What We Once Had

by Iruthb

Summary

"Babs, c’mon, it’s me! Bruce, tell her! Do you think Scarecrow got to her?"

"I’m not /scared/ of you."

Barbara comes across an intruder in the Batcave that swears he knows her, even though she’s certain he’s never met her. And if there’s one thing she’s sure of, it’s that she never, ever forgets a face.

"Babs, c’mon, it’s me! Bruce, tell her! Do you think Scarecrow got to her?"

"I’m not scared of you."

Barbara rubbed her arms where Bruce had restrained her, her shoulders tense as she leant away from the intruder, who now stood with his arms crossed, next to Batman. He had thick dark hair and olive skin, couldn’t be older than thirty or younger than twenty five. Five foot ten, probably around hundred and eighty pounds, built like a gymnast. Moved like one too, Barbara recalled bitterly, not turning her glare away from him as she tilted her head towards Bruce.

"Who is he?" she asked, briefly flicking her eyes towards Bruce. He was, in fact, staring at her, instead of the man who had waltzed his way into the cave and referred to Batman by name. Like she was a crime he had to unravel. “Batman?”

He was silent for a moment longer. “What was the name of the first Robin?” he asked eventually, not in any way answering her question. The intruder’s face lit up with hope, instead of the kicked puppy look he’d had on his face ever since Barbara had attacked him for being in the cave. Barbara gave him an apprehensive look, but if Bruce was asking her to reveal that, then it was
nothing this stranger didn’t already know.

"Jason, obviously. Why?" As if she’d smashed his fuse box, the intruder’s hopeful light fell away as he crumbled, and twisted away from both of them to hide his face. Too late. Barbara hadn’t missed the sudden tremble in his lips, and now all she wanted to know was why that hurt her so damn much.

The man left quickly, moving as if on automatic in a familiar place, but Batman just grew sterner, asking her question after question on what she remembered. It didn’t take long for Barbara to catch on to what his questions implied, and her heart grew tighter in her chest as she turned to glance at the door that the man had vanished through, just for a moment, before turning back to Bruce to repeat the names and ages of the first five people she’d helped as Oracle.

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"So, you’re saying I’ve known him for eighteen years."

Zatanna and Dinah nodded, Dinah with one arm wrapped around Barbara as if she could shield her from this… whatever this is. Barbara was clenching her fists and teeth as if to surpress her trembling. Eighteen years. It didn’t feel like there were any gaps there. Sure, no one remembered every day of their life, but to forget a person? A person she’d called best friend, flirted with, dated…

"…Babs?" Dinah gave her shoulder a quick squeeze to snap her back to the present.

"Yes?"

"I don’t think it’s reversible," Zatanna said sadly, "Magically altering the mind is incredibly dangerous. I don’t want to risk doing more damage than has already been done."

"That’s it, then? I just have to accept that there’s this huge person that has all these memories of me, while I don’t have a single of him? He loved me, and he’s a stranger." And I hurt him, which somehow hurts me. Barbara covered her face with her hands, no longer hiding the tremors that were running up and down her back, and forced herself to breathe. Someone had taken her memories. Someone she’d been near recently. Even if Barbara couldn’t remember them, she wasn’t Oracle for nothing, and if there was someone erasing memories, this was definitely a case for the Birds of Prey. Sucking in a deep breath, she looked up.

“We need to find the person who did this. We don’t know if any other memories have been taken and if they’re going to target anyone else, or why they did this.” Barbara looked at Zatanna, lips set, “Do I have your help? If this is magical in origin, we need an expert, before it happens again, to someone else. We need to find out the nature of the memory removal and whether whoever’s responsible can access those memories. If so, identities may be in danger.”

Zatanna didn’t even hesitate before nodding. She knew the consequences of messing with someone’s head, and she wasn’t letting any worse happen now.

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It wasn’t until after, when each (tenuous) lead was under investigation and all Barbara had left to do was wait for them all to report back. It was only then that her hands allowed themselves to tremble and that she curled over her twisting stomach, and her eyes started to burn with tears. God, she was furious. Barbara Gordon, she of eidetic memory, had had a person’s worth of memory stolen from her. Brainiac had violated her head before, and now someone had done it again, and she felt sick to her stomach that someone would even try.
And she grieved. It was weird, but she did, even though she didn’t understand who or what she was grieving. But there was a hole in her, and Babs just wanted to cry. Because Dick Grayson had looked like a kicked puppy and she wasn’t sure whether she could stomach the thought of talking to him ever again. Not when he knew everything about her (apparently), and she knew nothing.

But she also wasn’t sure she dared not trying.

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Two months since the ex love of his life had stared at him like he was a stranger. Two months, and he hadn’t heard a thing. Dinah and Zatanna had given him updates when they could, but the Clocktower itself had been silent. He missed Babs like hell, and there was nothing Dick could do about it. *Give her time*, Alfred had said, and Dick knew that was the right thing to do, he had no idea what she was going through. It was *Babs*, and it was Babs’ *brain* that someone had messed with, she was probably pissed and upset, and probably even scared (not that she’d say anything, because it was Babs, who was almost as bad as Bruce when it came to admitting fear).

He wanted to help, and the fact he couldn’t? Dick jumped to his feet. The Nightwing suit had been getting more than its fair share of wear lately, and probably really needed washing, but he pulled it on anyway. He felt better the second the uniform was clipped in place, useful. Reaching for his domino mask, Dick stopped short at the sight of his comm on the table. More than anything, he wanted to be alone tonight, and not have to hear from Bruce or the others, but if there was an emergency, well, he couldn’t risk it. Dick tucked the comm into his ear and donned his mask. Climbing out of the window, he launched himself into the cool night sky. He couldn’t stand not being able to help any longer.

Of course, the first case he finds is a Yorkshire Terrier stuck in a rather sickly looking tree. (How? Yeah, he wondered about that one too.) There was no way the tree would carry his weight along with the pooch, Dick considered as he watched from the roof top above, weighing up his options. If he could jump off something and grab the dog midair… except there was nothing to jump off except for the building he was on. Ouch. Dick peered over the edge, and grinned when he spotted a small window ledge he could drop down to. Giving the few onlookers a wave, Nightwing turned around and stepped backwards, falling (flying) briefly before catching onto the ledge, and using that to launch himself at the tree. His aim was true, he wrapped his arms around the pooch and plucked it out of the tree, and rolled to break both their landings.

As soon as he opened his arms, the dog sprinted back to its owner, tail tucked in between its legs. Dick silenced their thanks with a wave “No problem, sir, just doing my duty!” He gave a quick salute, then promptly located the nearest fire escape so he could get back onto the rooftops.

“Cute.”

Dick half jumped out of his skin at the familiar voice in his ear. “How long have you been watching, O?” he asked, trying not to sound hopeful or gleeful.

“A while.”

Dick waited for her to say something else, sensing some kind of hesitation, but she remained silent. “How’s your, ah, case going?” Again, silence. Maybe he shouldn’t have gone straight to that. Dammit Grayson, two months of nothing, then the second she contacted him, he blew it. Dick opened his mouth to apologise -

“I’d ask which case you mean, but I think I can work it out,” Barbara answered with a forced lightness he was sure she didn’t expect him to pick up on, “We caught the perp. He’s confessed.
He said that he can’t give me back my memories, but that they may return in time.”

“Why did he do it?”

Barbara sighed through the comm line. “He won’t say, but there are zero connections between you and him, nor between him and me. He does have a huge grudge against Superman, and the current theory is that he's been testing his magic in preparation for confrontation. Other victims have been found, I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time... The important thing is that Zatanna and a friend of hers stripped his magic from him. He won’t ever do this to anyone, ever again.”

“Great.” Both of them felt his frustration.

“Look… Nightwing. I’ve read through your files. All of them, and it’s a lot to read.” *A lot to forget, too,* Dick thought as he listened. He wasn’t sure where Babs was going with this, but he wasn’t going to interrupt. Not yet, anyway.

“I get that our past is pretty complicated, and whatever we had before… it was intense. Very intense. And the thing is… I won’t ever be able to fully replicate that past with you. To be honest, I don’t even want to try.”

Dick faltered, coming to a stop at the edge of a building. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been running, or where to, but suddenly he needed to stop. It was like he’d been punched in the gut, and he could almost feel himself deflating. Babs didn’t want to try. He should have seen it coming, really, he was just a symbol of what had been done to her, and because of everything he knew she probably felt vulnerable in a way he -

“But…” Babs continued, and Dick glanced up, pressing his comm into his ear, “I can’t deny I don’t feel some kind of weird connection with you. And you seem like someone I could get along with.” She made some kind of sound that was almost a chuckle. “You probably already knew that. But, I can’t do this if you’re coming in with expectations for what we’ll be like. We’ll both end up disappointed, and that isn’t what I want. I need you to be honest with me, Richard, can you do that?”

“Yes!” Dick replied instantly, before he even needed to think about the ramifications. Babs was first and foremost his friend, and he could, well, not forget about the rest, but let it go, if he got to keep that friendship. “I mean, yeah, I can. Whatever you need.”

“…Okay. I’ll send you some dates and we can meet up for coffee some time. No promises, but we’ll see how it goes.” Dick nodded, and a giggle escaped his lips.

“Hey, Oracle?”

“Yes, Nightwing?”

“Thanks. For calling, and all that.” A weight that had been putting him down for two months was starting to lift. For a brief moment, Dick felt on top of the world.

“By the way, there’s a mugging going down in the alley at your eight o’clock. Go be a hero, Grayson.” He could hear her smile, and it sounded like maybe something had lifted from her too. It shouldn’t have surprised him, really. More than Batman, more than even Clark, Barbara was the strongest person he knew.

“Yes, ma’am.”
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