moving back in. I assume you would want your old room back, but I didn’t want to make any assumptions.”

Barbara smiled. “Sneaky.”

Alfred tutted playfully. “I believe Batman would call it ‘having a plan’.”

“You should have asked me first, Alfred.” Dick grabbed a tart from the tray Alfred had just laid in front of him. “I have a much harder time saying no to you.”

“I realize that I am much more persuasive than Master Bruce, but I thought it would mean more coming from him.” Alfred sat back down in his chair and sipped his tea.
“Does Bruce actually want me back?”

“Don’t be absurd. Of course he does.”

“Do you really think he’d send me to Blüdhaven by myself if he wasn’t really desperate to have you back?” Barbara patted him on the shoulder.

“I don’t know what to think when it comes to him.” He put down his teacup and looked towards the door. “Whatever. I’m going to go apologize.”

Alfred and Barbara nodded, silent. Dick summoned his courage, finished his tea, and followed Bruce’s path door the hall, through his study, and down to the cave. Every step, his feet got heavier and his heart beat harder. He really hadn’t meant what he said, and he blamed his nerves for it. But deep down, he wanted their relationship to be okay, even if he was living somewhere else.

Bruce, predictably, was sitting at the computer, typing away as various faces and names flashed up on the screen. For a time, Dick didn’t say anything. He gnashed his teeth and stared at the back of Bruce’s head until Bruce spun around in his chair.

“Dick.”

“Bruce.”

“I’ve been going through the Blüdhaven Police Department’s database. It looks like you’ve made a number of high profile arrests.”

“I, uh…”

“And these corrupted cops. I can’t believe so many were convicted because of you.”

“Needless to say, I am not the most popular guy at the office.” Dick laughed a little, nervously.

“It’s all very impressive. You’re doing so well on your own.”

A compliment. Bruce had just given him a compliment. Dick could barely believe his ears.

“It’s, uh… thank you.”

Bruce looked him up and down. “I realize that what I asked before was unreasonable. I can’t expect you to leave when you’re doing so well.”

“I didn’t mean what I said earlier.” Dick pressed his lips together.

“I know. We were both being rash.”

“No, really. I really appreciate the way you brought me up. I can’t imagine a better life than the one you gave me. Thank you so much.”

“It’s all right, Dick.” Bruce turned away from him and faced the computer again. “Come out on patrol with us tonight.”

“How do you know I brought my costume?”

Bruce said nothing, but Dick could have sworn that he was smiling.

“Sure, I’ll see you tonight.”
The night air was thick with pollution and anxiety. Nightwing perched atop the Second Bank of Gotham, looking over his old haunt with a mix of nostalgia and attack-readiness. His first night back and he was already doing a stakeout with Batman. Two-Face’s gang was expected to show up around 2am, but whether the Jekyll and Hyde himself was going to make an appearance was unclear. Either way, Dick could hardly deny that he was excited.

“Look at you, ex-boy wonder. Already so eager to get back in the action.” Oracle chimed in his ear. She had opted to control the situation from the Cave instead of the clock tower, since they were already there.

“You know me, driven by justice and moonlight.” He smirked. “Any buzz about the break-in?”

“None yet, but you know Two-Face. He’ll show up on time.” She hummed. “Stay alert.”

“Have you ever known me to get distracted on duty?”

“I have known you to get all kinds of distracted on duty.”

He chuckled. Even without her there in person, it still felt like before. “I’m focused. Promise.”

“I know you are.”

Across the street, Nightwing could hear Robin was whisper-shouting his issues at Batman.

“So he comes back after ditching you for five years and he can just come out with us, no questions asked?”

“Robin,” Batman said sternly. “Be quiet.”

“No. Why? Why does him coming back suddenly entitle him to patrol with us? If anything, he should be with Oracle.”

“You don’t complain when we patrol with Huntress or The Question.”

“That’s because they aren’t deserters!”

Batman looked at Robin with the kind of intimidating glare usually saved for the psychopathic criminals he drove straight to Arkham himself. Robin, however, did not intimidate easily and glared defiantly back at Batman.

“Fucking try me, old man.”

Batman opened his mouth, but two armored vans had just pulled up to the front doors of the bank and monochromatic henchmen began piling out. He made eye contact with Nightwing across the street, who nodded back at him. Batman gestured downwards and Nightwing leapt to a nearby street lamp, eyeing up the lone thug who was hanging back to guard the vans with a small machine gun.

“Robin,” Batman said in a hushed voice, “there’s an open window on the right side of the building.”

“On it.” Robin was gone before Batman could say another word.
The henchmen were already wiring low-grade explosives to the front door of the bank. There were too many guns for the caped crusaders to risk jumping in headfirst, so they had to be methodical. Nightwing had already taken care of their cover man, who was propped up against the van thoroughly unconscious, and was now making his way up behind the group. Robin had crept through the narrow side window and was sitting atop a high wall next to the front door. Batman had disappeared through a skylight on the bank’s roof.


“Yeah?” Her voice crackled a little.

“They’re here. Can you hit the silent alarm in a minute?”

“You know I can.”

“Great.”

A small boom, loud enough to echo down the street, meant that the door was open. The alarms didn’t go off, but the henchmen seemed to have expected as much. No doubt someone had disabled them earlier today. They pushed in, two sticking to the doorway to keep watch, while the rest legged it to the vault. As soon as the rest of the men were out of sight, Robin dropped down behind the guards and smashed their heads together, effectively knocking them out. Impressed as Nightwing was, it looked a little brutal.

“Damn kid, you could have been a little easier on them.”

“What? You want me to prop up some pillows before I punch a guy?” Robin retorted. He grappled back up to the ceiling. “Come on.”

“Fine.” Nightwing followed him up, tiptoeing along the wide ledges that ran along the walls.

“I told you he hits too hard,” Oracle whispered. “But his heart’s in the right place.”

“Not sure this kid has a heart,” Nightwing said quietly.

“Stop that.”

“Sorry.”

Nightwing and Robin kept silent and watched the remaining henchmen fiddle with the vault’s high-tech lock. Someone among them must have worked for the bank during the day, because they were able to open it without any issue.

And if it hadn’t been for the wandering eyes of one thug, Nightwing and Robin would have been able to take care of the rest.

“Up there! It’s Robin!” he shouted, firing his gun in their direction. All but two goons dropped what they were doing and followed suit.

Nightwing and Robin dodged the barrage of bullets by dropping into the room behind them. Robin glared at Nightwing before grabbing a few batarangs from his belt and bolting into the next room.

“I’m setting off the alarm in ten seconds, eff-why-eye,” Oracle said.

“Maybe move that up to right now. We’ve been spotted.”

“Thanks, babe.”

She swore she could hear him winking.

“Oh shit! It’s the Bat!”

The gunfire redirected itself to the other side of the bank and Nightwing safely grappled to the top of the wall. He looked down, trying to discern the location of Robin. He found him quickly (red and yellow in the dark, after all), seeing him sneaking up on the last henchmen standing at the vault; all the others had apparently gone after Batman. He saw the henchman’s ear twitch – he knew he wasn’t alone. Nightwing half-sprinted to Robin’s location, jumping between Robin and the henchman just as the man turned around. Nightwing punched him in the face once and he fell to the floor.

“What did you do that for?” Robin hissed.

“He heard you coming up behind him!” Nightwing grabbed Robin’s arm. “Come on, let’s go help Batman.”

There wasn’t much to help with. Batman had taken down the remaining henchmen quickly, despite the noticeable handicap of not being nine men. Nightwing and Robin dashed up behind the remaining two men and took them out with an identical punch to the back of the head. Batman looked half-pleased, half-annoyed.

“You were seen.”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

Sirens blared in the distance.

“We don’t have time for this,” Nightwing said flatly. “We need to get out of here.”

Batman and Robin grappled to the roof as Nightwing ran to the side window. As he pulled himself to the roof, he saw Batman scolding Robin.

“It was careless!” The voice of the Bat boomed across the night sky.

Robin folded his arms, frowning hard. He didn’t respond to anything Batman said.

“Bats, calm down.” Nightwing stood next to them. “I was my fault too. Everything is fine. No one got shot.”

Batman exhaled roughly. “I’m going to patrol the harbor.” He ran off the rooftop and disappeared into the shadows.

After a time, Nightwing said, “Sorry, kid.”

“Whatever.” Robin rolled his eyes. He looked over the edge of the building and watched the police officers drag out the half-conscious handcuffed henchmen. Nightwing sat down on the ledge and Robin did the same. “…Thanks.”

“Eleven… and twelve.” Nightwing hummed as the last of the henchmen was thrown into the back of a police cruiser. He pushed himself to his feet and brushed some debris off his legs.
Robin stood up and looked at him. Despite the age difference, Nightwing really did not have much on him in the height department. Another year or two and Robin might be taller than him. Nightwing did not much care for the thought.

“Hey Nightwing, Robin,” Oracle beeped into their ears. “I’m picking up something weird on the closed circuit cameras outside the museum. Can you go check it out?”

“Is it a break-in?” Robin asked.

“No… there’s just a lot of people gathered outside it. I can’t tell who they’re with.”

“Yeah, no problem,” said Nightwing.

They ran off the rooftop together in the direction of the museum.

There were at least a hundred people clustered in front of the museum. None of them were wearing masks or specifically-colored outfits or any kind of noticeable motif. They didn’t seem to be doing anything, just standing there. Robin checked for chemical contaminants in the air while Nightwing monitored for mind control.

“I don’t like this,” Robin muttered. “There’s no trace of Ivy’s spores.”

“And their eyes seem clear, and it doesn’t look like anyone is armed.” Nightwing flicked his mask back to regular magnification. “I have no idea what they’re doing.”

“Should we call Batman?” Robin held a finger to his earpiece. “Oracle?”

“Batman is… busy. He’s chasing a wannabe murderer through a warehouse in the harbor. He knows what’s going on and he’ll be here as soon as he can.” Oracle was furiously running the crowd’s faces through police databases. A few of them had criminal records, a few of them were government employees, and the rest didn’t provide any results at all. There were men and women from what looked like all walks of life. Many of them probably didn’t even live in the area. “Guys, I can’t find any kind of pattern with these people.”

“What should we do?” Robin furrowed his eyebrows.

“Well… they’re not breaking the law. We can’t just jump in there and start swinging. This is a perfectly legal gathering. I guess we’ll just have to wait.” Nightwing crouched down, sitting on his heels.

“It’s almost 3 in the morning,” Robin groaned. “What the hell kind of ‘legal gathering’ happens at this hour?”

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

A few stragglers joined the rest of the crowd over the next few minutes, but they still did nothing. The heavy silence amongst so many people was unnerving.

“Should I call the police, maybe?” Oracle suggested.

Nightwing mulled the idea over. “I don’t… no, not yet. We’ll wait a little. Maybe Batman’ll show up soon.”

“Don’t count on it. This guy is getting the personal touch.”

“It couldn’t hurt to call, right?” Robin said. “They don’t seem dangerous.”
“Good point. Go ahead, Oracle.” Nightwing confirmed.

There was a short period of radio silence. Nightwing and Robin kept watch over the crowd, who continued to do nothing.

“Okay, it’s in.”

Three police cars appeared after about ten minutes. Several confused-looking police officers tried speaking to the crowd, but no one even looked at them. One of them grabbed a megaphone from his car.

But before he could raise it to his mouth, the fighting started. Out of nowhere, the crowd suddenly turned in on itself and the people began wordlessly beating the living daylights out of one another. The cops jumped in to intervene, but were immediately taken into the fight. One managed to shoot a few of the people before he got knocked to the ground and had his face stomped in.

“Oh my god!” Nightwing shouted. “Oracle quick, where’s Batman?”

“He’s still on the other side of town.” Oracle stared in awe at the camera feed, watching a man in a business suit dig his thumbs into the eyes of a college-aged boy.

“We can’t wait that long!” Robin dove into the crowd before Nightwing could stop him.

“Robin!” Nightwing leapt to his feet and jumped in after him.

The crowd was a mess of limbs and blood. All around Nightwing, people were screaming and swinging wildly. He spotted Robin’s cape, but there were dozens of people between them. A woman with bleached hair bit the ear off the elderly man next to her, who responded by breaking her jaw. This was not enough to send her down, and she pulled off one of her heeled shoes and stabbed him in the throat with it.

“Put your gas mask on!” Nightwing shouted, hoping Robin could hear him through the chaos. He put his small rebreather in his mouth and grabbed a knockout gas pellet from under his glove. He threw it to the ground and watched the people nearest to him pass out almost immediately. They would feel hungover later, but at least they wouldn’t be dead.

He was able to see Robin more easily, who had apparently heard what Nightwing had said and was in the process of retrieving his own gas pellets. There was a short woman running at him from behind with a knife in her hand, but he didn’t see her.

“Robin!” Nightwing yelled.

Robin looked up and turned around in time to only catch the blade in his arm, instead of his kidney. She removed it and plunged it in over and over, her eyes blank and unfeeling. He screamed through his teeth before putting the woman in a chokehold. When she stopped struggling, he lowered her to the ground. Nightwing ran to him, tossing his other gas pellets into the crowd on either side of them.

“Are you okay?” Nightwing said, eyeing the pocketknife sticking out of his arm.

“I’m fine,” Robin said through gritted teeth. He yanked the knife out of his arm and shoved it into his belt. “Let’s fucking finish this.”

They stayed together, Robin throwing capsules into the crowd and Nightwing knocking people out with a blow to the head with his escrima sticks. There were so many. And they all just kept on fighting each other. No matter how many people they took down, more kept piling in and filling
the gaps. Somewhere behind him, Robin could hear gunfire, sirens, a loud voice. There was no way the police were equipped to handle this. So many people were going to die. He elbowed a man in the face, leaving a serious mark but not taking him down. He kicked him in the side of the head and he stayed down.

Nightwing saw a flash of black out of the corner of his eye. Thank God.

But there were still so many. As he wrestled a woman to the ground, Nightwing felt a sharp pain sinking into his right arm. A man was there, biting him. Nightwing punched him once in the gut before hitting him in the head.

More police cars showed up. More gunfire erupted from all around them. The people wouldn’t stop. They just kept screaming and attacking and killing one another. A heavy green fog rolled in from the sides. It was gas, heavier and thicker than what Nightwing had. It was enough to coat the entire square and send the remaining people crash to the ground. As he reached for his grapnel gun, he looked around. There was so much blood on the pavement. So many people with bruises and missing fingers and exposed muscle, but they were alive. So many more were dead. He could barely register what had just happened as he reached the roof of the museum.

He watched Batman throw Robin over his shoulder and grapnel them both up, before sitting Robin on the roof. Robin wasn’t unconscious, but he was bleeding fiercely from all kinds of cuts. Nightwing noticed a several other wounds on his body and felt blood spewing from gash on his forehead. Batman was looking rough too. All of their costumes would need repairing.

“Batman…” Nightwing whispered. He didn’t know what to say.

“What happened?” Batman said gruffly, but concerned.

Robin fell onto his back. “Everything. Everything happened all at once. They just started… killing each other.”

Nightwing nodded.

“That’s…” Batman trailed off. He pressed the call button for the Batmobile. “We need to go back to the Cave.”

Robin and Nightwing said nothing.
When she heard the Cave door open, Barbara immediately wheeled herself to the area next to the Batmobile’s parking spot. Alfred had run up the stairs to get the extra first aid kit, but assured her that he would be back very soon. The Batmobile came in first, carrying Batman and Robin, followed by Robin’s motorcycle, driven by Nightwing. The Batmobile’s doors opened with a hiss and Batman half-dragged Robin out and pulled him towards the medical bay. Nightwing dismounted the motorcycle, keeping a hand tight on the bite mark on his arm, but blood was still seeping through his fingers. There was a blank expression on his face that was obvious even through his white-out lenses.

Stumbling slightly, he made his way to where Barbara was but never looked directly at her. He dropped his mask and helmet on the floor next to him before falling to his knees and wrapping his arms around Barbara's waist, hugging her tight.

“Dick…” she said softly. Blood leaked from a gash on his forehead onto her shirt, but she found it hard to care. “You're alive.”

He groaned and sat back on his heels but didn't look up. Everything was dawning on him all at once. He didn’t seem to know what to do or how to begin.

Jason dropped himself on the gurney with a squeak and a grunt as Bruce inspected his wounds. There were more than a usual week or two’s worth of cuts and bruises. Jason already knew that he had at least two broken ribs and a sprained wrist in addition to the knife wounds up his arm and shoulder blade, but he wasn’t looking forward to the grand total after his check-up. He could hardly even wrap his head around the idea of what had happened, let alone the sum of his and Dick’s injuries. Alfred rushed into the Cave with a large first aid kit in his hand. He immediately went to Jason and Bruce readily stepped out of his way. Before walking away, Bruce grabbed a bottle of painkillers out of the kit. He took two and handed the bottle to Jason.

“Let me see.” Alfred helped to take off Jason’s mask and gloves so he could inspect his wounds more easily.

Jason lifted his arms and pulled off the top half of his costume. The cuts were deep. Barbara had to keep herself from gasping at the stab wounds. Bruce looked away.

“Bruce…” said Barbara, taking Dick’s hand and moving towards the others. “What happened out there?”

“I have no idea.” Bruce walked to his computer and began to pull up the police records. He pushed back his cowl; Barbara had never seen him look so old. According to the GCPD’s record, the death count was currently sitting at 27 people. There was no doubt that the total count would be higher. “But we need to find out how to stop it from happening again.”

“We don’t even know who – ow!” Jason winced as Alfred starting cleaning the wounds. “Who did it. Or why.”

“I'll find out,” said Bruce. His fingers flew over the keyboard as streams of information scrolled over the computer screen. For anyone not used to the way his computers worked, it would have been nigh impossible to read.

“Let me help,” said Barbara, touching a piece of Dick's hair that had fallen forward. “I'll fix you up.”
“Yeah... yeah.” Dick hesitantly pushed himself up. He shook his head once, forcing everything down, and once more, so he could concentrate.

He sat on the bench next to the gurney while Babs grabbed the smaller first aid kit from next to the computer. It wasn’t as fully-stocked as the one Alfred had, but she knew it would be enough to take care of Dick’s injuries. She put the kit next to him and opened it up.

“Take the top of your suit off.”

She began digging through the kit, pulling out swabs, bandages, and closures of all kind. She had only done a basic visual assessment of Dick’s injuries, so she took out more than she thought she needed.

“Oh, say that again but slower.” Dick smiled cheekily, but the blood smeared across his face really wasn’t doing it for Barbara. All it took was a raised eyebrow and he took off his gloves and lifted his top off.

She winced at the mottled bruising and the multitude of new wounds that would no doubt turn into scars soon. “Well, at least the bullet wound from yesterday seems to be healing nicely.”

“One life-threatening injury at a time,” he said flatly.

They paused as Jason let go of a sound that was half-growl, half-scream. Alfred swabbed each new cut and scratch with alcohol, but was most interested in the unnatural shape Jason’s rib cage was taking.

“What happened here?” Alfred asked.

“I got kicked in the chest with steel-toed boots,” said Jason between swear words. “A lot.”

“My word...”

Alfred began unrolling linen bandages around Jason’s ribs and firmly reshaping his torso. Jason cursed and clenched his teeth, but he still wasn’t crying. It wasn’t unusual for him to pull the macho card, but any boy his age going through this should have at least been crying. Alfred couldn’t tell if it was out of pride or shock, but he knew that Jason would be in even more pain tomorrow. He did a mental count of the painkillers he had on hand and hoped it would be enough between the three of them.

“Jason's not looking so great,” said Barbara quietly. She didn’t want Jason to hear her.

“You should see the other guy...” Dick joked weakly. “Well, guys. Well... random assortment of people.”

She gently cleaned the gash on Dick's forehead. “How did this happen?”

“I don't remember. It all happened so fast.”

She frowned, applying some butterfly closures to the wound. “You all look terrible. Watching that was... it was terrifying. I was so worried about all of you.”

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Sorry. Didn't mean to make you worry.”

She blushed and quickly moved on the next injury. Alcohol, bandage, and repeat. Nothing seemed too serious, there was just a lot of it. That is, until she looked at the gaping bite mark on his arm. “Oh my god.”
“Oh, yeah. They were crazy.”

“When was the last time you got your shots?” She knew it probably wasn’t the first thought on his mind, but she wasn’t exactly thinking clearly.

“Why? You got any rabies vaccines lying around?”

The bite was jagged and rough, man seemed to have bitten him with the intent of eating his skin like some brainwashed zombie. Barbara gingerly wiped the area down, assessing the damage and being careful to not push it open further.

“Apart from surface wounds, does anything else hurt? Sprains, strains? Breakages?” She grabbed a needle for stitches from the kit. She could tell that even she wouldn’t be able to reduce the scarring for the bite – he was missing a sizeable chunk of skin.

“I honestly cannot tell the difference between bruises and internal damage right now.” Though overloaded with sensory information, he decided it was probably best to check now. He twirled his right foot, then his left. “Ankles are fine, though.”

“Just… let me know if I need to make a sling or get you a crutch or anything.”

“Of course.” Dick sat silently, assessing his joints and muscles from the bottom-up, while Barbara worked her way around the bite. It hurt, yes, but he had been in enough pain tonight to easily ignore it and just watch her work. He liked the way she bit her lip when she concentrated and the way her glasses slid down her nose. “You look cute.”

“Not now,” she said, pulling a suture shut.

“Sorry.”

Dick watched as Alfred wrapped bandages around Jason’s abdomen. His right arm was in a sling and fresh purple bruises were forming all over his arms, torso, and face. His stab wounds had been stitched and bandaged already – Alfred was always so quick – and his anger was looking more and more like sleepiness. His head bobbed forward and he kept shaking himself awake. If he didn’t get to bed soon, he was going to fall asleep in the cave.

Barbara finished her last stitch and began wrapping a bandage around Dick’s arm. He had a litany of small cuts all over his torso, but they could all be dealt with using butterfly closures. He had a painful-looking black eye that had begun to swell in the last few minutes.

“How’s your eye?” she asked.

“Hurts about as much as anything else.” Dick shrugged.

“Perfect.” Barbara made quick work of Dick's torso, cleaning and closing as necessary, before wrapping a bandage around his forehead and swollen eye. At this point, half of his exposed skin was being held together with linen and adhesives.

Alfred finished patching Jason up and was helping the boy to his bedroom. He moved stiffly and slowly, like a neglected robot, and he seemed to be having trouble staying upright. Barbara was concerned, but didn't have the resources to help Alfred get him to the elevator.

“Good night, Jason,” said Barbara. She drew her brows together with worry when she saw him stumble over one of the training mats. She wished she could put an arm around him to help Alfred.
“‘Night, Barbie,’” he said dejectedly, staying up despite the overwhelming need to lie down.

She turned to Dick. “Poor kid,” she whispered.

“He really got the worst of it.” Dick sighed. “I couldn’t get to him in time.”

“I saw… well, not everything. But I saw a lot. They were on him in no time flat.” She rubbed Dick’s shoulder that wasn’t stitched up. “Thanks for being there for him. I can’t imagine what would have happened if her were there alone.”

“What’s a big brother for?” His voice was halfway between sarcastic and genuine.

Bruce had finished at the computer. He turned in his chair before standing up and crossing the room to tend to his own wounds. His weren’t nearly as bad as Jason’s or Dick’s, but he was still looking worse for wear.

“Any news?” Barbara asked, hoping to coax something out of him.

Bruce didn’t look up. “The count’s gone up, but there’s still no news as to why it all happened. I’m change into my spare suit and go over to GCPD so I can be there for an autopsy.”

“How about you wait until Alfred or I take a look at you?” This was a classic Bruce misdirection; avoiding first aid treatment so that Alfred couldn’t make him stay home. Everyone knew the routine, but no one knew how to actually make him stay.

Bruce exhaled roughly, impatiently. “I’m fine. I need to get going.”

“You should rest,” said Dick. He remembered the way Bruce would pull this act, but it was more of a script than action. “It’s been a rough night for everyone.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Bruce. “We need to investigate.”

“Bruce, I—” Dick started.

“You don’t need to apologize. There was nothing you could have done. None of this was your fault.”

“But Jason…”

“Jason will be fine. He’s strong and so are you. There’s no point in blaming yourself.”

Dick swallowed once.

Bruce stood up and crossed the room to where he kept his spare gadgets and suits. He didn’t look at them again. There was a minute of awkward silence. Barbara chewed her lip while Dick glanced sideways at her.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” said Dick.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Bruce resumed his furious typing.

Barbara took his hand and led him towards the elevator.

“He’s right, you know,” said Barbara. "It wasn't your fault."

“I just… I feel really bad about Jason.” Dick sighed.
“Jason will be fine. You’ll both be fine.”

“I know we will. But thank you.”

“You’re looking pretty wiped. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let's go.”

He kept his hand firmly around hers as they rode up the elevator together in silence. His head throbbed and every muscle in his body wanted him to sleep, but he willed his eyes open for just a little while longer.

Alfred was stepping out of Jason’s room as they exited the elevator.

“I took the liberty of preparing a guest room for you, Miss Gordon,” Alfred said softly, not wanting to wake Jason as he pulled his bedroom door shut. “Two doors down, on your left.”

“When did you have time to do that?” She tilted her head.

“Oh, earlier this evening. When everyone was out.” Alfred quietly crossed the hallway to them.

“You didn’t have to do that. I was going to go home.” Barbara smiled as his genuine concern.

“Nonsense. It’s late and you’re always welcome here.”

“Thank you.” She paused for a moment. “How’s Jason?”

“He’s going to be off patrol for a while, which he’ll complain about. School as well, but I don’t imagine he’ll kick up much fuss about that.”

“That's our boy.” She laughed weakly. “Bruce is refusing to let me look at his wounds. He says he's going to change and go to the GCPD. Can you make sure he's at least bandaged up before he goes? You know he doesn't listen to me.”

“Of course.”

Dick wobbled a little, but caught himself.

Barbara frowned, putting a hand on his back. “That’s my cue to get this one to bed. Let's go. Good night, Alfred.”

“Good night.” Alfred stepped into the elevator.

Barbara held Dick’s hand as he half-sleepwalked into his old room. She pulled back the fresh bed sheets and helped him to sit down.

“Pajamas?” she asked, reaching for his duffel bag.

“Nng.” He yawned and flopped backwards.

“Come on, Dick. You can’t sleep in your suit.”

He groaned and kicked his boots off. “I know, I know.”

She unzipped his bag and put it on his lap before leaving the room, closing the door behind her.

“Babs, wait.”
“What?” She turned around.

“Just… hang on a second.” He jumped into his pajama pants and opened the door, allowing her back in.

He sat on the edge of his bed, half-pajama pants and half-bandages. He was pale from blood loss. He had dark circles of exhaustion under his visible eye. He was more bandage than man and pulling an impeccable Negative Man impersonation.

And he still looked great somehow.

Barbara felt another mistake coming on.

“Can you, uh, stay with me?”

She considered it for longer than she cared to admit. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Of course it isn’t.” Dick grinned. “This is us we’re talking about.”

She twisted her lips to the side a little. “There isn’t an ‘us’. You know that.”

He chuckled. "No, no. Of course not. But I would really appreciate your company right now.”

“Dick...”

“I don't mean it like that.” His eyes flicked down, then back up. “I don’t even think I could right now, to be honest. But I just need to be with you. Please.”

Barbara started towards the door, but stopped. “You promise... there's no ulterior motive?”

“I almost died tonight. My only ulterior motive is being close to you.”

Her heart fluttered a little as she felt herself falling for his sweet words again. She nodded once, very slowly, and Dick smiled. She closed the door and rolled to the other side of the room, where she discarded her jeans and socks onto the floor. She pulled the elastic from her hair and put it on the mostly empty bookshelf. Dick's bed was higher than she was used to, so he helped her up. He held her in his arms for a moment before helping her lie down.

Lying next to him in his bed was so familiar and comfortable. Even though she hadn’t slept in this bed for years, she could still see all the nights she had and sighed inwardly as she sank into his pillow. She faced away from him and he wrapped his arms around her tightly, pulling her close to his body. Barbara had to stop herself from smiling stupidly, but even she knew that she got into bed with him a bit more quickly than she should have. She couldn’t help herself anymore; he was wounded and exhausted and he needed her. She couldn’t deny the opportunity to sleep beside him when he was in this shape. It had been so long since she’d been with anyone and Dick still felt like the natural choice so many years later.

And that’s when she knew she had it bad for him again. Last night she could blame on distance and alcohol and opportunity. She might even be able to blame tonight on his injuries and the fear of him almost dying, but she knew she couldn’t. She hated herself for letting this happen so quickly, but deep down she knew it was inevitable from the start. She wanted to be with him again.

“Good night, Babs,” he whispered.

“Good night, Dick,” she whispered back.
He kissed her on the back of her neck and dropped into sleep almost instantly. She wasn’t far behind him.

There was a firm rap on the door. Dick opened the eye that wasn’t swollen shut and tried to lift his head, but it was too heavy.

“Breakfast is in half an hour.” Alfred called from the other side of the door.

“Thanks, Alfred…” Barbara muttered sleepily, not realizing fully where she was.

Dick tightened his arms around her chest and waist and pulled her closer. “Good morning,” he said softly.

It took Barbara half a second to remember whose bed she was in and whose arms were wrapped around her. She was a little bit surprised, but only a little bit. She was mostly happy. Being in bed with Dick after a night like the one before was the best she could have hoped for.

“Good morning,” she murmured. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. She turned herself over in his arms so they were nose-to-nose. She’d almost forgotten he shape he was in, the swelling and bruising of which had worsened overnight. “Oh, you look terrible.”

“And you have morning breath.” He pouted with mock offense. “How’s that feel?”

She lifted her hands and touched around the uninjured parts of his face. “No, really. You’re all bruised and swollen. I’d be surprised if you could get your mask on. Bruce is totally going to bench you.”

“Pssht.” Dick rolled his visible eye. “I feel fiiiine.”

To demonstrate his point he lifted his arm and flexed it, only to wince at the de-numbed pain of his stitches.

She tilted her head expectantly.

“We’ll just… see how I feel later.” He dropped his arm back over her shoulder and pulled her into a tight hug that must have at least irritated his chest injuries. “Thanks for staying with me last night.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, gently playing with the hair on the back of his neck. “It wasn’t so bad.”

“Oh yeah?” He kissed behind her ear.

“Yeah.” She put her hands on his chest and separated them just a little. “We should get up. Breakfast. People will talk.”

“Let them talk…” Dick dipped his head down slowly, planting kisses along her jaw and neck.

She laughed a little in her throat. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“Dick…” She took a sharp intake of breath as his lips grazed her throat.
He sighed. “I know. I’m just not really eager to be apart from you now that I’ve got you in bed.”

“So that’s how it is.” She kissed him once below his swollen eye. “Maybe we can talk about this later.”

“This’ what?” He grinned mischievously.

She shushed him once and pushed herself into a sitting position. She looked disdainfully at the shirt she’d been wearing since yesterday. “Hm.”

“What?” He sat up and looked over her shoulder.

“I don’t have another change of clothes. I only brought the one set when I picked you up.” She frowned.

“Guess you’ll have to have breakfast naked.” He shrugged as though that were commonplace.

“Funny.”

Dick swung his legs over the side of his bed and walked to his old dresser. He opened the drawers one-by-one, which were almost entirely empty. When he reached the last drawer he hummed happily to himself. “Bingo.”

“What?”

“I still have some of your old clothes in here, from before.” He tossed her a striped sweater and a pair of socks. “From our sleepovers.”

“Seriously?” She wrinkled her nose as she picked up the clothing, which, though smelling a little dusty, was cleaner that what she had with her.

“It’s not like you ever brought them home. You were always like ’just in case’. And I guess now is that ’just in case’.” He smirked. “It’s almost as though you planned this little rendezvous all those years ago.”

“Right. Of course.”

“Baaaaaabs,” he sang. “You’re always so prepared.”

“Ugh.”

“And you get to feel nice and fresh because I still have-” A pair of mint green panties landed on the bed next to her. “Underwear!”

“Dick!” She blushed ferociously, snatching the underwear into her hands. “Why do you still have these? Oh my god… did Alfred see these?”

“Oh, probably. They seem clean.” Dick bent over and opened his duffel bag, digging for something to put on. He found a t-shirt and jeans combination that seemed good enough and faced away from Barbara to get changed.

Face on fire, Barbara looked away from Dick and began to get dressed. The clothes had definitely been laundered since she abandoned them in Dick’s room years ago. She did her best to banish the thought of Alfred washing her clothes; the embarrassment would kill her if she had to think about it the next time she saw him.
The sweater was slightly too tight, and she couldn't remember if this is how she actually wore them when she was 20, or if she'd put on weight. The uncomfortably clean underwear confirmed it was the latter. It certainly wasn't that she was unhappy with how she looked now, but she knew she was getting less exercise now than she was then, and silently resolved to start a training regime with Dinah later. In the meantime, she couldn't wait to get home and put on something that she knew fit her.

“Do you have a hairbrush?” she asked, pulling on her socks.

“Maybe.” Dick pulled his nightstand drawers open, digging through old comics and spare change. “Comb okay?”

“Yeah.” She took it from his hands and hurriedly detangled her hair before tying it back up into a lose ponytail. “Okay, I’m good to go.”

“Good, I’m starving.”

The air in the hallway was cold and still. The door to Jason’s disaster of a room was wide open, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. Dick and Barbara took the elevator to the main floor and found Alfred and Jason sitting at the dining table. Bruce was noticeably absent, but it was not in the same anxious way that he had been yesterday.

“Did Bruce come home?” Dick glanced up at the clock. 9:30. He couldn’t remember the last time he slept in so late.

“He went to the office after the police department.” Alfred stood up and walked into the kitchen.

“It’s Sunday.” Dick rolled his eyes and sat down in his chair.

Alfred returned with two plates in hand and set them in front of Dick and Barbara. Cheese and spinach frittatas. Alfred's favoured meal for the night after rough fights: easy to chew, nutritious, and high tier comfort food. “He said he had to pick something up. I don't imagine he'll be long.”

Jason was eating quietly and slowly. More bruises and swelling had cropped up overnight, and he was breathing shallow breaths to ease the stress on his rib cage. He winced every few seconds, apparently at a different source of pain.

Barbara put down her fork and leaned forward. “Are you all right, Jay?” she said softly.

“No.” He kept chewing methodically. His voice was even, but angry. “I got stabbed. I have broken ribs and a concussion. I thought I was going to die. We don't even know what caused that fight. The body count is insane. The people who didn't die can't remember anything. And I'm not even allowed to go out and help.”

“It's okay—” she began.

“Okay?!” Jason slammed his first down on the table. “Okay? Do I look 'okay'? Are all those dead people 'okay'?”

“I'm sorry. I didn't think...”

“No, you didn't think. That's your problem. You're so fucking smart, but you never actually think.”

“You little—” Dick stood up.
“Master Jason—” began Alfred.

“No, Alfred, let me just—” said Barbara.

Jason grunted, then looked down. “Sorry. I... I didn't mean that. I'm in a lot of pain.” He picked up his fork and began eating again, avoiding eye contact. He made it clear the conversation was over and no one dared to start it up again.

“We... We're gonna figure this out. I'll call my dad and Bruce will be home any minute.” Barbara patted Jason's uninjured shoulder and turned to Alfred. “Speaking of which, I need to go home at some point today and pick up my laptop.”

“I'll drive you,” said Dick almost too quickly.

“With what? Jason's motorcycle?”


“When was the last time you even drove something with more than two wheels?” Barbara queried.

“It's been a while, yeah, but it's not a big deal. I'll borrow one of Bruce's cars.”

Alfred cleared his throat.

“I'll... pay for a taxi?”

“I don't need you to come with me in a taxi. I'll be fine on my own.” Barbara picked up her coffee and took a long drink. “It'll be a quick trip anyways. Shouldn't be more than an hour.”

“Well that's fine... Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?” Dick's voice adopted a hopeful upward inflection.

“You would be of greater use here, Master Dick,” said Alfred. “Master Bruce will be home soon and I'm sure he'll have a lot for you to do.”

“I just...”

“Want to go back to the clock tower and finish what you started last night? We know.” Jason rolled his eyes.

Barbara buried her face in her hands. Alfred's eyes popped.

“We all know she was in your room last night. What did you do? Guilt her into sleeping with you?”

“Look here you brat, you do not have the right to speak to me like that!” Dick leaned across the table, half-shouting.

Jason wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before standing up. “And you don't have the right to come back after what you did to her and act like everything is fine again. Bruce has been trying to get you back here for months, and when you finally do, you think you're entitled to her or something?”

“That's not what happening and you know it!”

“Really? Is that why, when all this bullshit is going on, you're more concerned with getting back into her pants than helping us out? I know all about your reputation. You're not fooling anyone.
Hurt her again and I'll fucking kill you.” Jason stomped out of the dining room and down to the Cave.

“Jason, wait!” yelled Barbara. He ignored her.

“I will, just, um...” Alfred glanced around the room erratically before grabbing the dirty dishes off the table and running them into the kitchen.

Dick huffed loudly. “Who does that delinquent think he is?”

Barbara stayed silent.

“I can't believe he has the gall to—”

“I'm going to go talk to him.” Barbara wheeled away from the table and toward the door.


“Because he's upset.”

“So am I.”

“You'll get over it.”

Jason was lying on the ground next to his motorcycle, tinkering with something or other. His right arm was still in a sling, so his work was slow and clumsy at best. His brows were furrowed with frustration and he was scowling hard, but from Barbara’s angle he looked like a grumpy toddler.

“Jason?” she said tentatively.

“Barbie,” he grunted.

“What on earth was that back there?”

He didn't look up. “I calls 'em like I sees 'em.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You and I both know that the only reason he's here is you. Specifically, you in bed. More specifically, living up to both his name and reputation.”

She frowned. “That's not fair.”

“No, it's not. It's not fair to me, or Bruce, or Alfred, or you, or any of the people who died last night. We've got a crisis going on and he's spending his time flirting with his ex.”

“He's under a lot of stress. We all are.”

“How can you be defending him right now? After all he’s done since he came back? For all the good it’s done, he may as well have stayed in Blüdhaven.”

Barbara sighed heavily and relaxed her shoulders. “It takes two to tango, Jay. I'm just as much at fault as Dick is.”
“You're better than that.”

“Better than what? Attraction? It happens to everyone.”

“But you shouldn’t be falling for it.”

“It's not a bad thing. I know you heard all about the break-up and all the afterwards drama, but we really were in love once.” She knew that well on her way back to the feelings she had once had for him. She probably should have been fighting it a little harder, for everyone's sake. Now wasn't the time, especially with everything going on.

“But you can do so much better than someone like him.” Jason dropped his wrench back into the toolbox to punctuate his point. “And you deserve it.”

She smiled and leaned forward. It didn't take the world's greatest detective to figure out Jason had a crush on her, she’d practically watched him grow up, but she did her best to be gentle with him. “We're not getting back together. There's a lot of tension, sure, but that's to be expected.”

“You promise?” He didn't look at her, but he sounded hopeful.

“For the time being, yes. For the foreseeable future? Who knows. Weirder things have happened.” She was being honest with him. Relationships were definitely off the table for her at the moment, until she was able to fully come to terms with what had happened. Dick didn't even seem to be that interested in dating, for that matter, and was being just as physical as was expected from him. There was nothing wrong with their current status, at least for now. She certainly wasn't about to say no to something good.

This half-promise seemed to satisfy Jason. “Can I offer some advice?”

“Of course.”

“At the very least, make him wait for it.” Whether or not Jason was a virgin, Barbara had no idea. His frankness with the subject suggested experience, but his lack of use of real terms pointed to innocence. Either way, it was hilarious when he talked like this.

“Jason!” she said with put-upon prudence.

He laughed, which obviously caused him a good deal of pain, but he didn't stop. He sat up and leaned forward. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Following me. I didn't mean what I said about you. You're the smartest person I know, for real.”

She mussed up his hair. “You brat.”

“Nerd.”

The air fell silent when Bruce’s familiar footsteps echoed into the cave. He descended the stairs, followed by Dick and Alfred, each wearing a solemn expression. Jason and Barbara both looked up at him as he spoke.

“We’ve got a problem.”
Chapter Notes

I want to apologize for how long it's taken to get this chapter up. It's been done for months, but I've been in the hospital since July. I'm perfectly fine now and I'm hoping to get the next two chapters out fairly soon. Thanks for reading!

If Dick was moving too fast, surely he could not be blamed for it. After all, he was in increasingly close quarters with the woman who years earlier had been his everything. For men like Dick Grayson, feelings like that do not simply disappear. He still had residual feelings from every relationship he'd even been in, no matter the length or circumstances of the break-up. He was even cordial when it came to friends with benefits and one night stands. Dick was friendly. Dick was intimate. Dick was romantic.

When Dick fell in love, it was hopelessly. He had been in love many times and was familiar with the fuzzy feelings that came when he did. When Dick fell in love with the same person for a second time, it was all-consuming. But Dick had never fallen in love with the same person for a second time until last night.

Barbara was a magnificent exception as far as he was concerned. They had been reunited for less than 48 hours, but he may as well have never left. Despite his default tendency to associate sex with love, he didn't perceive his feelings as impure or casual. He wanted her back and he wanted everything that went with it, including sex.

And he didn't see anything wrong with that.

However, being criticized for being in love by some punk who didn't even know him was something he simply could not tolerate. Barbara had to understand that, right? He was defending his honour and hers when he yelled at Jason.

He crossed his arms and stared at his coffee cup. The coffee inside was probably only lukewarm at this point, but he was never one to waste food. As he gulped the cool, bitter liquid, he wished that Bruce had better taste in charity cases. He wasn't looking forward to staying much longer if he had to keep dealing with Jason. Maybe he'd take Barbara up on her offer of letting him stay with her. He would have to put up with more of Jason's taunting before and after, but the middle would be perfect.

Then again… he wanted to be better than his old self for her. Despite his strong dislike for Jason, he owed it to Bruce to stick around for at least the duration of this case. It would be better for both of them if he calmed down. No more alcohol-assisted making out or coerced pity cuddling. She knew how he felt, and he was fairly certain she felt at least somewhat the same.

A date, he decided. He would ask her on a date after this case. It would be the perfect way to show interest in her as a person again, instead of as an ideal.

He set his cup down, only a few drops remaining at the bottom, as Alfred entered the dining room.

“Sorry,” Dick said immediately, wanting to prevent the awkward scenarios he was currently running through his head.
Alfred sat down at the chair across from him. “You've nothing to apologize for.”

Dick smiled. He could always rely on Alfred to be on his side.

“Although I must insist that you and Miss Gordon sleep in separate rooms for the remainder of your visit.”

Jokingly offended, Dick agreed. “You wound me with your suspicions.” The two laughed.

The front door opened. Dick lifted his head towards the sound, but neither he nor Alfred stood up. Bruce almost never used the front door.

Bruce looked into the dining room. Despite having neither slept nor showered, he looked to be in fine shape. This came as no surprise to Dick, as he was nearing peak Batman functionality himself, but it still felt like he was cheating. He had to sleep sometime, right?

“Welcome home. Would you like some breakfast?” Alfred asked.

“If it's not too much trouble.” Bruce sat down next to Dick, which was not his usual spot. Dick wondered if Bruce even noticed.

Alfred stood and hurried into the kitchen to prepare what remained of breakfast.

“What's the story?” Dick said evenly.

Bruce reached into his breast pocket and placed three tiny microchips on the table. “These were found under the scalp of every victim.”

“What do they do?” Dick squinted and leaned closer. One was still smeared with blood.

“I ran some tests with what I have at my office. As far as I can tell, they emit a low-frequency hypnotic wave and allows for the transmission of simple instructions. Which is most likely why the usual signs for mind control weren't present -- it's tech, not magic.” Bruce rested his chin on one hand. “But I need to run more tests first. I'll have Barbara do the same.”

“Good idea.”

Alfred reentered the room with a frittata for Bruce and two cups of coffee. He sat across from them.

“Sir, I must insist you eat before running any other tests.”

“Yes Alfred.” It was rare to see Bruce actually agreeing to slow down. Then again, the man hasn't slept for more than a day. At this rate he might even take a nap. He ate his food in small careful bites. “Where are Jason and Barbara?”

“The Cave,” Alfred said simply.

“Why?”

“Jason had a tantrum.” Dick coughed and took a long drink from his coffee.

“Excuse me?” Bruce stopped lifting his fork and glanced sideways.

“It's nothing.”
Bruce looked across the table. “Alfred?”

“A minor spat, sir. Nothing to worry about.”

“Is that right?”

“Boys will be boys.”

Bruce frowned. He had secretly hoped that his Robins would get along better. He knew Jason wasn't the easiest person to get close to, but he assumed that Dick's glowing positivity would have cancelled that out. “And how are his injuries?”

“Fractured ribs, concussion, sprained wrist, multiple severe lacerations.” Alfred sighed and put his teacup down. “I recommend that he stay out of the field for at least two weeks.”

“I don't imagine he's happy with that.”

“Whatever gives you that idea?”

Bruce turned to Dick, looking at his bandaged face and stitches. “You aren't looking so well, either.”

“What? No. I'm fine, I swear.” Dick smiled dismissively. “I'll be back on the streets in time for evening patrol.”

Bruce looked him over again. “Forget it. You're benched too.”

“What? I said I'm fine. I can totally help out,” Dick argued. Truthfully, he didn't really want to go out tonight with his eye the way it was. With Jason benched, though, it meant Bruce would be going out alone.

Bruce didn't respond. The conversation was over. He'd finished his breakfast and coffee and returned his attention to the microchips. He lifted one to his eye and squinted at it before handing it to Dick. “What does that look like to you?”

Dick held the chip close to his face, trying to discern some kind of engraving on it. He could barely make out an ornate letter 'S' etched into the tiny metal surface.

“Shit.”

“We've got a problem.”

Barbara and Jason looked up from where they were talking.

“What?” said Barbara.

Bruce quickly walked across the Cave and dropped one of the chips into Barbara's palm. “Mind-control chips. I think they're the work of Strange.” He briefed her on what he already knew and she followed him in a way that only she could.

Barbara groaned. “I'll head back to my place right away. You get started on the Bat Computer and let me know what you get.”
“Right.” Bruce strode to his computer, immediately getting to work.

“Do you want me to...?” Dick half-mumbled, wanting to be helpful but not wanting to appear over-eager.

“Mm?” Barbara, already halfway to the elevator, paused. “What?”

“Grab your bag for you?” he said quickly, avoiding the temptation to ask to sleep at her place.

“Right. Yeah, thanks. I'll meet you out front.”

Dick stomped up the stairs, leaving Bruce and Jason in the Cave while Alfred called Barbara a taxi. As he stepped into the room in which they'd spent last night, he was immediately assaulted by the smell of her. He'd forgotten the lingering scent she left after spending the night with him. Shaking off the feeling, he grabbed Barbara's messenger bag and stuffed it with the clothes she'd left on the floor next to his bed. Now that was a familiar sight: socks and shirts of the feminine persuasion scattered by his bedside. He almost grabbed his own duffel bag out of habit. He was having a harder time than he thought he would.

“One step at a time,” he muttered. “Just pretend you've never seen her naked.”

He swallowed thickly before dashing out of the room and running downstairs. He stepped outside just as the taxi was pulling up (he'd forgotten how quickly people could move when motivated by Wayne money). Smiling, he handed her the bag after helping her into the car.

“Thanks. I'll be back in a couple hours.”

“Are you absolutely sure you don’t need me to come with you?” His voice was a little too needy even by his own standards. In an attempt to compensate, he leaned against the car to look more confident.

Barbara smiled patiently and put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll be fine. You stay here and help them out.”

“Right,” he nodded, anxious but relieved. “I’ll see you later.”

“Of course you will.” She gave him a quick, chaste peck on the cheek and closed the door. He stood in the driveway and watched the car speed away. He never liked watching her drive away from him, but at least there was the promise of her return.

As Dick stepped back into the cave, Jason flashed a sour look in his direction. He brushed it off and walked to Bruce, who was still busy working at his computer.

“How can I help?” he asked.

Bruce paused and turned. “You can start cross-referencing the victim database again. There should be more information available now that we've got a complete list.”

“No problem. Leave it to me.” Dick nodded and sat at the smaller terminal next to Bruce.

Dick was no longer used to having a computer for crime fighting. The laptop he kept at home barely ran and made a weird high-pitched sound when he used it for longer than half an hour at a time. He mostly worked off leads from work and good old fashioned patrolling. That said, he certainly wasn't tech illiterate. He just liked things the old-fashioned way.

“Have you called anyone yet?” Dick asked after silently working for twenty minutes.
“For what?” Bruce didn’t look away from his work.

“Tonight,” Dick said like it was obvious.

“What are you talking about?”

“Back-up. You benched me and Jason. You’re gonna need a hand, whether you like to admit it or not.”

Bruce exhaled in a way that Dick knew to be his equivalent of a chuckle. “Not yet. I was going to ask Barbara to see who else is in town.”

“Do you not keep tabs on that anymore?”

“She’s… better at it than I am.”

Dick snickered quietly. “I can text her if you want.”

Without a word, Bruce pulled up his messaging system and began typing to Oracle.

B: Get me a list of allies currently in Gotham.

“Little abrupt there, Bruce,” Dick said.

Bruce exhaled sharply before sending a second message.

B: Please.

“That’s more like it.”

Before Bruce could say another word, Oracle sent Huntress and Black Canary’s profiles back.

O: BC is visiting family, but I know she has her gear.

O: Seriously though, you can’t wait ten minutes for me to have a shower?

Bruce frowned and thanked her before returning to his analysis. “There you have it, Dick.”

He took his small victory and returned to his research, which was still not accomplishing much in the ways of intel. Crossing his fingers, he tried a different approach.

Barbara rolled her eyes at the computer screen. She knew the “please” was a personal touch from Dick, but she assumed she would have more than a few minutes before she was put to work. She took it upon herself to message Helena and Dinah about a possible team-up tonight, knowing Bruce would probably ask her to later, before undressing and taking a shower.

The near-scalding hot water felt amazing. She hadn’t showered for two days, as both Dick’s apartment and Wayne Manor lacked the facilities for her. Not that it was an issue at any other time; Dick hadn’t expected her and she hadn’t spent the night at the Manor for years.

She washed her hair with citrus shampoo before scrubbing her body down until she felt
acceptably clean. While Barbara was never one to shy away from a mess, she hated to be dirty for longer than she had to be. She thought for a minute about shaving her legs – the weather certainly didn’t call for it – but ultimately decided for it.

A luxurious twenty minutes later, she was drying her hair and getting dressed. She put exceptionally more thought into the process than usual, without really questioning why. As she looked at herself in the mirror and actually considered putting on makeup, she shook her head.

“Come on. You already decided you were going to go slowly. Don’t get dressed up for a night in the Cave. That’s ridiculous.”

She swapped her teal tank top for a Gotham University sweatshirt before putting on a pot of coffee and popping the microchip into her computer. Immediately, streams of random data began running across her main screen. Most of it, to her trained eye, looked perfectly normal. Remembering what Bruce had said about the frequency emission, she refined her data to only include that information.

The coffee pot beeped once, letting her know the coffee was ready. Unashamed, she grabbed one of the many coffee mugs Dick had given her. This one was a tacky Batman number he got from a tourist trap downtown. The bat logo was skewed in a way that suggested it had been destined for the reject pile, but somehow made it to a shelf anyways. She drank her coffee black, like always, and she returned to her computer.

Barbara’s area of expertise wasn’t the human mind, but even she knew a mind control algorithm when she saw one. There only seemed to be two commands: gather and fight. Nothing else. She drank from her mug and stared at the screen, squinting at the letters. She sent the small amount of information to Bruce and returned to her search.

She knew it was a long shot, but she decided to check for manufacturer information on the chip. A fake business name alongside an address appeared on the screen. She frowned at the result: Strange would never be this lazy. And he wasn’t naïve enough to think that Batman would fall for such an obvious trap. Still, it was something to work with, so she forwarded that information to Bruce as well.

Her fingers hovered over the keys for a moment before she pulled up the chip’s directory. Apart from the commands, there were no other functions on the chip. Nothing hidden, nothing encrypted. It occurred to her that the chip probably should have been encrypted. Why wouldn’t it be? Why would it be so easy to access every piece of information on the chip? She furrowed her eyebrows and sent Bruce another message.

O: This was way too easy to break into. Stop analyzing it until I say it’s okay.

Moments later, her cell phone buzzed. A text from Dick: You are seriously launching him into a frenzy. Slow down.

Sorry, but there are some things I need to check first. Tell him to calm down.

She put her phone down and got another cup of coffee before running a custom algorithm on the microchip. This would find anything that was hidden under the layers of data on the chip -- original manufacturer, deleted information, file backups. It was a very thorough program, and despite the small size of the microchip, it would take some time to run.

O: Running tests now. Be patient.

A few moments later, Bruce sent back a stream of data. Dick had found the connection between
all the victims: each of them had been admitted to Gotham City General Hospital in the past year. The injuries and illnesses varied greatly, but it was the only connection they had. Strange, or someone working for him, had been planting these microchips under the scalps of the patients. Barbara could just imagine the repressed panic in the Cave. She glanced over the biography of each victim, paying special attention to their reason for admittance. Most of them weren’t even checked in for something regarding their heads.

Two blinking icons let Barbara know that Dinah and Helena had responded to her requests for a team-up. Both agreed, so she sent them mission briefs in the form of the information they had obtained so far.

In that time, the algorithm had run its course and yielded nothing. Not so much as a byte out of place. Whoever had programmed the devices knew exactly what they were doing. She was a little disheartened by the result, but sent what she had regardless.

O: BC and Huntress have confirmed availability and are willing to help. My program found nothing else on the chip -- I think we have all we're going to get.

Bruce replied quickly.

B: Let Huntress and Black Canary know I’ll expect them at the address on file tonight at midnight.

Barbara raised an eyebrow.

O: You know it’s a trap, right?

B: Of course I do, but it's all we have right now.

Regardless, she informed her friends of the situation. Having worked more with Batman in recent years, both had become accustomed to those kinds of scenarios.

She was unsatisfied with the information she'd been able to pull so far and wanted to run more tests. She knew she was a better hacker than this. One more cup of coffee and a quick spybot later, she decided not to go back to the mansion so she could keep on working. Dick was too much of a distraction right now.

O: I’m not coming back. I’ve still got a lot of tests to run.

She knew Dick would pout about it, but her computer was slightly better than the one at the cave. It would be easier for her to monitor and coordinate the plan from here.

Her phone buzzed. She lifted it, expecting a message from Dick, but instead just saw a thumbs-up emoji from Jason. A small snort escaped her lips as she put it back down. The kid was hilarious when he wasn’t a monster.

Midnight came. Batman, Huntress, and Black Canary were all gathered at the address on the chip. The building in question was a run-down office building in a less-than-savoury part of town that had obviously not been used in years. Batman began his investigation by starting at the roof and working his way down. Huntress found a fire escape halfway up the building and Black Canary
broke in through a service exit in the back.

Oracle watched the three as coloured dots (grey for Batman, yellow for Canary, purple for Huntress) on a map going through the building. The building was devoid of human life, electricity, and safety standards. It had not been used for anything apart from squatting in easily a decade. Barbara had looked into the history of it and found only rented office space for publishers and unsuccessful attorneys. Everything checked out.

The three dots zigzagged through the building level by level. Each room was checked no fewer than two times. No drawer was left unopened, no wall unchecked, no overturned desk overturned. Given the exciting buildup, the lack of any and all clues was more disappointing than anything. No one would admit it, but they were all hoping for some kind of climax.

They began to look in other places, like behind bookshelves and under photocopiers. Huntress broke a window because she mistook a moth on the other side for something stuck inside the glass. It was frustrating.

Barbara's phone vibrated once. A message from Dick.

*Why didn't you come back to the Cave?*

She rolled her eyes. *My computer is better than Bruce's. But don't tell him.*

*But it's SO BORING here without you. Jason won't even talk to me.* She could practically hear the whine in Dick's message.

*Maybe next time be nicer to him?*

Dick didn't text her back for some time. She felt a little bad, but reminded herself that it wasn't her responsibility to entertain him. She might have greased his wheels, but he came back to Gotham of his own accord.

Several hours passed before Black Canary finally buzzed in with good news.

“I found something.”

The grey and purple dots converged on the yellow dot's location. Black Canary had found an envelope taped to the bottom of a chair. Batman's name was typed on the front and the back was seal with the same insignia as the microchips.

Batman opened the envelope carefully, checking for residue and dampness, and a slip of paper fell out. On that slip of paper was a set of coordinates, a quick web search of which revealed a small town in Ukraine.

“What now?” Huntress asked.

“I hope you brought your passport,” said Batman.

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Upon their discovery, Jason had gone upstairs to play video games and Alfred insisted that there
was cleaning that needed to be done, so when Bruce returned home from patrol the only person in
the Cave was Dick. He had been intently texting Barbara when the Batmobile parked and Batman
hopped out. He had just rephrased “please please please date me again I swear I've changed and
I've always loved you please” for the eighth time without sending when Bruce stood next to him
and pulled his cowl back.

“Welcome home,” Dick said without looking up.

Bruce leaned against the computer console. “I need you to be Batman while I'm gone.”

Dick couldn't believe his ears at first. If he didn't know Bruce so well, he would have thought it
was a joke. Even when Dick dared to dream that he might one day wear the mantle, that day was
years from now.

“I…”

“It can't get around that Batman isn't in Gotham; there would be chaos. You need to pretend to be
me while Huntress and I are in Europe. I know you can do it.” It was clear that he had thought
about it before and possibly run scenarios in his head. His voice was solemn and slightly paternal.

“Of course,” Dick said with quiet awe. “I would be honoured.”

“We're leaving tomorrow morning,” Bruce said, looking out the window, “so try to get as much
rest as possible between now and tomorrow night.”

“What about Jason?”

“Jason is benched until I get back. Just listen to Alfred.”

So many questions were going through Dick's head. He looked at Bruce's cowl and had a
realization. “I don't think your suit will fit me.”

It was a valid concern. Dick, though tall and in great shape, was slightly shorter than Bruce and
sported a much leaner build. The suit would fit, but it wouldn't be a comfortable fit.

“There's one in your size in the back.”

“What?”

Without a word, he followed Bruce to the armory, where he opened one of the many tall closets.
Inside, behind two other suits for different purposes, was one that one that was slightly too small
for Bruce to fit into. He pulled it out and handed it to Dick.

“This is for you. Alfred made it a while back. When I asked him why, he said that we might need
it one day.”

The suit was heavy, like he was used to, made of a kevlar/spandex blend that seemed more
professional than his own suit. Nearly coming undone, he pressed his lips together and fingered
the black bat symbol on the chest. It was more than he ever expected or hoped for.

“Thank you,” Dick whispered.

Bruce nodded. “I trust you.”

The air was silent, but heavy with emotion. Eventually, Dick lifted his head and nodded at Bruce.
Bruce nodded back. He had never felt more like someone's son than he did in this moment.
And just like that, the moment was over. Dick put the suit back in the wardrobe and closed the door after staring at it longingly. Bruce sat in his usual chair and began to reference the information. There was still do much they didn't know.

Still reeling from their conversation, Dick finally spoke. “Right. I'll call the station tomorrow. Family emergency, I suppose.”

Bruce nodded. “Good night.”

“Night.”

Bruce continued to work with no signs of tiring, a sight Dick had been used to since he was small. The invulnerable Batman mythos existed even to the people who knew who he was and his stony demeanor saw to that.

Dick had no idea whether anyone upstairs was asleep, so he very quietly made his way back to his room. The clothes he'd left on the floor had been neatly folded and left on top of his dresser. His duffel bag sat empty behind the door, the remaining clothes and toiletries presumably in their correct places. He smiled at Alfred's efforts to make him feel at home because it worked. He was already more comfortable here than he had been at his most relaxed in Blüdhaven. Patrolling was more rewarding in Gotham. He was with the family he didn't know he missed.

He changed into his pajama pants and laid over the covers on his bed. He picked up his phone and deleted his last draft to Barbara. The thought of being Batman tomorrow night filled him with the confidence he needed.

*Lunch tomorrow?*

Before he could even put his phone down, he felt the vibration of her response.

*Soleil at 1.*

*You got it.*

Dick fell asleep with a grin on his lips.
"What?!"

Bruce had already left for the airport when Dick woke up. Apparently Jason had just been informed of Bruce's travel plans by Alfred because he was shouting about it in the hallway outside Dick's room.

"Please lower your voice."

"No! Why didn't he ask me to go with him?"

"You're still injured from the fight two nights ago. It would be counter-productive to take you with him."

"That's bullshit!"

Dick pushed himself into a sitting position as he listened to the argument on the other side of his door.

"Regardless of how you feel, that was his decision."

"I've seen him patrol with injuries twice as bad as mine."

"You need to calm down. You'll aggravate your injuries further if you don't relax."

"I can't believe this. This is all his fault, isn't it?"

"Are you referring to Master Dick?"

Thump. Dick assumed Jason had just punched a wall. "Of course I am. Bruce wouldn't have left me behind if he hadn't shown up."

"I assure you he has nothing to do with Master Bruce's travel plans. Now, please, come downstairs and let me change your bandages."

There was a loud *hmph*, followed by two sets of footsteps descending the stairs. Wrapping his arms around his knees, Dick stared at his closet in quiet thought. It was still open and Alfred had taken it upon himself to hang up Dick's shirts. With the exception of Jason, he felt like he was home.

He knew that he and Jason needed to make peace with one another. Dick had thought that, after saving him from that brawl, Jason would warm up to him. All evidence to the contrary; Jason seemed to dislike him even more now. Jason obviously wanted to be back in the field, but that was out of the question. There had to be a way to earn the boy's trust without putting him in danger.

Dick considered his options while he showered and shaved. He leaned forward in the mirror, inspecting his eye. The swelling was certainly down and even the bruising was looking better. His arm would still need time, but overall he would be able to efficiently patrol tonight.

As Batman.

He paused. He'd almost forgotten about that. Tonight was his big debut in his mentor's cowl. No
wonder Jason was so furious -- Batman must be his dream, too. Dick couldn't help but feel a little guilty about taking that from him. All things considered, Jason would probably come closer to actually fitting into Bruce's suit, too.

He searched his mind for a way to make things okay with Jason. What do wealthy teenaged delinquents like? When Dick was his age, he liked two things: being Robin and thinking about Barbara. Considering how Jason went off on him yesterday morning, it seemed safe to assume that they had those things in common. With Robin off the table and the knowledge that Barbara saw Jason as a little brother, Dick seemed to be out of options.

The thought process continued as he got dressed and descended the stairs to the dining room. He didn't know whether Alfred was cooking for them this morning, but he still knew his way around that kitchen if he had to fend for himself. All thoughts, however, ceased the instant a ceramic coffee cup exploded on the wall next to Dick's head.

"Holy --" Dick stepped back from the debris and saw Jason sitting at the table.

"Good morning," Jason said through gritted teeth. His eyes were narrowed and he was breathing shallow breaths.

"What on earth?" Alfred's head appeared from the kitchen doorway. Seeing the shock on Dick's face and the ruins of the cup on the floor, he frowned at Jason. "Clean that up this instant."

"No." Jason folded his arms and kept glaring at Dick.

"I won't ask you again, Jason." Dick knew that tone of voice. Alfred only used it when he was at his wit's end and was about to begin doling out punishments. It had been years since Dick last heard it and it still gave him chills.

Instead of doing as he was told or even responding, Jason pushed himself away from the table and stomped back upstairs. His bedroom door was slammed shut and some loud music began playing. Bits of broken cup surrounded his feet, so Dick knelt and started picking them up.

"Don't," Alfred said.

"It's one more hazard we don't need." Dick continued to pick up the larger shards.

Alfred shook his head. "No. Jason is going to clean that up."

Dick put the broken pieces back on the rug. Alfred's less-formal tone of voice meant his was in parent-mode and needed to stay in control. "Can I help with breakfast?"

"I wouldn't mind the company."

Dick stepped into the kitchen and saw Alfred had begun making crêpes. "What can I do?"

"If you would be so kind." Alfred gestured to a cutting board with a couple half-sliced strawberries sitting next to it.

"Of course."

Dick washed his hands -- Alfred would give him an earful if he didn't -- and set to work finishing the fruit. The soft sounds of slicing, eggs cracking, and batter being mixed made Dick feel young again, like when he would help Alfred cook in the little ways he could when Bruce first took him in. He had never been comfortable letting someone do all the work, even when he was small, and
insisted that he help in the little ways he could.

"Do you remember," Alfred said, as if sharing the memories, "when you were eleven years old and you tried to make waffles all by yourself?"

Dick laughed softly. He could still remember the dark smoke pouring from the waffle iron and the smell that stayed in the curtains for weeks, no matter how many times Alfred washed them. "Of course. It was Father's Day. I wanted to make something for you and Bruce."

"When Jason was eleven, he was caught shoplifting a wristwatch. Bruce left the office immediately to pick Jason up and bring him home. When Bruce questioned him about it, Jason admitted that he was trying to steal the watch for Bruce. For Father's Day."

Dick kept quiet, moving on from the strawberries and cut up the bananas that were sitting next to him.

"Bruce demanded to know why he didn't simply ask for money. Jason told him that he didn't want to rely on handouts." Alfred paused to pour some crêpe batter into a pan. It sizzled happily and the edges instantly browned. "Bruce hadn't formally adopted Jason yet, you see, and he then realized that Jason still felt like a foster child -- which is to say, he felt temporary. The following week, he made arrangements to adopt Jason. The week after that, Bruce showed Jason the Cave and made him Robin."

"I see," Dick said. He only half-understood where this story was going.

"Jason isn't like you. Bruce is the only father he's ever known, and before we took him in he had only ever been someone's problem. His real mother didn't even want him." Alfred moved quickly between crêpes and a small pile was already forming.

"But he has you and Bruce now. Why is he still so angry?"

"I think it's fairly clear. He's scared of losing to you."

Having finished cutting the fruit, Dick put the knife down and turned around. "What?"

"Whether you believe it or not, Bruce does talk about you. Ever since he became Robin, Jason has been compared to you, both directly and indirectly. He's worked very hard to build his own identity and family. He's worried that because you've come back you're going to replace him as Batman's sidekick and Bruce's son. To make matters worse, you're effectively replacing his father figure for an undetermined amount of time."

"Did he... tell you all this?" Dick suddenly felt guilty for not realizing this earlier. He had no intention of coming back permanently at this point.

"Of course he didn't. I doubt he even realizes all this himself. He's only fifteen. But it's obvious to me." Alfred had finished cooking the crêpes. "Are you done with the strawberries?"

"Yes." Dick handed him the cutting board. His fingers were stained light pink from the strawberries, so he wiped his hands on a nearby dish towel.

"Wonderful, thank you. I'm going to make the coulis, so if you could get Jason and be back in ten minutes or so." Alfred retrieved a saucepan from the lower cabinet and three lemons from the fruit basket.

"... What?"
"Try to reach out, with all this in mind. Even if you can't get an apology out of him, crêpes are his favourite. He'll come downstairs for those."

"What about the cup?"

"Oh, he'll be cleaning that as soon as he gets back down here." Alfred turned away. "He'll do it if he wants breakfast."

It honestly didn't take much coaxing to get Jason to turn down his music and open the door. All it took was "Jason! Breakfast!" and the guitar-heavy music was reduced to a mild annoyance. The door opened a crack and Jason's blue eyes peaked through.

"Yeah…?" He was skeptical, possibly expecting the same treatment he'd shown Dick earlier.

"Yeah. Alfie said he made your favourite." Dick jerked a thumb in the direction of the dining room.

The door opened a little more. Judging by his glassy eyes and red cheeks, Dick thought he might have been crying. "He… did?"

"Sure did." Dick took advantage of Jason's stunned silence and stepped into the boy's untidy room. Dick couldn't call himself a clean freak, but even he let Alfred in his room to do laundry, dust, and vacuum when he lived at the Manor. That kind of arrangement didn't seem to exist between Jason and Alfred.

"Is this a trick?"

"No, it's a peace offering."

Jason crossed his arms defensively. "What?"

"I understand there's a lot of tension between us and I want to clear the air."

"Yeah?"

Dick chose to ignore the attitude and self-righteousness that accompanied Jason's tone of voice. "I know you don't like me."

Jason rolled his eyes. "No shit."

"But I think life would be a lot more comfortable around here if we tried to get along." Dick sat down on the chair at Jason's desk. It didn't seem to ever have been used for homework. He saw a pack of cigarettes in a half-open drawer, but ignored them. "I'm not going to be here for long. I'm not moving back in. But I'm here now. I'm going to help you out while Bruce is away. When he gets back, I'll go home."

Jason sat on his bed so their eyes were somewhat level.

"I'm sorry if you feel like I'm trying to replace you or something, because I'm not. I'm visiting." Dick smiled. "And you don't have to call me Batman if you don't want to."

"Why did you come back at all?" There was no snark in his voice, no accusation. Just curiosity.

"After everything that happened with Bruce and the Titans and Kori and Babs, I needed to be away from the people I cared about. I know I let a lot of people down over the years, and every time I saw them I was reminded of my failings. But seeing Babs for the first time in so long… she
made me realize that I needed everyone I was hiding from. I want my friends and family back."
Leaning forward, he whispered, "And we're kind of family, too, you know."

Jason snorted. "Gross."

"Call me 'big brother'." Dick smiled cheekily. "I'll help you with your homework and give you
advice about girls. Later, we'll play catch in the backyard."

"No way." Jason shuddered.

Dick's trademark laugh erupted from his mouth. Even if he couldn't get Jason to accept him as
family, he at least seemed calm enough. A small smile cracked Jason's stony demeanor. He
laughed a small, hoarse laugh, one that Dick knew he probably didn't use much.

"Okay," said Jason. "If you promise to never call me your brother again, I'll try to not throw as
much crap at you."

"Deal." Dick stuck his hand straight out to make the agreement official. Jason pushed Dick's
fingers in and tapped their fists together instead. It was practically civil.

"One more thing, though," said Jason. "About Barb."

"Yeah?" Dick was wary to broach the subject of the mutual object of their affections after the last
outburst. The air grew serious.

"Are you guys gonna go out again?"

Honesty. He needed to be honest if he wanted to keep things as cordial as they were. "We're
having lunch together later. I was going to ask her out on a couple dates while I'm in town."

"You should."

"Oh yeah? Did she tell you something?"

"Kinda. But I need to know that you're gonna treat her right. She still likes you -- she told me so.
But if you break her heart again, I'll take her from you." Jason's voice was serious. To someone on
the wrong side of him, it would be intimidating.

There was no feasible way that Barbara would date someone a whole decade to her junior and
Dick knew that. Still, he pretended the threat was genuine.

"I promise I won't hurt her again."

"Good enough." Jason pushed himself from the bed and walked to the door. "Come on."

"Right. You still have to clean up that coffee cup." Feeling close enough, Dick ruffled Jason's
hair.

Jason shoved him away roughly and started down the stairs. "I know, dick."

"Hey, you finally used my name!"

"No I didn't."

"Awww…"

Breakfast was pleasant and quiet. Alfred had made herbal tea instead of coffee, citing Jason's
height potential as the cause, but knowing the boy actually preferred it when he had sweets for breakfast. Jason felt loved and Dick felt relaxed. Alfred felt like his family was growing.

Café du Soleil -- or simply Soleil -- was one of Dick's favourite places to eat when he lived in Gotham. In fact, most Gothamites under 30 with disposable income would probably list it among their favourites. The casual atmosphere and all-day brunch made the café ideal for nursing hangovers, meeting friends, and eating until you were totally stuffed. Dick tended to favour Soleil because he considered it to be the location of his first date with Barbara. She hadn't actually known it was a date until he kissed her later. In fact, she tended to consider their first date to be the next one, when they got milkshakes after a patrol, still in their suits. She kissed him that time.

Barbara was already there when he arrived. She was sitting at a small table against the far wall and looking down at her phone. He fixed his sunglasses (which were hiding both his identity and his black eye) as he glanced around the restaurant, carefully checking for exes and other people who knew him. He didn't see anyone, so he excused himself to the hostess and sat down across from Barbara.

"Morning," Dick said, taking off his sunglasses and putting them next to his coffee cup. He was pleased to see that there was already coffee in it.

"It's 1pm." A smirk played on her lips.

"Afternoon then." He sipped his coffee smugly. "Have you ordered?"

"Oh. No. I just got here myself." She gestured to her mostly full cup. "And that would be rude, wouldn't it?"

Dick picked up his menu out of habit, but he already knew what he wanted. He'd been eating the same thing here since middle school. "What are you getting?"

"The special looks good."

He squinted at the chalkboard next to the door, which declared the special (a vegetarian omelet with toast) and soup du jour (carrot ginger) in colourful chalk drawings and curly letters.

"That does look good." But it wasn't enough to change his mind. He put down his menu in front of him and leaned forward, waiting for Barbara to finish looking at the menu.

"About the other night --" Barbara began, lifting her head.

"I'm sorry --" Dick stammered.

They both paused, looked down, then at each other. They laughed.

"Ah. You had the same idea," he said sheepishly.

"Yeah…" She gently smoothed the napkin in front of her. She had sort of expected him to want her to jump back into things again, especially given his enthusiasm. Regardless, she needed to be in control of the situation. "I… I don't want to say it was a mistake, but --"
"Before you say anything else," he interrupted, "let me apologize. I know that I came off as irresponsible and kind of desperate. I'm sorry about that. It's been a long time since I've had the opportunity to be emotionally close to you. Or anyone. But you especially. I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. I'm sorry if my actions ever implied that you were replaceable. I'm sorry that I pushed you into kissing me and getting into bed with me. I promise to get a better hold on my feelings."

That was unexpected. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted again.

"You two ready to order?" They both turned to see a server, writing pad in hand, smiling cheerfully.

"Yes!" said Dick, almost too loudly. "I'll have the Rise n' Shine. Sausage. Over easy. Pancakes."


"Great!" Their orders were jotted down and the server strode away.

Barbara could feel the redness in her face. She wondered how much their server had heard and chosen to ignore. She hated having her relationship nonsense out in the open. A soft laugh shook her from her thoughts.

"Close one, right?" Dick smiled.

"Yeah…" She knew it was her turn to talk, but had lost her train of thought. Still, Dick waited patiently, smiling and drinking his over-sweetened coffee. "Thank you, for all that."

"It's no problem. I felt like we needed to clear the air about that so we could move forward."

She flinched. "About that… I don't know if that's the right thing, given the circumstances."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not going to be here long, right? Once you go back home, who knows when we'll see each other again."

"Bruce didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

Dick leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Bruce went to Europe with Helena."

"I know that. I was there. Who do you think booked the flight?"

"And he asked me… to wear his suit while he's gone."

"What?" Barbara's eyes widened.

Forcing his lips into a hard frown, Dick growled, "I'm Batman."

Doing her best to minimize her surprise, she sat back and clapped a hand over her mouth. After he started laughing, she leaned in again. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly."

"Oh my god… are… are you okay with that? It's a huge responsibility." Batman's most recent missions had been exceptionally dangerous. Violent crime was escalating in Gotham, and his even
his low-profile rogues were stepping up their game. Not that Dick wasn't trained and fully capable of taking care of them, but she felt more responsible for Dick's well-being than Bruce's.

"Of course I am. It's kind of my birthright, isn't it? Or my inheritance?" He shook his head. "Whatever it is. I want it."

"I suppose you're right." She exhaled softly. "Congratulations."

He was positively beaming. Approval from her was secretly his highest priority. "Thanks."

Barbara was happy for him. Ever since he was small, there was an implication that he would take over for Bruce one day, whether the reason was Bruce's voluntary retirement or something… unspeakable. This wasn't a permanent switch, but it was good enough for now.

"Now…" he said sweetly. "I believe we were discussing something else?"

The panic she'd been suppressing suddenly shot back up. "No."

He raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything else. It would be a lie to say that he wasn't disappointed, but he already promised himself that he wouldn't press the issue.

Their food arrived and they both ate silently. Dick kept hopefully glancing her way, but she kept her eyes down.

"Is it good?" He was no fan of awkward silence, or silence in general.

"Yeah. Yours?" she said.

"Mhm." He sighed before looking directly at her. "Babs, can we please talk about it?"

She placed her fork on her plate before taking and deep breath and meeting his eyes. She remembered what Jason had told her and grappled with her conflicting emotions about the idea. But she deserved, at least, an explanation. "Of course."

He took a big bite of pancake before he hesitantly asked her, "How do you feel about... us?"

"Complicated, obviously. We've got a lot of baggage and it makes things difficult. It's not like I didn't want to kiss you or get into bed with you. But our history isn't exactly clean or conventional. Just thinking about it is stressful."

"I understand." Dick nodded. "You have no reason to forgive me for anything I did."

"The break-up? Yeah… that was rough, to say the least. But that was years ago now. And it's not like either of us haven't done other things, which is perfectly fine." She started eating again. "We've both done a lot of growing since then."

Dick drank his coffee and kept eye contact, but said nothing.

"The fact that I've been so comfortable with you after so long is as telling as anything, right? But then I think about what happened before and your fairly recent history with other women, and it's... it's worrisome."

"But you know I l- like you."

She chuckled. "When you say it like that, you sound like a teenager."

"You make me feel like a teenager sometimes. I can't control my voice and my body feels all
tingly." He shook his shoulders a little and made a kissy face.

"Stop," she said through sputtered laughter.

He smiled and took another bite. "Look, I'm not asking for a full-blown relationship or whatever. But, I mean, the feelings are there."

"Oh, are they?" She leaned forward, smiling coyly. "What makes you so sure about that?"

"Because," he said, putting a hand over hers, "you blush every time I touch you."

Barbara couldn't deny the heat creeping into her cheeks and ears, but didn't want to give herself away just yet. "Hm. Maybe I'm sick."

"Yeah." He rolled his eyes. "Lovesick. Also, Jason told me."

She rolled her eyes and smirked at him. Of course Jason couldn't keep his mouth shut. "What do you want, right now? Not long-term, not big picture. Just, what do you want while you're covering for Bruce?"

"I want to take you out on a couple of dates. Once or twice a week, until Bruce gets back. No pressure, just hanging out and getting reacquainted. We won't call it a relationship or anything."

Barbara was a little impressed. "That's… surprisingly mature of you."

"I'm not 18 anymore. Don't expect me to put out after the first date," Dick said, crossing his arms. "I have some dignity."

She laughed, honestly and openly. It was music to Dick's ears. They finished their food and Dick settled the bill (despite Barbara's insistence that she pay her own way -- they both had Wayne money now), but he liked to pay for other people when he could.

"What did you have in mind for these 'dates'?" Barbara asked after they had left the restaurant and continued down the street with no particular destination in mind. It was colder today than it had been the last few. Their breath hung in the air for a few seconds before dissipating. She wished she'd worn a warmer coat or hat, but said nothing.

"That's a secret." Dick raised a gloved finger to his lips. Apparently he'd raided Bruce's winter clothes before coming out and was wearing a blue plaid scarf over his coat.

"Oh come on." She smiled widely. "How about a hint?"

"Hmm..." he hummed. "Well, there won't be any parkour or hacking."

"But those are the only things we know how to do together!"

"You're right," he said. "Fine. Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course I can," she said, doing nothing to hide the amusement in her voice.

They stopped and he stood in front of her, squatting down so they were eye-to-eye. He slid his sunglasses down his nose before looping his scarf around her neck and using it to pull her into a kiss. His lips were warm despite the weather, and she found herself putting her hands on his shoulders to keep him close. After a few seconds, he broke the kiss and looked at her adoringly.

"I'm just making this up as I go along," he whispered. "Don't tell anyone."
If her cheeks and nose weren't already pink from the weather, she would have blushed. "I promise."

"Great." He tucked the scarf into her jacket to protect her neck. "You need to stay warm. I won't be cancelling any dates because of work-related injuries, so you're not allowed to cancel dates because you're sick."

"Thanks…” she said, savouring the softness of the scarf. She silently wished she could hold his hand while they walked together, but the fact that Dick slowed down just slightly to match her pace was good enough.

It was still hard to believe that this was happening. It had taken Barbara over a year to get over the breakup before, and she thought she'd gotten him out of her system. They occasionally ran into one another for various reasons, rebuilt their friendship, and even had casual sex while he was still dating Starfire. But it was nothing, she'd told herself (and him). She dated other people, got serious about one or two, and even got engaged once. Through all that, she just assumed that she would never be in this situation with Dick again.

But she was and it was perfect.

"Do you want to go in here?"

Barbara shook herself from her thoughts and noticed they'd stopped in front of a small bookstore.

"Babs?"

"Sure."

They browsed separately -- Dick looked for something in fiction and Barbara looked in non-fiction. She had never realized how many books there were about Batman until then. Books of speculations and theories, essays, all trying to explain the significance and possible identity of Batman. Tonight, Batman was going to shrink two inches and probably start cracking jokes. She wondered how long it would take people to catch on.

"What are you looking at?" Dick suddenly appeared behind her. He looked through the row of books. "Batman? Don't people know he's just a government conspiracy?"

"I heard he's a supernatural omen, like the Jersey Devil or Mothman," Barbara said.

"That's crazy. You're crazy." He was holding a large novel that Barbara couldn't make out the title of, and a deck of cards.

"What did you get?" she asked.

"Just something to read at home between shifts." He held up the cards. "And these."

"What for?"

"Strip poker at your place." He winked. "Or Go Fish. I haven't decided yet."

She smirked before grabbing a book on the history of Gotham. "Let's go."

They spent another hour wandering downtown before Dick called a taxi and dropped Barbara off at the clock tower before he went back to the Manor.

"It's a big night," she said after he helped her back into her chair. "Are you ready for it?"
"I'm trying to not think about it. I'm actually really nervous," he admitted. "What if something goes horribly wrong?"

"Don't be nervous. You'll be perfect." She planted a soft kiss on his lips before turning towards the door. "And I'll be in your ear all night."

"Thanks, Babs."

"See you later, Batman."

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