

True Stories for Fictional Children to Tell in the Dark

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a mutli-fandom zine

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*selected fanfic stories by Mary
with artwork and collaborations by Audrey*

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Fandoms in this zine:

DC Comics

DC Animated Films

Firefly/Serenity

Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl

JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

New Line Cinema's *The Lord of the Rings*

Star Wars

JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series

The *X-Men* movie series

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Supernatural

A MonkeyWench.net production

Suspension

DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*
Intended for adult audiences

They have another not-shouting match when they get back to the cave.

"It was reckless."

"You're nuts. It was nothing."

"You were foolhardy, and I expect better of you."

"Yeah, well, I guess that makes you the sucker, then," Jason snipes. He's getting better at this kind of argument. When he was a kid, his parents would scream and swear and slam doors at each other and then be fine within the half-hour. With Bruce, it's a simmer. A big pot full of all kinds of crap and the heat's always, *always* on.

It isn't like he's murdered a bus full of nuns and orphans, either. Just waited a fraction of a second (or maybe, yeah, a half-dozen fractions of a second) longer than he really needed to before claspng the cord properly in a swing. Who wouldn't do that?

"I only expect what I know you to be capable of." Bruce is back in civilian clothes now, looking like there's nothing out of the ordinary about him even in the middle of the cave. It's like he gives off an aura of utter normalcy, canceling out anything odd in the situation around him. Jason wonders briefly how a guy ends up learning how to do that.

"And what's that supposed to mean, exactly?" Jason, however, is still in full uniform. He always takes as long as he can before changing, especially on Saturday nights. It's the worst and best time of the week: best, because he is Robin for the second night running, his peak of adrenaline and fierce contentment. Worst because it'll be a whole week's worth of boring, blank nights before he'll be back out and playing again.

Bruce sighs and scrubs at his face with his palms. Jason's gonna have to remember to actually call the number he keeps tucked in his wallet and ask Dick if Bruce always did that face-scrubbing motion or if it's one of those new things, like double-checking first aid kits and the 'no rock music after six pm' rule. "Nothing, Jason. Get some sleep."

It's better when Bruce looks like he wants to slap him or shake him or something. When all the fight goes out of him, Jason's got no choice but to walk off and get changed into something that isn't the Robin suit and lie on his bed and pretend to sleep for a while. It's frustrating and makes Jason feel almost queasy, a roiling in his gut that makes him want to punch something or drive fast along a long, empty road.

After enough time's passed, he goes to the kitchen and makes himself a couple of salami sandwiches. Jason really likes the sort that they get; it's kinda spicy, and he's glad that Bruce or Alfred or whoever obviously likes it too. There's always tons in the fridge when he sneaks down to swipe snacks.

When he's eaten, Jason borrows the motorcycle and heads back into the city center. He realizes five minutes after he's left the manor grounds that he's also left his helmet, but the wind feels almost as good as it did up in the air before he grabbed onto the cord and so he doesn't mind so much.

There's always a bunch of kids hanging out on the stairs near City Hall, chatting and smoking and watching the crowds along the sidewalks. Jason bums a smoke off one and a light off another, his clothes dusty enough from travel to look like they're not ridiculously expensive.

Some guy from a shelter comes by and offers everybody coffee and soup, but Jason's not really hungry and he's already feeling kinda strung out and jittery even without caffeine. It's been a while since he slept.

One of the kids, a boy about Jason's own age, has a beat-up guitar and a grotty old hat for people to throw coins in. Jason makes some lame joke and the boy grins. Jason gives him the remaining third of the cigarette and some spare change and then, with a wide yawn, Jason heads for home.

It's kinda tacky. Even hookers most likely have more subtle opening lines.

"Watch where you're walking, dipshit," Blake Stevenson says, his elbow connecting hard with Jason's rib as they pass each other in the corridor, and that's that. Six minutes later they're the center of a ring of guys from their class, out behind the trees past the home-ec block. The school's got all kinds of rules about what the students aren't allowed to do in uniform, and fistfights fall somewhere between smoking and playing arcade games, so there's somebody standing guard in case a teacher comes by.

Blake's knuckle makes contact with Jason's lower lip, making the skin split and making Jason's laugh sound harsh and raw. Blake's left ear is already looking all puffy and red-purple and they've both lost a couple of buttons.

"Dipshit," Blake says again, and Jason thinks for the first time about what that word might actually mean. He laughs and punches Blake in the stomach, hard.

After a while Blake starts to get sloppy and Jason knocks him down pretty quickly. There's no fun in fighting someone who's not really up to it. One of Blake's friends takes him off to see a doctor or something. Jason wipes at his bloodied chin with the back of his hand and wonders if he can put the buttons back on well enough to fool Bruce. Probably no chance in hell of that.

"You just cost me my ride home," somebody says. It's Blake's sister, Abigail, with her glossy black bob and her dark, dark eyes, leaning against one of the trees. "Now Blake'll take off without remembering me. So what're you gonna do about it?"

"I get picked up at three forty. I'll give you a lift home," offers Jason. He hopes it's the Bentley today. That is one damn cool car, and he bets it's just the kind that somebody like Gail Stevenson would be impressed by.

Abigail raises one sleek eyebrow. "That gives us more than twenty minutes."

The trees are just as good for shielding this as they were for blocking the fight from view. Abigail's straddling his lap on the mulchy ground and she's sucking at the split on his lip like she's a vampire or something. He tries to work the buttons on the blouse of her uniform and she swats his hands out of the way and pulls it open sharply. The little white buttons scatter across the damp leaves, mixing in with those from Blake and Jason's shirts.

"Nothing," she says, voice hot and damp against his mouth. "Nothing below the waist. My parents check."

"Mmm-hmm," Jason nods, moves in closer. Then, "What the fuck?" he pulls back. "They check?"

"Every six months. Gyno does a hymen check. It's a clause in my trust fund."

"That's psycho."

Abigail shrugs and nods. "Yeah. So nothing up the skirt, right? And I mean nothing. I'm not taking any chances on a brat like you, Todd."

Jason hums agreement and trails his mouth down along one strap of her powder-blue bra. They're both gonna have to wear their blazers to cover the mess they've made of their uniforms, and then burn the evidence or something before anybody sees.

Abigail nips and sucks at the point where his throat and collarbone meet, and Jason thinks that she's probably got a vampire fetish or something. She seems really into him, too. Maybe he gives off a vibe that says he looks good in a cape.

When the twenty minutes is gone, Abigail does that weird thing some girls can do where they manage to neaten up really well without a mirror or water or a comb or anything, and Jason does his best to look like he hasn't spent the time since classes ended getting messed up by the Stevenson twins. It's not a particularly convincing performance, but at least he's not actually bleeding anymore.

The car sent is the Bentley, and Jason thanks whatever power's looking out for him. Gail gives a slow nod and says "Nice wheels," and presses her leg against his the whole ride to her house.

"You should beat up my brother more often," she says by way of farewell when they drop her off. She's rolling one of the popped-off buttons between her thumb and forefinger, and Jason wonders how she could tell which ones came from whose shirt.

His own ruined uniform he stashes behind his out-of-season clothes in the back of his closet, intending to ditch them next morning on his way to school. The shirt and slacks are both gone when he goes to collect them, though, and after swearing under his breath for a few minutes Jason goes down to the laundry. No sense in letting a bad situation get worse.

There's a set of his school clothes neatly folded in a washing basket, and Jason can tell that they're the same ones from the near-invisible mending job that's been done on the little rips. All the grass-stains and empty buttonholes have been fixed.

"I repair enough decimated clothing each week to have developed quite a knack for patching," Alfred says, picking up the basket and handing it to Jason. "No sense in bothering Master Bruce about this, unless you feel it's best to do so."

"He probably knows anyway," Jason points out. Alfred's mouth quirks up at the corner.

"Doubtlessly."

After school, Jason does enough of his homework to get away with leaving the rest for later and then works out at one of the punching bags until his wrist starts to twinge a little. He fractured it falling off a fire escape a few years ago, and one of the girls who worked his block helped him bind it and keep it from healing crooked. It mostly only bugs him in winter, but sometimes too many jars can make it all weird for a few days. Jason switches to kicks.

A half-hour or so later, Bruce comes down and does some weight lifting. He doesn't say anything, but Jason's learning how to read Bruce's silences and this one seems relatively friendly.

"Wanna have a round on the mats?" Jason asks, pushing his hair back out of his eyes. He's thinking he might grow it long, if he's allowed.

Jason's always liked being on his own, not having to answer to anybody or have anyone feel obligated to look after him. Even his parents stopped doing that before he was all that old, and that was fine with him. But sparring is

about a million times better than working out on his own and Jason guesses that that means he does like having people in his life after all.

Jason shifts stance a little and Bruce's gaze moves with him, and Jason realizes that the collar of his sweatshirt doesn't cover the hickey that Abigail left. Any second now Bruce is gonna say something about it, or pointedly not say something about it. Jason uses that second to duck past Bruce's guard and throw him, and they both land with a muffled thud.

"You let your concentration slip," Jason says, triumphant, jumping back to his feet and raising his fists again. Bruce pauses for a moment, grinning, propped up on his elbows. It's rare that Jason manages to get the better of him in sparring and it's obvious that such occasions make Bruce pleased and proud.

"You're good at using opportunities," Bruce tells him. Jason beams. Bruce moves one leg around, too quick to dodge with a jump, and hooks Jason's ankles out from under him.

"Oof." Jason sits up and rubs at his tailbone. "That was low."

"Your own techniques aren't particularly Marquis of Queensberry." Bruce stands, and offers Jason a hand down. Jason thinks it's only fair to use their positions as a chance to plant his leg against Bruce's stomach and throw him over.

"And Todd wins again!" Jason raises both his arms as if to an applauding audience, then stands. "If I try to help you, am I gonna end up on my back?"

Bruce's smile is sharp-edged. "What do your instincts tell you?"

Jason rolls his shoulders back, working a little of the tension out. "Probably." He shrugs, and holds out his hand. Bruce rolls him down onto the mats, as expected, and pins him there with a hand on each arm.

Jason laughs, breath a little ragged from the workout. "Looks like you win after all."

Bruce stays still above him, looking at him like there's some puzzle in his face that needs working out. Jason swallows, trying to get his breathing back to normal. Bruce's fingers tighten on his arms for a split-second and then release him, and Bruce stands up and walks away.

"Finish your homework, Jason," he says over his shoulder.

Jason punches the bag until his wrist feels like it's on fire.

Wednesday afternoon is the practical science class in the lab; Jason likes it best of all his lessons. Next year he'll have the choice of chemistry or biology or even physics, but for now the class is simply "science" and they're dissecting cow eyeballs.

"Gross, man. Gross," he says with a smirk, watching the next bench over as David von Schreiber and Myfanwy Winder poke at the specimen in front of them and cause thick ichor to ooze out slowly from the scalpel cuts. Across the room, everyone's doing pretty much the same thing to the eyes they've been appointed. Cries of 'ohmygod, it spurted on me, I'm gonna puke' and 'here's lookin' at you, kid!' bounce back and forth. It's two thirty-five and nobody's really all that serious about finding the cornea or the iris or anything like that.

Nobody except Lucy Tripp, anyway, and alphabetized seating has put her right beside Jason. She's too busy documenting all her observations of the dissection, peering at the slimy bits of ex-cow on the tray in front of her, for Jason to get a go at making it squeal and pop and stuff.

"Wanna go get a burger or something after class?" Jason asks her, rocking his stool back and forth. She huffs a strand of hair out of her eyes; her right hand is writing and her left hand, still in its plastic glove, is gore-covered.

"No, Jason," she answers, longsuffering. "Can you be quiet, please, so I can finish our work? You're just interfering with your own grade if you distract me."

"Hey, I resent that. I'd be helping if you'd just let me near the damn eye for a minute."

She doesn't answer, and Jason goes back to watching David and Myfanwy. A two forty-two he looks over again. Lucy draws all her margins in red and her headings are black ink, all her notes written in neat blue printing. Jason reaches over and pokes at a large portion of the eye. It wobbles.

Lucy turns, her eyes narrowed in a furious glare. "Fuck off, you little shit."

Jason snorts. "Little? I'm a head and a half taller than you, and almost two years older." Lucy's in the accelerated learning program, and Jason's a year behind the rest of the kids his age. Considering that he had to catch up more than four years' worth of learning in handful of months, he doesn't think he's doing all that shabbily.

Once again, she doesn't bother to respond.

"Hey, your pen's running out of ink."

A muscle in Lucy's jaw moves rapidly, making her skin twitch. "So? It's working fine. See?"

"I was just gonna say you could use mine, but if you want to keep up with the haughty bitch act then I'll just let you scratch away at your paper there." Jason sighs, bouncing one knee impatiently as he watches the tick-tick of the clock above the teacher's bench. Lucy reaches over and picks up Jason's pen, a blue and silver and expensive thing that he hasn't gotten used to the weight of yet.

"Thanks," she says quietly. Jason shrugs.

"Whatever. It's just a pen."

After class, Lucy stays behind to help wash and put away all the instruments and to dispose of the specimen remains. Jason would like to crack a joke about the leftovers turning up in tomorrow's cafeteria mystery meat but figures he's probably used up Lucy's tolerance of him for the day.

He lingers at the front gate anyway, scuffing his shoes against the drive and then feeling guilty 'cause Alfred will have to polish them again. Jason doesn't really get why anybody would want shoes to be shiny.

"Hey, Lucy, wait up," he calls when she walks past. Lucy walks everywhere as if there is a dog nipping at her heels.

"What?" she snaps, clutching her books tighter against her chest. Her sweaters are always too big, like her skirts, but right now she looks as if she'd like to shrink down small enough to vanish beneath the worn wool completely.

"I was just thinking," Jason says, keeping pace beside her as she walks towards the train station. Her hair is wrenched back into two ruddy-coloured braids today, making the skin of her forehead look shiny and tight and pinched.

"Did it hurt?"

"Haha. Don't you think it's weird that we have mystery meat in the cafeteria sometimes? Like, a snooty place like our school, shouldn't it be caviar and champagne? It's just funny."

Lucy glares at him and walks even faster. "Funny for you, maybe."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her answer is almost too quiet to hear. "Fuck you."

She breaks into a run, and this time Jason doesn't bother to catch up.

Batman comes home with two crossbow bolts stuck in his side, and Jason's got the job of boiling the water and then putting away the antiseptic and the bandages later on, plus noting what medical supplies are getting low. He's tempted to write down that they need Sesame Street plasters, just to see if Alfred'll buy them. Alfred sometimes does stuff like that and gives Jason sly winks, and it's funny. There's no better comedy-routine straight man than the Dark Knight.

Jason's mom used to put the kettle on whenever his dad came home banged up, too, but that was to make coffee. She'd read in a book once that in times of trouble it was good to make tea, but since neither her nor her husband liked tea all that much she substituted coffee. Jason doesn't really know how to make tea, or coffee, but figures that it's better to try and fail than not give it a shot at all.

Bruce is propped up on pillows, reading a computer print-out and looking annoyed. His stomach's wrapped in bandages, and Jason reminds himself to add dressings to the supplies list. They go through them pretty fast.

"Made you tea," Jason says, bringing a cup and saucer over to the night-table.

Bruce looks surprised. "Thank you very much, Jason." He takes a sip and smiles. "It's good."

Since Jason's got no idea what good tea's supposed to taste like, he doesn't know whether Bruce is lying or not.

"Get some more sleep," Bruce orders. Jason doesn't bother, since it'll be time to get up in a couple of hours anyway. He goes back down to the kitchen, where Alfred's doing those little tidy-up things that people do when there's not actually anything that needs doing.

"Can you," Jason says, a little hesitant. "Can you show me how to make tea?"

Alfred doesn't bat an eyelash. "Of course. I was about to make a pot myself."

There's a kid named Sean who's in the year above Jason, who hangs out in the art rooms most of the time and probably thinks that accidentally catching a whiff of paint in the storerooms is living on the wild side. He's skinny and big-eyed and not all that tall and likes pottery.

Sometimes Jason goes and hangs out with him. They don't really have a lot in common but it's nice to have the company, and most other guys at the school are dicks with nothing to say anyway. Sometimes Sean gets this look in his eye, and smiles at Jason, and Jason knows that if he hopped down off the table where he's sitting and went over and grabbed Sean and kissed him then Sean would kiss back, and probably take him into the darkroom.

But Sean's skinny, and big-eyed, and not all that tall, and kinda reminds Jason of Lucy Tripp from science class and of some of the kids Jason knew when he was younger.

With people like Sean, Jason feels dangerous. He doesn't like feeling dangerous. He wants to feel like he's not a threat. Safe. He doesn't want to touch anyone who might break.

Instead of going to the art rooms and chatting to Sean, Jason goes and picks a fight with Blake Stevenson again. He ends up with a bloody nose and a

cut along one cheekbone and Blake's blood all over his knuckles. They both get sent to the principal's office.

"Your sister the only one who gets her cherry checked?" Jason asks, quiet enough so that the receptionist won't hear. Blake's got a black eye blooming. "Or do you have to keep yourself nice for a future husband, too?"

"Faggot," Blake answers snidely, too stupid to keep his voice low. Mrs Palmerston gives him a dirty look over her typewriter, and Jason adds another victory to his mental scoreboard.

"Takes one to know one, asshole." Jason's words are breezy and he leans back on the uncomfortable wooden bench.

Eventually, finally, it's Friday night. The sky's as clear as it ever gets in Gotham, the air's sharp enough to make Jason shiver. It's like the whole world is holding its breath.

They're doing a cursory sweep through one of the nicer parts of town when Jason spots trouble. It's sort of annoying, because he's hyper-aware of Batman up on the rooftop behind him, watching to see how he goes. It's like trying to read a letter with someone hovering at his shoulder. Another twenty minutes and they'd've split up, and then Jason wouldn't have had to worry about what he was doing wrong, or whether he was too obviously having fun.

It's a mugging, out in plain view on a well-lit but empty street. Good. Jason likes the cocky ones. They go down harder.

The victim's a young woman, mid twenties maybe, with a pretty face and slim arms and a soft-looking pink sweater and a softer-looking blonde ponytail. She's got a child with her, too, a toddler with a few dark curls peeking out from under a green knitted cap. The little kid's clutching at the woman and whimpering.

The mugger is a standard-issue thug, carrying a dull-bladed knife and grinning in a way that belies his "I'm not gonna hurt you, lady, I just want your purse" lines. Jason lands almost soundlessly a few feet behind him.

The woman's eyes open a little bit wider, a tiny movement of surprise and gratitude, and the mugger whirls just as Jason throws the first punch. There's that great sound of teeth coming loose, and then Jason has to jump back to avoid a clumsy sweep of the knife. He kicks the mugger in the jaw to distract him and then grabs the wrist of the hand that's holding the knife and bends it until he hears a crack.

"You broke my fucking arm! Shit!"

"Would you watch your language? There's a kid present," Jason says, and punches the guy a couple of times. The mugger tries to claw at Jason's face with his uninjured hand, cursing all the while. Jason dodges again and brings a knee up to the guy's groin and then just punches and punches and punches until the guy stops twitching. He's still breathing, though. Jason would hate to waste an ambulance on someone like this.

"You okay?" Jason asks the woman. She nods mutely. "You sure?"

"Yes," she manages. "Thankyou."

"Get a cab the rest of the way home."

The woman nods again. The kid is looking at Jason with big blue eyes made bigger with unclouded adoration. Jason checks again to make sure that the mugger's out cold, then goes back to where Batman's still watching.

Now he's gonna get a lecture about unnecessary force and about the difference between satisfaction and enjoyment and probably one about bad language too, even though it wasn't him who was swearing.

"You just changed that child's whole future," Batman says. Jason waits for the 'but'. "Good work, Robin."

Surprised, Jason grins. "No big deal. It's what we do."

"Yes," Batman agrees.

The days drag and Jason thinks that Bruce is getting seriously ripped off by the fees Jason's school is charging. The clocks have gotta be running on cheap batteries, there's no way a trig class should last that long.

There's no way a *week* should last this long. By Thursday he's losing his mind, and spends most of the day sitting on the steps near city hall with a girl who swears that her name really is Blueberry. She's pretty cool, and offers to pierce Jason's ear with a pin and a match.

Bruce is waiting for him when he gets home. He doesn't look angry or disappointed, so Jason doesn't automatically make a bolt back out the door.

"I'm assuming that there's a good reason why Alfred had to tell your year-level coordinator that yes, you've come down with that bad cough some of the other students have."

Jason winces. Stupid nosy school. "Um. I'm cultivating a cover for my secret identity?"

"Oh yes?" Bruce looks like he's trying not to smile.

"Yeah." Jason nods enthusiastically, praying that Bruce will let him get away with the bluff.

"I'd rather your cover involved diligent study and exemplary manners." And that was a smile, no question about it.

Jason shrugs. "You're always saying that it's best for a person to play to their strengths."

They're both grinning now. "Dick phoned," Bruce says.

"Oh," Jason replies, and keeps his face blank. Of course Dick called. Bruce would never be this cheerful just on account of Jason's smartass mouth.

"I -" Bruce pauses. "We didn't speak. Alfred took the call. It was for you, in fact. Dick's going away for the weekend, and invited you along."

Jason's not sure what to say to that. "Oh?" It's the word of a million uses.

"He's coming by on Saturday morning. If you want Friday night to rest beforehand, that's all right too."

"Er." It's good that going to a fancy school has given Jason such a wide vocabulary. He wants to say *but I want to stay here!*, even though he knows it would be whining, but Bruce looks so happy and pleased and even Jason's not enough of a bastard to harsh a buzz like that.

He expects that it'll be uncomfortable. Maybe like when his dad got out of jail the first time and took Jason to the zoo, and they stood there looking at the animals and not really saying anything. They had ice-creams, but the cones went soft and the topping kinda melted everywhere and left their hands all sticky, and Jason's dad kept saying all these jokey things that just sounded forced and sad. It's gonna be just like that, only Dick's probably going to skip the part where they watch a gorilla eat leaves and scratch itself for twenty minutes.

Dick doesn't try to have a heart-to-heart with him on the way, though, which is a good start. Jason's allowed to pick the radio station.

"Ever been skiing before?"

"Nope." Jason shakes his head. "Is it one of those things that everyone says is a piece of cake and turns out to be really shitty and difficult? Because

this girl I knew when I was a kid always told me that ice skating was easy, and then she took me along once and I spent the whole afternoon on my ass."

"You'll have fun," Dick promises. Which isn't really an answer, but close enough.

By nightfall, Jason's decided that snowboarding is his favorite rich-people pastime. He aches all over, and he's pretty sure that little fingers only go that particular shade of purple when they're broken, and he's almost as happy as if he was having an ordinary weekend.

Now he and Dick are sitting in the lodge or whatever it's called, drinking hot chocolate. Jason made a half-hearted attempt at persuading Dick to make them Irish hot chocolates, but figures that Dick probably wasn't allowed to even *think* about alcohol at his age and that it'd just earn Jason another of those eyebrow-furrows that seem to be Dick's version of Bruce's face-scrubbing move. Jason wonders if he could give them proper nervous tics, with enough time and effort.

There's a guy and a girl over by the bar, about college age. He's one of those tall, built types with big laughs and ultra-white smiles. His hair's dark brown. The girl's got shiny blonde curls, the kind that bounce a little when she moves. They keep glancing over at Jason. Jason keeps glancing back. This is turning into a really good holiday.

Dick follows Jason's line of sight over to the bar, does that eyebrow thing again, and clears his throat.

"Jason, has Bruce talked to you about sex?"

Jason splutters into his hot chocolate and coughs a couple of times. So much for suave.

"Dick." Jason tries not to crack up. How can he explain that, from Bruce, a talk about racism towards aliens would seem less surprising than a sex-ed lecture, and not just because they've actually had the alien-respect discussion. "Seriously, you of all people should know the answer to that."

"I just wanted to check if anybody's explained that being safe isn't just guarding against pregnancy and diseases, it's about choosing the right person. Knowing when you're ready."

Oh, geez. People actually say stuff like that outside of crappy movies? Jason flops back against the couch. He's willing to bet that Dick's not even sure exactly what the words are supposed to mean. Just that he's supposed to say them. "I'm having a really good time. This weekend, I mean. I know how to look after myself, all right? I'm not dumb."

"I didn't say you were dumb." Dick sounds offended, then sighs. "Okay, no more lectures."

"Am I allowed to go over now?"

"I'm not going to stop you," Dick says, which Jason knows is a 'you absolutely shouldn't'. Jason puts his drink down and gets up.

The guy's name is Andrew and the girl is Lorelei and they're from Metropolis and they're engaged. They let Jason drink champagne, when they get back to their room, and ask if he and his older brother come to the slopes often.

When Jason goes back to his own room for breakfast he finds that Dick's ordered the toast extra-brown, which is how Jason likes it. Dick's obviously spent at least some of the night on training himself to be cool about stuff, and doesn't even do the eyebrow-furrow.

In the afternoon, a young woman approaches them as they wait for the chairlift. She's selling Polaroid photographs, holiday mementos. Dick gives

her a couple of dollars and the flash makes Jason's vision swim with colors for a few seconds.

"We look so pale. Like ghosts," he says when the image has developed. Their noses are sunburn-red and their cheeks ruddied from the cold, but in the photo their skin is almost as white as the snow.

"Polaroids are crappy cameras," Dick agrees, and tucks the picture into the pocket of his jacket.

Later, when Jason's hand has started to feel uncomfortable in its glove - he bound the purpled finger with tape, and it's looking a little healthier - they sit and watch the other skiers.

"Did you ever think much about your parents?" Jason asks. His breath looks all gusty in the air. "When you were a kid?"

"I still do." Dick looks like he wants to pat Jason's shoulder or something. "You're allowed to talk about yours, you know."

Jason shrugs. "Dunno what to say." The snow's dirty where people have been walking over it all day, but the parts that haven't been stepped on are almost bright enough to blind. "I miss my mom, sometimes. And my dad. But I guess I'm still pretty angry at them for a bunch of stuff, so it's probably better that they're gone. I don't know whether I'd hug 'em or throw a punch."

Now Dick does pat Jason's shoulder. "I've been told it gets easier. I think it's more that you just get used to it."

"Lorelei - that girl I was talking to last night - she thought you were my older brother."

"Yeah?" The word sounds guarded, like Dick's trying not to put any tone into it.

"Yeah. She wanted to know what you were like. I said you were okay, for a square."

Dick laughs loudly, throwing his head back. "A square? I think use of that word loses you every shred of street-credibility you ever had, Jason."

Jason sniggers. "Yeah, you're probably right."

Jason naps for most of the drive back, and lets Dick choose the radio station. The world looks really still outside the car windows, and Jason feels like he could stay just where he is for the rest of his life.

"We should do this again sometime," he says, then coughs. "I mean, if you wanna."

Dick smiles a little, watching the road. "Yeah." He nods. "We'll do that."

"Cool." Jason grins, and closes his eyes again.

He zones out completely for most of the week, coasting along without really thinking about much of anything. There's an English paper that ends up with a big red D on the top of it, but Jason's planning to milk that 'I'm creating an intricate public identity' excuse for every drop it's worth. He doesn't mind being underestimated by most people. It makes life easier.

Friday feels like waking up, same as always. A kick here, a punch there, some guy's broken nose leaving a big smear on his leg on the way to the pavement.

"Robin."

Two more down and that's the lot taken care of. Jason laces his fingers together and bends them back, cracking the knuckles.

"Robin. You're done for tonight."

"What?" Jason turns, puzzlement and fury trying to up one another in his tone. "It's early, Batman."

"And you're done." Batman's voice isn't all that stern, by Batman standards, but it's still not a voice most people would sass back to.

"Screw that." Jason fires off a grapple and swings up and off, resisting the urge to whoop a war-cry as he does so.

The weather's patchy, lots of drizzly rain, so he doubles back to where they left the bike and the car and takes the bike out to the warehouse district, where there are lots of awnings and overhangs.

There's always some deal going down in that area, which makes Jason even more sure than usual that crooks are incredibly stupid. Even lab rats eventually learn cause and effect, with enough electric shocks. That same lesson doesn't seem to be getting through to the guys who continue to meet in places where half a dozen other, similar meetings have ended with Robin beating the shit out of all involved.

Jason smirks. Nobody would credit him with having paid much attention when they were studying rats.

When Jason takes out the first couple of guys, one of the other bright sparks decides to start grabbing handfuls of the gravel underfoot and throwing them at him. It stings a little, there's bits of glass and stuff mixed in, but Jason ignores it. The mask'll keep his eyes safe, and he's gotten scraped up worse before. He makes sure not to damage any of the evidence as he drops low and jabs at a couple of ankles with sharp kicks.

There's a crack of gunfire and Jason darts back into the shadows, getting his bearings before moving in to disarm. Another fistful of glass and gravel hits him on the thigh and he winces at the sting of it. Shots are still ringing out and it's obvious that the guy's shooting wild, and that's dangerous, so Jason runs out and grabs the pistol and cracks its owner over the head hard with the butt before the shooter has a chance to blink.

Still one more guy to account for. Jason spins, looking for him in the high shadows of the buildings all around before noticing the dark shape of a prone body sprawled in a puddle of rainwater which, when Jason gets closer, turns out to be blood. Two of the randomly-aimed shots have gone through the guy's neck, and he's already dead.

Jason's thigh hurts like hell and he's feeling kinda woozy. He figures that, even if he doesn't listen to Batman on the subject, he should trust his own body to tell him when it's time to call it a night. He makes a call to the police from a payphone and then, stumbling a little, heads back to where he left the bike.

He's in civvies by the time Bruce gets home, drinking tea with extra sugar and pretending to read a newspaper.

"Jason."

"I took out a gang. I've been listening on the police scanner, heard they found more than half a million dollars' worth of heroin at the scene. That'd be going out on the street this week, if I'd gone home when you said." Jason doesn't look up from the page he's not reading.

"Alfred tells me that you were hurt."

"I'm fine." Jason grits his teeth. "It was just a graze. Nothing deep. Five stitches."

"A graze from a *bullet*, Jason. You were shot."

"Spare me the drama. I didn't even realize it wasn't just gravel until Alfred looked at it. It just stung a little."

Jason glares down at the newspaper. Bruce doesn't say anything, and after half a minute Jason caves and looks up. The expression on Bruce's face difficult to read, which isn't unusual.

"I want you staying in at night until it's fully healed."

"No way," Jason says, shaking his head. "I favor the other leg anyway. It won't slow me down any, I won't be a burden."

"That's not why."

Jason shrugs, and looks down at the newspaper again. "Whatever." He wonders if he should start a scrapbook of articles that mention him. Something to show the grandkids one day: and this is the time when your poppa helped vanquish an evil mime. He laughs quietly to himself at the thought.

Bruce stands there, watching him. Jason acts like he can't feel it.

A journalist comes by the manor to grab a couple of quotes and a photo or two of Bruce sitting around for a puff-piece in some magazine. She's pretty, in that way that's got nothing to do with the person underneath and everything to do with the polish on the top, and her laugh is high and irritating and her nails are a glossy dark pink.

Jason trails them through the house, keeping quiet as he can. The journalist has no idea that he's there, and Jason smirks and considers moving stuff around when she's not looking. Creating a little bit of urban folklore; the Ghost of Wayne Manor. Bruce would probably let him get away with it, too.

Bruce does all those stupid playboy flirt things and she eats it up. Touching the small of her back to guide her from room to room, brushing lint that isn't there off her shoulder. Eventually, finally, she leaves, and Bruce goes to his study to read. Jason follows, leaning against the doorframe and watching Bruce for a minute or so before saying anything.

"You don't feel safe. With people like her."

"It's not a question of safety." Bruce looks up from the book he's studying. "It's a necessary evil. And I've never been in real danger of discovery in such circumstances."

"No, I mean -" Shrugging, Jason fumbles for the right words. "I don't know what to call it. You protect them, but you're not part of them. One of them. And when you touch them, you're worried that you're gonna break them. For them, you're not safe, and you know it."

"Jason -"

"Just thought you might be interested to know that I get it." Jason shrugs again, and turns to go.

"Jason, wait."

He looks back towards Bruce again, who's standing now. "Yeah?"

"I'm... glad you understand." Jason's treated to a small, not-entirely-Bruce smile. He can't help but smile back.

Jason's teeth are really crappy . Good food and regular brushing has helped some, since he moved, but they're still not anything like the even white smiles of most of the other students at his school. His dentist spends most of Wednesday afternoon trying to convince Jason to submit to a set of braces and Jason tells him in no uncertain, but somewhat colorful, terms that this is not going to happen under any circumstances.

Once the appointment's over, Jason decides to walk around the city for a while. He thinks best when his feet are moving.

"Hey, Jason! Jason Todd!"

Jason turns, surprised at the sound of his name. Lucy Tripp's running to catch up with him, her hair loose down past her shoulders. She looks cheerful.

Jason looks at her face closely. "Are you an alien pod-person?"

"What?" Lucy looks puzzled, and still cheerful.

"Evil robot? Possessed? 'Cause there's no way that you're Lucy. You weren't in class today, even though you don't seem to be maimed or dead, which is weird enough without you cracking a smile like that."

She snorts. "I guess I deserve that. What're you up to?"

"Just came from the dentist's. You?"

Lucy wrinkles her nose. "Catalog route. Letterbox dropping, you know? I just finished."

"Are you high, is that it? Because there's no way you'd be treating me like a human being without a whole lot of drugs being involved."

"Shut up, Jason," Lucy says, pushing her hair behind one ear. "I'm allowed to be in a good mood, aren't I?"

"Past experience is making me answer 'no' to that one."

Lucy shrugs. "I got some good news in the mail."

"Must have been damn good news, if you're talking to me."

"Yeah, well, it was."

Jason looks expectant. Lucy looks confused. "What?" she asks.

"What's your good news, dummy? Are you gonna tell me, or just stand there?"

For a moment, her good humor falters and the wariness creeps back into her eyes. "Um."

"Whatever." Jason sighs. "I'm hungry. You want to come to the ice cream parlor with me? My treat, as a celebration of whatever secret thing has turned you into a human being."

"Minute ago you said I was an alien."

"No, I asked if you were an alien. There's a difference."

They go to the ice-cream place and Lucy gets a banana milkshake and Jason gets a scoop of vanilla, a scoop of chocolate, and a scoop of strawberry in a bowl.

"Didn't you just say you were on your way back from the dentist's?"

"Yeah."

Lucy shakes her head. "Boys," she says, as if that explains everything. "Not to mention the fact that they have about five hundred flavors here - I mean, I didn't even know you could have garlic ice cream, ugh - and you've chosen the most absolutely boring combination possible."

"Hey, don't knock the classics, Tripp. Now what's the news that's got you all happy?"

"I'm going to boarding school."

Jason blinks. "You know, most people wouldn't actually think that's all that great."

"It is for me. I'll be a properly employed tutor for the younger grades, so I'm not gonna be a charity kid like I am now. No more wearing someone else's crappy cast-off uniforms, no more having to take diet pills so I'm awake enough when I get home from work to do my homework. I'm getting out of here, out of the city, out of my life."

Now Jason smiles. "Congratulations, then. That's cool."

"It's just been -" Lucy makes a frustrated gesture, her hands hooked into claws beside her head. "- I hate our school, you know? Once, before you started there, I had to get all my hair cut off. I live with a bunch of other kids in a home and one of the little ones picked up lice, so we all got the chop. And

our fine learning institution suspended me, because girls have a regulation minimum hair length in the uniform requirements. Is that fucked up or what?"

"Fucked up," Jason agrees. "Why'd you keep going, if you hated it?"

Lucy takes another long drink through her plastic straw. "We're not all born to the manor, Jason. Some of us are trying to claw our own way to a good future. I know what my strengths are, and one of them's my brain, and I play to that. Scholarships are a good way to climb the ladder."

"You and Bruce should talk. You'd get along."

"How come you call him Bruce?"

Jason swallows a mouthful of ice cream too quickly and gives himself a mild brain-freeze. "Huh?"

"Why do you call your dad by his first name?" Lucy looks puzzled. "Come to think of it, how come you've got a different last name? Your dad's Bruce Wayne, right?"

"In the habit of reading the society pages, are we?"

"Are you kidding? At our school, who your father is is more important than your marks."

"I'm adopted."

"Oh," Lucy blinks in surprise. "I didn't know. I guess I should read the society pages, huh?"

"Bruce isn't my dad." Jason thinks for a moment. "He's... we look out for each other, that's all. I gotta keep my name, anyway. I'm the last of the Todds. We're a pretty famous family. You might've heard of my great-grandad, the barber. Sweeney."

Lucy blinks, then chuckles. "You're funny. I didn't know you were funny."

"Or that I knew how to read?"

Her smile becomes a smirk. "Something like that."

"What about your parents?"

"What about them? My mother was a teenager and she died. Didn't even pick out a given name for me; the nuns at the orphanage did. Lucia Catherine Anne Tripp." Lucy makes a mock-revolted face. "I've always been Lucy, though. You got any nicknames?"

"Not really. Jay, sometimes."

"Like the bird."

Now it's Jason's turn to smirk a little. "Yeah, like the bird."

They finish their snack and Lucy looks at her watch and says "Oh, shit, I've gotta run. Thanks for the milkshake, Jason. I'm glad I got to know you, at least a little, before going. You... I've always thought you seemed pretty cool."

"Shut up, you did not. You thought I had the plague."

"I'm not coming back to classes this week. I catch the train out to the new place on the weekend."

"I might actually get a chance to do my own science homework."

Without warning, Lucy hugs him tight for a second and then steps away again, grinning shyly before running off.

Jason guesses that she's probably the unofficial den-mother at the children's home, and will end up in the same role as soon as she gets to her new school. She's got a good hug on her.

"Have a good one, Tripp!" he shouts.

"See you round, Todd!" she calls back.

Another rainy weekend. Jason wonders if he'd be allowed to design a cape with a waterproof hood. Probably not; the masks already block their

peripheral vision quite a bit. Better to get a little wet than to miss the swing coming at you from the side.

There's not much going on, so Jason goes and sits on a roof opposite an apartment building and watches the people who're still up so late. People talking, having late dinners, chatting on the phone, watching TV, making out, working on needlepoint. It's like watching a doll house that moves, little dolls with little lives, all happy and cheerful and plastic and painted.

He sneezes a couple of times and takes that as a cue to go home. He swings down the side of the building where he's been sitting and ends up landing underneath where the overhead gutter empties out, getting a torrent of dirty water dumped straight on top of his head.

"Dammit, this is not my night," Jason mutters, pulling his cape in closer around his shoulders. By the time he gets back to the manor he's slightly drier, a fine coating of grime covering his head and neck and the top third of the uniform. It looks pretty weird in the bathroom mirror, his whole face dirty except for the shape of where the mask covered him.

Once he's clean and dry and feeling a little better, Jason heads down to the cave and spends a while reading stuff on the computer. He yawns, and thinks that maybe he should get an early night for once. First time for everything, after all.

The squeal of the Batmobile's tires on the floor of the cave is enough in itself to make him jump in surprise. He's left more than his share of skid marks with the bike, but he's never seen the car driven so erratically.

He hurries over, standing by the driver's-side door as Batman opens it. "Jason," Batman says, and then doesn't say anything else because, *oh shit*, Batman's fainted and the car stinks of blood and there's a huge tear one of the legs of the suit and Jason can see a long white sliver of bone through the red.

He makes tea. He paces. He sits and jiggles his knee and taps his fingers against his jeans, over where the still-healing cut on his own leg is itching. He paces more and makes more tea.

"Master Bruce is going to be fine," Alfred assures him for the thousandth time. "It's just sleep. No longer a faint, and not a coma. The tears to muscle weren't serious, and it'll heal cleanly. The blood loss was significant, but not enough to cause lasting harm. Sleep is nature's great curative."

He's used the exact same words twice already. Jason, once again, decides to ignore the hint and keep pacing.

"I could see the bone, Alfred."

"As could I, and this is not the first occasion. I have no doubt that it will not be the last."

Eventually Jason covers his mouth with his hand, blinks sleepily, and says goodnight. It's probably not amongst his most convincing performances but he's counting on the fact that Alfred must be exhausted too.

Sure enough, when he cracks open the door to his room a half-hour later it's to find that the house sleeps. It's still dark out, because of the rain, but Jason knows that it's morning by now. The world feels different when it's really night.

Bruce is asleep with his back and shoulders against a bank of pillows, his injured leg raised a little on a couple of cushions. He's wearing dark boxer shorts and doesn't look at all like a person at rest - his face is shadowed, exhausted, pensive. Bruce sleeps like it hurts him to do so.

Jason kneels beside the bed, watching the rise and fall of Bruce's chest with each breath. There are so many scars; Jason wonders if Bruce's body

would be recognizable without them. They're like a map, or a puzzle, piece of art that's still in progress.

There's a long one on Bruce's forearm, a thin white shape edged with the tiny dot-bumps where stitches once went in and out. Jason traces the line of it with his thumb, then with his forefinger. There's another scar just above the first, this one less even and more faded. Another on the outer bend of the elbow, a wide knot of uneven tissue - torn stitches from bending the wound too much.

Three parallel lines above the elbow; a neat echo of a bullet's path; a ragged burn mark. Jason's made his way up over the curve of Bruce's shoulder and onto his collarbone, pausing to learn every scar on the way, when a hand comes down on top of his own and stops him.

Bruce's hands are surprising things. They look how they have to, manicured and cared-for, but the feel of them is nothing like the appearance would suggest. Bruce's hands feel very purposeful, all the time.

"Jason."

"You've got a lot of scars," Jason says quietly. "Times you've survived. You don't break." He could pull his hand out from underneath Bruce's if he really wanted to -- the hold is not intended to physically restrain him -- but instead Jason moves up to sit on the edge of the bed and restart the process with his other hand. Up the arm, over the shoulder. This time he moves down instead of across, finding the scars and scratches over the chest and along the breastbone.

"That doesn't make this safe." Bruce's voice is quiet and warning. Jason can feel Bruce's pulse with his pinned hand, even and slow and steady.

"No," Jason agrees, stroking his thumb across a particularly old, deep-looking scar. "But anything that would break you... it'd break me, too. And we'd be broken together. Bruce, please, I -"

Bruce's other hand stills Jason's just as he's about to brush it over the nipple, over the scratch which misses it by a fraction of an inch. "Jason," he says again, like the word is all he has left to use.

"I want to learn all your scars," Jason tells him. And, because he's got no hands free, Jason licks at the one his hand was about to touch, letting his tongue move over the scar and over Bruce's fingers atop his own.

Bruce makes a choked-off noise, his hands pressing onto Jason's more firmly. The rhythm of his heartbeat is shifting.

"I want -" says Jason, and plants one of his knees on the edge of the mattress and the other between Bruce's legs and kisses him, hard as he can.

It's a second, one thump of Bruce's heart under Jason's palm, before Bruce is kissing back. Jason thinks that this alone might be enough to undo him, the way Bruce's movements seem thoughtful even when they verge on frantic, the way he seems to be learning the taste of Jason's lower lip as thoroughly as Jason was learning the topography of Bruce's scars.

Bruce's hands aren't holding Jason's down anymore. One's in Jason's hair, pulling him deeper into the kiss. The other slides up and down Jason's side, rucking the hem of his t-shirt up further with each movement. Jason suddenly hates his t-shirt, his jeans, every item of clothing he has ever worn in his entire life. He makes a frustrated, impatient noise against Bruce's mouth and moves away for long enough to pull the t-shirt over his head, squirming as Bruce presses his uninjured leg up between Jason's. Jason's hands are still skating over Bruce's chest, memorizing all the marks he can find.

Bruce's hand traces up and down Jason's side and it takes Jason a while before he realizes that Bruce is touching the two little scars Jason has there, where he'd gotten scratched by a broken window one time. The cuts were never stitched, and the scars are raised and jagged. Jason shivers, forcing himself not to make too much noise.

It's probably uncomfortable for Bruce, having Jason's jeans against his skin with only the cotton of his boxers in between. Too coarse for comfortable friction. Jason's feeling a bit like that himself, because there aren't any shorts between him and the inside of the denim, but every time he thinks about caring the thought gets lost by another wave of feeling.

They're not really kissing anymore, just looking at each other, and Jason can barely get enough air in to keep himself from feeling light-headed, much less say anything, so they're almost silent as they rock and press and shift together. Bruce pops the button at Jason's waistband and slips his hand inside and Jason couldn't hold back the little jerk his hips make then even if he had Bruce-level control.

"Oh, fuck," he manages to gasp.

"Watch your language," Bruce scolds, and Jason starts laughing and then stops, going tense as the rush builds and builds and then spills over and he cannot imagine being able to do anything in the world except come in Bruce's hand.

He keeps rocking against Bruce, slower now, and thinks about all the things he wants to do when they're not so desperate, so impatient. When the ache's been dulled, just a little.

"Jason," says Bruce, and Jason had no idea that his name could mean so many things.

Second period on Monday is tech drawing. Jason's already studied orthographic projection intensively as part of his training, so mostly he just clock-watches through the classes, sharpening his pencils until they're needle-thin at the tips. He decides that nobody in the world should be made to study amphichiral objects on Monday morning, except as a form of torture-by-boredom.

The class is dragging on forever, as always, but that doesn't bother him so much anymore. Everything'll pass, given enough time.

Jason runs his palm over the stitches in his thigh, and follows the tick of the seconds.

(Not Quite The) World's Finest

DC Comics, the *World Without Young Justice* elseworld, which can be found in YOUNG JUSTICE #44 and #45, SUPERBOY #99, ROBIN #101 and IMPULSE #85
Suitable for all ages.

Thursday, 2pm,
San Francisco

When the girl sets her shoulders back, it makes the hem of her cape stir at her feet.

"I wasn't here," she says stiffly.

"Of course not," the boy beside her answers.

"And you especially weren't."

"Absolutely."

It's strange to watch him smile on the monitors. The domino mask over his eyes doesn't shift, and this makes the expression unnerving.

"Glad we've got that clear."

She, on the other hand, probably isn't smiling at all. Even as she banters, her voice is businesslike, and her eyes are narrowed. The lower half of her face is covered by something which probably isn't referred to as a "Kevlar kerchief", but might as well be.

Arrowette sighs, and swivels her chair away from the grainy screen. "We have visitors."

"Clients?" Cassie asks, sitting up from her sprawl on the couch.

"It's Robin and Spoiler."

Cassie flops down again, and smothers herself with one of the ratty cushions for a moment. Then, with a disgusted noise, she throws it at the back of Conal's head. "This smells like rotten mayonnaise."

"I'm not the one who orders out for eight-inch subs whenever she's bored," he snipes, not turning around. He's scanning the latest articles about them into the computer, and giving it the occasional encouraging pat as it whirs and wheezes. "Either of you two done anything to get the wrath of Gotham down on our heads recently?"

"They don't look pissed. Well, Robin does, but no more than usual."

"Guess we'd better -" Cassie starts to say, standing up and pushing an errant curl away from her eye. On cue, the intercom buzzes loudly. "One day I'm going to get you back for doubling the volume on this thing."

"You'd never hear it otherwise." Arrowette leans against the wall and smirks. "Might as well answer it, since you're up."

"You're the one on door duty."

"You're the one who's been napping on the couch all morning."

"Will someone answer it already?" Conal asks. "I don't know about you two, but I'd like to spend time with someone who hasn't expressed a desire to give me rectal surgery with a crossbow bolt or a wine bottle."

"You deserve it," Cassie and Arrowette answer in unison, glaring matching daggers at Conal. He coughs nervously, cleaning his glasses on the hem of his shirt.

The buzzer goes off again. Cassie sighs.

"Okay, okay. Don't get your bulletproof panties in a twist," she mutters, stabbing at the open-channel button with a plump forefinger. "Teen Titans. What can I do you for?"

"Robin and Spoiler here. Can you let us up?"

"I don't know. Hold your tongue and say 'I was born on a pirate ship', and I'll think about it."

Robin's sigh is an irritated burst of static. "Just hit 'unlock', Cassandra."

"Just blow me, Birdy," Cassie answers sweetly. Arrowette muffles a laugh against one gloved hand. The line goes dead, and Cassie can almost feel the rays of pure hate radiating from downstairs.

She's counted all the way to fourteen before the buzzer sounds again. "Teen Titans, can I help you?"

"Spoiler. I don't think we've had the pleasure."

"Don't think we have. Wonder Girl here."

"Can you let us up?" He sounds friendly. Or, at least, like he's better at faking friendly than Robin ever has been.

Cassie's always had a knack for getting the measure of people. It took her ten seconds to clue into the fact that Robin was someone whose buttons were worth pushing, first time they met. So she's been doing just that every chance she gets.

"Refreshments?" she asks them as they walk in the door. "The donuts are a little stale, but the pretzels were bought this morning. The red's open, and there's quite a nice bottle of cider around here somewhere as well. Or vodka. We have vodka, right?"

Arrowette shakes her head. "No. Remember? Con bogarted it all after we were done with Klarion."

"It was medicinal. Your secret admirer gave me the headache from hell."

"He's not my -" Arrowette starts to say, snarling at Conal.

Robin clears her throat pointedly. "No, we don't want a drink. Thanks."

"Yeah, I bet Daddy Bat sends you to your room without any cookies if you come home tipsy." Cassie raises the bottle in their direction as a toast before tipping it to her lips.

"So what's up?" Conal sits himself down on the edge of Cassie's desk, near where Spoiler's sitting. "Not that we don't like it when hot teenagers in costumes show up just for Crisco Twister, but I didn't figure you two were the type for that."

"Crisco Twister?" Spoiler asks.

Robin glares at Arrowette and Cassie, as if it's their fault that Conal's decided to bond with the kid in purple. "Ignore him, Spoiler."

"Careful. You keep the leash too short, your puppy's gonna break it," Arrowette tells Robin, pulling out a nail file and working on the point of one of her bolts.

"For the love of... my brain can't take that noise. Not this early in the morning," Cassie complains. "They're sharp enough."

"It's afternoon."

"You still don't need to scrape metal on metal beside my head, Cis-"

"You'll be shutting up now, if you like your eyeballs unperforated."

"Oh, wait, I get it." Spoiler smiles and shakes his head. "Crisco like the oil. I'm assuming that there's nudity, too."

"Well, I'd hate to ruin your cape." Conal grins broadly.

Robin looks like she's about to have a minor stroke from bottled tension. Arrowette's several seconds away from bursting a lung; it might even be one of her own.

But before any of that happens, Spoiler turns to Cassie. His smile gets wider.

"That's really cool. Your consort's the child of Cadmus. I never realized that before now. I guess some stuff's destiny, huh?"

Cassie blinks. It's like he didn't even notice that Con was mentally stripping him, or that he was flirting back. He can jump from that into making obscure observations about Greek mythology without a beat.

"Can I timeshare him?" she asks Robin. "You can have weekdays and the second Sunday of every month, and I'll have him washed and brought to my chamber."

Arrowette snorts. "This rathole's the closest thing you've got to a chamber, your high-and-mightyness."

"Well, forget the washing, then."

"If we're all done with the lame banter, can we get down to business?" Robin asks.

"What's this 'we', Birdy? You haven't bantered yet."

"Look," Robin goes on, as if she hasn't heard Cassie at all. "It's like this: the League's offworld right now, and I would be perfectly happy if we could take care of this problem before they get back.

"There's a situation in Japan. Some experimental technology has had a non-corporeal entity introduced into its matrix, and -"

"Wuh?"

"A ghost's taken over a computer, Cass. That about it?" Conal's speaking to Robin, but still looking at Spoiler.

"A robot, actually," Robin answers. "And it would be best if -"

"Hey, didn't I tape over an anime of yours with a plot just like that?" Arrowette rests her arm on Conal's shoulder and pinches his cheek. He swats at her.

"I'm not sure I want to let you anywhere near a robot, Con. Ever."

"Oh, get over it."

Cassie makes a mental note to herself to replace his shampoo with bleach and his soda with cod liver oil.

"It would be best if," Robin attempts to say for the third time, pushing her hair back off her face and glaring at them all. "We took care of it sooner rather than later. The technology is volatile."

"So why do you need us?" Cassie asks, throwing the now-empty bottle onto the pile in the corner, where it lands with a forlorn glassy clatter. "Aren't you guys in your element with this kind of crap?"

"A super-powered being would even the scales, in this situation," Robin says coolly. "We're willing to pay you very well. In cash."

"And all the sake you can drink," Spoiler adds, and smiles at Cassie again.

"Oh, by the grapes of Dionysus, just give me the boy and I'll be your pet meta forever," Cassie mutters. Then her eyes narrow. "Wait. I call bullshit. No way the Girl Wonder comes to Wonder Girl's team for help with an evil robot."

For an endless second, Robin matches Cassie's glare.

Then she lets out a breath, and pulls her mask down.

Her eyes are still chilly, but the rest of her face is deceptively friendly-looking. Her lips are fuller and darker than Cassie expected.

"Can we talk?" the girl who's been hiding behind Robin's mask asks. "In private?"

"C'mon, guys, I'll emasculate you both by beating you at Mortal Kombat while our fearless leaders have a heart-to-heart," Arrowette suggests, ushering Conal and Spoiler over to the other side of the room.

"We can go out on the ledge," Cassie says, and stands up. The hinges on the window only protest a little as she pushes the panes open. "Sorry about the view."

The second story of the run-down building Cassie calls home looks out over a selection of dumpsters, the back door of a cheap Chinese restaurant, and the gutted remains of a blue Volkswagen. The ledge is comfortable and sun-warmed.

"Do you remember... a few years ago..." Robin begins, hesitantly, not looking at Cassie. "There was... I guess you could call it a crisis."

Cassie winces, and closes her eyes, and remembers. Remembers the flashes of the life she might've had. The Cassandra Sandsmark designed for all work and no play, colorless and crabby. No sex in her violence, and no violence in her sex.

"Yes, I remember."

"I do, too. Tim -- the Spoiler -- doesn't."

"Arrowette and Conal don't, either."

"When it first started, a boy came to you. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah." Cassie shudders at the things she can't shake from her mind. The smell... "That was nasty."

"You killed his parents. In revenge." Robin's voice is flat. She's still staring out at something in the middle distance.

"Hey, it was the least we could do. I didn't even get a chance to molest the poor guy. What's this got to do with anything? And don't give me some crap about crossing a line or anything like that. I haven't had nearly enough to drink to put up with supercilious garbage."

"I've done research. In situations like this, the fact that you took an eye for an eye gives you a certain amount of power. Clout. I don't know what to call it." Robin looks down at her hands and bites her lip. It takes a second for Cassie to realize that the sound coming from the girl is a kind of laughter. "Do you have any idea how many times I've had it drummed into me not to turn to magic to fix problems?"

"I still don't see what this has to do with some robot in Japan."

"He was supposed to be Robin."

"What?"

"The boy. Jason. In the other world, the one that almost happened. He was Robin before Tim."

"Spoiler was Robin? I don't remember that."

Now, finally, Robin looks at Cassie. Her smile is hard. "There's not a day when I forget it."

Cassie can feel her expression turning sharp and dark, like a knife in a nightmare. "If you've done your research, you already know what the Bacchae did to Orpheus."

Robin doesn't look scared at all. "Greta Hayes."

"What?"

"Not 'what', who. She's our Tokyo problem."

"I know that name. Why do I know that name?" Cassie scowls. She hates feeling confused if there isn't a nice mellow buzz to temper it.

"Because she would have been one of you. One of your team. At least, I think so. Prior to the crisis, a wraithlike form known as William -"

"Billy."

"All right, Billy. He was what Batman's files refer to as a 'warder'. An unquiet spirit. Did he ever tell you why he wasn't resting in peace?"

They'd never talked all that much. Cassie was still getting used to her powers, back then, and Billy had been a quiet guy at the best of times. "I don't remember. I don't think he knew, to be honest. The past was kinda hazy for him."

"It's likely he didn't. Beings in his situation usually repress as many of their memories of life as they can. He was atoning. He murdered his sister."

There doesn't seem to be anything to say to that, so Cassie shuts up and lets Robin talk.

"Her name was Greta. Ever since the crisis happened, I've been putting together a database of people's memories about the other world. There's a boy in a private hospital down south who seems to have a near-complete recollection of it. Trouble is, his mind's so broken that talking to him is like playing scrabble with Arkham's finest."

Cassie really, really needs a drink. "No, that's not... not Greta. That's not it. Susan? Sally?"

Robin shrugs. "Maybe there. Here, she was named Greta Hayes, and when she was killed something weird happened. She was electrocuted, and wound up getting merged with the energy that had shorted out her system. Got bounced around from one government super-secret lab to another for a while, until she broke free. Since then she's been causing low-grade mayhem all over the place. Crashing networks, frying broadcast towers."

"Paranormal vandalism. I like her already."

"So you'll help?"

"Hell." Cassie shrugs, and tosses her curls away from her face. The ledge gets windy sometimes. "It's not like I've got anything better to do today. And what kind of leaders would we be, if we didn't take care of our teams?"

Robin nods, and looks satisfied in an icy-bitch kinda way. "Well put."

"Off to Japan then, I guess."

24 hours later, outside Tokyo

"Warn a guy before you do that, okay?" Spoiler shouts.

"What? Can't hear you!" Arrowette lets off another grenade arrow.

"I said WARN A GUY BEFORE YOU DO THAT!"

"More up high? Thanks!" She looses a volley at the five dark figures on the upper walkway of the hangar.

"Neither of you can hear a word I'm saying, can you?" Conal asks cheerfully, over the commlink. "Y'know, we should work with the Bats more often. This plane has every gadget and toy a guy like me could ever want."

Spoiler ducks, and another pulse beam hits the retaining wall behind him. Arrowette whoops and corners two more of the 'bots, pin-cushioning them with six bolts from her wrist crossbow.

"Next time I hit Luthor up for hush money," Conal goes on "I'm totally getting some of this stuff for myself. And installing miniature cameras in all the costumes. It's a crime against the ancient and noble art of eye candy that I can't watch the pair of you fight an army of ninja robots. I bet you're getting all sweaty. You know how I love to watch that sumptuous chest of yours heave, Arrowette. And Spoiler's gotta be a sweet little mover in the field."

"You know," Cassie says, voice wry. "Some of us still have use of our eardrums, Conal. It'd be such a shame if someone told Arrowette what you've been saying about her."

"You wouldn't dare."

"I still owe you a major dose of hurting, techno boy. Give me a location on the runaway 'bot, so I can stop playing the rat-in-a-maze game through these closed underground train lines." She's several blocks away from the hangar,

now. Cassie trusts that Arrowette will eventually stop having fun for long enough to get the situation there under control.

"Robin still with you?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, she turned her earpiece off before you started remarking on our esteemed team mate."

"Aren't the Bats all about collecting as much information as they can?"

"And yet, for some strange reason, she seems to feel that doesn't extend to listening to your discussion of Cissie's breasts."

"Ooooh, careful. She'd be way shittier at you for using the Dreaded Given Name than she would be at me for the cracks about her dirty pillows."

"Signing off. Too much static," Cassie lies, and pulls the small plastic speaker out of her ear.

"Had enough?" Robin asks blandly.

"Needed a break. He didn't have any idea which way we should be heading, anyway. Any sign of our rogue?"

"She came this way. Then turned left."

"You know," sighs Cassie. "Next time, maybe it'd be an idea to mention to the people you hire to help you out that the naughty ghost-robot they're chasing can replicate itself at will."

"You found out soon enough."

"Not really my point, Robin. A heads up about the martial arts programming would've been courteous, too. I can't believe I'm down in these gross tunnels like this. I can feel the cobwebs sticking to my skin."

"If we were in Gotham, this chase would take place in the sewers."

"Aw, Birdy, are you homesick? Miss the homey stench of your wretched hive of scum and villainy?"

Robin shoots her a glare, then snorts. "You don't strike me as the *Star Wars* type."

"You've met my tech monkey, right? Weedy guy, glasses? Kinda looks like Superman's scrawny little brother might?"

They turn a corner and the tunnel goes from being dim to entirely pitch black. Cassie recoils, but after a couple of a seconds Robin clicks on a palm flashlight and sends a beam down into the darkness in front of them.

"It went this way. Come on."

"So, um, when we catch up, what's to stop it from making ten thousand of itself and wasting us?"

"The energy core will be depleted from making all the doubles that the others are taking care of. She shouldn't be able to manage more than two or three more for the next thirty hours or so."

"This is Batman's technology, isn't it? That's how come you know so much."

"Yes."

Cassie pushes her hair off her face again, missing the daisy garlands she used to braid into crowns. They kept her curls out of her eyes, at least. "Ever stopped to consider that maybe it's situations like 'the army of possessed ninja robots need to be contained before they destroy Tokyo' which give people trust issues with you guys?"

"We prefer working alone."

Robin's the only one who can still make Cassie feel like the furious, hot-headed kid she was back in Young Justice. Maybe Robin's a button-pusher too.

They keep walking. The tunnels are quiet, and claustrophobic. Cassie considers putting her earpiece back in, but decides not to. She loves Conal,

but it'll be a while before she's really going to forgive him for what happened last week.

"You don't strike me as the *Star Wars* type either, Robin."

"You've met my sidekick, right? Skinny guy, smiles a lot, kinda looks like Batman's well-adjusted little brother might? I've seen my share of megaplex marathons."

"So what's his deal, anyway? Spoiler's. Is he really your sidekick? Would that make him Batman's grand-sidekick or something?"

"He's not an official operative in Gotham. Batman wants him to give it up."

"Why? He's pretty good. We'll have him, if you don't want him."

Robin starts walking faster. Cassie switches from walking to floating, keeping pace.

"Honestly," Robin says, as if Cassie could possibly believe that she'd ever tell the full truth. "I think Batman's a little scared of Spoiler. He's a freaky kid sometimes. He notices everything. He's sneaky."

"Um. We're talking about the same Batman, right? Tall guy, dark cloak, likes to lurk?"

"People tend to be most uncomfortable around those they can see themselves in."

Cassie blinks. "Okay, that was just downright horrifying. It was like listening to the Bat, only he'd turned skinny and blonde and female."

A pulse beam spits out towards them from the dimness ahead. Robin sidesteps it, and breaks into a run. "Stay near the ceiling!"

"Roger." Cassie flies a little higher. Clattery footsteps, metal on cement, echo dully around them.

"Greta, we don't want to hurt you!" Robin calls, moving at a run.

"Don't give me that 'she's more scared of us' crap. She's shooting pulse lasers at us! She's a freakin' supervillain!" Cassie offers a hand down. "C'mon, it'll be faster if we fly."

Robin hesitates, then takes her hand. Cassie moves them forward quickly, towards the footsteps.

"I've chased enough nervy muggers and smash-and-grab crews to know when it's fear, not cunning, at work."

"Robin? Could you loosen your grip just a tad?"

"Sorry." Robin sounds genuinely apologetic, and a little self-deprecating. "Habit. Deceleration cables don't bruise if I hold on too tight."

"Careful. You sound almost human when you admit a shortcoming."

A slamming sound reverberates around them.

"Put me down," Robin says, and pulls a palm computer out of a pouch on her belt. The backlighting on the screen is a shade Conal would call 'krypto green'. He likes it when Arrowette gets bored and draws on her nails with high-lighter, because it turns out almost the same color.

"So you had a map of this place at your disposal the whole time," Cassie says, looking over her shoulder. "And instead we were playing hide-and-seek?"

"Tools are to be used when necessary. Not relied on."

"And there you go with the being-a-miniature-Batman again. What's up with that? You weren't this anal back a couple of years ago, when you helped out with that Lobo stuff Young Justice got mixed up in."

"When I saved the three of you from the entire planet bent on turning you into teen hero pate?"

"Details, details."

"There's a supply closet up ahead. One door, no air vents. She's cornered herself," Robin explains as she leads Cassie further down the tunnel. "We'll just have to wait until she's ready to talk."

"Or until thirty hours are up, and we get pasted."

"Pessimist." Robin settles into a crouch in front of a door set into the side of the tunnel. "Stay on your guard."

Cassie hovers beside Robin. "I feel like I'm stuck in a b-grade Gamestation level."

"Welcome to my life."

Cassie starts fidgeting after two minutes. At seven minutes, she contemplates listening in on Spoiler and Arrowette's mayhem and Conal's commentary. When it's been twelve, she starts fiddling with the clasps and toggles on her costume.

"You like that outfit a lot." Robin states. She hasn't moved at all since getting into position. Her gaze doesn't shift away from the door as she speaks. "You've kept the same design since you first took up the identity."

"If it ain't broke, as the saying goes."

"You changed your hair."

"I still wear the flowers on ceremonial occasions and stuff. Pam - she's my supplier - didn't like how many garlands were getting mashed in battle. She's protective of her plants."

"We all have our causes, I guess," Robin agrees. Then she raises her voice and addresses the door. "Greta, we promise we're not going to hurt you or try to contain you. We want to talk."

No reply. Cassie sighs, and bends her laced fingers back until the knuckles crack.

"Have you ever met Nightwing?" Robin asks after a few more minutes of quiet.

"Nah, but I've heard stories from Troia. And I've seen photos of him from when he was Robin. Your costume's way better."

"Thanks. Spoiler likes it too." The pause, the hesitation before elaborating, is almost too brief for Cassie to notice. "Batman's not a fan."

"Why, because your legs are covered up? Has he ever considered changing his name to Chicken Hawk Man?"

"Cute." Robin sounds like she's actually entertained for a change.

"Witty quips are but one of the many super abilities I'm known for," Cassie says, and hates that she can't keep her tone light. Now Robin's going to go back to being a broody little jerk, and that'll just make the time fly.

All Robin says is, "You sound bitter."

"Hey, I know the deal. I wisecrack and make with the funny for a few years. Do some work in a minor team. Save some lives, right some wrongs. Have lots of adventures with other goofballs. Die messily at the hands of some loser villain. In ten years' time, you'll be skulking around the shadows at my funeral, listening to Starfire and Green Lantern talk about what a hero I was. As if Kory or Kyle would deign to give a joke hero like Wonder Girl the time of day when she was alive."

Robin looks up at Cassie and meets her eyes, before returning her concentration to the door. "It doesn't have to be like that," she offers quietly.

"Sure it does, Birdy. We can't help who we are. You're more like Daddy Bat every time I see you."

"He's not my father."

"I didn't mean it literally."

"My father was the Crypto King."

When she feels a sharp knock on the back of her head, Cassie realizes she's involuntarily levitated up to the ceiling. "Ow. You're kidding, right?"

"Yes. Such a joke would fit my sense of humor exactly," Robin says sarcastically.

"Do you ever get tired of being a snappy little witch? You're skinny enough that you'd be able to wear one of my bra cups as a tent blouse if you cut some holes in it -"

"It's rather obvious that you and supportive undergarments aren't on familiar terms, Cassandra."

"- and you're so snitty all the time. WASP would be a better code name for you than Robin. Chicken Hawk Man and Wasp, the Bitch Wonder. And what's with the Cassandra stuff, anyway? CASSIE. It's not a difficult name to learn. Or Wonder Girl's fine, if you want to be a haughty maiden all the time. Nobody calls me Cassandra except you, Birdy."

"Nobody calls me Birdy except you, Cassandra."

They wait by the door in frozen silence for what feels like forever, but is only another twenty three minutes according to the watch in Cassie's armband.

She's about to try getting Greta's attention again, just to break the monotony, when Robin speaks.

"That's why my mask's like this." She gestures to the kerchief portion of her costume. "My Dad's was the same. I didn't want Batman to just shove me into the old Robin outfit and pretend that I was another friendly kid who could help him. I didn't want him to forget what a risk he was taking by trusting me."

"You didn't want him to forget, or you couldn't handle him trusting you?"

Robin snorts. "Most of the armchair psychologists I've met don't smell like cloves and oranges."

"Or chase robots through abandoned Japanese subways?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

Cassie chuckles, landing beside the door and rapping her knuckles against it. "Come on. You're bored, we're bored. If we get back to the States by the start of next week, we can watch the pro wrestling semi-finals on cable. Faux-hypermasculine homoeroticism. What troubled young self-replicating robot doesn't enjoy a dose of that?"

The door, and anyone beyond it who's listening, doesn't answer.

"This is getting old." Cassie can feel her temper fraying. "Greta, we're not handing you back to evil scientists, I promise. You can be a Titan, if you like. If you can put up with Conal. Or not. You can be a sandwich-maker in our kitchenette for all I care. I just want to get out of here."

"I shot at you." Greta's voice sounds like it's coming through a badly turned radio. Cassie can't actually remember anything about the girl from the other world, but she sounds familiar nevertheless.

"You think I'm cranky about that? I'll introduce you to Arrowette. She shoots at me at least once a week, and I still helped her move when she got evicted."

"Why... why are you doing this?" Greta asks. She must be right up against the door.

"I need a reason?"

"If you're lying, I'll kill you."

"Good to hear you don't resort to violence. I was worried you wouldn't fit in with the rest of my team. Gonna open the door now?"

After a minute, she does.

Cassie didn't get a proper look at the robot when the Titans, Robin and Spoiler got to the hangar -- there wasn't time before the fight began and 'robot' unexpectedly became 'robots'. It's pretty obviously a Batman-designed thing, all dark and sleek and scary, and Cassie decides not to wonder too much about what prompted its creation in the first place.

"Conal will ask you if you want a design update. You'll tell him 'no', and never let him touch you. For your sake and everyone else's."

The robot nods. "Okay."

Robin approaches the two of them, and holds her hand out. "Hi. We got off to a bad start. Want to try again? I'm Robin."

"Hi." Greta says, and after a second takes Robin's hand in her own. "I'm sorry I tried to kill you."

"You're way too hung up on that." Cassie claps Greta on the back. "Ow. Remind me not to do that again. What's this made of, titanium?"

"It's an... alloy," Robin says.

"Are you even physically capable of just answering a simple question?"

"It wasn't a simple question. It was at least partially rhetorical."

"So that's a 'no', then."

They go back to the hangar, where Spoiler's trying to console Arrowette by promising that she can come blow things up in Gotham sometime. She ignores him, and continues to complain loudly that it's no fun fighting ninja robots if they're all going to self-destruct without her getting to blow them up first.

When they're back in the plane that Robin borrowed from Batman without telling him, Conal gives Cassie a lecture about keeping him informed of her location at all times. She rolls her eyes and smacks him on the side of the head.

"You're delivering your respect-your-team speech from a very glass house, on top of a mountain of kettles, Con."

"I was worried, Cass. Give me some slack."

"I'm a superhero, genius. You don't have to worry about me."

"I hope there was a comma in that first sentence, because otherwise you're just full of it. Hey, do you think this Greta chick will let me redesign the robot? I could put -"

"No."

"Aw, but I promise I wouldn't -"

"No." Cassie crosses her arms, and glares.

"One day you're going to develop heat vision, and I'm going to wake up castrated, aren't I?"

"Who says we need to wait for the heat vision?" She gives him a vicious smile. "Get up the front with Spoiler and get this thing on course, okay? Even you can hit an 'autopilot' button."

"Yessir, Ma'am."

Cassie sits herself down by one of the windows and closes her eyes, listening to everyone else's chatter as they take off. She gets airsick if she flies this high by any means other than her own power. It feels wrong to be up in the air without feeling the wind around her.

Arrowette and Greta have gone up to the front of the fairly small cabin space, and are telling Conal about their battle in the hangar. It sounds far more grandiose than the way Cassie recalls the events, but Spoiler's not correcting any of the details.

They can all give this up some day. If they want to. They're normal, underneath the confusion and dismay which has colored Arrowette and Conal's lives, and whatever situation led Spoiler to become who he is despite Batman's discouragement. They're ordinary human kids. When they want to walk away from all this, they'll be able to.

Well, not Greta, but who knows what magic and science will manage to dream up next? She might get a second chance.

But Cassie's going to be what she is for the rest of her life. She's the champion of a god.

A gift like that tends to stick.

She stares out the window of the plane, at the tiny world below, and remembers a tearful late-night conversation with her mother.

Cassie had been fifteen, and she didn't even *like* wine back then, and her hair was falling out and growing back red and shiny and curly, and her breasts and stomach and thighs were swelling with muscle and fat.

She'd made herself sick with crying, and screamed, and bent a quarter coin double, and cried some more.

Her mom sat down on the bed beside her, and stroked that weird two-color hair, and when she'd spoken, she'd spoken quietly.

"When I look at you, Cassie, do you know what I think?"

"There's my big weird metahuman daughter who can't keep down anything non-alcoholic?" Cassie had snuffled into the pillow.

"No. I think of a Latin word. *Sacer*. It has two meanings. Sacred, and cursed. Because they believed that to be touched by the heavens was to be both these things."

"Yeah?"

Cassie's mother went on stroking her hair. "Yes, sweetheart. You're blessed and burdened, and you won't have an easy life. But you'll do amazing things. And I'll always be proud of you. You're my girl. My wonderful girl."

The words had comforted her then, and they comfort her now, but it's a passing feeling. Sometimes Cassie feels really lonely, and more than a little lost.

She digs through Conal's bag until she finds the bottle of Brunello di Montalcino she knows he packed. Even when they haven't had income for months, there's always a bottle handy when Cassie needs it.

There are plastic cups in the bag, as well, and Cassie takes two of them before walking to the back of the cabin, to where Robin's sitting on the floor.

"I," she tells Robin. "Am going to get you very drunk. No ifs, ands, or buts allowed."

Robin pulls her mask down and gives Cassie a small smile. "Nice try, Wonder Girl, but you'd have about as much luck getting me drunk with one bottle as I would getting you to come lurking in the shadows on the top of a high-rise."

"Oh, come on, you don't look like you weigh a hundred pounds soaking wet. I could get you drunk on a glass of grape cordial."

"Cassandra," Robin says in a flat voice as Cassie sits down beside her. "I've lived with Batman since I was fourteen. What makes you think I haven't trained my body to withstand large doses of intoxicants?"

Cassie pauses mid-pour. "Are you telling me that Batman and Robin have drinking contests?"

"We used to, when I was younger and first getting the hang of it. Maintaining my tolerance is a job he expects me to do on my own time."

"You're so weird."

"They were a lot of fun." Robin sounds nostalgic.

"So you are capable of having fun, then. I wondered."

"It was a long time ago." The retort is acid-laced.

"So what happened to you?"

"Life. Death. Same things that always happen." With a sigh, Robin leans back against the wall of the plane. "Speaking of, we'll have to arrange a date for you to come over to Gotham, so we can work out resurrection stuff."

"What? Oh, right. Raising the dead. Slipped my mind." Cassie gulps the wine gratefully, and sighs.

"No hurry. It's not like he's getting any deadier."

Cassie snorts. "You're one of those girls who wears a ton of eyeliner and crocheted black sweaters, and hangs out at the mall talking about how classic 'A Nightmare On Elm Street' is, aren't you?"

"You think I'm a Wes Craven type?"

"Or David Lynch, maybe."

Robin smirks a little, and takes the remaining cup and the bottle off Cassie. "So I guess that makes you Fellini, then?" she asks as she pours.

"Not likely. Try Tom Green."

"Yeah? Me too. Spoiler says I'm juvenile."

"Because he's such a sage ancient himself," Cassie says, glancing at the gang at the other end of the cabin. "So what happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"What was the life and death stuff?"

Robin sips expensive wine from a plastic cup and shrugs. "A bad guy. Did bad stuff. I knew some people who got hurt because of him. A couple who died.

"Gotham's crime families thin each other's herds from time to time, and this time it was him. They had his feet in cement and were about to throw him off a pier and..." she presses her lips together and looks at Cassie. "I let them."

Cassie knows that saying 'hey, you already know that I believe in revenge, that's how this all started' isn't the correct reaction in the circumstances, so she keeps her mouth shut.

"He had a daughter. My age. Batman believed me when I said that I didn't get there fast enough to save the guy, but she never did. She blames me. She's not in school anymore; she spends her days orchestrating her father's crime syndicate and answering to the name Viper. I thought I could make the world a little less crappy, and instead I made a supervillain." Robin lets out a deep breath and takes another swallow from her cup. "That answer your question?"

"Wow. It really does suck to be you, huh?" Cassie pats Robin on the leg. "I'd probably be a nasty little ice queen if that happened to me, too."

"It doesn't suck to be me. Not really. I just... that's not going to happen again. Ever."

"I'm glad you've got Spoiler to keep you sane. Batman wouldn't be the best guy to do the cheer-up thing."

"He's not as bad as you think," Robin protests. "Really."

Cassie's sure she looks dubious.

"If I'm spilling my guts, you've got to do the same. Only fair. What's Conal done to make you and Arrowette so angry at him?"

Cassie chokes back a laugh. "It's not all that deep and meaningful. Really. He's just a geeky little pervert."

"Well, it's like he said: us Bats always want to know all the info."

"You were listening?"

"I'm always listening."

Cassie drains the bottom of her cup and refills it. "Well, what happened was that Arrowette and I were out dealing with this whole stupid radioactive zombie dinosaur thing, and Con got really bored while we were gone. He was doing his hacker mojo, and he found a bunch of old schematics for a specialized security system. Decided to make one."

"Let me guess: custard in a bucket over the door."

"Better. A spankbot."

Robin splutters into her drink. "A spankbot?"

"A spankbot. A robot that spanks intruders. Took three hours to deactivate. Hence us wishing Conal dead."

"And you say my team's weird." Robin pours herself more wine. "You're lucky. You seem like you have a lot of fun, even when you're hating each other."

"Yeah, we do."

"I don't have a lot of fun," Robin says with a tired smile. "I don't think I remember how."

"Well, provided you don't mind dealing with spankbots, or Gamestations being thrown at your head when you forget to buy milk, you're welcome to hang with us."

"I'm not... I'm not Dick. Nightwing. I'm not really Titans material."

"Yeah, and I'm not Donna, and Arrowette's not Roy. Who gives a damn? It's a job that needs doing, and we're doing it. Isn't that all that's supposed to matter?"

"Mm." Robin spins her drink between her palms.

"Hey... what's your name? Who are you when you're not Robin?"

"I'm always Robin, Cassie." Robin's tone makes Cassie wonder if the Bats can read minds, too. Robin couldn't have known what Cassie was thinking just a minute ago, right? "It's not a day job."

"Duh. You guys are allergic to sunlight or something."

Robin smiles, a little nervously. Her gaze skitters over to Spoiler and the others for a moment before settling on Cassie again. "Stephanie."

"Seriously?"

Robin nods. "Stephanie Brown."

"I thought you'd be, like, I dunno. Vivian or Ophelia or something. Lenore, at the very least."

"Nope."

"Pleased to meet you, Stephanie." Cassie grins. "That's not going to start feeling normal any time soon, I can tell."

"Call me Steph. Or..." Another tiny smile. "Birdy's okay, too."

Little Black Dress

DC Comics, set prior to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*
Intended for adult audiences

Dear Diary;

Wow! Paris is really nice. Or Paree, which is what people call it here. The hotel room is huge and beautiful and the view is amazing. Bruce had to tell me off for leaning out the window too far, and when I pointed out that I seriously don't have any kind of fear of heights he reminded me that Jason might not, but that doesn't mean Jane wouldn't.

The heels aren't so bad, and I think the clothes must be really expensive. They hang different to the ordinary dresses I've seen teachers at school and Amanda and Julia wear. There's a red one and a couple of black ones, plus some jeans and shirts.

It's weird. I've been undercover before, but never for as long as I will be this week. A whole week in disguise! I'm not really worried about playing at being a girl, I figure I'll do the best I can and hope it goes okay. I got to bring the Robin costume too, of course, but Bruce says I most likely won't get a chance to wear it. We're here so Bruce can see how the European research companies he's funding are going, after all. Not to fight crime or anything fun like that.

I was kinda surprised when Bruce said he wanted me to come along, because I knew he was just using the invitation to the gallery opening gala as an excuse to travel here to look at the science and technology stuff. I was especially surprised when I found out that the invitation was for "Bruce Wayne and date". It's confusing having more than one identity! Because there's Batman and Robin, and Jason and Bruce, and they're all together, but then there's Bruce Wayne who's this big playboy guy with lots of rumors about him and all these girls, and it was him who'd got the invitation. I couldn't see how I could fit into that part of Bruce's life.

Then he started talking about practicing my disguise techniques and a chance to hone my performance skills and all kinds of things, and boy was I surprised! Alfred says he thinks it's just that Bruce didn't want to be away from me for a whole week. Either way, I get to visit Paris, so I don't mind having to be Jane instead of Jason while I'm here.

We're going to go out walking and look at some of the shops and cafes and parks now. I hope nobody expects me to speak French, because I don't know much beyond "Hello", "see you later" and "Are you sleeping, brother John?", none of which would be much good if someone asked me what time it was or something!

Dear Diary;

I was going to order toast for breakfast, to see if it was actual French toast, but then I remembered that I don't really like French toast. So I'm having boring old muesli instead.

When we got back to the hotel yesterday evening some of the other gallery guests were checking in, and Bruce stopped to chat to them. He laughs way more when he's being Bruce Wayne, but it doesn't sound like his real laugh. I like his real laugh better.

The guests were a French couple, Madelaine and Henri Dufarge. Madelaine gave me a really big smile and told me that I had wrists like sparrow bones. French people are a bit strange! She was really pretty, very

smooth-looking and glittery and powdered. I think she's a bit older than Bruce, but Henri was way, *way* older.

Bruce is going to look at a medical lab today. He asked if I wanted to come along, but I pointed out that Jane probably wouldn't tag along to stuff like that, would she? And Bruce got this big smile on his face and said "that's good thinking, Jay."

So instead I'm just going to wander around. I'm glad that short hair is fashionable on girls at the moment, a wig would be way less fun than the rest of this costume. I don't think I'm doing the mascara right. Maybe I'll go to a beauty salon.

Dear Diary;

Last night was the first of the gallery parties. I wore one of the black dresses and a necklace I found when I was out shopping yesterday. It's got a bunch of little stones on it, red and green and blue and yellow, and the saleslady said that it caught the color of my eyes. I mostly picked it because I'm not used to just wearing black! I like bright clothes.

There's this other Gotham family staying at this same hotel and going to the gallery things too. We met them last night, and the dad looked me up and down and it was weird, it made my skin feel crawly. Sometimes I get people looking at me like that when I'm Robin (and even occasionally when I'm Jason) but this felt totally different. No wonder girls like it so much when boys treat them like humans. That it - he didn't look at me like I was really a person. I was just a big pretty doll. I kinda wanted to punch him, but instead I smiled and laughed and did all those disguise things I'm supposed to be learning.

I guess I make a pretty girl. I can't tell. I'm not curvy, and the insert things for the bras aren't that big. Alfred says Dick used to be a C cup, but that I look better as a B.

Bruce seems to think I look okay, anyway. We were riding back up to this room in the elevator after the party and he started kissing my shoulders and my neck and resting his hands on my hips from behind me. There was this old lady with a little white dog in the elevator too and she gave us this big grin, like it was really cute that Bruce couldn't keep his hands off me. It was kinda nice, because we never get to do anything like that back home. For once it's part of the secret identity for him to touch me when people can see us.

Dear Diary;

Just after I wrote that last entry, the phone in our suite rang. Bruce answered it and then his eyebrows shot up like he was surprised, and he handed the phone to me and said "It's for you". It was Madelaine, the lady we met when we first got here, and she wanted to take me out for coffee. I said okay, and put on some of the jeans I brought with me. It's weird, you'd think that I'd just look like plain ordinary Jason in jeans, but in these ones I still look like Jane. They go in at the waist or the legs are different or something (don't ask me!) and so I look like a girl in pants instead of a boy.

Madelaine kept smiling at me a lot and I asked her what was so funny. She said that I remind her of a girl she knew a long time ago. I think she meant her. Then she started going on about how my wrists are like sparrow bones again, and calling me 'little bird', and then she noticed the little red rub marks where I'd had the scarves tied on last night. She gave this big deep chuckle and clasped my hand and said that I should make sure to get a rock on my finger before Bruce got sick of me.

I blushed a bit and said that I didn't think about stuff like that much. Madelaine said that girls like me never do, and that's why they end up bitter and lost and angry. She showed me the ring on her finger. It was a really, really big diamond! The kind of stuff Catwoman would probably try to steal if she saw it.

I didn't really know what to say after that, but I didn't have to think of anything because the boy from the other Gotham family staying at the hotel was hovering around outside the cafe and kept looking in at us like he was pretending that he wasn't really looking. Madelaine leaned in close to me and said "he has a crush on you, I think", and she seemed to think this was adorable. She made the waiter bring over this big chocolate sundae and then she got up.

"Every boy should have a memory of a beautiful woman in Paris," she told me, and she said it Paree. Then she left, and stopped outside to point the boy inside to where I was sitting.

He came in and he was blushing really hard. He said "Hi. My name's Tim. I'm sorry about my dad," so I liked him right away. He's twelve years old, and when he told me his age he looked at me like he was daring me to comment on the fact that he was wandering around a foreign city on his own. So I didn't say anything.

Then Tim asked why there was a big ice cream on the table and I had to explain about Madelaine. I didn't say that she thought he had a crush on me, because I think he woulda died of embarrassment if I had. I just said that since we were both American she thought we should hang out.

Tim's funny and smart and a bit weird, like he's always trying not to laugh at some huge joke that the rest of the world isn't getting. It's kinda cool to have made a friend way over here who I might end up meeting again back home. I just hope I never have to see his dad again!

Dear Diary;

Dick sent me an email with a link to an online newspaper article from the States about the gallery opening. There was a picture where you could see me and Bruce in the background crowd. The email had a sound file in it that played a loop of someone laughing.

I sent back a message saying 'Marie Antoinette.' He hasn't replied to that one.

Dear Diary;

Another party last night. I introduced Tim to Bruce. Tim got all wide-eyed and stammered, which was totally cute. I guess it is kind of a big deal to meet Bruce Wayne, if you're a Gothamite and know who he is. Tim told Bruce that he met Dick once, a long time ago, which just goes to show that it really is a small world.

I realized that I won't be able to hang out with Tim when we're back in America, because he only knows Jane and I'll be back to being Jason then. That made me feel sorta sad.

Bruce says he's really proud of how well I'm handling a sustained undercover assignment. I told him that he makes a good handbag to complete my disguise, and he laughed. I really do like his laugh. It always makes me smile, like everything in the world is just right.

Dear Diary;

It's night-time of the same day as that last entry now. No party tonight or tomorrow night, and I'm glad of the rest! Small talk is hard. I feel sorry for Bruce, because he has to do this stuff all the time.

Today Tim and I went to this arcade and all the games were in French, which was pretty funny but we couldn't understand what the rules were. Tim glanced around to see if any of the attendants were watching and then he snuck around the back of the nearest machine and fiddled with the wires or switches or something, because the screen flicked off for a few seconds and when the picture came back the words were in English.

I said Tim must have magic powers and he gave me a funny look and shook his head and said he was just good at working things out.

We played in the arcade for a while - Tim kicked my ass - and then I figured that Jane probably wouldn't spend all day hanging around with a twelve-year-old playing video games. But there's only so much shopping I can do, even in Paris! It's not like there's any point in me buying clothes or shoes or makeup, after all. I just kind of wander around and look bored, like nothing that's for sale is good enough for me.

We went walking. The buildings are all really cool looking. It's kind of like being inside a picture book all the time. I didn't expect Paris to look so much like Paris, if that makes any sense. I feel like I'm in a French movie or something. I've even got this cool pair of tortoiseshell cat's-eye sunglasses.

Tim was telling me about a book he'd read about space exploration when we both heard this little muffled screaming noise from the little alley-space between two shops. I started running before I'd even stopped to think about it, and even when I did think about it I didn't slow down or anything. If I let a crime happen just to protect my secret identity, then the secret identity isn't worth anything, is it? Keeping people safe has to be more important than anything else.

There was a lady, and a guy was going to hurt her. She ran off when I started punching. I'd stepped out of my shoes when I was running, which is kind of a pity. Those heels have to be good for something, right? I bet I coulda done some damage with them. My stockings got torn up on the concrete ground while I was beating the guy up, too.

Tim was holding my shoes and calling Jane, Jane from the mouth of the alleyway and then his voice got sharper and he shouted JASON!, and you'd better bet that got my attention! He said he'd phoned the police and that we should get out of there, so we ran for a couple of blocks and I took off my stockings (which were all shredded on the soles) and put my shoes back on. We ducked into a cafe and Tim ordered us coffees (he speaks better French than I do). I asked if he was allowed to have coffee and he gave me this look that would probably have frozen me solid except that I was still all jazzed up from the fight. We got kind of snitty then, like we weren't sure if we were supposed to be pissed at each other for keeping secrets or not, but we got over it pretty fast. It was more interesting to talk than to argue.

Seems that he's been watching Batman and Robin for years. I wasn't really mad about that, because I did the same thing for a little while. He was way scared that Bruce and I would be super-mad at him for sneaking around. I promised him that things would be okay. I said it would probably be best if



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we waited until we were all back in Gotham before telling Bruce and Alfred, and then I asked what Tim wanted to do.

"Do?" he asked, like he'd never even thought about it. "I just... what could I do? I just watch."

I told him he was the cutest, most clueless thing ever, and that there were tons of things he could do. He could be our computer guy, or he could sneak around and get information and evidence for us, and help with undercover stuff.

The best part is that I'll still be able to be buds with him when we're back in Gotham. All the time, because it's not like I have much of a chance to do ordinary friend stuff on weekends or after school. Having a friend who's one of the team will be totally cool.

Dear Diary

Bruce says that a stay in Paris isn't complete unless there's at least one day where neither of you leave the hotel room at all. So I don't have anything to write about today.

Dear Diary

Today's the last day here. Our flight's tomorrow at midday. It's just after five in the evening right now, I'm about to get changed into the red dress. I haven't worn it yet, but I'm pretty sure it's going to look really great. I'll have to make sure to steer clear of Tim's dad. Did I write here that at the party the other night, when I introduced Tim to Bruce, Tim's Dad asked me what the number of my escort service back in Gotham was? And he was trying to stare down the neckline of my dress, too. He was totally drunk. Then, a little later, Tim's Mom gave me this glare like it was my fault. It was awful and horrible.

Tim wanted to see some of the research facilities with Bruce, so we both went along. It was pretty interesting, they're doing things with plants to make them more nutrient-enhanced or something. I know tons of people don't like modified food, but sometimes when I'm Robin I see kids who're hungry and I figure that they would probably be happy if everything they did manage to eat was extra-good for them. If you're only getting one apple in a whole day, it's better if it's the best apple it possibly can be, right?

This stuff is confusing. I never know what the right answer is. Everything's all shades of grey.

Bruce says that's exactly why he needs me so much. He says I'm the color in the grey. He told me that yesterday and I think it's the best thing anybody's ever said to me.

Dear Diary

Bags are all packed! We're about to go catch a taxi to the airport. My head's kinda sore, because at the end of the party last night Tim and I stole one of the bottles of champagne and went up to the roof of the hotel and looked out at all the lights of Paris and took turns taking gulps. It made me feel kind of fizzy all over, like the bubbles in the drink were in my brain or something. I think Bruce thought it was cute when I got back to the room and I had to keep my hand on the wall so I didn't stumble in my shoes.

Dear Diary

Bruce says that a stay in Paris isn't complete unless there's at least one day where neither of you leave the hotel room at all.

So I don't have anything to write about today.



He laughed a bit, but in a nice way. I hope Tim's okay. His parents will probably be sleeping in themselves, so hopefully he can get more rest than I've had.

Madeline took me aside at the party last night and tried to give me more advice. She says I should make Bruce marry me, and then have a baby right away so that even if Bruce dumps me then I'll still get money for the kid. She'd been drinking too, I could tell, because her eyes were kind of bright and shiny. She gripped my hand really tight and said that next time she saw me, she wanted me to be Jane Wayne. I wanted to laugh at that, because it sounds funny when it's said (especially with a French accent) but I could tell that she was being serious. I said yes, yes, I'll do my best, okay, I gotta go. She nodded, and let me walk away. Then she called out "Don't forget, little bird, a gilded cage is better than the empty air." I felt sort of sad for her, but I'm not sure exactly why. I don't think she's ever been really happy in her life.

I've liked being in Paris a lot. It was fun pretending to be someone else. Maybe next time Bruce has to go abroad I'll be able to tag along again. It would be a shame for these clothes to just end up in the back of the closet, considering how nice they are and all. But I hope Bruce's next trip isn't any time soon. I'll be glad to be Jason (and Robin!) again for a while first. When Tim's family gets back home, he's going to phone me and we'll plan a day when he can come over and meet Bruce and Alfred properly.

I'd better go now, so I'm ready when the taxi gets here. What a week!

Just Another Gotham Saturday

DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*

Suitable for general audiences

7:04 am

When she wakes up, the first thing Steph feels is comfortable.

The second is a breast under her cheek.

She keeps her eyes shut, and groans.

"You have some of those cyanide suicide capsules, right?"

Cass stirs and stretches a little, causing Steph's pillow to shift warmly against her face. "No. Juice?"

Steph sighs. "It'll do."

8:38 am

Batman gives Steph two little pouches to clip onto her belt. They feel like they're made of metal.

"Take one to Tim. It's a standard precaution when Ivy pulls a stunt like this."

Steph opens one of the pouches. "Woo. Is this Kryptonite?"

"Yes."

"It's not going to make me grow a third eye, is it?"

"Keep it in the pouch until it's needed. You'll be fine."

"Me?" Cass asks. Batman shakes his head.

"Not necessary. Only Robins and former Robins need worry about it."

Cass nods. Batman looks at her for a beat, as if trying to work something out. Then he turns to Steph.

"You promised me you'd do your utmost to avoid going near anyone else until it wore off."

"I... er... I tried, I swear. It was just... she found me before I could get home, and..."

Alfred clears his throat and approaches, placing a large pot of flowers on the table nearby. "Delivery for you, sir."

Steph picks up the notecard tucked between the blooms. "Ooo. Who's Selina?"

Batman plucks the card from between her fingers. "Never you mind, Robin."

9:17 am

"Is Tim home?"

"You're up and about awfully early for a Saturday, Stephanie," Tim's Dad says, squinting against the morning's bright light. She smiles and flicks her hair back over one shoulder.

"I do running. Early starts, you know."

"Come -" he yawns widely and covers his mouth with one hand. "In."

Tim's at the dining table, reading the newspaper and eating an apple.

"You've got a visitor," Tim's Dad says, stumbling over to the coffee maker.

"Hi, Steph."

"Can we go upstairs?"

"Sure." Tim stands up. "Come on."

When they're in Tim's room, Steph pulls the second pouch out of her shoulder bag and hands it to Tim. "I was told to give you this. It's -"

Tim looks at the pouch and sighs. "Did she get the vegetables this time?"

"What?"

"Are the city's vegetables laced with potent aphrodisiacs again?"

"Flowers. Big pollen-spurting flowers. Are you telling me Ivy's created sex carrots in the past?"

"Turnips." Tim slips the pouch into his pocket. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Nope. Not yet, anyway. We still have to catch her. She got me and Batman last night when we were on patrol." Steph keeps her voice at a whisper, glancing at the closed door behind her. After the morning she's had, she doesn't want to have to deal with Tim's parents.

Tim looks horrified. "You... you and... you didn't."

"No." Steph shakes her head. Tim breathes out a sigh of relief. "No, we only got the edge of a spray. He ordered me to go home and stay on my own until it passed. And, seriously, if I'm never again in a position where Batman asks me if I have a vibrator, that's fine with me. I bet if I'd said no, he'd have pulled some special massaging thing out of the trunk of the car and told me to take it with me. It'd have a little bat logo on it."

Tim's fighting valiantly against a laugh. Steph can tell from the way his face is twitching.

"But... uh..." Steph looks at the ground. He deserves to know. "I kinda... slept with Batgirl."

9:43 am

"I just can't believe you didn't come to me. I'm your boyfriend!"

"I told you, I didn't go to her. She found me."

"I'm... I can't believe you slept with Batgirl."

"Would you stop saying that?"

"What? You said it first. You slept with Batgirl."

9: 44 am

"I slept with Robin," Cass says.

Babs looks away from the computer screen. "I forgot to mention that part of the legacy, didn't I?"

9: 45 am

"Look, you want the real answer? Out of my two best friends - my two best virgin friends - Cass was the one who hasn't had her whole world turned upside down in the last few months, okay? The last thing I wanted to do was mess with your head."

"So cheating on me with Cassandra was you being nice to my sanity?"

"Hey, don't you go waving the cheater-stick at me, Mister! I saw you with that Tim Burton reject at your school!"

"Darla?"

"Is that her name? I kinda thought 'skanky little slutmuffin' suited her."

"Reality check, Steph. You're the one who, when stoned on supervillain sex pollen, threw herself at someone decidedly not her boyfriend of two years."

"Oh, like you're upset. I've never met anyone as happy with virginity as you, Timothy Drake!"

"Will you keep it down? Dad and Dana will hear!"

"So they don't know you're a teenage boy, either?"

Tim pinches the bridge of his nose. "Let's go out to the park or something."

"Fine with me."

10:00 am

"I'm not really angry that you slept with her. I'm just surprised," Tim says as they walk around the edge of the park's greasy-looking pond.

"You do a pretty pissed version of not being angry, then," Steph retorts.

"It's not that." Tim looks at her. His expression is sad and tired. "Until this happened, I'd been doing a pretty good job of not thinking about the fact that you're Robin now. But... you are."

"Yeah." Steph can't help but smile a little. "I am." She breathes in a deep sigh. "This is what it means to be a Bat, huh?"

"Pretty much. Crushing on your team-mates is a big part of it. Have you had a fight with Batman yet?"

"Not yet."

"He'll probably fire you sooner or later. Or you'll quit and come back a bunch of times."

"You know, you all looked way more glamorous from the outside." Steph's smile turns rueful.

"I know." Tim nods. "You show up in the suit and you think you know what you're in for, and the next thing you know you're carrying Kryptonite and fighting crazed naked people high on turnips."

"What's with the Kryptonite, anyway?"

"Ivy enjoys getting a number of powerful beings involved in this sort of thing."

"You mean Superman's going to show up and try to fight me?" Steph yelps, hand going to the pouch at her hip.

Tim presses his lips together. "He probably won't want to *fight* you..."

Her laugh comes out a splutter. "You're kidding. This is the Tim version of what a joke sounds like."

"My jokes rarely involve aliens who have a keen fascination with Batman's sidekicks."

"Okay, that's it, I quit."

"Told you so."

Steph's quiet for a few moments. "Superman," she mutters. Then her eyes narrow, and her mouth widens into a grin. "Who'd you crush on?"

"What?"

"You said you crushed on someone. Who?"

"Let's just say that Superman's not unique in his proclivities."

"Okay, now let's have that answer in English, Tim."

Tim clear his throat. "Robin. It was Robin."

"Hm." Steph blinks. "Guess that makes roleplaying pretty easy."

12:23 pm

They go to a cafe for lunch. Tim doesn't tell her she's gross when she puts salt on her pancake.

"How are you?"

He shrugs. "Ask me again in another three months."

"Okay. I'm sorry. That it's weird for you. The whole thing with me taking over your job."

"Someone had to. I'm glad it's you."

"Liar."

"Another skill you'll learn in time."

1:45 pm

They stop a mugging, almost by accident.

Tim seems to feel guilty about it.

"I'm pretty sure your Dad doesn't mean you have to be a totally heartless bastard. He just doesn't want you seeking that sorta thing out."

"I know. But I jumped between an old lady and a gun. I'm pretty sure that's a no-no."

"I've never seen you freak out so much over the thought of keeping a tiny secret. It's not even a white lie, it's so innocent."

"Maybe I'm tired of secrets." He says it like it's something he's thought about a lot. Then again, this is Tim. He thinks about pretty much everything a lot.

"It's okay, Tim," Steph tells him. She makes it sound like it's something she knows for sure. "Everything is okay."

3: 06 pm

Cass finds them sitting on top of a climbing frame. They're in an elementary school's playground, in one of the seedier bits of Gotham.

"Not angry?" she asks Tim, staying a little way back.

He shakes his head. "No, I'm not angry. I'm -" he pauses, and looks at them both. His mouth twists into a wry grin. "Homesick."

It's strange for them to be here like this, Steph thinks as Cass climbs up to sit with them. All in ordinary clothes, on a windy and overcast day in the suburbs. Like they're normal kids or something.

"All children leave," Cass says quietly. "Grow up."

Tim shakes his head again. "I'm not running away from home. My father would kill Bruce." He tilts his face up and closes his eyes. "And I don't mean that metaphorically."

"No. When you're older. You can choose."

"It won't be the same. Anyway, I never thought I'd be doing this when I was an adult."

Steph sighs. "That's because you're so good at lying that you do it to yourself, boyfriend wonder."

4:26 pm

The clouds have cleared a little. Some kids are playing on the swingset, and the squeaking creak of the chains makes it easier to stay quiet.

"She's a better kisser than Superboy," Cass says to Tim. Steph spends a second seriously considering what the quickest way to make herself unconscious would be.

Then Tim tilts his head, thoughtful, and says "You think so?"

Steph wonders if there are specially trained counselors for the hero community. "Just how many people have you been kissing and crushing on while we've been dating, Tim?"

"I don't know, Steph. How many people have you had pollen sex with?" His mouth's a thin line, but his eyes are smiling.

Cass looks entertained and slightly puzzled, like how Steph feels when her Mom watches French comedies. "You two are... strange."

5:40 pm

"I should go. Otherwise, he'll think I'm doing things on the forbidden list." Tim swings down off the climbing frame.

"Things will be okay," Steph says again, and wonders how many times she has to say it before it starts being true.

Tim smiles. Steph hasn't seen such a dishonest expression aimed at her from him since before they were a couple.

"We should go, too," Cass reminds Steph quietly.

"See? Places to go, villains to punch. I'll see you 'round, guys." Tim turns to go.

"Wait, Tim..." Steph jumps down.

"Yeah?"

"Everything changes, y'know? Even this will, sooner or later."

He smiles at her like she's something that's right with the world. Gives her a soft, light kiss.

"Of course it will," he says, but she doesn't think he believes it.

6:30 pm

"You didn't buy me flowers," Cass says to Steph as they stock their belts. The pot plant with the card from 'Selina' is gone from the table, probably to a sunnier position upstairs somewhere.

"You think you'd take good care of a plant, B.G? I'll buy you a cactus, if you like, but that's it."

"How romantic." Cass clips her belt on.

"That's me." Steph double-checks the Kryptonite pouch. "Ready to roll?"

"You bet."

7:04 pm

Steph loves the Batmobile. She feels like a rockstar and a superhero all in one when she and Batman ride in it.

"Is it true about the turnips?"

"Yes."

"And about Superman?"

Batman's mouth twitches, like he's Really Absolutely Not Smiling. It reminds Steph of Tim.

"Yes."

"All things considered, this job should come with a warning label. 'Caution: contains weirdness'."

"Perhaps you're right."

"Of course I am." She settles back in her seat. "Oh, can I ask for a favor? If we get whammied by Ivy again, can you sternly tell me to go home in the general direction of Tim's house?"

Batman clears his throat. "Are you sure that's wise, Robin?"

"Nah. But I think he'd appreciate the gesture. And you know he'll just knock me out and tie me up, anyway. Not even in the fun way."

"All things considered, I think *you* should come with a warning label."

"Guess that makes me the right woman for the job, then."

"Yes," Batman says.

Jabberwock

DC Comics, an alternate universe story
Suitable for general audiences

Now:

She knows it can't be, but the first thing she thinks when she sees that bright gold hair is *Stephanie*.

The cuts on Alice's stomach and thigh are deep enough to make her vision swim and her head hurt almost more than the wounds themselves do. Coupled with a sprained ankle, the situation is one of the less optimistic she's faced this week.

But now Killer Croc is distracted, by the bright blur ducking and weaving around his punches. The girl's hair is loose and shining and Alice winces, because even Stephanie was never reckless enough to wear it like that. Still, the girl moves too quickly for Croc to grab it, or her, and now the girl is stabbing out with a small object in one hand. A spark, a crack, Croc stumbles. A taser.

Alice's head lolls forward. There's blood all over her gloves. Her own blood. She can't concentrate, everything's fuzzy. There was something important...

She looks up blearily. The girl is still shocking Croc, over and over. He's curled on the ground. She shows no sign of stopping.

"Robin..." Alice mumbles, trying to push herself back up to standing against the wall. Her ankle screams at the movement. "Robin, don't forget... the rule..."

The girl looks up, perfect candy-apple-red lipstick smeared across her cheek and her even white teeth bared in a snarl. As soon as she sees Alice, the expression changes and softens. Croc forgotten, the girl runs to Alice's side.

"Tell me what to do." Her voice is higher than Stephanie's ever sounded in-costume, and her hands more hesitant as she tries to staunch the blood on Alice's abdomen.

Alice knows she should say something, but her head aches. It seems so much easier to just close her eyes.

Then:

When Alice sees the bunny rabbit she has to chase it, because it has a funny little tail and it's going hop hop hop just like in the Beatrix Potter books her mother reads her by the fire in the evenings sometimes.

Then the ground's gone, and she screams, and she's falling. She feels like she falls for a long time, but when she lands it doesn't hurt that much. She thinks maybe she's fallen into the underworld, and looks around for the ferryman. Bruce reads her stories about that stuff sometimes, when their mother's too busy for Peter Rabbit. Bruce isn't supposed to read Alice those books; everybody says she's too little for scary stories yet.

Alice doesn't think the stories are scary, and she doesn't think what's happening to her now is scary either. The cave is very big, but that might be because she's so little. There's not much light, only a patch of sun in the spot where Alice fell in.

"Lissy!" Bruce calls from somewhere up there. The light's obscured as he looks down into the cave. "Alice, are you all right? Are you hurt? Alice!"

"I'm just here," she shouts back. "I'm just fine. I'd like to come back up."

"I'll get Father. Stay where you are!" Bruce calls, and runs away again. Alice decides that staying where she is wouldn't be as fun as exploring, and so she starts to look around. She can hear rustling noises. There are animals down here. Maybe dragons.

"Hello? Mister Dragon?" Alice calls. "Please don't breathe fire on me."

There's a screeching noise and Alice covers her hands with her ears because the noise is hurting them. Lots of little creatures with wings flap around her. Bats.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!" Alice sings happily, keeping her palms cupped at the side of her head to block their noises out. "How I wonder what you're at!"

"Alice?" Father calls. Alice takes a final look at where most of the bats are still sleeping and then runs back to where she fell in. Father and Bruce have made the hole wider and lowered one of Mother's rock-climbing cables down.

"Here I am!" she says. Father grabs her in a hug.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"Yes. Can I have a pet bat? The bunny ran away."

Bruce shudders. "I don't like bats."

"Scaredy."

"Shut up!"

"Children!" Father says sharply.

"Sorry," Alice mutters. Bruce echoes her.

"Let's get out of here. Bruce, you go up first, then help your sister. I'll have to see about getting this place sealed off properly."

"Don't do that!" Alice is horrified. "What about the bats? I'll be more careful, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die."

Father frowns. "You know I don't like that expression."

"I promise. Pleeese?" She presses her palms together in front of her, like a peasant begging for a favour from a king. Or, not a peasant, a knight. Alice is a knight, trying to protect a friendly family of dragons who live in a cave. She'll have to make up a proper story about it, and tell Bruce. He can write it down for her.

"We'll see," is all Father says.

When she gets back up onto the grass, Alice feels a bit sad. It was fun to have an adventure.

Now:

Alice wakes up and fumbles, eyes closed, for a pillow. Grasping one in her flailing hand, she presses it against her face and over her ears.

"FwgIgtthsrmsdprfed," she complains.

"I'm afraid I don't speak that particular dialect, Miss Alice," Alfred answers, fussing with a tray of breakfast foods over at the table underneath the window.

Alice sighs and throws the pillow aside, sitting up gingerly. She feels mummified, bandages coating her from ribcage to hip. There's another bandage on her ankle.

"I said, I thought I got this room soundproofed. But now I see the problem." She nods towards the open window, squinting against the light.

"Ten a.m.?"

"Half past. And one cave is more than enough, even for you. Fresh air will do you good."

"That racket won't," Alice retorts, easing herself out of bed and walking to the sill. The outside world smells like fresh grass clippings, and the pulsing bass beat of the small-but-expensive stereo system resting in the shade of one of the ash trees overwhelms any birdcalls or soft natural sounds the morning might have to offer.

The girl they've decided to call Sandra is moving through a complicated series of flips and tumbles in time with the music. Tim and Conner - Alice raises her eyebrows, wondering if Bruce knows that the pair are continuing to see one another despite his constant and unsubtle suggestions against it - are watching appreciatively. The blonde girl, now dressed in clothes which look like they were borrowed from Sandra's wardrobe, claps her hands.

"Miss Ariana Dzerchenko," Alfred supplies. "She brought you back last night. Another twelve stitches to add to your always-growing collection."

Alice rests a hand against the bandage over her belly. "She was wearing the suit -"

"A suit. Home-made, I assume. Not a bad job, as these things go. I convinced her to exchange it for some of Miss Sandra's clothing by explaining that we expected Master Bruce home sometime this morning, and that he would not be amused to find a young lady in such a getup wandering the halls."

"Dzerchenko. That rings a bell."

"Miss Ariana was Master Tim's rival in several of the subject prizes at their school this year. He bested her in Mathematics, Biology, and English, but she triumphed in Chemistry and Gym. It seems that they have a kind of competitive respect which approaches friendship."

Alice shakes her head, moving away from the window and sitting down at the table. "I met Tim's classmates at the party he held. None of them looked like her."

"Master Tim assures me that the last time he saw her before this morning, the day before yesterday, her hair was still its natural dark brown."

"Hmm." Alice reaches for the marmalade. "That's interesting."

"She seems anxious to be of help. Though I'm sure that fact is no revelation to you."

"No. Alfred... when I was injured, I... I called her Robin."

Alfred gives a tiny sigh. "Then I suppose it is all but written in stone, ma'am."

Then:

One of the few things Alice and Bruce can ever agree on is what sort of film they want to see. This time, it's *The Mark of Zorro* and it's so cool. They're pretending to have a swordfight like the one in the movie, now, using rolled-up playbills. Mother and Father are walking a little way behind them. Alice stops playing with Bruce for a moment to look at them, because they're so beautiful and handsome and wonderful.

When Alice turns fifteen she is going to be allowed a necklace just like Mother's, a line of perfect creamy pearls.

"Lissy, it's no fun if you don't fight me back," Bruce complains. Alice turns back to him and grins devilishly.

"Have at you!" she cries, and lunges.

"Wait for us, little ones!" Mother calls, laughing, as Bruce flees from Alice's attack. Alice gives chase, crashing against Bruce's back as she rounds a corner.

There's a man with a gun. He looks just like something from a gangster movie. Alice doesn't like gangster movies.

Bruce is shaking. Alice grabs his hand.

"Alice, Bruce, what -" Mother says. Then she says "Oh, God," and Father says "Just do whatever he says, children."

Then something happens. Something goes wrong. There are two bangs, two flashes of light. The damp dank smells of the street are shattered by something bright and sharp in the air. Mother's necklace is just beads, bouncing on the pavement.

Alice is screaming at the man. "You killed them! You killed them!" Her voice sounds high and strange to her ears, like the shrieks bats make. The man runs. Alice wants to chase him, but knows she has to stay. She has to stay with Bruce.

Bruce is on his knees. The street light above him paints a yellow circle around him, and Mother, and Father on the ground. Bruce is crying. Alice can't tear her eyes away. It's like seeing a nightmare come to life.

She never knew that the scary stories were really true, before.

"Bruce," she says, and they cling to each other until the police arrive.

Now:

Alice eats her eggs and toast and drinks her coffee and then, after shrinking back from Alfred's glare, drinks her orange juice and swallows a handful of vitamins as well. She dresses, glad that her clothing tends towards the elegant and easy-to-wear. Complicated fastenings are beyond her groggy fingers today.

The music outside finishes, eventually, and she breathes a sigh of relief. "Don't they have schools to be at?"

"Saturday," Alfred explains. Alice rubs her forehead.

"Right, right. I knew that. And Bruce is getting back today, you said?"

"I will be leaving to pick the family up from the airport shortly."

"Great. The dance party ends just in time for the day care center. Can you ask Ariana to wait for me in my office? I'll be down soon."

Alfred nods. "Of course."

When he's gone, Alice sits on the edge of her bed and sighs as deeply as she can without pulling at the stitches.

Ariana. Quick, darting grace. Hair like sun on sand, dyed just for this. A suit she'd made herself.

Robin, Alice thinks, and her heart aches with a kind of hopeful joy.

Then she remembers Stephanie's easy, sharp-edged grin, and her smile fades as quickly as it appeared.

Then:

She has been to the best schools in Europe. She's been yet another rich girl seeking enlightenment in Tibet. She's climbed mountains, like her mother before her, and seen opera performed on the great stages of the world, as her father would have done.

And now Alice Wayne has come home. Gotham is not as she remembers it; Bruce's philanthropic work has kept the steady growth of police corruption and organized crime from translating into abject, visible poverty, but only just. Employment rates are terrible and the number of drug-related deaths is matched only by the number of murdered sex workers and missing runaways.

There are parties thrown to welcome her, and she wears beautiful silk dresses and priceless diamond necklaces and smiles widely and laughs at all the jokes. Bruce has a reputation as a recluse, a serious man with no time for frivolity. Not so his little sister.

The Manor is as Alice remembers it. She'd expected it to seem smaller, dimmer, duller after her boarding schools, but it isn't diminished in the least. Alfred is a little grayer. Bruce has grown into the man he was always going to be, and watching him makes Alice wonder if she was as shaped by that night of horror as she has always assumed. Maybe she was destined to be who she is, regardless.

Bruce has a ward, a vivacious and cheerful boy from one of the foster programs the Wayne Foundation sponsors. There's something familiar in Dick's eyes, a sadness which Alice recognizes, and she's not surprised when Alfred tells her the story of how he was orphaned.

"Trying to save yourself, Bruce?" Alice asks her brother that night, sitting in one of the leather armchairs in his office. She remembers climbing on this chair when she was a child. It smelled like her father, then.

"No," Bruce answers, and smiles a little. Alice can tell that he's puzzled by her. She does not bother playing at being the socialite when she is at home.

"Are you planning to have children of your own?"

He shrugs. "Perhaps. One day. For now, I'm helping the children of this city who haven't any parents of their own."

"Gotham needs more help than you can possibly give it."

Bruce looks affronted. Alice doesn't care. He was always too soft. "I do everything I can," he protests.

"Yes, and it's not enough."

"You think flirting with brainless upwardly-mobile men is a better way to help the world, I suppose."

Alice wants to snap a reply, but after a moment's tension breaks into a short laugh. "Father would tell us to stop fighting, if he heard."

"Lis, let it go. Live your own life."

"You want me to just forget them? What happened?"

"Of course not. But you have to move on."

She wants to throw something at him. Wipe that oh-so-superior look off his face. "You think I should go out and find some little blonde girl and buy her some toys? Take her to the zoo? Find a proxy for my inner child?"

"Never speak so sarcastically of my choice to bring Dick into this house again." Bruce actually sounds angry. Not just a bit angry, either. Seriously pissed. Alice didn't know he even had it in him. "I needed family. You ran off to lose yourself or find yourself or whatever it was you did. What was I supposed to do? Sit here in the dark and mourn Mother and Father for years on end, by myself?"

"You think I didn't mourn them?" She's shouting and she doesn't care.

"I never said anything of the sort. I said -"

"I heard you. You think I don't want family, Bruce? You think I don't envy you and your son?"

"He's not my son. Dick knows I would never try to replace his father."

"Why the hell not? You seem perfectly fine with telling me to forget mine!"

"Alice." Bruce's voice is like ice. "You are an adult. You have the best education money can buy. You have a home here, if you want it, or a range of other properties all over the city at your disposal. There is a bright future ahead of you. You know they wouldn't have wanted you to spend your life dwelling on their deaths. Let it go."

"Go to hell." She stalks out of the study and slams the door behind her.

Now:

A framed photograph of Bruce's family hangs on the wall between her walk-in closet and the door onto the landing. It was taken shortly after the birth of his second child.

Helena, already a protective and deeply loving woman prior to parenthood, looks as dangerous and graceful as a mother swan in the photo. Standing at the front is their firstborn, a daughter as dark as her mother and sharing her father's gentle mouth, five and a half years old and burdened with the weighty name Helena Martha Bertinelli-Wayne. The second child, a boy, was a babe in arms in the picture but has since grown into a tow-headed toddler; the Nordic strain in Helena's Sicilian background coupled with the occasional tendency to fairness in the Wayne line - as evidenced by Alice's own hair - providing little Bruce Jr with a mop of strawberry blonde waves.

Helena and Bruce begat Helena and Bruce. It's almost funny.

Alice gets up and leaves the room, walking towards her study on the lower floor.

Then:

She dyes her hair a violent cherry red and puts on a pair of cheap, worn jeans she picked up from a second-hand clothes store and a t-shirt with the hem pulled out of shape. She paints her lips the same shade as her hair. Perfect. She looks utterly unlike herself.

Alice goes to one of the worst areas of the city and sets out on foot. Before she's walked even a single block, a little girl with her neckline pushed down over one skinny shoulder and a skirt hiked up above her reddened knees approaches her.

"You looking for fun, lady?"

"Holly!" A man, obviously the girl's pimp, comes over and smacks her across the head. "I told you, you've got to learn to pick them. BROADS won't go for what you're hawking."

Alice punches him in the face before she even thinks about doing it. The girl -- Holly -- runs away, genuine fear in her eyes. Alice hopes it was for the pig currently nursing a broken nose. She doesn't want the innocent to be afraid of her. Only the guilty.

"Bitch," the man spits, and punches her. Alice has done countless hours of tae kwon do and karate, but she's never fought outside of the edges of a practice mat before. She lands on her tailbone, hard. She jumps back to her feet. That's when the man hollers for his friends to come help him.

Fifteen minutes later, Alice manages to hobble back to her car, climb in, and turn the key in the ignition. She thinks she's probably going to die. And then Bruce will shake his head and think about how Alice had a death wish, because she never recovered from what happened, and how sad that is.

She grits her teeth. She'll be damned if she'll give him the self-righteous satisfaction.

It feels like at least one of her ribs has punctured something. Alice is hopelessly, pathetically grateful that the thugs merely beat her up and left her for dead. She knows how much worse it could have been. How stupid she was to think that she was ready.

Somehow, Alice makes it home without crashing into anything. She stumbles into the study and sinks into the chair which used to smell like her father.

She tried. She wanted to help... to clean up this city that her parents loved so much... that took them away from her... but all she did was get herself killed... she should find Bruce, or Alfred.... they'll save her... but maybe she doesn't deserve to be saved...

It hurts to breathe. Alice turns her face towards the window. There's something flying towards the glass. Its wings are huge and dark against the still-high moon. They make Alice think of dragon's wings.

A bat crashes through the window, sending glass splintering out in all directions.

Alice gasps.

Then, every movement like agony, she goes to look for help.

Now:

"Thank you for getting me back here last night," Alice says when she reaches the doorway of the study. The alternative to moving slowly is to hobble, and she'll need to be far more injured than she is before she'll do that.

Ariana turns in her seat, face lighting up. "You're all right!" she says, almost shouting before giving an embarrassed grin and composing herself. "I mean, I was worried. There was a lot of blood."

"This isn't the first time Alfred's had to give me a transfusion, and I'm sure it won't be the last." Alice sinks into her own chair, behind the heavy oak desk. "You're playing a dangerous game."

Ariana's mouth tightens. "It's not a game, Ms Wayne. I don't need you to teach me that."

Alice nods curtly and wishes she could blame the pain in her gut on her stitches. "Good."

"I also know that I can help you. I'm good. I've taken judo and karate and self-defense, plus a little gymnastics. I'm dedicated. I take orders. And I know

what can happen to the vulnerable and innocent of this city if they're not defended against the violent and the cruel."

"Gonna give me your CV? Provide references?" Alice asks, only teasing a little. Ariana's expression doesn't become any less intense.

"You need me. You're getting hurt more, since -"

Alice holds a hand up quickly to silence her. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I do need you. But why do you need me? If you're so determined, why not strike out on your own?"

Ariana looks down at the blotter atop the desk. "I -"

"Hmm?"

"The first Robin. I... she wouldn't remember. It was just after I moved to America. A man wanted me to help him look for a puppy. I tried to run away, but he caught me. He was going to -" Ariana stops and swallows. "She came. She punched him and tied him up and then she bought me a soda while we waited for the police." She smiles at the memory, her face suddenly young and soft. "I'd never had a fizzy lemonade before."

Then:

"Barbara Gordon?"

The young woman in the mask laughs. "Damn. You're the first one to guess. My hair gave it away, right?"

Alice shakes her head. "No, not at all. You dropped this." She hands over the small red purse, a driver's license poking out of it.

"Oh, thanks. I didn't even realize it had fallen off my shoulder. I should've made this outfit with a pocket somewhere."

"That is quite a striking costume. What are you supposed to be, if you don't mind me asking?"

Barbara's eyes, rimmed by a mask, light up with mirth. "I'm supposed to be having a little joke on my dad, but I haven't run into him yet. You've heard of the Bat, I assume?"

Alice laughs. "Who hasn't?"

"Well, I started thinking, what's as far from a Bat as I can get? What could be a counterpoint to someone like that? So here I am, a robin. To give my father a little variety in his costumed freaks."

Barbara strikes a pose. Against the red of her blouse and the yellow of her cape, her bright hair looks even more flame-like than usual. Alice laughs, and makes a show of giving applause. "Wonderful!"

Alice's own costume is a silly, frilly ballgown, an arch of face paint and a line of pasted-on rhinestones paying lip service to the idea of a mask.

"It must be a lonely life," Barbara says, craning her neck as she looks around for her father.

"Hmm? What's that?" Alice asks idly, playing with the swizzle stick in her cocktail.

"The Bat. Or does someone help, I wonder? I wish we knew more about her."

"Truth, no matter how strange, is never as fascinating as mystery," Alice replies quietly. Barbara smiles at her, puzzled.

"Maybe. I still wish we knew."

Suddenly there is the loud bang of a warning gunshot, and the milling crowds freeze in surprise and fear.

"Nobody move and nobody gets hurt!"

Alice turns to look at Barbara, but Barbara is gone.

A figure dressed in vivid colour swings towards the gunmen, grasping a high curtain from the windows along the wall, and kicks one of the guns out of its owner's hand.

"Who's that? Is it the Bat?" someone asks in a near-hysterical cry.

"No!" the reply comes after a moment's puzzled quiet. "This is someone new."

Now:

Alice's tone is serious. "Do you know what happened to the first Robin, Ariana?"

The childish sweetness leaves the girl's face once more, replaced by the grim determination of earlier. "Of course. You can't scare me by listing the risks. Barbara was shot in the shoulder by the terrorist Jade Nguyen - also known as Cheshire - while protecting her step-daughter Lian. She decided to leave behind vigilantism in order to create a more stable home environment. She's a librarian for the D.E.O now."

"You know a lot about the Bat."

Ariana nods. "Yes. I've been watching for a long time. You think it's coincidence I go to the school where your brother sends his wards?"

Oh, shit. Alice wants to bash her head against the table. How could she be so stupid? She didn't even think about the fact that Jason didn't go with Bruce and the family to visit Dick. Of all those who'll need to be told, he's the one Alice would have liked the chance to break the news to gently, and he almost certainly knows already.

Out loud, all she says is "Tim isn't Bruce's ward."

Ariana waves a hand dismissively. "Foundation volunteer, ward, whatever. Another lost lamb brought under the wing of your brother."

Alice smiles a little. "You're mixing your metaphors there a little, Robin."

Ariana's expression is one of pure delight.

Then:

"See, this movie's totally us. I'm the kickass blonde superhero chick with a great rack, and you're a scruffy punk who's good with cars and stuff."

"I'm Luke Perry?" Jason asks, outraged, and tackles Stephanie down onto the carpet in front of the television. She laughs, and wriggles against him as he pins her. Tim clears his throat.

"I'm getting more popcorn," he says, standing up and skirting around the scuffling couple.

Stephanie grins. "Timmy's totally hot for you." She flips them, pinning Jason's legs in place with her thighs. The movie plays on, ignored.

"He's, like, practically my foster brother, Steph."

"So?" She smirks, and rocks against him. "And have you seen the way he gets when Dick comes back for weekends? That kid is all about the almost-incest, Jay."

Jason rests his hands on her hips. "He's just as hot for you as he is for me. Did you see the way his eyes nearly fell out of his head when you wore those cutoffs last week? And if I'm his brother, that makes you his cousin. Which makes us cousins. Oh, gross." He makes as if to push her off. "We're banjo-plucking freaks."

Stephanie laughs, leaning in for a kiss. "Kristy Swanson acted in *Flowers in the Attic* as well as *Buffy*, you know," she says against his mouth.

Alice, standing in the doorway, clears her throat. Jason groans, banging his head back against the carpet.

"Justice has shitty timing," he complains as Stephanie climbs off him.

"Sorry, babe. Keep the home fires burning, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah."

She pecks another kiss against his mouth and bounds over to Alice.

"What's up?"

They begin walking down to the Cave.

"Jarvis Tetch broke out of Arkham this afternoon."

"The Mad Hatter?" Stephanie looks mock-cross. "You interrupted us for the *Mad Hatter*? I should complain to the union."

"What union would that be?" Alice asks, smiling as they change clothes. Stephanie always brings out her most playful side. Even the worst nights don't seem so bad with Robin near.

"The union I'm gonna set up to complain to you about," Stephanie retorts. "Now I've left Jason all antsy, with Tim right there, and they're gonna have sex and I'm not gonna get to watch because I'll be out fighting against some weird little gnome-man who makes evil hats. I mean, really, is that justice?"

Alice rolls her eyes, and wonders what insanity possessed her brother when he decided to fill the Manor with teenagers. She very pointedly ignores the natural follow-up to that thought, which asks what insanity possessed her when she decided to take in a tough, clever, decidedly teenaged ward of the state as the second Robin.

She aims a fond glance in Stephanie's direction, eyes narrowing at what she sees there. "I told you not to wear that when you're in uniform."

Stephanie looks down at the dogtag on its chain around her neck. Jason has its match. "Nobody'll see it."

"That's not the point. It might hinder you in a moment where you can't afford to be distracted. This isn't a joke."

"Okay, okay." Stephanie unclips the necklace. "You're way too serious, Alice."

Now:

Alice stands as gracefully as she can manage. "I need to go speak to somebody now. I don't know how long it'll take. You can wait here, and I'll give you the tour afterwards."

Ariana's eyes widen and she nods without saying a word.

Jason is just where Alice expected to find him, sitting cross-legged on the low couch which runs along one wall of the office he shares with Bruce. A pile of books about dysarthria, dysphasia, and dysphonia are littered around him.

"Still looking for an answer to the Sandra enigma?" Alice asks, sitting beside him. Jason pointedly continues reading for another twenty seconds before putting a marker between the pages and looking up.

"Glad to see you're up and about," he says in an even voice. "And we think she doesn't like 'Sandra' as a name. We're trying 'Cass', now."

"Jason, I -"

His eyes narrow. "Don't patronize me, Alice. I'd like to think we're both above that. You've never felt it necessary to answer to me before, and I don't see why this is any different."

Then:

Her teeth chatter against themselves as the car speeds along the bumpy dirt road, jolting her up and down in her seat.

"Just this once, let her have listened to me," Alice mutters like a prayer, eyes fixed on the column of smoke over the next range of low hills.

Now:

"I didn't want you to find out like this," Alice says finally. Jason laughs. Alice winces at the sound.

"What?" he asks, every bleak and hungry day of his childhood like an extra serration on his tone. "You thought I'd raise my glass in a toast and wish you the best of luck if you told me in a different context? Fuck you, Alice. We both know that there's no way in the world you can convince me that taking on another Robin is anything but a bad idea."

Then:

The gravel crunches under her boots and sweat runs down the back of her neck underneath the cowl.

"Robin?" she cries. "Robin!"

Then she hears the sobbing.

Now:

"She knows what she's getting into, Jason. This is the right thing to do right now. I need her help."

Jason stands up and walks away from the couch, sprawling in Bruce's chair and spinning it to face the broad window behind the desk.

"See? You don't need my blessing, or whatever it is you came here for. You've made up your mind anyway."

"Try to understand -"

"Oh, I understand, all right."

"Let me break the news, at least?" asks Alice. Jason doesn't answer.

Then:

Jason's face is streaked with dirt and ash. "I... I should have gone in," he stammers to Alice, his arms still clutched around Stephanie. "Sheila... my mother... she was working with him... if I had gone in, she wouldn't have told him... I should have gone in... should have been me... she wouldn't have told him, if it had been her son... we just wanted to help her..."

He's babbling, and Alice knows she should try to get him lucid again. She'll need his help. But Alice can't move, can't even think. All she can do is stare at the still form in Jason's arms. The blood on Stephanie's face, the bruises, the doll-splay wrongness of the angles of her legs.

Later, what she will remember most is the glint of silver at Stephanie's throat, a necklace the girl was not supposed to wear with her suit.

Now:

"All right," Jason says finally. Alice huffs out a breath of relief.

"Thank you."

"I'm not doing it for you," he snaps. "You owe her this much, at least."

With a curt nod, Alice stands and walks back towards the door.

When she turns at the threshold, Jason is still staring out of the window. His jaw is set in a hard line.

Not for the first time, Alice can see echoes of her brother in Jason's expressions. When Bruce is determined not to cry, he looks just like that.

Then:

"Alice..." Bruce's voice is soft, even though they're well away from the part of the house where Helena has just managed to settle the baby down for the night. "Stay in. Just for tonight. For me?"

"And when the paper arrives with breakfast and some child or parent or friend has lost their life, shall I write a card to their family explaining that I let it happen as a favor to you?" Alice asks, double-checking the police reports spread across her desk.

At this time of year, dusk takes forever to settle into night. Alice hates the twilight. In the evenings, it's harder for her to find distractions from her thoughts.

"Alice, since S... Ethiopia, you've lost control. You're getting hurt. This needs to stop."

"Have I lost all my allies, then?" Her voice sounds weak, and that's another thing she hates, but she can't stop the tremble in her breath.

"I was never your ally in this. And I'm only telling you what you already know."

"All I know is Gotham still needs me. Even... even without Robin."

She covers her face with her hands. "Oh, God," she mutters.

"Alice..."

"Just go, Bruce."

Now:

Though she has only called it twice over the past eighteen months, the number is on the speed dial of Alice's office phone. She sinks into her chair and wonders how angry Alfred is at her for walking around so much with her ankle as it is. Ariana is no longer here, but Alice expected that. She will deal with it later.

The tone rings in Alice's ear and her hands shake a little. She swallows and takes a deep breath to steady herself. It doesn't work.

"Oracle."

Even though the voice scrambler, Alice can hear that Stephanie's tone is cool.

"Your caller id can decode secure lines, I see."

"Of course." There's a trace of pride behind the words. Stephanie has taught herself an enormous amount of information in a short span of time.

"How are you?"

"Let me check... yeah, still crippled."

Alice sighs. "Can we just pretend, for ten seconds, to have a conversation?"

"Well, you're the one who likes to make the rules. Why don't you tell me?"

"I didn't call to have this argument. I never wanted to fight with you like this."

"Oh, I see, kicking me out of the house, that was just an attempt at avoiding confrontation. And here I was taking it personally." The scrambler makes the words flat and static-laden, but the bitterness is not hard to detect.

"You weren't happy here. I wanted to -"

"It was still my home!" The line squawks with feedback as Stephanie shouts.

"Calm down," Alice snaps. "I told you, I didn't call to go over this again."

"Fine." Stephanie is quiet for a long beat. "How's Jason? Is he still seeing the army brat?"

"Rena? No... they broke up a while ago. I'm sure he'd love to hear from you."

"He still calls sometimes. I let the machine pick up." A buzz of static which might have begun life as a sigh. "What do you want?"

"I wanted you to hear this from me. There's a girl, and -"

"Ah." The laugh sounds alien and mechanical. "This is like when Bruce gave little Helena the new baby talk, huh? Only in my case, Mommy really doesn't love the old kid anymore."

"Never say that. You know it isn't true." Alice swallows back the tightness in her throat and blinks hard.

"Forgive me if I'm not comforted by knowing that you care." Stephanie pauses, waiting for a retort, but Alice can't speak. Stephanie sighs. "Okay, so there's a new one. Good luck to her. Let's hope she's better at ignoring women in danger just because the boss told her to stay put."

"Stephanie -"

"Give her my number. I'll... try to listen. It might be too weird, I don't know. But I know I'll do a better job of it than you."

"I'll do that."

"See that you do. Bye."

"Goodbye. Take care."

The line clicks dead.

Then:

After Mother and Father's funeral, Bruce lets Leslie read to him. It's one of his books of myths. There's a river down in the underworld and when you drink it, you forget everything. Alice wonders what it tastes like. Probably salty.

She sits down in her parents' walk-in closet and breathes in the smells she knows will soon be gone forever. Her father's shoe polish and a hint of pipe tobacco and her mother's perfume and powder and the faint scent of evening air caught in the folds of her coats.

There's a diamond necklace and some earrings. No pearls. Those are gone. Alice puts on one of her father's jackets, the sleeves pooling at her wrists.

She lies down and looks up at where she knows the ceiling is. It isn't visible in the dark. When she shuts the door, there's no light at all, but Alice isn't afraid. She'll never be scared of monsters again, now that she knows they're real.

Real things, she can fight.

Now:

Ariana is just where Alice expected to find her, standing near the foot of the stairs down into the Cave. The girl is gazing up at one of the trophies, the oversized playing card with the Joker's ghoulish grin painted on it.

"I thought I told you to wait," Alice says, smiling as she rests her palm on Ariana's shoulder.

"I didn't think you'd mind."

"I don't."

Ariana's gaze darts from object to object. "You know, there's some stuff here even I don't know the story behind."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," Alice promises.

"Tell me later. First, show me. Show me everything. All the things you can do. That you can teach me."

Ariana's expression is eager and excited and confident. Alice's aches and pains melt away, no longer important in the least.

"Let's begin, then," Alice says.

True Stories for Fictional Children to Tell in the Dark

DC Comics, incorporates canon introduced during *Infinite Crisis*
Suitable for general audiences

Tim: Little Red Riding Hood

In a book nobody has ever read to Tim, the wolf is about to eat Little Red Riding Hood. Her bright cloak is puddled on the dark ground around her.

It reminds Tim of the circus and of Batman.

He keeps the book under his pillow; it gives him nightmares.

Dick: Cinderella

Cassandra hears Jason's story several times. From Batman, about herself. From Bruce, about Stephanie.

And from Dick, about Cinderella.

"When Cinderella grew up and left the castle, the prince took Cinderella's glass slipper and went searching again. And Cinderella's glass cut the heart of a beggar girl, and she died."

Stephanie: Bluebeard

One night, she hits a rapist hard. Not harder than she means to, but harder than she's been told is just. There's blood on her gauntlet and she scrubs, scrubs, scrubs, but it stays.

Maybe he won't notice.

And maybe the suit in the case is just someone's old spare.

Jason: Sleeping Beauty

Before she pushes him off the edge, Talia kisses him goodbye.

Jason's too surprised to react. Doesn't make a sound or kiss her back.

A shove, and he's gone.

Someday Jason will kiss her and whisper and touch her in ways she won't predict.

But that won't be her boy.

Carrie: Beauty and the Beast

The story always goes that Beauty learned to love the Beast. The stories say: at first she was afraid, but grew to see past the looming silhouette and growling voice.

Carrie knows better. Beauty was never scared.

It's a love story, after all.

She could never be scared of him.

Day dream

DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*
Intended for adult audiences

"This is where we first met, y'know. Isn't it romantic to be back?"

"You're late," Batman says. Jason shrugs.

"Yeah, some girl I knew back in the day came by and wanted to jabber. Didn't know a polite way to tell her to get lost."

He rubs his arms, bare to the shoulder, and shifts from foot to foot in his no-brand sneakers. When Batman climbs into the car Jason follows gratefully, the smells of the city at night drifting in from the chill damp of the alley.

"Trisha - that was the girl," Jason says as he fiddles with the heater, making no move to buckle his seatbelt. "She didn't even blink when she saw me like this. Turns out that it's the easiest thing in the world to buy that Jason Todd ended up hustling." The words are spat out, as if they taste as bitter as they sound. "I got what we needed, though. There've been seven murders, not five like the cops think. Well, six at least; there was only one body hushed up but there's this other girl who fits the type and who's dropped off the face of the planet. All under seventeen, youngest thirteen. Three male, four female."

Jason shivers again, despite the thick and nearly overpowering heat the car is now filled with. The streets are hushed around them as they drive.

"You gotta let me have this one when we catch up with him, okay? I mean, God, Trisha's right, there's nothing that's true about those kids that's not true about me, too, or about a thousand other people who just got lucky."

"We'll see."

Jason grins, knowing that for the 'yes' it is. He stretches, bending his fingers back until the knuckles click. "Six Johns pulled up, if you were wondering. I gave 'em the prices we worked out and five of them backed right off."

"And the sixth?"

"Offered me a fistful of hundreds for the whole night. I'm talking serious cash; this guy that big fists. I told him I couldn't tonight, but that he should come back tomorrow. Figured that was safest. I don't have to go back, right? We've got what I was there for."

"You don't have to go back."

Jason sits back, falling quiet for several minutes. His cheeks are turning red and a sheen of sweat makes the skin of his upper arms catch a wash of the light from the neon outside.

"When Trisha was talking, I started thinking. About who I could've been. If I hadn't met you, I mean. Like maybe that would be me now, leaning on a wall in the cold with some kid named Snuffy telling me I gotta learn not to look so tough. And," Jason swallows. "I knew you were waiting for me and that we'd be going home and I'd be warm and safe and all, but it was so easy to pretend that that was the day-dream and that when I climbed into a big expensive black car with a powerful guy it'd be because he gave me a fifty or a hundred or whatever. It was... shit, it shouldn't have been exciting to think it, because I know how fucked up that life is. I've seen kids die, or as good as, from it. But I kept thinking about you, and thinking what if, you know? What if this was really me, and I was meeting you for work?"

Batman doesn't answer right away. When he does, his tone betrays nothing of the mood behind it. "What if you were?"

Jason laughs a little, the chuckle coming out slightly breathless. "Oh yeah? Then how come I didn't blow you in the alley, smart guy?"

"Because I paid for the whole night."

Jason's breathing falters for a moment before he laughs again. "And you chew *me* out for acting like all this is a game."

Then, quite deliberately, he slumps down into a slouch in his seat, spreading his knees a little. "So where're we going, anyway? You got some secret castle or something?"

"You don't need to know that. In fact -" Batman reaches into one of the pouches on his belt and draws out one of the lengths of black cloth they sometimes have to use as bandages or tourniquets. "Put this on."

"Kinky." Jason's smirk is cruel and amused, his eyes lazy. "It'll cost you extra."

"That's fine."

"Okay, you're the boss." Jason takes the cloth and ties it over his eyes, settling back. "This is a pretty sweet ride you got here."

"I hear you have a similar reputation."

Jason splutters on what wants to be a howl of laughter and just smirks again instead. "You'll find out for yourself soon enough."

"What's your name?"

"It's your money. You tell me."

They're quiet for the rest of the trip to the Cave, Jason's breath catching on the occasional hitch and stumble.

When the car is parked, Batman climbs out and walks around, opening Jason's door and pulling him to his feet.

When his blindfold is untied, Jason blinks a few times and gives a low whistle. "So this is where the Batman lives, huh? Some guys say you sleep in a coffin. That true?"

His mouth tastes like cigarettes. If asked, he would claim he smoked to stay in character. It would be a partial truth. He hums happily, tongue hot and slippery, and when Batman reaches down to cup his erection through the cheap, too-tight jeans the hum becomes a muffled moan.

Jason moves his hands up to push the cowl back from Batman's face, still kissing like he's frantic. Batman moves the hand pressed against Jason's fly up to catch his wrist, the dull texture of the glove like some sort of nightmarish pattern against the pale, sweat-shimmer skin.

"No," Batman says. "Keep your hands still."

"Aw, c'mon, don't, let me -" Jason whines, breaking character for a moment, before he remembers himself and leans back against the car. "Hey, whatever works for you. You want me to keep my hands still, they're still."

"Good." Batman drops to his knees and pulls Jason's jeans open, hard enough to tear the thin denim at the edges of the zipper's seam.

"Hey, watch it, I might need to do another night later if the case doesn't break."

"They can be mended." It's too late to care about ruining the illusion, with Jason's heat and scent filling all the world. Cheap soap -- he takes the undercover work more seriously than he'll admit to -- and sweat and desire. Jason's fingertips press back against the door of the car, the nails too short and blunt to damage the dark paint.

"Yeah, Alfred'll be able to do it so good you won't even see where - ah!" Jason's hips buck a little as Batman breathes a gust of cool air against him.

"You'll mend them yourself. Someone with your life does not have access to a valet's services," Batman reminds him, peeling the jeans down off his thighs. There's a small knife in one of the pockets.

"Gotta carry something, else everyone thinks they're a tough guy who can take you. Come on Br - Batman. Why wait on getting what you paid for?"

"Not waiting," Batman corrects. "Savoring the moment."

"Savor thi-" Jason chokes on the end of the word, his hips arching as Batman swallows him down. "Jesus Christ. Feel like I should be paying you. Fuck."

Batman makes no acknowledgment that he's heard, still-gloved hands pinning Jason back against the car as he sucks. Jason makes another whining sound and moves one hand to Batman's head before dropping it slackly to his side again, a mutter about "fucking ears, not holding onto your goddamn pointy little ears" coming out between the soft grunting noises he's making with each bob of Batman's head.

"So -" Jason manages to gasp out, head tipped back and a bead of sweat tracing a path down his neck to the worn collar of his top. "Whatever happened to that other guy you used to hang with? The one who wore yellow and red?"

Batman leans back, standing up in one fluid motion. Jason, panting, eyes glittering, grabs one of Batman's hands in both his own. Lets himself be pressed back against the car in a furious kiss as Batman begins to work his wrist in short, even movements.

"Why don't you tell me? Does he sleep in a coffin, too?" Batman asks quietly, voice sharp. Jason whimpers, curled in around Batman's hand, one of his own palms now leaving a damp handprint on the shoulder of the suit.

"They - uhn - they say that... uh... oh Jesus... uh... they say that he's gone. That you're looking for another one. That... oh, fuck, fuck, I'm... that's why you come to the Alley. Why you pick up guys like me. You're looking for the right one."

"Is that so?" Batman's tone is conversational. Jason looks him in the eye, hair messed, eyes bright and dark.

"It's what..." Another gasp. "They say."

"You asked me your name earlier," Batman says. "Want me to tell you?"

"Yes... God, say it... say it." Jason's teeth are clenched, lips pulled back in a grimace.

"Robin," Batman whispers.

Jason comes with a cry, face buried against the throat of the cowl.

In a moment, he'll shake himself and laugh and go to take a shower. He'll change back into the well-made clothes that he is slowly learning to feel comfortable inside. The disguise will be put aside, to be mended on some far-off occasion when he's is bored enough to bother remembering.

In a moment, Batman will push the cowl back from his face and add the information Jason found out to what they already know about the case. He'll remember to eat something, eventually, and at some point he'll go upstairs and sleep.

For now, Jason is warm and soft and trembling - just a little, and he'd never admit to it - in Batman's arms. With one glove, Batman strokes at the tangles in his hair.

"It's all right," Batman murmurs against Jason's skin. "I've got you."

Both Of Us

DC Comics, incorporates canon introduced during *Infinite Crisis*
Suitable for general audiences

"Her death's on both of us."

Batman doesn't turn around. Jason's not surprised. He doesn't want to go through the whole 'look at me, dammit' thing again, so he settles for leaning against the wall of the alley and waiting.

Batman turns. The lenses on his cowl are retracted. Jason's glad of the double layer of helmet and mask hiding his own eyes. He's not so good at having Bruce look at him yet.

But that's what this is about, isn't it? Being ready. Failing to be ready.

"How can one death bother you, when you've caused so many?" Batman asks. His voice is quiet, but not soft.

Jason shrugs against the rough brickwork. "Because she didn't deserve it. Because she was one of the pretenders. Because I could have stopped it, if I hadn't pissed around waiting until I felt ready before starting the cleanup on this city. Pick whichever reason suits."

"I wish you wouldn't call them that."

"What, pretenders?"

"Yes. Just because they came after you -"

Jason laughs. The helmet muffles some of the sound, but he knows Batman hears anyway.

"You think that's why I use the word?"

Batman looks puzzled. "I assumed -"

"Of course you did."

"Then why?"

"Because we're all pretenders, Bruce. Nightwing, me, Robin, and her. We pretend that we're invincible. That we'll never get hurt, or die. Or grow up. That we won't fail you. But it never quite works out like that, does it?"

Batman just glares.

"It's on both of us. Don't kid yourself otherwise," Jason says, and walks away.

It's the evening before his birthday. He's not sure if he counts as sixteen or nineteen. He feels neither.

He's kept an eye on Dick. Chess was never Jason's greatest talent -- even the easy setting on the computer could beat him half the time -- but he knows better than to let one of the bishops roam free at the edge of the board unchecked.

The first phone number Jason has listed as current rings out, but the second is picked up on the third buzz.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

"Oh."

Jason knew he could rely on Dick for dramatic reactions. He snorts. "Oh yourself, Dickwing."

He wonders if Dick ever knew when his birthday was. Could've read it off a headstone or an obituary or something.

Even if he knew, it's doubtful he'd remember.

"What do you want, Jason?"

"Straight to the sixty-four-thousand dollar question, then?"

Dick just waits. Jason laughs. "You're not as good as that as you think you are. The brooding quiet."

"I'm going to hang up now."

"See, there you go, ruining it by talking. No way he'd say that. Give a warning."

Quiet on the line.

"Hey? Dick? You there?"

The static of a breath comes through, and Jason scowls at how relieved it makes him. "Fucker."

"Just ask it. I don't have time for this."

"Gimme a name. Someone you killed. And don't bother giving me that whole life-is-sacred bull, because I know you've never pulled the trigger and let slip the dogs of war yourself. But I also know that there's someone in your head you see before you go to sleep. Someone you carry the blame for."

"You never used to be this chatty."

"I'm making up for lost time. Now give me a name."

"What's it to you?"

"Humour me, Dick. It's my birthday."

This stretch of silence goes on, and on, and on, but Jason knows that Dick's still there.

"Blockbuster."

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

He talks to the girls working the block where he's staying, until he gets a lead on who's gone missing recently. He visits the pimps who've had the most losses, and finds out where the hush money's coming from, and changes his gloves for an unbloodied pair.

The brownstone's nothing special from the outside, but inside it smells like bleach and air freshener and new carpet. It wouldn't take a former protege of the world's greatest detective to sniff a rat.

Jason finds the owner of the house asleep in the master bedroom upstairs. Nothing special about him; a neat salt-and-pepper moustache and a thinning cowlick of hair, the start of a middle-aged spread under cotton pajamas.

Jason holds a gun to his temple and makes him march down to the basement. The bleach smell is stronger here, and there's a thin shape of a girl curled in one corner. Jason can see that her hands are bound to the water pipe running the length of the wall, but he can't tell if she's alive.

"Unlock her," he tells the man, pressing the gun in against skin by way of punctuation.

The girl stirs. Her hair's a pale brown with darker roots and her eyes are grey. She looks starved, but any fear she had before has been replaced with anger in her eyes.

That makes Jason feel good.

"Are there clothes for her?" Jason asks. The man nods, the moments feverish. Beads of sweat are sheening his face.

"Yes. There's a trunk upstairs. Please, I don't -"

"Save your begging," Jason says, and kicks the man's legs out from under him. His knees make a painful-sounding crack against the cement floor.

Jason cocks his gun, and -

"Wait." The girl holds her hand out. There are faded bruises in the crook of her elbow, and raw patches where she'd been bound. "Can I?"

They almost never say that. He likes it better when they do.

She knows how to shoot, too.

He wipes the gun clean after she hands it back. "Fingerprints," he explains.

"Thanks."

They almost never say that, either. He prefers it when they don't.

The late-night edition of the newspaper Jason picks up from a stand states that two teenage boys have been shot and killed by a liquor store clerk. They were after the \$94 in the till, and a packet of cigarettes.

He hopes that Bruce will see it and know what Jason's thinking.

That's two more on the both of us.

[00:16] RED5271: tell me the name of some1 u feel guilt over

[00:22] 003ROBIN457: What difference does it make?

[00:24] RED5271: i want 2 kno how far 2 is from 3. + its my brithday

[00:28] 003ROBIN457: I know.

[00:32] 003ROBIN457: Red?

[00:32] RED5271: im here

[00:32] RED5271: name.

[00:34] 003ROBIN457: There are a lot I could choose.

[00:38] RED5271: who was yr fault

[00:44] 003ROBIN457: Johnny Warren.

[00:50] RED5271: thanks

[00:51] RED5271: do u have a scar

[00:52] 003ROBIN457: Yes.

[00:55] RED5271: guess u owe me 1

He ends up at one of Gotham's neater graveyards, because it's his birthday and he doesn't feel like being alone. There's always someone in a graveyard, though Jason's yet to meet a ghost. The skin of his cheeks feels so sensitive in the air. So alive. It's why he likes the helmet. But it would feel wrong to wear a costume here. There are enough symbols here without the people turning into them too.

A petite asian girl in jeans and a jacket is standing at the grave that Jason was planning on visiting. She's got a bunch of pale peach roses in her hands; it looks more like a wedding bouquet than anything else.

"I guess you're who I think you're are," he says. She looks up at him, and nods. "And I guess you're not planning on kicking my ass, or you would have already."

"I wouldn't. Not here," she replies.

They stand in quiet for a few minutes. There's not a lot of light, but Jason can make out the shape of the headstone in the gloom.

"You hurt him."

Jason turns at the sound of her voice. "Yeah, well. That's intentional."

"He loves you."

"What are you, the exposition? Despite the family fiction, sweetheart, I'm not stupid. I know how he feels."

"He loved her, too."

"Didn't save her, did it?"

That shuts her up so fast that Jason feels bad.

"He took me to your grave, once." She stares at him. Most people don't hold eye contact for as long as she does. Jason wishes he had his masks. "I can't really know people with just words. Pictures are better. Movement is best. But I learned... you. A little. He told me."

Jason looks away from her unwavering gaze and down at the headstone. "Tell me about her, then."

He can feel that she's still looking. Her voice is barely more than a whisper when she speaks again. "It's not... yours. Her death."

"I could have prevented it."

"She wouldn't have wanted you to kill."

"I bet she didn't want to die, either, so that evens things out."

"Stop trying to hurt me with her." The words are a furious mutter, and when Jason looks up there are tears in the girl's eyes. "Stop it."

"Then tell me about the girl I let die because I was too busy pissing around to get this city clean fast enough."

This time it's her who looks away first, down at the flowers in her hands. "She... never listened. To 'no'. Or 'stop'. Her laugh made... other laughs. Like... candles, from one flame. Even Batman. She was like him. Anything she loved too much... she -" She makes a pushing gesture with her hands, palms pressing out away from her chest against the air. "Giving up made her sad. Angry, but sad first. She kept a diary. She tried to teach me. She painted her beeper purple. Sometimes she would smile at me. I would..." Her breath shudders. "Know why Batman wanted to keep her safe."

"She sounds like someone cool." Jason wants to touch the girl's shoulder, but doesn't know if it'd earn him a broken finger or not.

"Like water," the girl agrees with a nod, and drops the bouquet onto the grave. "Hi, Stephanie."

Jason doesn't have a flower or anything, so after a second he just gives the headstone a lame little wave. "Hi, Stephanie." He wants to add 'If you ever come back, I'll buy you a pizza', but doubts that it's an appropriate thing to say.

But maybe the girl beside him hears him say it, even though he doesn't open his mouth, because she gives him another long look.

"If she ever comes back," she says. "I won't waste it with being angry."

She walks away before Jason thinks up a good reply.

Later, he wonders if he should have asked her if there was anyone she guilted over, but doubts that she'd tell him if there was. She was never a Robin. She doesn't owe him anything.

The Cave probably has tons of new security, so Jason decides to spare himself possible maiming and go for the front door.

He expects Alfred, but it's Bruce who opens it, dressed in a robe. The cowl never looks so much like a costume as this does.

"Turns out that it's really damn annoying when someone walks away from you in the middle of a conversation," Jason says. "So I thought I'd give you a chance at having the last word. I know you like that."

"Do you want to come in?"

"No. You wouldn't let me in anyway."

"We'll never know," Bruce answers. It's after dawn, so it's not surprising that he looks tired. "I carry them all, Jason. I know the deaths that are on my head."

"I know." Of course he knows. He always has. "I wanted you to know that I know mine, too. And I sleep like" the dead "a baby."

Bruce quirks an eyebrow. Jason thinks about punching him.

"Don't bother investigating the guy on Baker street. That was one of mine," he says, and that's as good as a punch. Bruce even rocks back a little.

"Don't -"

"Every girl he doesn't kill is on my head, too. Their lives. Do you think that the good will outweigh the bad when I die, this time around?"

Bruce doesn't answer. Jason laughs, the sound bitter in his mouth, and turns to go. His bike's parked on the perfect gravel of the driveway.

"I guess mourning her makes it easier to hate me," Jason calls over his shoulder as he walks away from the door. "If she's the dead one, that makes me the bad one."

"I could never hate you," Bruce says, voice at a reasonable volume, the words only a little strangled. "Never. You know that."

Jason has to bite his tongue. He said that Bruce could have the last word, and he'll keep to that. No matter how it stings.

And then there's a hand on his shoulder, spinning him back to face the house. Jason finds himself missing the way Bruce used to tower over him. Crowd into his personal space. But that was long before he even died. Growth spurts happen.

"You know it's you."

"What, your biggest foe of the year? Your most annoying enemy? You have to be a little more specific."

"The name. The death I carry closest. You know it's you."

Jason wishes he had his mask on. He wishes his eyes were still blanked out with death. He wishes Bruce would stop looking at him, because he can't breathe.

"Still nice to hear you say it," he manages to say. Bruce's hand is still on his shoulder, and after a moment Jason realises that Bruce wants to touch his neck. To feel the pulse there. "Does it go away? Now that I'm alive again?"

"Of course not."

Now Bruce's thumb is on his cheek. Jason wants to close his eyes, but he can't even blink as they begin to sting and water.

"I have to go," he chokes out, finally, and makes the mistake of letting his eyelids drop. The tear feels hot on his skin, like it came from some other, warmer body than his own. "It's not like I can come in and have breakfast and... and fall asleep to the sound of the birds in your garden, is it? It's not like before."

"Just today," Bruce insists. The callus on his thumbtip rubs brushes over the tear, wiping it away. "It's your birthday."

It's a second that feels like it should go on forever, held in freeze-frame on a film reel. The moment of truth, as crappy tv shows might put it. He has to sink or swim. Fight or flight.

"Just today," repeats Bruce. "It doesn't have to mean anything."

"Everything means something." And some things mean everything.

But Jason's good at pretending.

He follows Bruce inside.

Switcheroo

DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*
Suitable for general audiences

Bruce wakes up crying and, because of this, it takes him several seconds to notice that he's not himself.

Tears are not a regular indulgence he allows. Sometimes, he thinks of them by way of metaphor; as an equivalent to going wading as a child. For a moment, there's coolness and relief, but when all's done there's a long walk home with legs weighed down by water.

His own dreams don't cause him sobs anymore. It's a long time since they did. But this dream was a borrowed one, it seems. One that he hasn't learned how to manage. His body feels empty, scraped and scooped and scarred. And his hands, oh God, his hands and arms feel like some vital part of them has been amputated.

Then the seconds pass, and the dream fades, and the knock comes at the door again.

"Stephanie! I won't tell you a third time. It's past ten. Didn't you say you had to be at work by eleven?"

Bruce's natural aptitude for split-second situation assessment kicks in like a reflex. "I'm awake," he calls in a high voice not his own, sitting up.

There's a sound of frustrated acknowledgment, and then footsteps away from the door.

The inside of his mouth feels sour with sleep and sharp with the pain of a chipped molar. There is a cramp in his right knee, which is clad in faded sweatpants.

He's in Spoiler's... no, *Robin's* body. The shock of surprise has muddled him, a little, but now things are coming back to focus.

The mobile phone he gave Stephanie is in her knapsack, along with her purse and the exercise book she uses as a journal. He offered her an encrypted file on the computer system, but she declined.

"I like to see my words in my own handwriting. Makes 'em feel like they're mine," she'd answered.

The secure line into his bedroom rings twice before being picked up. "Batman?"

"You were already awake?"

"Yeah, a minute ago," she answers. His voice sounds disconcerting to his ears. "What do we do?"

"Call for Alfred. Explain the situation, and have one of the day cars pick me up. Then call that burger chain you work at and tell them you have the day off. We'll -"

"Hold up, how come I have to call in sick? You're the one who's blowing off my hours! I'm saving up for a new pair of boots, you know. You can call and get chewed out by Mandy the shift manager. It's only fair."

"Robin."

"Okay, okay. Just messing around. Car'll be there soon."

Returning the phone to Stephanie's bag, Bruce glances around the room. Her floor is strewn with discarded clothing, her mirror decorated with snapshots. There's one of her and Tim sitting together in a park, smiling, and a strip of pictures from a photo booth of her and Cassandra pulling faces. She doesn't appear to have any close friends outside the group. Bruce finds

himself surprised by this, which strikes him as odd. He wasn't aware that he'd made any assumptions about her social life one way or the other.

He finds a black turtleneck and a pair of dark jeans in the untidy recesses of her wardrobe. The boots she wears as Robin are arranged beside her other, ordinary shoes. The only clean socks Bruce can find are a pale purple, dotted with small white hearts. He can't help but smile as he slips the boots over them.

Stephanie's mother is sitting on the couch in the living room, switching channels with the television remote. "The hospital switched my shift at the last minute. I'm so behind with my soaps; I had no idea that Lydia left Rod for his pirate brother, or that Brenda had discovered she was metahuman. You heading off?"

Bruce nods. "Yes."

"Have a good day. Don't let them wear you down. Chin up." The smile she gives him is so kind and... *motherly* that Bruce has to blink against a sting in his eyes.

"Bye, Mom," he says, feeling like a criminal for stealing a small warmth which is Stephanie's by rights.

The car's already at the curb. Alfred is behind the wheel and Stephanie is sitting in the back seat. She looks surprisingly at ease in Bruce's body. She hasn't bothered to shave.

"Y'know, there are a lot of people in Gotham who'd love to claim that they woke up in Bruce Wayne's bed this morning, and here I can't tell anyone that it happened to me," she remarks. "Quit scowling, you'll give me wrinkles. So what did this?"

"I'll make some calls and find out. We'll reverse the process as soon as possible."

"I have to say, this is not what I was expecting."

"One can rarely anticipate such things," Alfred points out.

"Oh, I don't mean that," she waves one hand. "I mean the whole Bruce Wayne thing. I totally had Batman pegged as someone else."

"I see." Alfred meets Bruce's eyes in the rearvision mirror, and gives a very pointed look. Bruce stares back, until Stephanie punches him lightly on the arm.

"No cranky faces! I don't want to grow up and need a cowl to cover all my crows' feet, thanks."

Several hours later, they've narrowed the possible causes down and are awaiting final results from tests conducted by the JSA and the League. Bruce has done enough work on the Cave's equipment to know the strengths and weaknesses in Stephanie's body, and has tried on the variant costumes until settling on the one which feels most comfortable.

"You break it, you bought it. I'm not trading back into a body you've let get shot or mangled or whatever," she says casually from the bench press. The increased strength in her new form seems to provide her with endless entertainment. "I never thought I'd have to warn *you* about STDs, because you're Mr Creepy, but I know Bruce Wayne's reputation and so I'm saying that, too. You get the clap, you're dealing with it. No trade-ins."

Bruce blinks. Stephanie sits up and gives him an exasperated sigh. "As if you're not going out on patrol the second dusk hits. Come on, give me a little credit."

"Gotham's need for protection hasn't changed just beca-"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." She smirks at him. "If it's all the same to you, I'm gonna hang here and wait for Zatanna to call back. And try not to singe the hair or anything, if you can help it? It's taken me ages to grow it back long."

Alfred is waiting in the equipment room when Bruce goes to stock the Robin utility belt. "She didn't know your name, sir."

"That's correct." Bruce adds extra first-aid supplies. No harm in care.

"I have attempted to make you see reason in this matter in the past, to little avail, and I feel that present circumstances force me to raise the subject again. You are not being fair to this girl, Master Bruce. I know you feel there are similarities between her and Jason, which makes your refusal to trust her even more puzzling."

"If I had put less blind faith into Jason's ability to judge situations, he would still be alive," Bruce answers calmly, re-checking the small can of mace stored in one of Stephanie's pouches. "I won't make that mistake twice."

"She is meant to be your closest ally. You have deemed her worthy of Robin without telling her your name?"

"She knows it now."

"Not by your choosing."

"So few things in the world go as we'd planned," Bruce replies, and leaves to choose a motorcycle.

There's a Pavlovian reaction in Stephanie's body whenever he uses the uppercut. A jolt of fierce joy and a ghostly tap against his own jaw; some memory of an ancient knock. Every strike she makes in such a fashion is payback for some wound in the past.

Between that and the nightmare, Bruce wonders what secrets his own body is offering up to her.

There is a freedom in a domino mask. The wind feels good and wild in his hair as he moves from scene to scene. Oracle isn't bothering to make sure he gets only the easy pickings, which he appreciates.

For the first time, he wonders if Stephanie knows that he's arranged for her to be given only simple jobs.

He meets up with Batgirl to take down a group of Scarface's thugs, and when they're all accounted for Cass begins to giggle.

"You move like... arguing," she tells him, and kisses Stephanie's cheek. "Stop trying to be you. Be her. You might not have another chance."

Three hours and seven arrests later, he has another visitor.

"Rob-- Tim thinks you should be a Titan," Superboy says, hovering a few feet above the grotesque Bruce has paused to rest on. "I don't."

"You made that quite clear last weekend," Bruce answers stonily, pushing strands of hair away from his face. "None of us wanted him to quit. Not him, not me. We're doing the best we can with the situation. Why do you feel that you need to blame someone?"

"You don't seriously think that you're Robin, right? I mean, some part of you knows that Batman's never going to think of you like that. Nobody's going to think of you like that. You're just some replacement they're making do with."

Bruce has never been entirely fond of the clone at the best of times, and feels a protective surge of anger in Stephanie's defense now. "Not at all like your creation after Clark's death, then?"

Superboy flits back in the air, away from Bruce, as if he's been physically stung by the words. He looks surprised. "Huh."

"What?"

"You knowing Clark's name. I didn't expect that. I guess I was wrong about Bats."

Stephanie knows hardly anyone's name. Not Dick's, or Jason's. Or Bruce's, before today. Certainly not Clark's.

"Superboy..." Bruce says, hoping he hasn't jeopardized Stephanie's future with the Titans by his anger. "I don't want Tim to be a block between us. We both miss him and care about him. Can't that be common ground? Can't you give me a chance as myself, and not as his replacement?"

"And what if he comes back, huh? What if his Dad gets amnesia or something and he can be Robin again? What'll you do?"

"I... don't know."

"Look, Spoiler --"

"Robin."

"Robin, whatever. I like you. We've always had fun in the past, on team-ups and stuff. Batgirl likes you, and her opinion of people counts for me. Tim's still crazy about you, even if the two of you aren't talking so much anymore. But this is weirding me the hell out, and I don't know if that's ever gonna change."

He's so much like Clark. The look in his eyes is pure Kent. "I respect your honesty, Superboy. The Titans don't need me, for now, so I'll keep my distance. Batman's... glad Tim has a friend who cares about him so much."

Superboy laughs. "Not likely. The B-man hates my guts."

Bruce shakes his head, but doesn't know what to say.

"I gotta go. I hope one day Tim's dad gets whacked with a memory-wipe ray and we can go back to how things were, y'know? Maybe the Titans'll have two Robins at once one day," Superboy says, and flies off.

Bruce sits, Stephanie's knees drawn up below his chin, and thinks to himself for quite some time.

They drink the antidote and settle back into their respective chairs. Nothing happens.

"Zatanna said it'll be about twenty minutes. We'll pass out and wake up in the right bodies," Stephanie repeats for the eighth time.

"You said that already. Several times."

"I know, I know. I just wanted you to know I paid attention. I'm not a total screw-up," she answers.

"Stephanie, I..." Bruce looks down at her hands. They look very small, and pale, and soft. There's a scar from a fight with her father on the pad of the index finger. Bruce wonders if he knew that before the body switch. "I don't think you're a total screw up."

"Well, yeah, I figured that when you let me be Robin," she replies with a grin. "But I'm not an idiot, Batman. I know you haven't decided whether you trust me all that much."

"Superman's name is Clark Kent."

She blinks. "Whoa. Okay, maybe your trust issues aren't as big as I thought."

"Losing Tim has been hard for me. I forgot that... other people lost him too. I'm sorry."

"Batman apologized to me. Now I know today's been one big hallucination. Kidding, I'm kidding. Don't hurt me." She holds her hands up, as if to block a blow. "Hey, if we're sharing, can I ask something?"

"What is it?"

"What happens when Tim comes back? Let's face it, we both know he's gonna be back eventually, and I guess he'll be Robin again. So what happens to me? Do I have to pretend this never happened? Or is it like the Narnia thing? You know, 'once a king or queen, always a king or queen'?"

"I think it's... the Narnia thing," Bruce answers finally. He's beginning to feel drowsy.

"So I'll be Spoiler-who-was-Robin, the same way Nightwing's Nightwing-who-was-Robin? That's cool. I can live with that. So long as you don't lock me out of the Cave again."

"Dick."

"Huh?"

"Nightwing. His name's Dick."

"Oh. Cool. I've always liked him. He's funny. And you can tell when he likes someone. Not like with you." Her voice is slurring slightly, her posture relaxed. "What about the other one? The second Robin? Cassie told me that you told her about him, but she'd never say anything else about it. And I was.. hmm.. walking around the Cave this evening, after you... went out..." She yawns widely. "And looking at that costume you keep in a case. It made my skin... feel wrong. Like... your body's missing something... when you think about him."

Bruce thinks again of the nightmare his day began with, the borrowed dream of Stephanie's own horror. He wonders if she's ever told Tim how much she misses the child she never met.

"I'll tell you about him when we wake up," Bruce promises quietly. "You should... know your heritage." His eyelids are very heavy.

"Sorry to flake out on you, boss, but I think I'm out. See you when we're ourselves again."

"Yes," Bruce thinks he says, but he's not completely sure.

Unconsciousness pulls him down. He doesn't dream.

Spare

DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*
Suitable for general audiences

It's halfway through the fourth funeral when Jason realizes today's his sixteenth birthday. That seems almost funny, and he'd laugh if he remembered how.

It's sunny and there's no wind and someone's shouting and honking their horn and swearing out on the road. Jason feels like he's trapped in a bad dream, and imagines that if he tried to run away his feet would drag and the air would turn thick as syrup. And then his alarm clock would start beeping and he'd swear and Bruce would tell him to watch his mouth.

Seems that even though he's forgotten how to laugh, he still knows how to cry. The tears sting his eyes and feel hot against his cheeks. He's been lost in thought for a while, because now it's just him and Alfred beside the new grave.

The headstone's an angel, sad-looking and tall and elegant. Jason's got no idea what makes something classy or tacky but it seems pretty tasteful to him. He stares at it until he could draw it perfectly just from memory.

"Master Jason," Alfred says gently, resting a hand on his shoulder. "No more graveside vows. Let this be an end to it all."

Jason doesn't want to lie, not here. Not now. So he doesn't say anything before turning away and walking back to the cars.

The nightmares are so bad that Alfred keeps suggesting that maybe Jason should think about seeing a doctor. Jason always shakes his head and gives wan smiles in reply. Anybody'd be shouting in the night, after what happened.

"Jason."

"They're watering down the morphine, I swear to God. I think you should speak to somebody about it."

"The doctors have been persuaded that your condition is stable enough for you to be discharged."

"About time. This has been the longest week ever. We going back to the States tonight?"

"Yes."

"I never thought I'd miss Gotham, but I do. Weird, huh?"

"You're not going back to Gotham."

"What?"

"I've spoken to an associate. You'll be recuperating with a family in a small rural town."

"What the fuck, Bruce?"

"This is for the best."

"No. You won't go through with it. You can't. You know you can't."

"When you've made a full recovery, if you wish -"

"Don't do this. You can't do this to me, you bastard."

"- if you wish to return to Gotham..."

"Get out. Fuck you. Get out."

The Kents stay for three weeks and Jason knows that everyone's hoping he'll go back with them. Alfred keeps saying stuff about fresh air and sunshine and new starts.

It's not that Jason doesn't like Smallville, in a novelty-value sorta way. And the Kents were great to him in those months he spent with them after he got hurt. But he knows where he belongs. Where he has to be.

Eventually they leave, with lots of remarks about how he's always welcome and how they'd love to have him, and as they pull out of the drive Jason breathes a shaky sigh of relief and hopes that someday he'll be able to make their kindness up to them.

"What's happened to the money?" Jason asks one day. He can't believe he hasn't thought of it before now, considering how precious spare change was to him once upon a time.

"The majority is in a trust, with a sum provided monthly to keep you in the manner to which you've become accustomed," Alfred answers. Jason thinks of the way he'd been 'accustomed' to living before meeting the Batman and he laughs until he chokes. Alfred remains tactfully quiet until Jason's gotten a hold of himself again.

"Sorry."

"It's all right, Jason." Said as if that can ever be true again.

"I just... I know there are foundations, charities and scholarships and stuff, named for dead people. I wanted to do something like that. I thought -" Jason ducks his head, afraid his idea will sound stupid. "Barbara might've liked a rehabilitation type of deal. Teaching new skills to people who get injured."

"She would have appreciated that."

"I don't know about the others. What the best ways to honor Dick and the Commissioner would be. Nothing feels right."

"You will think of something in time. And, ah," Alfred hesitates, worry obvious in his expression and his tone. "Master Bruce?"

Jason grits his teeth and looks away. It's not time yet, but it will be soon. He's almost ready to face what he knows he has to do.

Once, at a dinner party or a cocktail party or maybe just a party party, Jason heard somebody talking about him and Dick.

"Wayne'll never settle down long enough to make a match," the partygoer had explained between sips of champagne. "But a family line like that can't be allowed to end simply because the head of it doesn't want to marry. You've heard the rumors about the Grayson boy's parentage, I'm sure. Wayne can't parade a bastard as his heir, but a *ward* is no trouble at all. And now here's another 'orphaned' child with the striking family coloring being introduced to society. An heir and a spare, eh? Where's that waitress got to, I could do with another glass of this..."

Jason knows he'll never be the first choice. But the true heir is dead and cold and in the ground, so it's up to the spare to do the best he can.

It's another three weeks before Jason works up the nerve to go down to the Cave. There's no dust or damp or anything so he guesses that Alfred's been coming down. Good. That'll maybe make the inevitable fight a little less heated. They both know what's going to happen, even if neither of them are really ready to say it.

Jason stays down there for a couple of hours and breaks some random crap just to feel it shatter and crumple against his knuckles. Just to hurt. When he leaves he takes one of the batarangs with him and sleeps the night through with it clutched in his hand, the bladed edge biting into his palm

hard enough to draw spots of blood along the welt-line. For the first time in two months, he has no nightmares.

"Jason, telephone for you."

"Is it him again?"

"Yes, it is."

"Tell him I'm dead."

"I'm quitting school."

"Do you think," Alfred says softly. "That this is the choice he would have wished for you to make?"

"Well, we'll never know, because he's gone."

Alfred's gaze is level and calm. "I'm open to debate, Master Jason, but you must have the courtesy to remain consistent in your arguments. If you tell me now that you are leaving behind formal education, despite the fact we both know Bruce would never allow such a thing, then I will assume that when you come home some night in the future in need of stitches or bone-setting with a cowl about your neck you will not tell me that it's what he would have wanted. Either you let Batman fade into myth, and make your own choices, or you honor *all* the things which were dear to him."

Jason blinks. "Are you saying you won't try to stop me, so long as I stay in school?"

"I am saying," Alfred sighs. "That I know which battles I have a hope of winning, and which battles I do not, and I believe your schooling is something it's possible to convince you to change your mind about."

He spends all the time he can training. He's good. Strong. More balanced in his techniques, because his arms can't take the same kind of punishment since he got hurt. He's even learning all that detective stuff, or at least making an effort to try.

His growth spurt has slowed down for the time being and he's pretty tall for his age but it's still not enough. Alfred shortens the capes and buys boots in Jason's size.

On Halloween night, Batman goes on patrol. One of the thugs he takes down makes a wisecrack about how vacations do wonders for the figure, but it mostly goes smoother than Jason was worried it might. He drives home shortly before dawn arrives and gratefully eats the plate of food Alfred's prepared. After that, Jason curls up in the center of Bruce's bed and lies very still. His heart feels like his knuckles do after a brawl.

Jason's grades are dismal, but they were anyway so nobody notices. When Poison Ivy stabs his leg with a two-foot-long thorn, he claims that he got in a bike accident. He's getting a rep as a dangerous kid, a bit of a lost cause. The principal at his school says something about bereavement and recklessness and Jason nods and tries to look like he's losing his grip and takes the business card of some counselor who specializes in cases like his and then never goes to see her.

The wackos like Ivy are making life easier. They don't care who Batman is, not really. That Batman *is* is all that's important to them.

He gets hurt a lot. The bad guys do too, way more than they ever did before, but Jason's not good at dodging or blocking or that stuff. Alfred stitches and dresses all the wounds and sometimes says "Jason, I will not continue to play nursemaid. You must stop this. Even Master Bruce did not

do what you are doing when he was sixteen. I cannot remain here simply to watch you kill yourself". But Jason knows that Alfred wouldn't leave him, so he doesn't even pretend to listen.

It's hard, and Jason knows he's not really keeping it together, but he doesn't know what else to do but fight as hard as he can for as long as he can.

In the middle of February Jason is chasing down a jewelery thief when a small figure launches itself out of the shadows and knocks the guy down.

It's a kid, probably about thirteen or fourteen and small for his age. He's wearing a jacket and jeans and expensive sneakers and his face has that burned-away look Jason recognizes all too well. Like everything comforting or good or happy has been sucked out, stripped down, leaving nothing but the strongest and fiercest bits behind.

"You need me," the boy says. "You're not up to this on your own. You're going to die. I won't let you die. Not again."

His eyes glitter in the dark of the nighttime air. He tilts his small, sharp chin up. Daring Jason to say no.

"Get in the car," Batman tells the boy.

"Jason."

"Wide open spaces and daylight. Isn't that against your religion or something?"

"You gave me little choice, considering your apparent hatred of the telephone."

"It isn't the telephone I hate."

"My decision was made with your best interests in mind."

"They're great. The Kents. Superman's real lucky to have parents like them."

"Then you see why -"

*"But they're not **my** parents. My parents -. I worked something out. Wanna hear it?"*

"Yes."

"You want me to have all the good stuff. A wife and kids and a dog and a house and all that. You want me to be happy. But I'm not happy here, 'cos I don't fit here. I fit with Gotham. In the night. With you. Take me home, Bruce."

"The more things change..." is all Alfred says when they arrive back at the Cave, before walking away and leaving the two of them alone. Jason can tell that there's going to be an extremely stern lecture in the near future.

"So what's your name, anyway? I can't just call you Robin," Jason says, and thinks wryly that Bruce probably could've.

"Timothy. Tim. You're Jason."

"I know my own name. Have you been stalking me?"

"What? No." The boy's eyes widen. "No, I just want to help."

"Why?"

"Batman needs Robin. You need someone to help you. I need... for Dick, I need to. I need..."

"To honor him?"

"Yes." The boy, Tim, nods emphatically. "Please. Give me a chance?"

"Would I have brought you here if I was gonna say no?"

They design a new costume for Tim, something more armored and sleek than the old one. Jason's in no hurry to go to any more funerals.

Alfred doesn't say a word beyond "would you like pumpkin or potato and leek soup?" and "I took the liberty of returning your overdue video rentals, sir" for weeks, and Jason starts to get scared that he's gone too far this time. That Alfred's gonna quit, or call Superman down on Jason's ass, or phone Tim's parents and spill the beans.

"On a scale of one to seriously, how pissed are you?"

"I'm not angry," Alfred answers, not looking up from his ironing. "Merely deeply concerned. I had hoped that you would have abandoned this whole business by now, not brought in another boy to aid you."

"You make it sound like I dragged him kicking and screaming. He chose this. And he's super-smart. He knows what he's doing."

"He's a child. So are you, for that matter."

"He's Robin now. Robin's not a kid. You know that."

"Of all people, Jason, I would have thought you would see the danger in such thinking."

"There's danger in a lot of things that need doing."

Alfred smooths down a tiny crease in the sleeve of one of Jason's school shirts and doesn't say anything else. Jason punches himself in the thigh in frustration and walks away, heading for the Cave.

Tim's at the computer, face lit up with the weird almost-green light from the screen. He's reading through the foe files and has just hit 'J', and Jason tries not to wince at the photo of the Joker. One of these days he's gonna face off with that guy and show him just what a crowbar to the kidneys feels like.

"Can we talk for a sec?" Jason asks, sitting on the second swivel chair at the bank of screens. He wonders if it's disrespectful to something big and important that they're both wearing normal clothes in the Cave. Sometimes the uniforms feel hard to breathe in, in a way that's got nothing to do with how heavy the new chest plates are.

"You look like the kids in my class at school, when we've got a surprise exam," Tim says and smirks a little with his mouth. His eyes are smiling more genuinely, as usual; most of Tim's softer expressions are neatly obscured when in-costume.

"I was just talking to Alfred. He's pretty furious."

"Ah." Tim's smirk fades a little. "Do I have to go?"

Jason shakes his head tries to work out how to say what he wants to get across. "That's not his decision. Hell, it's not even my decision." Jason matches Tim's reappearing smirk with one of his own. "No way I'm brave enough to call someone twice as smart as me my sidekick. We're fifty-fifty, right? I mean, I know I always hated that 'junior partner' tag. I'll keep helping you train for as long as you want it, but only 'cause I still know stuff you don't yet. You're Robin as long as you want to be, and not a day less or more or whatever, and -"

"Remember to pause for breath occasionally. I hear it's useful," Tim cuts in.

"Babbling?"

"A bit. But thanks. I think we make a good team."

"Yeah," Jason says. "We do."

"I'm almost touched. In a creepy way."

"I wanted to feel you were still present here. I couldn't help harboring the hope that you'd return."

"So you stuck my suit in a case like a butterfly on a pin? Has anyone ever told you that you're kinda nuts?"

"It's been suggested."

"Is it waterproof? The case. We could keep piranhas in it. Or those deep sea fish that look like alien bugs. Hey, Bruce, can I tell you something kinda weird?"

"What is it?"

"When I was gone, it was like... it was like Robin needed Batman, and Jason needed Bruce, and those two things weren't the same thing at all. Doesn't that sound stupid?"

"I understand."

Gillian Matheson dies brutally and alone. By the time Tim and Jason get a chance to look the crime scene over, the police have been through and collected pretty much everything useful. Tim checks and double-checks anyway, just in case. It's a crummy motel room, and it stinks of desperation and blood.

"Don't touch anything," Tim tells Jason in his coolest Robin-voice. Jason makes a face at him and stands as still as he can.

"Can't you just hack into the police files and see what they've already got?"

"Yes, but I wanted to do my own sweep. Stop moving your foot, you're disturbing the edge of the stain."

Jason looks down. "Whoops. Sorry." He steps back onto the unmarked part of the carpet. It's not a big area. "How did you know that I'd moved? You didn't even turn your head."

"Just one of my many talents," Tim says, and Jason doesn't need to see his face to know there's a smirk on it. If Tim wasn't consistently right about everything, Jason would accuse him of being a cocky little know-it-all. "I want to interview the husband."

"He'll be sedated." Jason swallows. He hates it when they have to deal with the families. "Doped up to his eyeballs."

"Still, I'd rather contend with that than wait until he's had time to block out the gorier details."

When they get to the Matheson penthouse, a woman is sitting at the glass-topped dining table with a bunch of police forms spread out in front of her.

"Oh, it's you," she says in a thickly accented voice, looking up. "The Commissioner told me you would be coming here."

"Can we see Mr Matheson?" Jason asks. The woman shakes her head.

"No. He's resting now and I won't disturb him. Anything you need to know, I can tell you. I'm the housekeeper."

"Can you think of anyone who might be responsible for what happened?" Tim takes over the questioning. Jason's glad; the soft tremble in the woman's voice, and the way that she's looking at them like they're the only thing that has meaning in the world, makes him way too angry to remember the right things to ask.

"No." She shakes her head. "No, no. Gillian, everyone loved her. She was a beauty, but kind too. So kind. Such a big heart. She would have been a wonderful mother."

"She was pregnant?"

"Yes. Always she was trying to feel the kicking. The doctors tell her no, too early, but she tries anyway. She was so excited."

"The baby would've been her first?"

"Yes." Now the woman looks down at the papers, and her breath is shuddery and choked. "Yes, it would have been her first."

"George Matheson has an adult son, doesn't he?"

The woman looks up at Tim and shakes her head.

"Martin is a good boy. He didn't do this. The Commissioner, she wanted to know about him too. So many questions. He's a good boy."

"I'm just trying to get my facts right, ma'am. We want justice as much as you do."

Her mouth is a thin, hard line. "Good. You find them, and you make them pay for what they did to her."

"We will," Jason says, and doesn't care that there's a crack in his voice.

"That was a professional hit, wasn't it? Done up to look like a crazy." Jason keeps his eyes on the road. "I still don't know how you can use that while I'm driving. Don't you end up wanting to hurl?"

"No," Tim says, not looking up from the laptop screen. "And yes, you're right. The entry wounds looked frenzied, but they all hit a major artery or organ. See, I told you that you weren't giving yourself enough credit for your detective skills."

"I wouldn't say 'the vibe felt wrong' counts." Jason shakes his head.

"So what's your vibe say about the son?"

"Well, part of me wants to say that it's too obvious. But if the cops are thinking that way too, then maybe it's not so unlikely. Guys like that snap at the sight of guys like us. I think the police are hoping we can get a confession out of him and end this mess the short way."

"Hmm." Nodding, Tim types something rapidly. "I can give you his address. It's a gamble, but I think it'll pay off."

It's an impressive entrance. Tim's new uniform, with the high-collared black cape, is just as badass as the Batman costume. Together, they look like something out of a nightmare, especially swinging boots-first through a glass wall.

"Martin Matheson," Jason says in the nastiest version of the Batvoice. "You're responsible for the death of Gillian Matheson, your stepmother."

Matheson's a trim-looking guy in his mid thirties, and the photographs on the wall of him with various dignitaries and models show that his smile is superior and cocksure. Right now, he's not smiling, and his pulse thuds visibly in his throat as he swallows and sits up in bed, gaze skating over to the bedside table before settling on them.

"She was a gold-digging whore. She wasn't even half his age, did you know that? She was younger than me, and he was going to leave it all to her."

"So you had her murdered, the crime disguised to look like a random attack."

Matheson laughs. It's not a nice sound. "I knew he'd slip up somewhere. Even for ten thousand, I knew something'd go wrong." He glances at the nightstand again.

"Get that?" Jason asks Tim. Tim nods, and opens his palm to show the two micro-recorders there.

"I'll go phone the police," Tim says. Matheson's looking at the bedside table in quick, nervy glances. Jason gives Tim a tiny nod. "I'll be five minutes," Tim goes on, returning the nod and then moving through the doorway into the other room.

Matheson makes a dive for the drawer and has the gun in his hand by the time Jason's moved beside him. One shot goes off, the bullet hitting the symbol on Jason's chest harmlessly, and then Jason bends Matheson's wrist back until there's a snapping sound and he drops the gun. Matheson's nose breaks and bleeds easily as Jason pushes the heel of one palm up against it, and when Matheson kicks wildly at Jason it's the perfect excuse to step down hard on his ankle. The angle's bad, because Matheson's still half on the bed, but that just means that it's some of the smaller bones in his foot that give way first. When Matheson cries out, Jason socks him in the mouth twice. Matheson gives a wet groan and his eyes roll back in his head.

Jason steps back. It doesn't feel like enough, and he keeps thinking of how small that patch of unstained carpet was in the motel room, but it'll do. He cuffs Matheson and binds his feet, too, just to be on the safe side.

Tim's waiting in the doorway. "I played the confession to the operator, just in case anything happens to the recording we're leaving here."

"Don't think we've got anything to worry about. This guy's not going anywhere before the cops show up."

"Yes, I can see that," Tim says. "Let's go."

They don't talk much on the drive back towards Tim's house. Jason's glad of the way they can just sit and be quiet without needing to say all the stuff they're thinking. He hopes he's as much a comfort to Tim as Tim is to him, but can't imagine how that could be true. It seems like Tim was practically born to be Robin, while Jason's just Batman because somebody had to be.

He drops Tim off a couple of blocks from Tim's house and then goes home. He's not hungry, but eats the toasted sandwich left out for him anyway. It's still warm. The manor feels bigger than the universe, and the sunrise is still a couple of hours away.

Jason changes into boxers and an old t-shirt, and brushes his teeth until his mouth doesn't taste like he's been swallowing back vomit all night, then slides in between the cool cotton of the sheets on Bruce's bed.

"I can tell when you're awake."

"It's hard to stay asleep when you're petting my hair like that, Bruce."

"I couldn't help myself."

"I guess I'm the Batman's one weakness, huh?"

"I'm sorry I sent you away, Jason. I didn't know what else to do. I'm sorry."

"Hey, all's well that ends well and all that jazz. G'night, Bruce."

"Sleep well, Jason."

"Don't stay up listening to me breathe or anything creepy like that all morning, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"I guess that's all anyone can really ask for, isn't it?"

After what feels like a very long time, Jason falls asleep.

Days in the Life

DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*
Suitable for all ages.

Sunday

First thing Steph does when she gets off the plane is exchange all the money she has for American dollars, and that's when she starts to get choked up. It's funny how something dumb like currency can do that.

Airports don't feel like home, 'cept to people who travel all the time, and she doesn't stay there long.

She rides a bus, and thrills at it. A bus! With seats, and busted air conditioning, and a baby that won't stop screaming in the warmth. She smiles at everyone. They give her weird looks. She smiles more. The air is humid and oppressive and horrible, and the traffic slows them to a crawl for the whole trip. Steph can feel a laugh bubble in her heart, and has to cover her mouth with her hand to keep it in.

Her clothes are generic; a long-sleeved tee to cover what scars her arms have kept, a pair of dark pants. Her hair's kind of patchy, from where she pulled at it that time she broke her restraints, and from the time she got at a knife, but the baseball cap mostly covers the tufts. She'd rather look a bit weird, and be here, than wait out her recovery in a motel somewhere.

And she's ready for the inevitable freak-out and shock and all that. No way to avoid it, so she's hoping it'll be like waxing or something. One good rip and then it's over.

Her hand shakes as she lifts it to the wood of the door. For a single, terrified moment, Steph wishes she was still pushing up daisies. Then she deals, and knocks.

Footsteps. Damn. She was half hoping that her Mom would be at the hospital. Then Steph could've broken in and gotten some of her own clothes, and tried to do something with her hair, and maybe even had a nap in her bed. She wonders how much of her stuff has been packed up and given away.

"Dad?!" she asks, when the door swings back and her father is standing there. She knows it's him, even with all the scars and stuff. She knew him when his face was covered by his mask, after all.

Steph's never seen someone's jaw actually drop in surprise before. The laugh in her throat rises again, but she's too choked to let it out. "Stephanie?" His voice sounds different. Harsher. Before she can answer, or say anything, he's grabbed her in a hug. It's been years and years since he hugged her. Steph wonders if he was always this thin, and she never noticed, or if that's a new thing.

"Art, what's -" she hears from somewhere inside the house. Then there's a crash, like her mother's dropped a glass and it's hit the coffee table, and there are more arms hugging her and more sobs against her skin.

They're still in the doorway, and it's kind of awkward, and Steph never, ever wants to let go.

Wednesday

Her Dad finds her sitting up on the roof, beside her window. He climbs out and sits beside her, his joints creaking and stiff.

"Mom asleep?"

"Yeah."

He touches her shoulder, squeezing a little. She smiles. They do that a lot; physical talking. There's less chance they'll accidentally say the wrong thing and screw it all up, but sometimes it makes Steph think of Cass, and that has a pang in it.

"Dad."

"Yeah?"

"You know I'm going back to it, right?"

Her Dad sighs. It's a long, long sound, like he's letting out all the air he's ever breathed. His lungs had to heal normally, not like hers, and sometimes she finds herself wondering if plain old being alive hurts him much.

"Crystal's going to have a thing or two to say about that."

"I know." Steph looks down at the dark shapes of the suburb around them, feeling ashamed. She doesn't want to give her mother more heartbreak. She wants to wrap her in felt and keep her safe forever.

It's trippy, to have her parents both living in the same place again. It didn't happen all that much when Steph was a kid, because her Dad was in jail so much, so she never really noticed when they separated. But it still feels weird. Maybe, she thinks, they had nothing else left except each other.

"But... you get it, right?" she asks, still looking out at the silhouettes of the streets. "Why I have to. I've got a lot to make up for."

"Kid, your Mom hasn't even let you walk to the store. You know what this'll do to her. Might be that she'll go back on the pills, if you try."

Now her head whips around, and she glares. "Don't you fucking dare," she hisses. "I was the one there, when she was messed up from you. I took care of her -"

"You died, Stephie. You got yourself killed. You haven't the faintest idea what it feels like to lose a child."

She can feel her glare shift, into a different expression, but can't begin to guess what she looks like. "Don't I?"

"If she has to put you in the ground again, it'll kill her. Can you go out there, knowing that?"

"I have to, Dad." She stands, moving to climb back through her window. "I thought you'd understand that, after what you did to atone, but I guess I should've known better."

"No, wait." He puts a hand on her shin as she moves to step past him. "Stay out here. If you're going to do it, I at least want to know you've thought about it first."

"Of course I've thought about it," she spits, sitting down again. "My old costume doesn't fit anymore, I tried it on last night when you guys were asleep."

"Lost too much weight?"

"Yeah." Steph glances down at her arms. They're bare, because of the unexpectedly warm weather, and skinny, and marked. She misses how she used to look. "I kinda want to change it anyway. I want it to be red, because -"

"Because you were Robin?" Her Dad finishes for her. She nods, then shakes her head.

"It's stupid."

"Hon, it's all stupid. Figure you inherited that from me, so I can't comment." He pats her on the knee. "We won't help you make it, of course. And you might want to think up a new name for yourself, to go with the new clothes. TV was covered in pictures of you as Spoiler for a while there."

"Mm. Which reminds me, think you could pull some strings and get me some new papers? It kinda sucks being nobody."

"I'll ask some old friends. Got a name in mind?"

"For in or out of costume?"

He laughs quietly. "Both, I guess."

"I'll think about it," she promises.

Saturday

She wants a name that means 'second chances', but the closest the internet gives her when she searches is 'Mulligan'. That doesn't sound all that great, so she thinks that maybe she'll just be Spoiler after all. That'd save her thinking up a new ordinary name, too.

Maybe there's a form she can fill out, saying that she's not dead. She remembers the tests Batman did when Green Arrow came back. He'll probably want to do them on her, too, when he sees her.

Steph doesn't really want to see him. Ever. She's scared to, for a whole bunch of reasons.

The new costume is dark, the cloak heavy on her shoulders. The logical thing to do would be to stay in until she's got her strength back, but she'll go crazy if she spends another week being coddled by her Mom and fighting with her Dad.

And the radio said Robin's been sighted in Gotham, so there's no way in hell she's staying in.

Sunday

For a first night, it's pretty okay. She stops a bunch of the sort of stuff she's always thought of as 'background crime' -- those little muggings and robberies that're the capes' version of busywork. She gets used to the bits of Gotham that're new or different. Her Dad told her to keep out of the way of cops, so she does that too.

A bit before dawn, she finally catches sight of Tim a few blocks away from the rooftop she's resting on. He looks thinner, just like she does, and a bit taller than she remembers. She watches as he pauses, looking at the street below, and rests his face in his palm for a moment.

Steph still remembers how to make the most out of a grapple swing, and it's only a few seconds before she lands near him.

"Hey, Robin," she says quietly. He goes completely still, then turns with agonizing slowness.

"You can't -" he manages, looking horrified. "You're not."

She puts her hood back, and pulls away her undercowl. "Hey," she repeats, even quieter.

"St... Spoiler?"

"Cass told me about your Dad. I'm so sorry." She means it more than she knows how to tell him.

"You're..." he wrenches one of his gloves off, and moves to touch her cheek. She wonders if he's noticed the little scars on it. "Are you real?"

"Guess so," she answers, and then they're hugging.

"Steph," he breathes against her hair. She laughs.

"This is the best part, you know. All the hugging. Nobody's ever happier to see you than they are when you've been six feet under."

Tim stiffens at her words, and she knows he wants to pull away and start interrogating her. But for now he just sighs, and clings tighter.

Eventually they break apart, both a little snotty and red-eyed, and Tim gives her a trembly smile. "I -"

"I know," she cuts him off. She's not really feeling up to anything that heartfelt right now. "Let's go back to my place, huh? You can give me all the Bat-Lie-Detector tests and everything there."

She can almost see his eyes narrow behind the mask as he considers the suggestion. Then he nods. "All right."

They take his bike, and it feels so much like old times that Steph has to swallow back more crying. Seems like she's spent all her time since she woke up laughing or crying, especially since she got back to Gotham.

Tim's got a change of clothes stashed in his bike -- of course -- and so it's just two ordinary-looking kids who climb in Steph's window.

Her Mom doesn't know, yet. Steph wishes it could stay that way forever.

They sit down on her bed, and Tim's features settle into interview-mode. "You've seen Cass."

Steph nods.

"She had something to do with it?"

Another nod. "Technically, that makes it twice that I've been around when she's desecrated a grave. We sure can pick our buddies, huh?" she says, trying to keep her voice light. It doesn't quite work, and Tim gives her a curious look.

"What happened?"

"Nyssa Raatko. She... Cassie..." Steph scrubs at her forehead with her hand. "I don't know if I'm an apology, or an offering, or what. At least partly, I think that I'm an excuse. Nyssa told Cass that she'd bring me back, if Cass agreed to stay. I think... I don't know, I'm not her, I can't *read* people. But I think that she thought that doing it for a trade would make it okay that she really, really wanted to stay. Which is totally fucked up, because she's Cassie and I'm just me, and there's no way I'm worth her, you know?"

"They put you in a Lazarus Pit?" Tim has gone very pale, and his mouth is a thin line. Steph looks down at her coverlet, picking at a stray thread with shaky fingers.

"Yeah. It was, uh, really bad." She self-consciously pats at a chopped section of her hair. "They kept me restrained until it wore off, mostly. The craziness and stuff. Nyssa was really sweet to me. I think she wanted me to stay with Cass. But Cass told me I had to come back."

She's not crying. Her hand's shaking as she wipes her face. "And I'm really scared, Tim, because I messed up so bad, and people died, and I'll never make it better, and I've got all these random scars but a bunch of my old ones are gone and I never thought I'd miss the one from the cesarean but I do, and I don't feel like me anymore. And Batman's going to find out and -"

"He knows."

Steph blinks. "What?"

Tim takes both of her hands between his, so she can't keep fiddling with her hair and the coverlet. "He didn't get to the graveyard in time to catch whoever did it, but he knew as soon as your body was taken. He installed alarms in the coffin lid." She flinches at the word 'coffin', but keeps listening as he goes on. "He's had a lot of really bad stuff happen at once... we all have... but he's been working on it with all the time he can."

"Probably wishing they brought back someone useful, huh?"

"Don't, Steph."

She bites her lip. "I don't want to see him."

"You'll have to." Tim squeezes her hands so hard they hurt, but she doesn't mind it. She sort of likes it. "I was so scared when I saw you. The red suit... I thought you were working with someone else."

"Who?"

"The Red Hood. New vigilante. It's Jason, Steph."

He says it like he expects her to recognize the name. She shakes her head.

"Sorry, I don't... maybe my memories got screwed up, I don't know, but -"

"He was the Robin before me. He died, too."

"Oh. Oh," she says, and laughs despite herself. And once she's started, she can't stop. She feels slightly hysterical.

"Shh, shh," Tim soothes, stroking her hair. "Calm down."

"Tim, don't take this the wrong way, but that's the dumbest thing you've ever said."

She gets a tiny smile from him for that one. She moves closer, for another hug, and clings on for dear life.

Monday

She knows it's kind of creepy, but she wants to see her grave.

She takes a flower, a pinky-colored rose, which is totally dumb. People aren't supposed to bring themselves flowers, and it's not like there's anyone under the headstone anyway.

Still, she feels like it's the right thing to do, and drops the stem onto the packed-in earth with a feeling more like sadness than anything else.

There are flowers there already, a big bunch of expensive-looking blooms. Nobody ever bought Steph anything that pretty when she was alive. There's no tag. She wishes she was a better detective, so she could work out who might've done it.

Tim's waiting for her at the cemetery gate. "Ready to go?"

"Can't put it off forever," she replies, and tries so sound upbeat. "Let's go face the monster."

Tim holds her hand, and lifts an ordinary-looking cellphone to his ear. "Tim here. I'll be there in ten."

"Heigh-ho Silver," Steph says, and climbs onto the bike. The wind is warm and sharp in her hair as they drive away.

Lightweight

DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*
Suitable for general audiences

Tim has a USB datastick in his fireproof security box, along with the originals of his most important papers, his father's reading glasses, and the beeper Steph painted with purple nail polish.

The datastick contains five hundred high-resolution jpeg files, the majority of which were taken on a single night. The night Superboy threw a party at the Fortress of Solitude.

Of these five hundred photographs, he has printed out five. They crowd together in a light gray picture frame on his wall, beside the vintage James Bond poster Dick gave him last Christmas.

The picture in the upper left-hand corner is of Tim, with Dick on one side and Conner on the other, all of them smiling. Nobody's wearing any masks, and Conner has his arm slung across Tim's caped shoulders. Mia took the photo, and her natural aim isn't limited to arrows. Sometimes, when Tim looks at the picture, he can barely recognize himself.

Beside that photo is one of the Dance Dance Revolution contest. Conner wanted to hire a karaoke machine, but Bart and Tim both voted him down. He pouted, and said "whose illegal superhero party is this, anyway?", but DDR it was.

Batgirl and Supergirl are competing in the photograph. Tim bet five dollars on Cass, and Conner did the same. When Kara protested, Conner shrugged and grinned and said "it's not your fault. She's a Bat. They can breathe in space."

"I can breathe in space!"

"Yeah, but it's not as special when you do it."

Cass had won, of course.

The center photo is of Conner, cheeks flushed after a drinking contest with Stargirl, gesturing as Tim captured him with the camera.

"Dude," he'd been saying. "There are people having sex in the zoo. I throw the best parties."

"I don't think it counts if they're Outsiders," Tim had retorted. Conner leered.

"Not all of 'em are."

In the background of the shot are Batgirl and Raven and Anita, bent over a Ouija board. Tim's not sure why any of them would be the slightest bit interested in something like that -- Cass wouldn't have known the letters well enough for it to mean much, and Raven and Anita had other ways of interacting with the world beyond the physical. But someone found the board (and why the Fortress had one stashed away in the first place was a question for the ages) and they started fussing with it.

Later, Cass had come over to sit with Tim, swaying a little and looking more relaxed and happy than she had in a long time. Someone had decorated her eyes with dark, dramatic liner. It should have made her look older, but somehow did the opposite.

"She watches us, sometimes," Cass told him, and kissed his cheek.

The lower left hand photo is of the aftermath of other kisses. Wonder Girl had gotten herself plastered early in the evening, like sobriety was a foe in need of vanquishment. She'd then spent several hours stumbling from person to person, telling them how much she loved them and how special they were.



She'd rested her head on Tim's shoulder and said "You're... you're my rock, Timmy. Robbie. Robbie Rob Rob Robin. You're like my brother. Not a real brother. A frat brother, you know. You're my wingman. We're gonna be the JLA one day and we're gonna save the world and people will say look, it's Wonder Cassie and Superconner and, uh," her eyebrows furrowed, her mouth grimacing as she tried to think. "Batman, I guess. You can't be Tim-man. Or Bat-Tim. I love you. You're my brother."

He'd patted her knee, trying not to laugh. "I love you too, Cassie."

Then her mouth had been on his before he knew to dodge away, and her lipstick tasted like oranges and sugar and her breath was sweet from the girly drinks she'd been gulping like water.

"Whoa," Conner had said, and Tim had frozen up and tried to push Cassie away but she'd just laughed and hugged him, then turned to smile at her boyfriend.

"Like to watch?"

"Uh," Tim and Conner answered in unison, and Cassie giggled again.

"Kory! KORY! STARFIRE! Come over here! I want to give the boys a show!"

Grace, looking sex-rumpled and drunk and happy, came over to join the group. "I hope the boys are gonna give us one in return."

"I'm game if you are," Conner said, all bravado and distracted-by-the-prospect-of-lesbianism. And how was Tim supposed to back down from that, with the girls giving him Looks and Starfire smiling in that way that Tim knew meant she was imagining everybody naked.

So Tim stood up, leaving Cassie to sprawl lazily across the couch, and Conner leaned down, and they were kissing. It was nice. Conner's mouth was bigger than any Tim had kissed before, and very warm, and Conner was serious enough about kissing that he didn't just peck for show and then go assert his manhood by groping his pliant and happy girlfriend or anything. No, there was a tongue darting past Tim's lips, and a hand on the back of his head, and it was... nice.

When they broke apart, Cassie started telling Kory in earnest tones about how they were gonna be the JLA one day, her and Conner and Tim, and about some book about a Greek warrior team from ancient times called the "Thee.. Thee... Thebans, or something" that Cassie's mom had never let her read when she was a kid so of course she'd stolen it and it was just so beautiful, you know, how a team could love each other, and she loved her team so much...

Conner licked his lower lip and said "you taste like lipstick", and smiled, and Tim smiled too, and Grace thumped them both hard enough on the back that they went "oof".

"Way to go, Butch and Sundance," she congratulated them, and went to find Roy.

The photo in Tim's collection is of Cassie and Conner on the couch, a few minutes later, posing for Tim's camera. They look relaxed and happy and like they never want to be anywhere else.

The last picture is of Batgirl resting her head on Nightwing's thigh, eyes closed and face a little clammy from overindulgence. Dick's hand is stroking Cass' hair, and he's looking at her with something warm and familial and safe in his face. Conner and Bart are attempting to carry large stacks of empty cans away in the background of the shot. Bart is about to lose his balance, sending the cans clattering. Conner is going to laugh, and tease, and then his own stack is going to fall a split-second later.

Then he'll turn to Tim and say "Dude, put the camera away, you need to have some fun."

And Tim will smile, and put the camera away, and everything that comes later will still be far off in the future, and he'll help his friends pick up the empty cans.

Tim Tam

Crossover between the animated DC film *The Return of the Joker* and the Universal film *Serenity*
Suitable for general audiences

1.

It's Zoe who decides it. They've been on Whitefall three days, and Kaylee's finished all the repairs that need doing, and there's a job waiting for them on a planet halfway across the verse (or near enough to call it that).

"We are not leaving the child here," she says, and though none of them truly think the boy a child they can all hear her unsaid *it's not like we don't have the room aboard*, and the look in her eyes makes them glance down at the table top or off at a cupboard against the wall.

So they don't leave him.

And even when, another three days' worth of time later, they have to talk the kid down from where he's balanced on the rail of a catwalk with a lifted gun clutched knuckle-white in his hand, the worst remark spoken by anyone is the Captain's own wry "ever get that feeling of deja-crazy-vu?"

"Hell," says Jayne later, as River watches him clean the gun in question with the same quiet, intent look she wears most of the time now, "Wouldn't feel like home if we didn't have a looped-out space-brain trying to kill us, and since you seem to have lost the inclination it might as well be him."

"His dreams are like the Reavers," she says, walking her fingers across the edge of the table; slim lurching creatures on the wood. "But the screams are laughter."

Jayne makes a disgusted, annoyed face. "Now why'd you have to share a thought like that? Don't do nothing but leave a bad trace behind it."

"Hollow bones," River tells him. "Light for flying, but once they've been fried they'll splinter in the throat."

2.

River had been the one to find him, huddled low in the recesses of the cargo hold with his hair wild and his eyes bright. A stowaway, who might have gotten away with his plans if not for the engine delays.

"Tim," he'd told her, and she'd smiled and said "Yes."

He's younger than her by at least a year, maybe more, and he's slightly built and small and underfed. The physical Simon performed on him found borderline malnutrition, old scars which made even the soldiers and mercenary among them flinch in sympathy, and a sophisticated behavior conditioning implant embedded in the back of the neck. This, River has demanded they fire as far into the Black as they can. The slightest mention of it makes her shudder and twitch in a manner otherwise left to her past.

"Lost in the woods, same as the rest," she said one day to Simon as he made notes on his data pad. The marks were typical doctor's handwriting, all scrawls and shorthands. "There are so many different fairytales, all in that same place. Do you think Hansel and Gretel ever met Jack the Giant-Killer? Or a wolf? You'd expect so."

"I don't know," he'd answered, distracted. "Probably."

3.

When Simon's glares begin to show an edge of 'I can declare that you need your nipples removed for very serious medical reasons, and nobody here will be able to contradict me for certain', Tim switches his flirtations away from Kaylee. He chooses Inara next, who concludes one evening meal soon after with a mutter of "We got it wrong. We thought he was another River, but he's really a bonsai Jayne." The romance with River lasts exactly four seconds; the time a withering look takes to form.

Of all the women, Tim spends most time with Zoe, but there's never a hint that he'll try his sharp, obnoxious charm on her. They just work, side by side, on keeping Serenity running smooth, and she tells him stories about people she's known and places she's been.

If Zoe's not around, however, there's more likely disturbances being caused than not. The old games of tag that Kaylee and River used to play have evolved into something frightening. Late in the night-cycle of the ship's rhythm, the clatter of soles on metal will echo mutedly through the corridors. No lights, no pauses for conversation, and nothing like laughter. Just Tim and River, chasing each other. If the prey's caught, there's a short scuffle and then the hunt begins again.

It's like living on a ship with two cats. The metaphor would even more appropriate if, with cats, there was always the chance that one or the other of them would go nuts and try to shoot them all.

4.

On the day when River comes to breakfast with a black eye, and Tim's neck has three long fingernail scratches across it, Mal says "Tim, you come walkin' with me when we're all done eating, got it?"

The way Tim's eyes look then makes Mal think of shutters clacking closed. He wants to reassure the kid, and tell him that nobody's getting tossed off at port today, but can't say for absolutely certain it's the truth.

Tim scuffs his feet as they step in time together, and doesn't look at Mal. After a little while Mal clears his throat and says "most times, when I see folk in my crew antsy enough to be hurting on each other, I tell them they'd do better spending that energy on their chores."

"I don't have any chores," Tim spits back. "Not real ones. Just cleaning and fixing and stuff."

"They sound damn like chores to me."

"I don't do anything. I knew you'd have to kick me off sooner or later, because I'm no use. You already have fighters, and someone to pilot, and, well, not to get crude, but you've even got a Companion. I can't offer anything, and I don't like charity."

"You're, what, fourteen?"

"Sixteen."

"Kid, if I'd been flying at sixteen, I woulda complained a blue streak if I'd had half the work Zoe and Kaylee give you to do."

"It's not real!" he snaps, still not meeting Mal's eye. "I ran away from where I used to be... from my *family*, because they stopped letting me help them after -"

His mouth clicks shut abruptly, and he punches at one of the support beams in the wall. The thud of flesh on steel makes Mal flinch.

"You ever gonna tell us what happened? Those scars, that chip the doc cut outta you? Because frankly, if it's as much bother as the last trouble we got mixed in, I'd rather you didn't."

"There's no trouble." Tim looks straight at Mal's face now, eyes glittering, the skin of his knuckles split and weeping blood. "I killed the man who hurt me."

Mal gives a short nod. "I'm mighty glad to hear that." Revenge, in Mal's experience, may not be the road to happiness, but it can be damn satisfying. "Look, howabout I make a deal with you. You go a month without swiping anyone's weapons, or making River talk flippity about how your brain's like a Reaver's when you sleep, and I'll think about taking you on jobs. Deal?"

Tim gives his first smile of the day. "Deal."

5.

It doesn't come in the first month, nor the third, but now that Tim's got something to work towards he seems more content.

They're taking a load of fruit-bearing saplings to a new moon out on the Rim, to River's apparent delight. She spends hours wandering between the pots, gazing at the plants like they're as beautiful as stars. Tim sits and watches her, but doesn't seem taken with their cargo.

"Nah. I'm a city kid to the bone, I guess," he answers when Inara remarks on it.

Later, Inara sits with Mal on the couch, pretending to read one of the paperbacks they've taken to keeping in the rec area. There's something comforting about an actual book, some magic in the object. River'd be able to put it in prettier and truer words.

They try not to talk overmuch, the pair of them. If they keep quiet, the arguing's less likely to happen. Clever in theory, but doesn't always work.

Yesterday, Inara read on the cortex that the body of Adelei Niska had been uncovered, a year after his last sighting. She hasn't mentioned it to anyone in the crew, though she suspects that Mal and Zoe will eat at least a few well-deserved sour grapes of happiness at the news.

"It's a noble thing you did, taking Tim on," she says to Mal in the quiet.

"Well, I have my days," he answers, and gives her an easy grin. "And it's nice to have another around who makes your time difficult."

She sighs. "I live in terror of the day when there's a moment you don't ruin, Mal."

"No sense in worrying for what might never come, 'Nara."

"Quite," she says dryly, and looks back at the page. The sound of running footsteps drifts on the air.

Tim Tam 2 – written and drawn by Audrey Fox

Crossover between the animated DC film *The Return of the Joker* and the Universal film *Serenity* :: Suitable for general audiences









Tim Tam 3

Crossover between the animated DC film The Return of the Joker and the Universal film Serenity

Suitable for general audiences

Money's been slow, and the notion of taking on a passenger or two has been bandied around the dinner table on recent nights. So Kaylee's not surprised to see Zoe talking to an unfamiliar face near the opened cargo hatch while they're laid over on New Melbourne.

She's about to go over and be friendly -- all of those aboard know that she's the one who pulls the payers in best -- when she notices the gun in Zoe's hand.

The man's standing real still, like Zoe's an animal likely to pounce. He's well dressed, and reminds Kaylee of how Simon used to be when he first turned up.

No, not Simon. He's more like Inara was before she left and came back. Something in his face; all closed-up behind the pretty and the manners.

They haven't noticed Kaylee, or if they have they give no sign. She hangs back, half in the shadow of the edge of the mouth of the hatch, and catches the end of Zoe's even, calm words.

"-- with Shifty Drake a few years ago. Dumb guy. Didn't like him much. But that don't change the fact that he's the child's father, and neither does him being dead. Isn't a bribe in the 'verse that can contradict that, so you can put your money away right now."

The man's eyes narrow. If that look was to be aimed at Kaylee, it'd make her shrivel up faster than a grape in the sun, but Zoe doesn't move a muscle.

"Family isn't just about bl--"

"Damn right it's not. Which is why you're going to turn around and walk away."

He doesn't move. Zoe raises her gun, just enough so's he'll note the gesture. Kaylee hopes she's not about to see some killing.

"Turn. Around."

When he does, it's plain to anyone watching that this ain't the end of the discussion. Just a lull.

Once the man's gone far enough for peace of mind, Zoe breathes out a long sigh. Her shoulders drop, and she looks almost as tired as the worst Kaylee's seen here in recent times.

Kaylee's about to go down to meet her when there's a soft footstep from further into the ship, and a quiet gasp.

Kaylee turns to look, but there's nobody there.

"Tim? River?" she calls.

"Something up?" Zoe asks, gun back in its home on her hip.

Kaylee glances behind again, then shakes her head. "Guess not."

Wake

Universal film *Serenity* / Mutant Enemy television series *Firefly*
Intended for adult audiences

Jayne don't especially like bein' around a body once it's died. Makes him feel a bit like he's prying, same as he does when he's in someone's room that they've left all messy. Worse, even, seeing as how he's partial to prying in some circumstances.

Bodies, though, he feels downright uncomfortable around.

Saffron, or Yolanda, or Verena -- that being the name she died wearing -- or whatever she were really called, is still on the table in the infirmary. River's sitting up with her. Says she feels comfy in that little room there. Rutting weirdo. Jayne's not so twitchy with River as once upon a time, but that don't mean he think she's natural in her thinking when it comes to things of this sort.

Kaylee's in there too, resting up. Shrapnel tore her arm, but she can still wiggle all her fingers and so doesn't seem to care about the pain. Jayne gets perplexed by Kaylee on occasion. She ain't predictable. Nobody on this stupid crew is.

Take the doc, f'rinstance. Sitting in his sister's piloting spot, staring out at that black that makes Jayne's eyes sting for want of a point to focus on.

"River loves it," Simon says quietly. Figures he'd know Jayne was there without even turning around. Jayne don't bother being stealthy in his footing when there's only the crew and the dead around to hear him.

"Space?" Jayne asks mildly, because he figures Simon would get scowly at him if he declared that River was, to put it into fancy talk, bugshit crazy.

"Yes. She finds great joy in it."

Jayne grunts, and sets about shifting the debris leftover from their escape. Whole ship's tracked through with mud and grit. Simon looks scrubbed to the bone by comparison. None'd know to look at him that he was up to his elbows in guts not an hour ago.

"I don't."

"Huh?" Jayne can feel his forehead furrow as he tries to remember what they were talking of.

"Find joy. In space. It frightens me."

Jayne grunts again. "Makes sense, I guess." A surgeon'd hafta be pretty partial to life, after all. Figures that the black would scare someone like that.

"You don't think I'm weak for it?" Simon's voice is quiet. Too quiet, almost, like it was back when he was first aboard. Jayne's tempted to as if Simon's checked himself out for signs of shock, but doubts it'd be an appreciated suggestion.

Jayne makes a face, and shrugs. "Nah. And I'd say a guy who saved his pretty's life is allowed a moment or two of being weak if he wants, anyways."

"I wish I could have saved them both. It's been a long time since someone died with my hands on them. I'd... I didn't think it would be something I'd ever forget, but somehow I did." Simon pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out a long sigh, before standing up. "I should sleep."

He looks exhausted, but not tired. Jayne don't know a better way of saying so, but the distinction's real even if there ain't words for it. Simon looks kinda like how Jayne feels, after all that gunfire and the like. It's been a big day for them all, and they've got a bunch of cash for a change.

"Nobody's sore atcha for her dying. We all saw you trying to keep her here," Jayne says, because he feels like somebody oughta say something. Zoe and Mal are in the kitchen, getting rotten drunk, and Inara'll be sitting there pretending she's not working toward smashed herself.

Jayne's tempted to suggest that he and Simon could go join with them, but can see that Simon's not in the mood for it. Jayne notices the ways of people's drinking, on account of how his uncles used to get after a couple, and he's seen Simon do it enough to know it's a way of unwinding for him. When he needs to loosen up, like. Right now, Simon looks like he'd unravel completely.

After a second, Jayne realizes that he's in Simon's way, and steps out of the doorframe. Simon nods a thankyou and pushes past down the hall. Jayne hesitates, sparing a last glance for the blank darkness out ahead of them, and then heads back towards the infirmary.

River's still sitting by the body, staring at it like she expects something exciting's about to happen. Jayne tries not to glare at her, or to look in that direction much at all. Death, he don't have any troubles with. It's just what gets left behind after that gives him the crawlies.

Kaylee's reading a newspaper. Fashions and serial reviews. Like they ever get anywhere near a store or a theater. Then again, they're cashed up now, so maybe they'll live it a little.

"Hey," she says, smiling at him. "Glad to see you. Those two ain't much for conversation." She nods towards the other bed.

"Sorry we hadta stick you in the morgue. Won't be for long."

"'s okay." Kaylee gives him a kind smile. She's got a great smile on her. Jayne reckons he's always been a little bit in love with her. It's not just that he thinks she'd be fun for sexin', though that's true too. It's more that he wants her to be happy.

"You need anything? I'm guessing patients shouldn't be drinking liquor, but I could sneak you something down. That's if there's any left, with the wake going on up 'round the table."

"I'm good. Is Simon drinking too?"

"Nah, he said he was taking himself to bed."

"*Jayne!*" Kaylee slaps his arm, with the hand that isn't bound up and splinted. "You let him go alone? He's got nobody to distract him from himself!"

"How's that my responsibility? Last I checked, you was the one who'd signed on for that stuff."

She gestures, pointedly, to her bandaged arm and the drip running from it. Jayne snorts, exasperated.

"I ain't babysitting your hump just 'cos you gimme a scowl, Little Kaylee."

"Jayne. He needs a friend, and I'll betcha strawberries that our bed's comfier than yours anyway."

"Hey now, you're building this up a mite fast. Minute ago you wanted him distracted, and now I'm spending the night in your bed? He'll try to spray me all over with sanitizer or somesuch." Plus, Jayne's only sly when he's real drunk, but he figures Kaylee might take it as a slight if he disparages the attractiveness of the guy she's doing by saying so. Women get weird about that kinda stuff, as if it's a reflection on them.

"Please?" She gives him one of those pleading looks she's so good at.

Jayne swears at her a little, under his breath, and then says "Fine. But only on account of how peculiar folk get after one among 'em's passed. And if Mal or anyone else gets tetchy at me for being a cat among the lovebirds, you're the one responsible for this hairbrainery."

Kaylee gives him another broad, bright smile, and Jayne's damn glad that it's not her lying still over there with River close by. He smiles back, feeling shaky about the mouth.

Maybe it'll do him some good not to sleep alone, too.

Simon's looking just as he did in the cockpit, only now he's staring at the wall opposite his edge of the double bed. He glances up, surprised, when Jayne steps in and closes the door.

"Being on your own's no good when your head's full up of black," Jayne says, and Simon gives a small nod.

"You're not wrong," he says, staring down at his hands, curling and uncurling the fingers real slowly. Jayne does that, sometimes. He's willing to bet that Simon's thinking about all those fingers have done, and all they didn't quite.

"You're alive, y'know," Jayne blurts, not knowing an eleganter way to put it. "Still. I know it's easy to forget, time like this."

Feeling awkward, he takes the two strides to cross to where Simon is, taking Simon's wrist in his hand and pulling him up to standing. There's a steady pulse under the skin, and Jayne presses his fingertips to it. "See? Heart's got a beat."

Simon's eyes are dark, the gray gone thin around his pupils. They're black like space, and Jayne doesn't wanta look at that, so instead he keeps his eyes on Simon's palm and brings the fingers to his mouth. They taste like nothing much at all. Like soap. Jayne knows better than most how easy blood washes off.

Jayne sucks on one finger, then another, and then Simon makes a strangely sorta noise in his throat and shoves Jayne back against the wall. It's cold, and Jayne'd protest if he could be bothered to. Doc's stronger than he looks, but ain't that true for all the pretty kids aboard this boat? They've all got steel in 'em, just as sure as Zoe or Mal do.

Simon mouths at Jayne's jawline, teeth a hard and sharp little dart of feeling up and down Jayne's spine. Simon's skin don't flush up like some Jayne's been with. It stays pale and fine. Maybe they teach the way of that to rich folk. Just another way of lying.

When Simon moves to kiss lip to lip, Jayne wants to stop him. He's got his policies for a reason, and it's never safe to make assumptions about who wants what from him. But to say anything would just make them both think of the infirmary, of Kaylee and of River and of the one who's not there anymore but left herself behind. And Jayne knows that neither of them want to be thinkin' of that stuff, so he doesn't say nothing. Jayne always liked the look of Simon's mouth, anyways. Might as well take a try at the feel of it, too.

It's a frightened, desperate sort of kissing, which Jayne shoulda been prepared for. Not just from Simon, though there's a damn lotta squirming going on there for a guy who don't like to get rumped if he can help it. No, Jayne's pretty worked up himself, and it's real good to have a warm, living body to press against. He thinks of Kaylee, alone, but knows that Inara'll be along to keep her company sooner or later. Inara loves Kaylee maybe even more'n she cares for Mal.

Now, that would be some pretty bed games, Inara and Kaylee getting fun.

Jayne walks Simon backwards to the bed, letting their mouths keep on doing what they're doing as he does so. Simon falls backwards and Jayne puts a knee up to straddle him, smiling a little as it sinks down. Kaylee was right; this bed's softer than Jayne's own.

Simon's shirt's not slippery-fine, like the ones he brought with him when he joined up, and Jayne surprises himself by being a mite dismayed by that. But it pushes aside just as easy as any other would, and Simon's skin is an expanse of warm, shivering flesh under Jayne's hand as he snakes up to find a nipple. He pinches it, and Simon makes that strangled noise again, so Jayne gives a second pinch.

He ain't one for teasing as a general rule, however, so after that he breaks their mouths apart and asks "What d'you want?"

It don't take a genius to guess what the answer'll be, but considering that Simon's regular mate is Kaylee there's no saying for certain. She's the kind to have all sorts of wicked notions in that happy head of hers.

"Your mouth," Simon says, almost matter-of-factly, and Jayne gives a low laugh. Figures that Simon'd be just like anybody, underneath it. Can't go past a good suck for making the world look brighter.

"Yessir," Jayne retorts, soundin' more respectful than he ever does when really taking orders.

Simon's pants are needlessly complicated, and in Jayne's opinion that likens them to pretty much all the other aspects of Simon's life. Nothing ain't ever easy with that guy. Maybe things that're too simple seem a bit too much like the quiet. No wonder Simon frets as he does over his sister, even now she don't need it any longer.

Jayne doesn't want to be thinking of River right now, not as he's finally got the gorram stupid zip down and the belt part unbuckled. Trust Simon to choose out clothes that look loose and easy but're really just as crazy as those old outfits he had. Jayne wonders if Simon still has 'em; if Kaylee ever asks him to put them on before she goes down like Jayne is.

Simon's dick is cut, which is just another piece of stupid. Jayne can almost see why Mal and Zoe and their sort risked and lost it all in the war, times like this. Alliance doctors, going around slicing up a kid's john thomas afore he's even met it. Far as Jayne can see, a kid's got no business getting scarred until he's old enough to earn the marks for his ownself. It's true of drunk uncles, and it should be true of the Alliance too. Jayne can get downright political, about important stuff.

His own equipment's making protestations about being ignored, but Jayne keeps on disregarding. The first girl he ever went with, the daughter of one of the other women in his ma's knitting circle, taught him to get his partner worked over before worrying about himself.

"You gotta fetch her, y'know?" she'd said, breath hitching, teaching him hands-on as it were. "Fetch her first, then go find it yourself when she's done."

And so Jayne always had, figuring that he should do something mannerly in his life. Damn sight more fun than saying please and thankyou's, anyhow. Women mostly appreciated it, which was nice. Bed's a good place to have someone grateful atcha.

Simon sounds pretty damn grateful as Jayne swallows, making all sorts of curses in a bunch of languages Jayne's never heard anyone use in regular life before. Jayne grew up speaking mostly Cantonese, with a little English thrown in for lessons, and tends to slip back into it when he's riled. He's always figured that's what most people do in sex: go back to the language what's playing in their heads. But there's no way even a guy like Simon Tam was raised speaking dead tongues like Latin and French.

Simon's hands work themselves into Jayne's hair. Jayne knew another guy with hands like that, years back. Clever fingers. Strong. Worked as a gun-

keeper for a mob boss. Got a shiv in the eye during a bad job. Never did smile enough for Jayne's liking, and once admitted that it was on account of feelin' that his teeth were bad. Pity. Jayne's got a soft spot for smiles.

Jayne likes Simon's smile, more'n he'd be like to tell anyone, but he likes the look Simon's got to him now as well. That flush that weren't arriving earlier has turned up, better late than never, and has made Simon's cheeks all blotchy as he watches Jayne. His eyes don't look dark no more, they're bright, glittering.

Jayne speeds up, much as he can manage to keep a rhythm steady. This ain't so bad. Down here Simon smells more like Simon and less like clean. Don't feel right for a body to smell all scrubbed when it should be giving off them ferry-moan things Jayne's heard River and Inara chatter 'bout.

Least it's only got a whiff of Kaylee on the sheets, that dumbass fruity scent she's taken to spraying about her, making the engine room air all girlified. Any more of her, and Jayne and Simon both might be getting worked up too fast to get any real fun outta this. That, or they'd fret too much, and waste their time thinking.

Simon don't look like he remembers what thinking entails right now. His cursing's shifted to English, which is more like it, and Jayne's pecker gives a twitch at the sound of those words coming out of that gentle mouth.

Before he comes, Simon tries to warn Jayne. Tugs on his hair like he's trying to pull him up. Jayne ignores him. He takes enough orders for his job and his place here, he ain't about to start doing it for sucking cock too.

Simon swears, and arches, and then it's done. Jayne gives him a minute to gather himself before moving off. No point in trying to do up that gorram retarded fastening, 'specially not when Jayne's hands are a might shakeful.

"What would you like?" Simon asks, like he wants to sound like that mouth never said anything bluer than damn. The effect's kinda spoiled by the pink of his skin and that nice boneless way people get when they're all contented in their bunks.

Jayne finds himself remembering that gun-man again, name'a Jacob or Joshua or one of those fanciful Bible-y ones, and says "How's about one of those hands?"

With a nod, Simon shoves Jayne until they're mostly switched places, with Jayne on his back and Simon playing at being in charge. Only takes a second to get Jayne's pants off his hips; it don't seem fair that Simon didn't have the same frustrations that Jayne went through in that department, but then again Simon's hands are clever and could most likely get anything undone faster'n Jayne could think about it.

They ain't like a girl's hands. Jayne likes getting this from guys on occasion. He likes the feel of how they touch. He's been known to drink too much for just the reason of getting some, from time to time. It's important to stay true to one's code, after all, and Jayne's code's only got a couple of rules. *Don't kiss on the mouth* is one ('cept he did, this time), *menfolk can be picked if there's drunkenness involved* ('cept there weren't, this time), *don't complicate a job by sexing anyone on crew, unless they're real fancible* (Simon is).

Simon's being real efficient, which Jayne'd complain about if it weren't exactly what he wanted. He knows Simon would laugh if he said so, but the truth is that Jayne's tired of thinking.

Then, deciding that this night needs a bit of laughter, Jayne says it. Simon just gives him a crooked, understanding smile, and speeds his strokes up. Pity.

Jayne thinks about the living, and thinks about the dead, and Simon puts his mouth close to Jayne's ear and breathes "Stop," but he might as well have said "Go," for what it does to Jayne's body. He feels it building, like it's been building ever since they made it back into the cargo bay and tried to hold back those that were chasing them. Since Jayne threw a used-up gun aside and turned for a minute, and caught sight of Kaylee and she what was called Saffron all bloodied over. It builds, and builds, and then it's gone, and Simon bites at Jayne's earlobe and keeps his hand working steady.

They lie for a minute, feeling all sated and selfish-like, and Simon gives Jayne another tired smile. "Thank you. I needed that."

"Weren't my idea."

Simon nods, like he guessed as much. "All the same, thanks."

"Well, same to you, I guess," Jayne answers gruffly, because it'd be too strange for them both if he started being polite to Simon. Sex is one thing, but manners can make people think things've changed afterward.

"I should go see how she is," Simon says after another minute. Jayne grunts in agreement, and they clean themselves up best they can without changing their clothes. The 'verse's rushed back in around them, but at least they've got the glow to get them through it now.

Soon as they get to the infirmary, Simon goes and gives Kaylee a kiss to the forehead, squeezing her unhurt hand so hard that Jayne can see her skin go white. She don't complain about it, so he figures she doesn't mind.

A hand taps Jayne on the shoulder and he whirls, feeling more than a little jumpy in that room of ailing. It's River, so he glares at her and calls her a string of ugly names. She waits for him to finish, and then nods towards the bed with the body on it. "It's time."

So they seal it up into a hermetic bag, and carry it on a stretcher between them to the airlock.

"Don't seem very respectful," Jayne says, doubtful. River shakes her head.

"She didn't want to be put in the ground. She wasn't scared. She stopped being scared a long time ago."

"Wish she'd stuck around to teach me the trick, then," Jayne mutters, and hits the button to seal the inner door. He's got no love for that airlock, ever since the trouble on Ariel and Mal getting all stupid about it after.

"There was a poem. On apricot paper. I couldn't read the words," River says, looking a bit confused and troubled, like she often did in the older days. "She told me her name. But it was hers, so I gave it back."

Jayne hits the outer door release, and the bag gets dropped into space. He lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding onto. "Ever get scared that you'll be dragged down, when you hear a dyin'?"

River shakes her head. "No. They're very private things. No room for passengers." Unexpectedly, she takes his hand in hers. "Let's get a drink."

Inara's nowhere to be seen, but Mal and Zoe are still drinking away, talking about people Jayne never did hear of before. He spares a minute to think of her who died, and how he still kinda felt like he wanted to take care of her even after she made it plain she didn't need it. Then he thinks about some of the others he's known who're gone now, and with River pressing a drink to his palm and Zoe laughing with that new, different way she's had since the Miranda business, it's not a bad kind of remembering.

He don't know how he'd ever say this with words, but Jayne kinda likes a wake. They're better than funerals, that's for rutting sure. He'd rather think about people drinking for him, and telling stories about things he did and

friends he made, than to contemplate a bunch of weepers and a body with his face to it. Better the stories.

They never did hold a wake for Wash, or the Shepherd, or any that they lost on Haven. There weren't time at first, and then when there was it didn't seem right no more. Maybe they will tonight. Maybe the others have already.

"What 'bout you, Jayne? Bet you've known a passel of characters," Mal says, passing him the bottle again.

Jayne shrugs with one shoulder, pours himself a glass, and passes it on to River. "Yeah, I guess. There was this one guy I knew, Joshua. Worked with guns..."

It ain't a bad way, to end a day like that.

A Pretty Boat

Crossover between the Mutant Enemy TV series *Firefly* and the Disney film *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*

Suitable for general audiences

Inara takes three steps onto the gangway above the hold, takes one look at the new passenger, and turns back around.

"Inara! Sweetheart! Lovely to see you!"

Inara's smile is as insincere as her expression ever gets. "Captain Sparrow. It's always... memorable to make your acquaintance." She shifts her focus, voice hardening. "Kaylee."

Kaylee smiles apologetically. "First place we land. Promise."

"You better believe it," Inara answers, closing the door behind her.

"Nice to see she hasn't changed," Jack says with an easy grin.

"I'm gonna have to agree with her on this." Mal shakes his head. "Next place we touch down, we're saying our goodbyes."

"That's fine. I 'preciate the ride. Always good to see new places."

"And get away from that angry mob?" Kaylee suggests. Jack gives a faint laugh.

"Always the joker, you are. Now, if I could trouble you for a bite to eat..."

Without waiting for a reply, Jack saunters towards the kitchen.

In the quiet left behind, Mal clears his throat.

"I know, Cap'n, but the mob was real big. Pitchforks, and tar, and feathers. I think I even saw a flaming torch or two."

"First. Place. We. Land."

"Cross my heart." Kaylee gives a nervous salute. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll just make sure he's outta trouble."

Jack plucks an apple out of the bowl on the table and bites a chunk out of it. "Crew's friendly as ever, aren't they?"

"You do have a knack for getting on their good side. Why don't we go sit in my cabin? Very quietly. Not touching anything," Kaylee suggests brightly.

Jack grins. "Nah. Nothing fun in there."

"Kinda the point."

"So you've had a run-in with Poppy, eh?" Jack nods to a sign tacked to the wall beside the cupboards, featuring a blurry photograph and large, underlined letters reading "DO NOT LET THIS WOMAN ONBOARD UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, UP TO AND INCLUDING ANY CIRCUMSTANCES".

"She was Saffron first time we met her. Oh, hey there."

River nods, wandering over to the wall and examining it closely. After a few seconds, she pulls a tube of glue out of the pocket of her dress and smears a droplet of it onto her fingertip. Painting a smear at eye-level, she carefully presses a strip of empty protein packet against it.

"Collage," she explains. "If we make a well, we can throw stones down it."

"Uh-huh. That's great," Kaylee's smile is only a little fixed.

"Well aren't you a pretty little dervish, then?" Jack eyes River up and down. "What's your name?"

"Your heart's a ship. Man can't live long away from his heart. Better get it back right quick," River says cheerfully.

"River, why don't you go for a walk? Find some more walls for decoratin'?" Kaylee turns back to Jack. "You lost the Pearl? Again?"

Jack makes a face. "Temporary setback. Not all of us find loyalty like you've got in Serenity here."

Kaylee smiles and pats a doorframe fondly. "Yeah, she's a good girl."

"At the risk of speaking against me and mine... she is," Jack agrees.

"Do I even wanna ask about the pitchforks?" Kaylee asks.

"While we're on the subject..." Jack pulls the wide collar of his shirt to one side. "You got an medical room I can patch this up in?"

Kaylee's eyes widen. "That's quite a scratch you got there, Jack. Some'd call that a stab."

Jack looks down. "I reckon you've got a point. Any of your lot good at stitching?"

"What's a laundered boy like you doing on a boat like this?"

"This is easier if you don't move," Simon says distractedly, picking chips of gravel out of the wound.

"Not so fun that way."

"Forgive me if our definitions of fun are a little different from one another."

"Don't knock what you haven't tried." Jack leers. "Last of your sort I met was all set to marry an Alliance Commodore. Everything all ordered and ready for a nice little life, 'cept she couldn't keep her eyes off the smithy in her settlement."

"Does this story have a point, or are you just being generous and sharing the pain you're feeling with me?"

"I'm just saying that folk like you keep a streak of something living underneath all them airs and polishes. Something wanting for the wildness. So tell me, what're your thoughts on displaced pirate captains?"

The door slides open. "Doc, I swear, I'm three gorram seconds from introducing her to the airlock."

River waves at her brother, with the hand not currently glued to Jayne's cheek. Simon gapes for a moment. "Oh, River, that's -"

"I don't feel the need to explain my art to you."

"Sit, sit, I'll get the solvent..."

River stares at Jack. "All the seats on this flight are taken. You'll have to catch another," she explains matter-of-factly.

"Is that one of my apples?" Jayne asks, pointing to the half-eaten fruit still clutched in one of Jack's hands.

"I was under the impression they were for everyone."

"They ain't for you. I still remember the trouble you caused with those flea collars and them acrobat girls."

"And yet another story is added to the list of those I hope never to have elaboration provided for," Simon sighs.

"What's the commotion?" Kaylee rejoins them. "River, did you glue your hand to Jayne's face?"

"It's a metaphor," River whispers conspiratorially.

"What for?"

"Something metaphoric."

"What's this here gathering on account of?" Mal asks from the doorway, taking stock of the situation in the cramped room. "Well, I must say, Jack, this is a new record for you. Haven't been here an hour and you've got half my crew in the infirmary."

"Now, I don't see how this can be said to be my -"

"You get yourself sewn up, you go to Kaylee's room, and I don't hear a peep out of you for the next two days. Are we clear?"

Jack looks like he wants more than anything to protest for a while longer, but the chorus of warning looks being shot at him seem to be hinting that it might be wise to let this lie for the time being. He nods. "Crystal."

"That's quite a meringue you've got on display there."

Kaylee doesn't look up from cleaning her tools. "It's not a meringue, it's a dress."

Jack huffs a laugh. "Know a good story about a dress like that. I was in New Singapore, see, and I needed a disguise -"

Kaylee breathes out very slowly. It's going to be a very long two days.

Gravity and Levity

Disney film *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*

Suitable for general audiences

Jack thinks that this is a much better state of affairs, and that he'll have to remember to make a note with the crew to fiendishly take Norrington prisoner more often. This way he can have a chat whenever he feels like it, unlike that last jaunt to Port Royal where he hung 'round in that cell near three weeks and barely got a heigh-ho for his trouble. Then the weather started to come good and Jack knew Norrington would want to try that hanging business again. It's putting a dampener on their interaction, in Jack's opinion, the way Norrington won't stop attempting to kill him.

No, this way's much better. Norrington's sitting with his back against the portside rail, eyes closed and shoulders tensed. Jack knows the brig is more traditional for the stowing of captives but it smells dreadful in there ever since an unknown member of the crew (Jack has his suspicions) offered a critique of their captain's singing in the form of several dozen non-figurative really bad eggs in a crate.

Anyway, there's nowhere for Norrington to go if he gets it in his head to run, and it's a clear and windy day for being on deck.

"Is this wise, Cap'n?" Gibbs asks with a motion towards the prisoner. Jack shrugs, not particularly valuing wisdom as a virtue. Wise people are pompous with the glut of knowledge, and the only true surprises offered to such a person by life are the short sharp shocks when the world proves their wisdom incorrect. Jack would rather be a perpetual apprentice than a master, his brain would become sticky with cobwebs if he started thinking he was too clever to ponder things.

He's been pondering about religion today, and reckons he's got a metaphorical explanation for Norrington's personality near figured. Port Royal is far from Jack's own visions of Eden, but the analogy fits so he doesn't dwell on it. The Port's Norrington's Eden, and the Commodore himself is that angel with the big flamin' sword at the gate. Trouble is that, from what Jack can see, the angel might have an important job but never gets any fun. Doesn't get to hang around in Paradise because he's busy protecting it all the time, helping everyone but himself.

"Apple?" Jack offers, walking over and lounging against the mast to Norrington's right. The Black Pearl always has fresh fruit on it these days - it helps remind all aboard that there are some things better than gold, silver, and sundry plunder.

Norrington takes the offered apple and bites, chewing as if he's too busy considering something else to truly taste the mouthful.

"There's your problem again, mate. None of you's ever where you actually are, 's all off doing things involving wigs and shiny boots," Jack says conversationally. Norrington has neither shiny boots nor a wig in current circumstances. Actually, without the puffed-up fripperies of office on him, Norrington doesn't look nearly so obnoxiously froglike. His dark hair reminds Jack of young Will's, only with more curl to it - Norrington obviously considers this attribute as a personal affront, and Jack can see faint spots and pock-marks on Norrington's forehead; evidence of years spent pulling the skin taut in an effort to tie back and control the natural wave of the dark hair.

Jack recalls vaguely that the Commodore's wig is somewhat the worse for wear after an unfortunate run-in with the case of overripe eggs below deck, but as far as memory serves him nothing has happened to anyone's boots recently.

"They're over there," Norrington says listlessly before Jack can speak. They often do that to each other, preempting ideas and moves. "They were pinching my feet."

Jack can tell straight off that the apathy is as sincere as a tart's kisses. In the year and a half since he got his ship back he's been caught by the Navy on a good half-dozen occasions, and would like to think he knows the head of the fleet a little better than to fall for such a trick.

"You're playing games again. That's nice, was starting to think you didn't love old Capt'n Jack no more."

Norrington's face loses any trace of apathy instantly, hardening as his jaw clenches.

"One battle does not give you the war, Sparrow. I will escape you."

"I don't doubt it, mate, I don't doubt it."

Jack has no hesitation admitting to himself that he's fascinated by Norrington. The man can hear the sea's voice, same as Jack can - though Jack would be hard pressed to say why this knowledge is so obvious to him.

Perhaps like simply calls to like, or maybe the wind told him when he was sleeping.

And, even hearing the song the waves sing in the dark, Norrington joined the Navy. The Navy, who build high walls and thick ramparts to hold the tides at bay, who seem to think the ocean can be policed just as the land can with extra provisions provided against damp. That's all the Navy thinks the sea is, Jack's sure of it - wetter land. For Norrington to join such a group makes Jack think of a dancer who willfully hobbles himself.

But it's that sense of goodness and obsessive respect for the law Norrington insists on nurturing which make his choices hold a small amount of sense in them. It goes beyond a fault, it seems as if the man was simply built without selfishness to him. Jack's heard the story from various people who knew someone who knew someone there, stories of how simply and quickly Norrington blessed Elizabeth's choice to love someone who was not himself.

Jack doubts Norrington has ever done anything because he would benefit personally from it, a fact that seems wholly at odds with the man's habitual arrogance, ridiculously stupid, and astoundingly sad at once.

"Cheer up, you're on a holiday. A forced one, I'll concede, but an otherwise entirely beneficial situation." Jack ticks the reasons off on his fingers. "Nobody else to worry about, due largely to the fact you're preoccupied with worrying about your own eventual fate. No need to wear an extremely ugly costume all the time. Rum if you so desire, an entire lack of responsibility, and good company to converse and carouse with. Best of all, it's free of charge -- your accommodation and meals having been paid for by the generous merchants of that nice ship we visited this morning."

Norrington's expression isn't the definition of 'unreservedly thrilled'.

"Come on, Commodore. I bet your last holiday was visitin' old ladies with ugly little dogs in Antigua or something horrible like that. You -" Jack points one erratically angled finger in Norrington's direction. "Have the unique opportunity to experience piracy with no guilt whatsoever and instead you keep trying to find a way out of it. You'll get rescued eventually, or have a chance to escape, or something similar, so why not stop botherin' yourself and enjoy the ride? That Gillette fella who licks your boots clean'll keep the world from ending until you get back, even if he can't tell his arse from his elbow."

Norrington gives the faintest and smallest of smiles.

"Knew you were human under the frills. Have to say I did wonder from time to time. Still reckon they sew you fine gentlemen into your uniforms, though."

Now Norrington rolls his eyes, exasperation and boredom once again overpowering his amusement. Jack has met wild tigers who were easier to make tame - at least, he's heard stories about himself that say so. He never knows if such tales are apocryphal or not, as his memory is a somewhat disorganized receptacle.

"You'll reach Tortuga by nightfall if you stay in the wind," Norrington says with a cursory glance at the sails. "What exactly are you planning to do with me then? The Commodore of Port Royal will be somewhat unwelcome in such a disreputable shanty town."

"Could lock you back in the brig," Jack suggests, amused at the fetching shade of pale green Norrington turns at the prospect. "Hate to have to tell you this, mate, but you're not looking your usual mop-handle-up-though-the-back-door regimental best. Nobody'd look twice at you 'less they were

attempting to estrange you from your money, so I'm thinking to mistreat you terribly by forcing you to come drinking."

Jack's only half-joking, he thinks Norrington would make an extremely amusing drunk. The thought of a good-sized glass of rum and a plate of unidentifiable fried things possibly made of meat makes Jack's mouth water. As always, the thin scar across his palm twinges in response. Jack scratches at it, as if his fingernails could pull the sting out, and notices Norrington watching the movement with curious interest.

"Will and Elizabeth," Jack says. "Their cuts healed. Weren't cursed, just victims of circumstance, location, and parentage. But Captain Jack Sparrow, well, your charming adversary had to be a clever-clogs and take the gold in order to win the scuffle. Ever thought much about the nature of curses, Commodore?"

Norrington shakes his head and Jack expects some scathing remark, but none materializes. After a moment he takes up the tale again.

"Curses ain't like flames that get blown out with a puff and just leave behind a bit o' smoke... why would heathen gods bother with something tame as that? Nah, curses stick around in small doses, just enough that you don't forget 'em. Enough to be bloody annoying. I've been told I look peaky by moonlight often enough, and this ruddy scar itches if I want anything too badly. If I were the type to engage in self-pitying behavior I would have ample cause."

Apparently genuinely lost for words, Norrington offers no response. Jack slides down to sit diagonally opposite from his prisoner, tipping his hat forward to shade his face. Norrington hadn't had his own hat on him at the time of capture, which is a damn shame. Jack would like to try it on and see for himself if there's a curse hidden by the ridiculous brim - some dark enchantment turning unlucky souls into laughable prats.

"Come in to Tortuga," Jack says in a tone that's equal parts plea and order. "Not all us naughty wicked outlaws have easy-to-see brands for you to know us by. Think of all the rotten apples you'll know by sight in future after spotting them on a sociable evening out."

"I fail to see what you hope to gain by putting me through these indignities."

Jack grins and tilts his head back so he can see under the low brim. "It's an end in itself, mate. Would've thought that was obvious."

"If I've learned anything at all from you, Sparrow - and considering the number of hours invested I certainly hope I have - it's not to assume anything about your motives."

"Now that, I'll concede, is an extremely intelligent approach to yours truly. C'mon, Commodore, seems a shame we've been mortal enemies so long and haven't shared a drink."

When AnaMaria sees Norrington among the group going ashore that evening she gives a snort of disgust and informs Jack that he really does get stupider every day of his life. He bows low and thanks her for the compliment.

"I trust you will not be so trite as to challenge me to some kind of contest?" Norrington says a half-hour later as Jack brings the mugs to the table.

"Not tonight, but I make no such promises for future occasions. Have a feeling you can hold your grog better than most would credit. I made a habit of knowing by foe's measure before the battle, y'see."

With a smile verging on awed, Norrington shakes his head.

"Is there anything you take seriously, Jack Sparrow? Or is life a continual game?"

Jack knows he need not answer; the Commodore knows the truth of gravity, levity, and how one relates to the other. Instead he clicks the rim of his cup against Norrington's, which still rests on the table where Jack placed it.

"Drink up, mate. Table's gonna get knocked over sooner than later."

So they drink, and the great conversation lubricator, alcohol, begins to draw truths out as the night wears on.

"I must confess I was relieved when the child proved to be a girl - I'd dreaded that they might want to name it for me," Norrington says, lifting his (sixth? seventh?) cup out of the way as two arguing patrons make firewood out of the righthand end of the table. "James Turner, can you imagine? Sometimes I suspect Elizabeth asks me to visit and professes her happiness so often in an attempt to salt the wound. It hurts her pride that I don't pine for her."

Jack doesn't interrupt the speech. It's interesting, and Jack has never had a problem with interesting things. Not that he hadn't guessed a bit of it from other information he's gathered over time, but there's nothing like the horse's mouth for hearing the whole story.

"I... I truly did love her. For that brief time I thought we were to wed, the world seemed brighter. Silver, as the ocean sometimes appears in the morning." Norrington looks down, scowling in surprise when he realizes the bottom of his cup is once again visible. "I think that was the trouble. I wanted her because I told myself that having such a life as we would have had would make me happy. I see her and her husband and their little Sarah-Anne and I know that if all that were mine I would be no happier, no more fulfilled, than I am without it."

"So what would make you happy, mate?" Jack asks. Their drinks are refilled, he notices, though he can't recall the serving girl coming round. It's never smart to take your attention off a tavern worker in Tortuga, and Jack chides himself to be more attentive in future. Norrington shakes his head.

"I only wish I knew." He laughs mirthlessly to himself. "I've hardly felt alive save for the time spent chasing your ludicrous ship up and down the coast. How's that for pitiable, eh? The best fun I have in my life is playing cat and mouse with Captain Jack Sparrow. So now you know... I began playing the game in earnest on day one, just as you did."

"Least you chose the best to tangle with," Jack offers diplomatically. He doesn't know what to say to this strangely introspective and friendly Norrington, a new version of a man who is unpredictable at the most sober of times.

Norrington laughs, then sighs. His mug is empty again and he pauses, obviously deliberating with himself.

"Damn it all," he says, and calls the serving girl back for another round.

Tortuga is a town with two souls, one of which can only be seen by mid-morning light. Dawn-time still belongs to the night, washed thin and grey and still too drunk to be regretting it. Afternoon is for preparing for the night to come, re-stocking kitchens with filling and cheap meals and making sure the knives are sharp. But mid-morning is nothing but itself, a time when the restless anger and reckless lust of the town are sleeping off old indiscretions and the world is quiet.

Norrington's already considerable grumpiness isn't reduced... in fact, is notably increased, by the addition of a hangover. Jack's just thankful it

appears the dialogue of the preceding night has been washed out of Norrington's memory.

"I can't believe you left me asleep in the pig sty," Norrington says furiously, wiping mud and filth off his face. Jack chuckles, then regrets the action. Even by his own generous standard he had a bit to drink last night.

"Think of it as a parting gift," offers Jack as they walk back towards the shore. "That's one of your pretty boats on the horizon if I'm not mistaken, and I suspect my fine and faithful crew are beginning to feel you're outstayin' your welcome. And so, I regretfully suggest you find passage home with the chaps come looking for you."

Jack wants to clap Norrington on the back, or bow low, but is not so brave as to attempt these feats in his present state.

"Thank God," Norrington mutters. "Hot water... clean clothes." He sighs contentedly at the thought of such creature comforts. Jack snorts and mutters something about poncy powder-haired china dolls. Norrington glares.

"It's unwise, Mr Sparrow, to insult the man who can order you to the noose."

"You're too fond of that threat, mate," retorts Jack. "Time to find a new tune for us to dance to."

"Shall I endeavor to do so before the next round of the game?" Norrington asks with a sly smirk. "Farewell, Captain Jack Sparrow. I trust it won't be too long before I see the Black Pearl in Port Royal waters, weather permitting?"

"Well, I 'ave heard stories of fine Navy brandy, which I'd like to verify." Jack squints against the brightness of the morning as Norrington walks down to the boardwalk to wait for his rescuers.

Turning back towards the town and taverns, Jack considers a nap of his own amongst the pigs. The seasons are turning, the year once again approaching the months of frequent storms and winds. Difficult to hold a public hanging in such conditions. A good opportunity to play the next round of cat and mouse.

Jack's palm starts to itch in anticipation.

The truth about Mermaids

Disney film *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*

Suitable for general audiences

The Turner homestead always felt like Will had brought the swelter of the forge home with him. The windows of the back rooms overlooked the shore and sea, as framed by the lazy branches of heat-limp trees. They had decided not to keep servants, as Elizabeth found she preferred to nick her fingers on the knifeblade as she chopped fruit and to wear her arms out stirring washing coppers to simply sitting about looking ornamental.

There were two children now, the elder a toddling two-year-old girl named Sarah-Anne and the younger a boy of two months. James hadn't seen this second child as yet; his excuses having run the full range of possible reasons why he couldn't visit. In truth, he was afraid to come back, to walk down the cobbled road lined with houses like the Turners' own and to bring his knuckles to the front door. They had not parted well the last time he came

calling, and it hurt something deep within him to think that the slight might somehow have been too great to repair.

On that occasion, things began well enough. After a simple but enjoyable meal Will had gone to crouch on the floor with Sarah-Anne and Elizabeth cleared the plates away - James asked her and asked her again to allow him to do this small task, but she would have none of it. Impending motherhood and family life suited her better than had seemed likely, and she was in good spirits.

"James," she'd said. "If this child is a boy, Will and I would like to -"

Before Elizabeth could finish, James shook his head. "I thank you for the honor, but I must decline. Don't name the child for me, Elizabeth."

Her gaze went shuttered, her smile shifting to the haughty coolness she'd made an art. "Fine." Putting the plates down on the table with a clatter, she turned away. "We'll name him Jack, then."

Will had looked over, concerned at the commotion, and glared at James. Ever the faithful puppy, that one. The house had seemed suddenly confining rather than cosy, and James had taken his leave as quickly as possible.

But Elizabeth had never harbored grudges, her anger was as hot and brief as the bay storms. Gathering his courage, James knocked.

"You two stay and finish that ridiculous card game. I'll see who it is," Elizabeth's voice called back towards the inner rooms of the house as she approached the door. James felt doubly hesitant, not wanting to intrude if the young family was entertaining another caller.

It was almost funny, of all the places he'd expected to find awkward in his life he'd never listed 'a narrow street in Port Royal' as a potential candidate. In the decade since the port had nominally become his home, the typical house in the area had changed from board-and-wattle huts to these unpretentious and sturdy two-story affairs.

He couldn't help but wonder, somewhat sardonically, how long it would be before the novelty of the simple life wore off for Elizabeth. She would always be happy enough, with her little family, but James suspected that her contentment would not be so long lived.

She looked content enough, however, as she pulled the door open.

"James!" Her voice was merry and relieved, her cheeks colored to a high blush from laughter. "I thought you might have decided you didn't like us anymore, after last time!"

He managed a smile back. "Hello, Elizabeth. May I come in?"

"Yes, of... uh, no." Elizabeth stepped outside suddenly, forcing James to stumble back off the front step and onto the road, and closed the door with a snap. "It's terribly untidy, you see, and I really couldn't entertain anyone with the rooms in such a state..."

James' small smile grew wider, despite himself. Her hands were holding the handle behind her back, as if she feared he'd push past her and force the door open. "Surely we're beyond such things, Elizabeth. That is, if we truly are past the misunderstanding of my last visit?"

"Oh," Elizabeth waved one hand as if to clear the past aside. "That doesn't matter. But no, no, the house isn't fit to be seen by anyone. Dreadfully sorry, lovely to see you, must catch up soon."

Her smile was really quite desperately frantic by this stage. James suspected it would be impolite to laugh.

"So your insistence on my departure doesn't have anything to do with the fact that, perhaps, a mutual acquaintance of ours has come to meet his namesake?"

"We named the lad William, actually. Liam for short, otherwise it would be confusing."

"There was a time, Elizabeth, when you would avoid answering my questions by throwing yourself off parapets. Are we now to be reduced to simple conversational misdirection?"

"Who's at the door, love?" an extremely familiar voice called. "Not selling something, are they? Tell 'em we're all stocked up. Unless it's drinkable, of course. Can't believe you two don't keep rum in the house."

Wincing, Elizabeth redoubled her hold on the handle of the front door. "I fear I must insist on postponing your visit to a later date. As you can hear, Will's... maiden great-aunt has recently arrived from England for a visit."

"Ah, so that was her, was it?"

"Yes, yes, that was her." Elizabeth nodded. "Wanted to see the children, you see."

"Mr Turner's great aunt."

"Yes."

"Looking for rum at two o'clock in the afternoon."

Elizabeth nodded, gracing him with another strained smile. "Yes?"

"Elizabeth?" Will's voice came through the door, the handle rattling as he tried to open it. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" she said back in an overly cheerful voice. "Just, er, just explaining to James that we can't possibly entertain now, as your great aunt's here visiting."

"Oh." Will's voice, as usual, took a few seconds before expressing comprehension. "Oh, yes, my great aunt. Lots of children with her, very hectic, no room for anyone else, must see you some other time, Admiral."

"Ah, well, I'll come back some other time then..." James nodded to Elizabeth with a smile. She looked very, very relieved. "... When you're not having a maiden aunt and her children to stay."

The relief fell away from Elizabeth's face like water on waxed cloth.

"Norrington, you bastard." The bedroom window on the second story was opened wide with a protesting squeak, Jack Sparrow's head becoming visible a moment later. "Stop tormenting poor Elizabeth and hurry up with the promising not to hang me so's she can come back in. The baby's starting to smell like he needs his mum."

"What makes you think I'd make such a promise, Sparrow?" replied James. "Especially after such an insulting greeting?"

Jack shrugged. "Intuition? You'd have me in irons by now if you had a mind to do it at all."

"Perceptive. All right," James faced Elizabeth and tried to look serious. "I promise no men currently hanging halfway out your bedroom window will be arrested during my afternoon social call, Mrs Turner."

She did not look nearly so amused as James felt or Jack looked. "I've a mind to throttle you both, hanging be damned." She pushed the door open, almost slamming Will into the wall in the process, and went to attend to her son. "Bloody men," the mutter drifted back in her wake.

"Afternoon, Mr Turner," James said, helping Will regain his footing. "I trust you're well?"

Will nodded, coughing as he got his breath back. Jack walked -- no, he sauntered, there was no other word for it really -- down the narrow stairs and into view, clapping Will on the back in an entirely unhelpful fashion.

"Elizabeth knock the wind out of you, did she? Good strong woman. No doubt she's got a good arm for throwing crockery too. Wives are fond of that."

"You've been married, Sparrow?" James asked with a smirk.

"Only a little," Jack answered. "How's our fine and fancy Commodore been, then?"

"It's Admiral now, I'll have you know." James took his hat off, noting that Will had caught his breath and gone off to find Elizabeth and the baby.

"Yeah, heard about that," Jack nodded, leaning against the end of the banister. "Wanted to send my congratulations, but thought there was probably some law against it."

"I've never known you to be hindered by such considerations before, Jack."

Shrugging, Jack motioned for them both to venture further into the house. "Been busy, mate. Sure you can sympathise, there's trouble coming and there has been for a while. We'll see some violence and mayhem, with any luck."

James smiled, disbelieving. "You're all talk."

"Nah," Jack said with a grin. "Some of me's wriggle."

The drawing room was, just as Elizabeth had warned, a complete disaster. The small table, usually decorated with a pretty cotton cloth, was strewn with battered playing cards and the stems and cores of apples. A cup-and-ball toy, brightly painted in red and blue, was tangled around the leg of one of the chairs, and the rest of the floor was decorated with marbles and scraps of paper.

"Hullo!" a small dark figure shouted, launching itself at James' ankles. Will, who was attempting to contain the chaos by sweeping the remnants of the card game into a bucket and setting it aside, made a small scolding noise.

"Sarah, you're all sticky. Don't ruin Admiral Norrington's stockings."

"It's quite all right," James said, bending to scoop the little girl into his arms. "Dear me, you are sticky, your father's right."

Sarah-Anne smiled, patting him very deliberately on the shoulders and leaving behind small gluey handprints. Her brown eyes crinkled up with delight as James pretended to be horrified at the marks.

"What's this then?" he said, lifting a lock of the girl's dark hair to inspect the three small wooden beads threaded in a line. Jack, now lounging in one of the chairs with his head tipped back, made a wide gesture of innocence.

"Don't look at me, I swear she put them in all on her own. You've a pirate's grandchild there, Will, no doubt about it."

Will smiled, hiding the expression behind a cough when he noticed James had seen. "Yes, she always wants pirate stories at bed time," he muttered. Elizabeth returned from attending to the smaller William, holding the baby out for James to see. Sarah-Anne made a face.

"He's a beautiful child. You must both be very proud," James said. Will and Elizabeth beamed at the compliment, sitting down side by side. "And as for you, Miss Sarah." Shifting her on his lap as he seated himself opposite Jack, James gave the small child a piercing look. "I once knew another little girl who was fascinated by pirates. Do you know what happened to her?"

Sarah-Anne shook her head mutely, eyes wide.

"She was kidnapped. Taken on board the Black Pearl and dragged into a dangerous adventure. Let that be a lesson to you as to what happens to girls who spend all their time thinking about pirates."

"Only if they behave themselves and ask their uncle Jack real nicely," Jack put in. James did not look impressed at the remark.

"Even you're not so lunatic as to take a child out to sea on a pirate ship in the current political climate, Sparrow."

"Well she ain't big enough to appreciate the trip yet anyway, is she? Things'll have died down by then. Always do."

"And if they don't this time?" James countered. Jack sat up properly, aiming a level gaze at him over Sarah-Anne's head.

"Then they don't. All good things, as the saying goes. And then we'll be out of a job, the pair of us. If the world changes and doesn't want pirates any more, where's that leave their hunter?"

Will cleared his throat nervously. "Jack, maybe it would be best -"

"Don't tell me what's best, lad. The Admiral and I are just having a friendly chat, no need to get nervous." Jack's glower vanished as quickly as it had arrived and he smiled broadly. "Might never come to that, anyway, and your wee lass here can have her turn at playing scallywag."

Sarah-Anne, sensing the moment of danger had passed, clapped her hands at the suggestion.

As the afternoon wore on, it started to seem to the hosts of the impromptu party almost as if James and Jack enjoyed sparring verbally with one another. Elizabeth and Will found themselves wishing that they did keep rum in the house, to balm their own frayed nerves.

"Sparrow, stop telling the child such fairy stories. You'll fill her head with nonsense."

"'s not a fairy story. Mermaids are real as you and me, I'll have you know. Seen one or two myself."

"You're a liar."

"Hardly like I've never been accused of that one before, mate. Anyway, bet you would have said there was no such thing as curses, once upon a time."

"Yes, well, if I ever see a mermaid I will concede the point. Until then, I will assume you are lying."

Eventually Sarah-Anne and William began to fidget and fret, ready for their afternoon rest, and Will decided to make this as good an excuse as any to show their guests to the door.

"Righto then," Jack said, and pulled out his pistol. "Admiral, I'll have to ask you to come along quietly, m'afraid."

Will covered his eyes with one hand, shaking his head in despair. "Jack."

"'s all right, Will. We'll just be popping off to the Pearl. I won't kidnap him for long, just for the time it takes to get well enough away from the noose."

Elizabeth, having set the children down for their naps, returned from upstairs and surveyed the situation. She made several frantic facial expressions at her husband: Aren't you going to do something? Can't you concuss them or distract them or at least get out of the way in case they get any stupider? They were only arguing when I left five minutes ago, what on earth did you do?

Will's own silent replies -- I didn't do anything! What exactly should I be doing, there's a pirate pointing a gun at a naval officer two feet away from me -- were amusing enough to make Jack's mouth twitch momentarily out of the grim scowl.

"It's all right, Mr Turner," James said. He was better at schooling his face and voice to suit the situation, and therefore marginally less likely to start laughing than Jack was at that moment. "I'll go along quietly, as the pirate requests."

"The pirate, is it? And here I thought I'd be Sparrow and nothing but forever."

"I'm not the one who considers 'bastard' a greeting, you know," replied James. Jack tilted his head to one side, as if considering the point.

"Hmm. Well, on that note, the pirate and the bastard shall take their leave. Must do this again, tell the kiddies we said our goodbyes. Lovely to see you both, as always. Will, Elizabeth," Jack nodded to each in turn and opened the door. "Until next time."

"Jack, I really don't think it's necessary to take a hostage..." Will said, following them out onto the street. Elizabeth hovered in the doorway, looking less worried than simply annoyed at the antics on display.

"Oh, come inside, Will. Let them kill each other, if that's their intention," she said icily. Reluctantly, Will stepped back inside beside her. Elizabeth's voice was muffled by the door as she closed it. "We have to make new friends."

"I suspect we wore out their hospitality," Jack commented. "Can I put the gun away now, or are you going to make a fuss and try escaping if I do?"

"I do keep my word, you know, even when it's to one such as yourself. I had no intention of arresting you." James pushed the gun aside and gestured for Jack to put it away. "You're too damn theatrical for your own good."

"Never been particularly interested in my own good, if I'm being honest. Which is a rare occasion in itself." Jack draped an arm across his captive's shoulders. "To the Pearl, then?"

"If you insist." Pausing, James let himself smile properly. "Mermaids, Jack? Sarah-Anne is going to grow into a holy terror if you continue with such an education."

"Balance, Admiral, 's all balance. I'm relying on you to temper my influence, as it were. And mermaids are real as I am, I tell you."

James slipped his own arm around Jack's waist in a half-hearted attempt at steering him into a straight line. "That isn't a rousing endorsement of their existence, Jack." Suddenly, strangely, a wave of sadness swept over James' thoughts. He sighed, giving up on guiding their route and following where Jack wandered. "What's to become of us, when the world changes into something new? What's fate got in store?"

Jack made a noise of disgust. "You'll believe in fate but not mermaids? That's an insult to common sense, James Norrington. If there's any irony or justice in the world, you'll end up married to a mermaid for all your doubting."

"Won't she miss the sea?" James' voice had grown softer. He sounded exhausted.

Jack grinned. "Nah. Not if you settle in a port town. Mermaids, they're adaptable."

"I was under the impression they required the ocean to stay alive."

"A myth's a myth, and a truth's a truth, savvy? Real mermaids -- which, like the ladybeetle, is a race with boys and girls and all sorts in between -- don't need the ocean. They are the ocean, in a way." Jack patted James' shoulder. "You'll understand it one day."

James shook his head, smiling slightly. "I doubt I'll ever really understand a tenth of what you say, Jack."

Jack stopped walking, leaning against a convenient wall with a sage nod. "Well, I hate to mention it, but you are a little dim."

"Am I, now?" James planted his palms either side of Jack's shoulders. "I should have you clapped in irons for that."

"Haven't told me that you missed me, yet."

"Neither have you," James pointed out.

"I don't need to miss me, I'm always where I am," retorted Jack.

When James was quite finished kissing him, Jack pushed himself back off the wall and recommenced walking in the vague direction of the Pearl. "Was starting to think you weren't planning on doing that, Admiral."

"I do make a point of keeping one step ahead of what you expect," James answered smugly. Jack rolled his eyes.

The Black Pearl had not changed in any significant way since James had last seen it, and there was a familiarity to the feel of her under his feet which came disturbingly close to a homecoming of sorts. Jack, who could be at home anywhere he found himself, seemed to almost become a part of the ship when he was on deck.

"I should charge you room and board, seeing's how it's actually your turn to have done the catching," Jack said, leading the way in to his cabin. James followed, glad to feel that his earlier melancholy seemed to be gone for the time being. It was hard to worry about the future when Jack was present, in all meanings of that word.

"You're the one who made me promise Elizabeth that there would be no arrests," James pointed out. "Anyway, I don't know how you've managed to keep track of who last captured who. It must be eight months since you were in these waters."

"Nothing like making up for lost time," answered Jack, grinning wickedly in the way only he truly could as he shrugged his shirt off. "Best if we get started."

"Indeed," said James, and for once the pair of them agreed on something.

Untold

Disney film *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*
Suitable for general audiences

"Mother?" Sarah-Anne asks. She's perched on the end of her parents' bed, one skinny leg drawn up and her sharp chin resting on her knee. Elizabeth looks up from the book she is reading over by the window and holds back a sigh at the sight of the knee-length pants under Sarah-Anne's skirt. If Elizabeth has told her elder daughter once that thirteen is too old for such getup then she has told her a thousand times.

It's Will's fault. He spoils them all rotten; the two boys and the two girls and especially their mother. Elizabeth would feel angry, if she ever had the ability to conjure annoyance at her husband. But she can't, so she doesn't.

"Yes, dear?" Elizabeth answers her daughter now, leaving the conversation on proper clothing for another day. Let the girl wear trousers if she wishes to, lord knows there is enough time for dresses once she grows up.

"Who's this?" Sarah-Anne holds up a page torn from a book, the creases carved deep from long years of folding. "It was in with Father's old papers. It's an etching."

"Oh," Elizabeth says, rising to her feet and walking over to take the sheet from Sarah-Anne's hand. "That's James. Your father and I became friends with him him back before you were born. You knew him when you were a child, though I doubt you remember him now."

Sarah-Anne nods. "I... think I do. I remember I thought his wig was funny."

Elizabeth presses her lips together in an effort to hold back a smile. "Yes. He wasn't terribly fond of it himself, poor man. Said he'd forgotten how to be himself without it, said he turned into Admiral Norrington when it was on his head."

Sarah-Anne looks again at the etching, surprise widening her dark dark eyes.

"That's Admiral Norrington? You knew him? Why I didn't know that? Why don't you and Father ever tell us these things! Norrington's very famous. Liam and Josh never shut up about him." Sarah-Anne's tone as she speaks of her brothers is the voice of long-suffering exasperation. "Norrington this and Norrington that and Norrington the other." She looks up at her mother, smirking. "I can't believe you've never told me."

Elizabeth shakes her head, biting her lip as she looks down at the image. It doesn't look much like the face in her memory, though perhaps that was never the point.

"Didn't seem like there was anything to tell. He vanished when you were just on five years old... though I suspect men like him always do, in the end. Their legend becomes too big to sustain a real person, the center can't hold."

"So you don't know what happened to him? Not at all?"

"I have my theories." With a final glance, Elizabeth folds the paper along the worn crease-line and hands it back to Sarah-Anne.

"So what other secrets are you keeping from your children?" Sarah-Anne unfolds the page again and traces the bold line of the Admiral's hat with a fingertip. "What other larger-than-life characters did you know and never thought to mention? Did you ever meet a heathen priest? Or a pirate? Or a princess? Now I'm going to suspect you and Father had all kinds of adventures, if you won't even tell your daughter about some stodgy old Navy man."

Elizabeth simply smiles, shaking her head and gesturing for the girl to go outside and play with her siblings. "Never you mind, Miss. Now go, and don't go spilling to your brothers either. I'll tell them when they're old enough..." Elizabeth's voice drops to a quieter volume as Sarah-Anne gives a conspiratorial chuckle and skips away, rich with secret knowledge. "...children deserve to have impossibly wonderful heroes."

She turns and goes back to her book, pausing for a moment to stare out the window at the calm blue eternity of the horizon and sky. In a gesture left over from young days now passed, she chews again on her lower lip. She thinks about men and legends and escapes, and stories she will tell her daughter when the child is older, and then she smiles.

Ruby

JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*
Suitable for general audiences

Love among gentlehobbits, as far as Sam could see, seemed to be the same old acquisitional mergers, financial agreements, and all the other distasteful legalities that so concerned the wealthy and the greedy, only with a sprinkling of awkward romancing thrown into the mix as extra.

Of course, it was just as easy to say that farm folk were only interested in a wriggle in the hay and having someone about to cook the breakfasts in the mornings, but at least Sam had witnessed all the other things that went along with marriages of that sort. There was just as much mooning about and poeticizing in most of the courtships Sam had seen his sisters dabble in as in any Elven story. And there was a lot to be said for breakfast-cooking, really.

So perhaps he was being overharsh, thinking so little of the way the richer families went about getting their young ones wed. After all, Sam had hardly seen enough examples to go by, what with Mr Frodo never paying much mind to the sisters, cousins, and daughters that all the local landowners introduced to him at parties. And it wouldn't have been fair to any custom to judge it by the current scene.

"Angelica." Mr Frodo was trying to hold a sigh in, keeping his voice polite and cordial, even if he couldn't quite manage cheery. "There are a dozen clever seamstresses within an afternoon's walk of your front door. Any one of them would be happy to make you a gown with as much beading as your heart desires, and I can give you the cost of such a dress at this very moment."

Angelica's face showed no sign of gratitude at the offer, but Angelica's face rarely showed anything except smooth skin and a plump pout. She was lovely to look at, being near the fairest in a fair family, but her petal mouth never smiled easy and her delicate nose didn't have the look of one that scrunched with laughter on a regular basis. Her long sandy lashes blinked down over the cat eyes so common in the Bagginses and so rare in other folk, and she shook her head.

"No, a new dress simply won't do. The dress Bilbo's mother wore would still be in fine condition, seeing as he never had a bride to wear it out. Vintage is all the rage now, you see, and terribly fashionable."

Sam, from his vantage point by the kettle, could see Mr Frodo's thoughts as clear as if they were written out on paper. A flicker of a laugh kept in, annoyance held back by a civil tongue, exasperation. Frodo eventually took a deep breath, and spoke in the measured tones of the weary.

"Belladonna's dress was for a summer wedding, and the fabric hasn't kept for one hundred and twenty years. It wouldn't have been to your taste at any rate, it was a simple and elegant gown with little in the way of overdecoration."

Sam had to touch his fingers to the hot kettle to keep from laughing, but Angelica didn't catch the barb in Frodo's words. Sam poured the tea and carried it to the kitchen table - Frodo preferred the gentle warmth of that room to the airless dignity of the parlor (a result, Sam had no doubt, of his master's young years as a Brandybuck), and didn't seem to notice Angelica's insulted pride at the location her visit was received in.

"Thankyou, Sam," Mr Frodo picked up his tea and blew a curl of steam off it. Angelica took her own cup without a word and Sam thought it a pity that Frodo could not escape beneath her notice as easily.

Sam could understand why Mr Bilbo and now Mr Frodo had never sought to make a match for themselves, at least not with lasses like that Angelica. Things were much simpler when a hobbit knew that it wasn't his pocketbook being flirted with. What Mr Frodo needed was somebody who didn't care a whit for gold or jools, perhaps a Brandybuck or a Took. Or even a Brown or a Cotton or a Hornblower; those families were respectable enough to wed a Baggins, and as sensible as they came.

The garden was a breath of air after the mood indoors, the roses and pansies and nasturtians simpler to tend to than the demands of a spoilt young hobbit lass (and prettier, too, if only because the flowers didn't know that they were lovely as Angelica did), and when he was back outside with his hands in the soil Sam felt that he wouldn't trade lots with Frodo for all the leaf in the farthing.

The visit went on for a while longer and then, mercifully, Angelica left with a small suede bag (that exactly matched the trim on her hat) full of silver.

"Is it wrong to be exasperated by relations, Sam?" Frodo asked, watching Angelica's retreat down the hill as if he'd half a mind to throw mud after her.

"Well, it don't seem charitable, but if I were in a family with Miss Angelica I might change my mind, if you follow me," Sam said. Frodo laughed.

"Ever the diplomat, Sam, aren't you?" He sat down on the step and drew out his pipe. "Can you pause a moment for a chat, or would I be keeping you from joy quite selfishly?"

Sam stammered a few words of clumsy denial and then fell quiet, content to be the subject of his master's gentle teasing.

"There's a wedding in your family coming up soon as well, isn't there?"

"Aye, our May's marrying Tom Noakes in a month. Good for them both, from where I see it. No sister o' mine is going to bend her back crooked cutting peat for miserly fires, and Tom's a generous sort in that regard."

Frodo chewed on the end of his pipe, nodding thoughtfully at the words. "Does she have a dress made yet?"

"Ah," Sam chuckled. "I don't mean to offend, sir, and I hope you won't think us Gamgees a bad sort on account of this, but May's leaving off cutting the pattern until the day gets close, lest the dress end up too tight for her."

Frodo laughed. "Congratulations are in order then, Sam. A more doting uncle a child couldn't wish for, if your patient ways with me are anything to go by. Come inside for a moment, I think I may have something your sister can get some use out of."

Puzzled and slightly curious, Sam followed Frodo to one of Bag End's spacious storerooms. It smelt, not unpleasantly, like dried herbs and dusty paper.

Frodo lifted a few boxes out of the way, uncovering an old trunk in one corner.

"Here we are," he said, lifting out a carefully folded gown of pale green muslin, the hem and collar traced with ivy patterns.

"My aunt Dora was born shortly after my grandparents wed," Frodo explained. "So this should fit May nicely."

"Oh, Mr Frodo, we couldn't ask for the dress of your grandmother!" Sam protested, though it was a pretty thing and May would be over the moon if she knew. It might make old Hiro Noakes hold his tongue, too, to see that Gamgees could scrub up just fine, and that his son wasn't falling in with a bad crew. In a dress like that, May would look as sweet as fresh cream.

"Well, you didn't ask. I offered." Frodo gently smoothed down a crease on the bodice and handed the bundle over to Sam. "I'd rather May and her Tom get the use out of it, and I wish them all the luck I can't bring myself to bestow on Angelica and her twit of a fiance. Come into the kitchen, I've eaten so many tea-cakes and scones that if I don't get some carrots and mushrooms into me my bones will turn to flour."

Sam folded the dress carefully and put it aside, fixing up a bowl of stew for Mr Frodo and buttering a crust of bread to go with it. Frodo liked the crusts the best, usually Sam made an extra loaf in the mornings so that there'd be enough crusts to last the day. It meant there was usually enough left over to make bread and butter pudding for supper, too, which Frodo always let Sam take most of down the hill to his family.

"What was your grandmother like, sir?" asked Sam as Frodo ate and Sam got a start on the washing up, curious to hear about the original owner of such a fine and uncommon garment.

"She was famous in from Pincup to Hobbiton for her red hair. Vivid as fire from the day she was born I've been told, though of course I only saw it white. Named Ruby, for that hair. Come over here to talk to me, Sam, I'm not in the habit of addressing people's backs."

"Ruby's a right pretty name for a lass," agreed Sam, drying his hands and sitting down at the table.

"Well then it suited her, for she was right pretty herself." Frodo smiled. "When Bilbo was a tween all the young folk fell in love with her, even though she was a mother of tweens herself by that time."

"Not Mr Bilbo, surely?"

"Yes, Sam, even Mr Bilbo," Frodo said with a hearty laugh. "You looked quite scandalized, then. There are some ridiculously florid poems in with his old papers, dedicated to 'my lady of the blood-bright tresses', if you can believe it."

"I'm not sure that I can, begging pardon. It seems so unlike him is all."

"The heart rarely does what we expect of it, Sam." Frodo's voice was soft, as if he was thinking of something that was happy and sad all at once. Then he was his usual self again. "Now, we'll hang that dress out to air for a while, and you can take it down to May this evening, all right?"

"Don't you want to come give it to her yourself, sir?" Sam asked in surprise.

"You don't want a boring old bachelor like me cluttering up the place when you've got a wedding and a birth to look forward to," protested Frodo.

"Yes I do!" Sam blurted, before lowering his voice. "You're always welcome down Bagshot Row, sir. Come down and have a drink with the Gaffer and wish May her luck yourself... I ain't saying that my skill with a pot and pan are lacking, but my sisters could cook a mud pie so fine you'd ask for seconds."

"Well," laughed Frodo. "I don't see how I could turn down an offer like that!"

Evening came quickly, Sam was quite surprised when he looked up from a group of troublesome weeds to find the sky losing light. The two of them walked down to Bagshot Row in companionable silence, Frodo looking out at the silhouette of the forest against the red-tinted clouds with a pondering cast to his features.

"That's the last of your sisters to be spoken for, isn't it, Sam?" he asked. Sam nodded.

"Yes, sir. And brothers are both married, too. It'll just be me and the Gaffer in number three, once May's wed. Marigold's not so far, her and her Tom are just up in number eight, but it's the feel of the thing. I'm not fond of empty spaces."

"I find myself tiring of them, lately," Frodo agreed, his voice once again taking on that soft sort of wistfulness Sam had heard in the kitchen. Sam realized what he'd said and blushed something fierce, ashamed to have said something that would sound like he was criticizing how Mr Frodo lived.

"Bag End's roomy but it has a cosiness to it," he offered. "With just one or two other folks in there, it would feel right full up."

"Maybe someday, Sam," Frodo said, and smiled, and Sam got the feeling that there was a joke he wasn't quite catching in the air.

Bound

JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

Suitable for general audiences

Frodo doesn't come to the Shire. He writes, letter after letter full of the same old gentle sarcasm and strange whimsy, but he doesn't come himself. Sam keeps the letters, for the most part, and pretends that nothing's different. As with everything nowtimes, the rambling dear messages maintain that lie almost perfectly. A sharpness of a phrase, an allusion to some violence, these things are easily ignored by Sam. He's learnt the knack of seeing with his eyes half-shut.

A packet of seeds for a September birthday, hard little pellets that Sam put into the best soil in the Bag End gardens. The flowers that grew were strong and creeping, and choked the other blooms that year.

Sixteen years now it has been, sixteen years in which Sam has been unable to forget how Gollum looked before he died. He hated the creature, that's sure enough, but that death wasn't one that Sam would have wished on Sauron himself. And then Frodo had looked down at the ring, gleaming on his finger; visible as fire in the dark. Looked down and laughed, and Sam's eyes had shut frantically. Invisibility would have been a thousand times better than the expression Frodo wore in that moment.

Once wee Pippin ate some leaves from those flowers, and it seemed that he'd be lost for sure that night. Sam will never be able to shake the memory of his son struggling to breathe, harsh high cries ripped from the child's throat. Rosie brewed tea steeped with kingsfoil and they forced Pip to drink cup after cup, but it seemed that nothing would help. Even now, years later, the boy keeps to his chair or the bed mostly.

But some day yet Sam will learn the knack of forgetting that, too. He'll walk with blinkers on, like other folk have taught themselves. His Rosie doesn't say a word about it, so Sam thinks it's likely she doesn't think of it either. It's never been her way to dwell on things she can't fix. And, after all,

the Shire is as safe as it ever was, isn't it? The hobbits have nothing to worry about. Travellers don't even bring news in anymore, because nobody wants to hear it. Wars and murders in far-off places. And when Sam writes to Frodo and asks why, why, why all this blood?, Frodo's answers are always calm and sensible. *If they do not see that I can be terrible, my dear Sam, they will never allow me the power to do good*, he writes, before asking politely after Sam's health.

Sometimes Frodo sends more seeds. Sam keeps them shut up in a chest in one of the store rooms. Some days he's sure they're lying there in wait, for the day some poor fool will put them in the earth. Then he shakes himself, and forgets the foolishness. They're just seeds, after all.

His writing is so familiar, black on white with a smudge on the lower tails. Frodo could never keep his pen steady on ys and gs. His fingers were always moving on to the next letter already.

If they do not see that I can be terrible, my dear Sam, they will never allow me the power to do good.

There's the rub, because Frodo's rule is one of immense goodness. He is just and merciful to those who submit to his dominion. Towers may have fallen, woodlands razed to ash on the ground; but, like a parent with a punished child, Frodo takes the people in his arms and soothes the bruises on their skin. Sam supposes that after a while the people forget who laid the blows in the first place. People can forget most anything, if they make the effort.

Whatever else there is to say about them, they are beautiful flowers. So colourful that it seems the brightness will seep out of them and spread over the world, and it's hard not to smile at the sight of that riot of shades in the sunlight. It's easy to forget the way they smell in the evenings, when the light is strong.

The Shire is prospering, the crops are good and the seasons are good and everything, at the heart of it, is good. His children are growing up sturdy and strong, and Rosie is a good and sensible mother for them. When Sam half-shuts his eyes, he lives a life that is wonderful, more than he ever dreamed he would have.

Some days he remembers the years Before, when there were only pansies and nasturians and ordinary roses in the gardens. None so beautiful as the flowers there now, but there was something good and sweet about clipping them. Some in a pot for Mr Frodo's study, some tied with string to take down to the Cottons' in the evening. Somewhere in his heart, behind his eyes, those days go on forever.

But when he opens them, there are creeping shadows in the sunlight. Elanor, oldest and fairest of his brood, with her eyes as blue as winter wind. Frodo named her, though he has never seen the girl. Suggested the name in his letter of congratulations, sending more money and jewels than Sam and Rosie could need in a thousand lives with a thousand children. Elanor, who cuts a hen's head off halfway to see if it will run in circles and then giggles and runs off to play some other game. There were many children like her born in those first few years, with pale complexions and knowing, almost mocking,

smiles. There have been more every year since, and Sam wonders if some day all hobbits will be like them and the old sort will be forgotten.

Elanor braids the flowers into her hair and twirls about, petals falling around her in an arc. She looks more beautiful, more alive, than anything Sam has ever seen, and he can feel how proud Rosie is of their miraculously lovely child. The colors of the blossoms suit her face, and she breathes the smell in as if it were sweet as honey.

When Sam and Rosie were small, it was considered a great treat to get a kitten from a stable-litter, some small huddle of gray fur. All the children would beg the wife of whomever owned the stable in question, pleading that their own store-houses were overrun with rats and a cat was direly needed. Of course, it was months until a kitten grew enough to be any use as a ratcatcher, but those months were what the children loved the best. Saucers of milk by the fire, envious siblings begging for a turn at patting the tiny pet.

Some days he's tempted to leave the garden to itself, to simply forbid his children to go near and shut the back door tightly. But that's against the grain of his nature, and some innate gardener-sense in him refuses to believe that it will never be proper again.

Now the stable-litters go unclaimed. These new, fair children have no interest in pets, yet somehow the barns are never overloaded with unwanted toms and tabbies. Perhaps the children have an interest in them after all.

Bag End's garden is the envy of all the others in the Shire.

Elanor is a sweet and charming girl, even at fifteen she still calls Sam 'daddy', but it's a sweetness tinged with cloying rot. She delights in telling her younger brothers and sisters that there's no such thing as tooth fairies and solstice wishes, and then she turns and cuddles away their disappointment. Confused, the children have come to think of hurt and comfort as things that come from the same loving hand. Some day, when death and forgetfulness pushes the old age past memory, everyone will feel like that.

Sam's children love to hear him talk about flowers. Rose-lass curls on his lap and smiles up at him. "You always sound so happy when you talk about them," she says with a lisp. But his favorite flowers are the ones he tucks into bed at night - Rose, small Daisy, and Elanor. They kiss him goodnight and his heart fills up. He could never hate a flower, even one he was afraid of.

And now, Frodo's last letter. *I want you and Elanor to visit.* Sam is forever thankful that Frodo considers Rosie and the other children beneath his notice. It makes a twinge of something sad pull in Sam, because Frodo and Rose would have been sugar and cream together. In a different way of things, she might have pulled him out of himself a little. Instead, they've all been pulled in, a silty green undertow.

She loves me, she loves me not, Merry sing-songs as he pulls the petals off a freshly-picked bud one by one. She loves me! He finishes with a triumphant crow, happy at the flower's promise.

They won't come back, Sam and Elanor. He looks at the green dusk on the fields, the children playing a run-about game. He left all this behind once before to try and save it, and he will again. If they succeed, they will probably die, and if the strength fails them...

"You're a marvel, Sam," Frodo used to say, wandering out into the garden mid-morning, ink on his cheek and eyes lit up with Elvish stories. "My poor garden would be a sorry place without you in it."

They won't come back.

"Without you, Mr Frodo, there'd be no garden for me to work in."

Elanor is laughing with Goldilocks over some silly joke, and for this moment she is as pure and fair as she should be. She is as unpredictable as a flame, and Sam wonders if she'll be friend or foe when it comes down to it.

"Oh, this garden will outlive us all, I think."

But then, until the end comes, there's never a way of knowing who is which.

Twenty-three things that happened between two ticks of a clock

New Line Films' *The Lord of the Rings* adaptation
Suitable for general audiences

The little brass catch gives him pause, unfamiliar under fingertips where it had always been at home before.

Then, after a moment's uncertainty and hesitation, the trick of it comes back. Frodo lifts and turns the little clasp; the glass veiling the clock face swinging back with a protesting squeal. Frodo cannot help but wince at the now-unmuffled tick of the seconds.

A twist of a tiny key, a stilling press of fingers against the sharp black hands marking hours and minutes. The clock is quietened.

Frodo sighs, relieved at the newly-made silence in the study. He wonders how he'll be able to judge the passing of time, now. If time means much once all the clocks are stopped.

He goes on walks, long walks out into the fields where the birds make small noises and soft songs. The sunlight skates against his skin warmly, the brightness of the days making the green grass look touched with gold.

Sam comes to borrow books, re-visiting tales that Bilbo read him long ago. Frodo follows him back down the Hill, the two of them stepping in time and without hurry along the path.

"Stay for dinner," Sam says, and Frodo begins to shake his head. He sees the hesitation and hope in Sam's eyes, and the memory of feeling trails down Frodo's spine. Offering a slight nod, Frodo begins to walk again.

"All right," he accepts. "You should have said back at Bag End, I could have brought wine."

"If I'd asked then I wouldn't have gotten you this far down the Hill." Sam's grin is wry and lopsided. Frodo blinks, then smiles a little in return.

Sam whispers to himself as he reads, difficult syllables in a mutter under his breath. It's like the sound the wind makes through the curtains of Frodo's bedroom at night. Baby Elanor is asleep in the other room, and there's a faint chorus of cicadas out in the garden.

Moving quietly so as not to disturb Sam, Frodo goes to where Rosie is washing the dinner crockery and picks up a tea-towel. Her fingertips are warm and slick from the dishwater as she hands him a mug.

One morning Frodo wakes up and realises that another winter has come and gone. He has not died of illness or gone hungry, so he must have remembered to wear a jacket and buy food.

He writes down all he can remember, and wonders what it is he has forgotten. It's strange to miss a thing when you can't recall what it was to begin with.

Sam wakes with a start, disturbing the empty teacup beside him on the wide garden stairs leading up to Bag End's green door.

"Must've drowsed off," he mutters. Frodo is sitting nearby, watching him.

"Yes," says Frodo. "I didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful."

Sam smiles, the small laugh-lines at the corner of his eyes crinkling. He brushes a few blades of dry grass off the seat of his pants as he stands up, offering a hand down to pull Frodo to his own feet.

"Think I best be off home, if I'm laying about snoring and all. Do you want to come down for the evening, Mr Frodo? You're always welcome, you know."

"I know, Sam." Frodo does not let go of Sam's hand once he's found his balance. "Thankyou."

He is awoken in the night by the front gate; the thud, pause, thud of it swinging in the breeze seems to echo through his skull.

Frodo lies still and tries to breathe.

The gate thuds again.

Breath. Silence. Thud. Breath. Silence.

Eventually, the sun rises.

He goes walking, and finds himself turning away from the fields. His knuckles rap against the cheerful yellow door and the sound seems such an unwanted intrusion in the still garden that Frodo has turned and walked back up the path before Rosie opens the door.

"Hello," she says with a wide smile. Rosie's smile has always made Frodo's spirits lift. "Sam's gone to see Ted Sandyman about wheat prices." She steps aside, leaving the entryway open for Frodo to step inside. "He'll be back in an hour or two. Sugar in your tea?"

"It must be difficult, living such an ordinary life after the bustle and fun of working in the Green Dragon," Frodo says, watching the way the sunflowers are nodding and swaying in the breeze outside the kitchen window. The cloth on the table is pale blue with a pattern of light green vines and flowers worked into the weave.

Rosie puts down a cork coaster and then the teapot. It looks huge, almost comically so, for Frodo has not made tea for more than one person in a long time.

"I like the quiet," she offers.

Sam always lets himself in to Bag End, now. "I brought back those books, Mr Frodo," or "here's some of those flowers I said I'd cut for you," or "I collected your mail from the letterbox."

"I thought I got the mail today," Frodo says. Sam hasn't got an answer to that.

Sam sets about making sausages and toast for luncheon, humming softly to himself as he moves about the kitchen. Frodo finds that the sound doesn't grate on his nerves as it would from any other voice. It's nice, to be reminded of music.

The food is good, warm and tasty in Frodo's mouth and in his belly. Pushing the windows wide, Sam smiles at the brightness of the day as if it is an old friend. Charmed by the expression, Frodo moves to stand in close and rest his chin on the sturdy width of Sam's shoulder.

They stand together, and as the clocks are all still and silent now Frodo does not know how long the moment lingers.

"Was beginning to wonder if you'd forgotten entirely," Pippin says teasingly as Frodo sits down beside him at the Dragon's corner table. "We've been here three hours."

"He's stopped his clocks, that's why he's always late now," Merry explains. There's a note of concern in his voice, but Frodo can barely hear either of his cousins over the din of the room.

"I'm not late." Frodo sips his mug of ale. Rosie doesn't work behind the bar anymore, and he wonders how he ever dared to exchange a flirty word with her in the days when she was. Were words ever really so effortless for him? "I arrived just when I meant to."

Merry and Pippin exchange a glance, and offer their cups up for a toast with a sigh.

Elanor has learned a few words; her voice is a sing-song and there's an edge of a lisp lurking, threatening to turn her sweetness irritating. She loves to say hello and goodbye to everything, and on more than one morning Frodo wakes to hear the clang of the door-bell as she pulls on the chain and shouts "hello! hello-lo! hello!" in the clearest tone she can muster. Elanor rarely lets her father come for visits without demanding to accompany him.

It's almost her second birthday. Her hair is blonde and soft, and one afternoon she falls asleep on Frodo's lap and sucks at her thumb with an air of utter satisfaction.

Out walking, Frodo sits to rest under a tree. The dappled light on his legs makes his skin look strange, unfamiliar. He falls asleep and dreams, and when he wakes the sun has set and the stars are out in all their silvery brightness above the wood. Frodo thinks of the echo of his feet in the rooms of Bag End, and decides to stay where he is until morning.

He wakes with dew on his face, clammy-cool under the heat of the sun.

"Hello! Hello-lo! Hello!"

The call comes seconds before the sound of the bell, and Frodo blots the ink on the most recent words he's put to paper. He's reached the darkest parts of the tale, and does not mind a respite.

Elanor is in Sam's arms, Merry and Pippin standing either side. They are all so familiar and dear that Frodo's whole heart aches at the sight of them there.

"We thought we'd come walking with you today," Sam explains. "We know you like to go out wandering, and thought you might like the company."

Frodo nods, opening the door wider and ushering them in.

"Pippin's thinking about getting married."

Merry and Frodo have strayed away from the path together, leaving the others to finish the picnic lunch they brought out with them. It's a windy day, and they both carry stout walking-sticks idly. They need no such aids to travel distances on foot, now.

"That bouquet he caught at Sam's wedding did it; you know how superstitious those Took's are," Merry goes on. "He's been sending love poetry to his second-cousin Diamond. Awful stuff, half of it doesn't even scan properly."

Frodo bites back a laugh and just smiles instead. "I'm glad. Not about the bad poetry... I'm glad our little Pippin's grown up so well. Times were it seemed unlikely."

"I know what you mean. Thought for sure I'd have him underfoot until I was old and gray." Merry scuffs at the ground with his feet. "That's not what you meant, though, is it?"

Frodo shakes his head. "Not really."

"What about you Frodo? How are you? What plans've you got for the future?" Merry asks. The wind has died down, and the birds are quiet. Frodo rests his walking stick against a tree, for some other hobbit to pick it up one day in the future.

"This and that," he answers.

He's down in the Hobbiton market when he runs into Rosie one Saturday morning. She's wearing a wide straw hat, the sunshine coming through the weave of the brim in such a way as to sprinkle bright gold freckles across her nose and cheeks. She smiles hello, weighing and selecting fruit and vegetables from a stall.

Frodo's own shopping is not nearly so complicated, he has long ceased to be choosy about what he cooks. The bright red skin of an apple caught his eye, but he can't imagine that he'll eat it. Perhaps he should give it to Rosie instead. Elanor can nibble slices of it as she plays with her paints and brushes in the slow light of the long afternoons.

Rosie doesn't comment when he walks up the Hill with her, offering another of her smiles to him as they reach the gate to her garden. Frodo returns the smile, following her up the path and to the bright yellow door.

"Tea?" she asks, and then "Sam told me how to make it the way you like it."

Frodo blinks, smiles. Remembers a time when food and drink were about taste, rather than habit.

The day passes, the pieces of apple all eaten up. Elanor paints pictures in green and blue and yellow splashes on paper. Her parents and their visitor share a bottle of wine, and laughter.

Eventually it is time for good-nights. Frodo walks home at his own particular pace, thinking of the day he's had in the quiet company of the small family.

He sleeps, and does not wake until morning.

Perhaps unwilling to let Pippin outpace him in any competition, Merry begins to flirt and court shamelessly with a selection of cheerful volunteers. Despite the fact Frodo suspects his cousin's heart isn't truly in the game, it goes on for several months.

Eventually one of the girls Merry turns his eye to tells him straight off that he can go duck his head in the pig trough, and he falls into deep and true love with her then and there. It's Fatty Bolger's youngest sister; she does an admirable job of withstanding the full attentions of her would-be suitor for some time thereafter.

Frodo thinks she'll probably give Merry her hand sooner or later, if only to stop the small gifts and the poetry. Some of the metaphors Merry has thought up for why Estella Bolger is attractive make Pippin's own clumsy attempts look like the most lyrical and elegant of elf poems.

Frodo does not see the baby until a week after its birth. The child has thick black hair and clear eyes of a deep blue colour, and tiny feet that kick and kick.

"Your eyes used to be like that," Sam tells Frodo. "They're more greyish now. I wonder if his will pale the same way?"

Frodo can hear Rosie and Elanor playing pat-a-cake outside, the bedroom windows opened wide to let fresh air and light into the small space. The baby yawns, and Sam's eyes crinkle up at the corners as he smiles. This season has been good to Sam, he's all shades of warm browns and golds and coppers; his hazel eyes seem almost to glow with pride and contentment.

"If it's all right with you, I'd like to name him Frodo," says Sam.

"You don't need my permission," Frodo answers. "Though I think I'd rather see him named Sam, truth be told."

"You picked out Elanor's name for her, I'm doing the choosing now." Sam rocks the newly-named Frodo-lad gently. "He is a marvel, isn't he?"

"Yes," Frodo agrees. The light from outside is heavier, thicker, than it was when they first came in. "It must be getting late. I should be off home."

"You're welcome to stay."

"It'll be dark soon."

"Begging your pardon." Sam's voice has a note of amusement to it. "But I think that don't matter as it might with other guests and hosts, all things considered." As if on cue, Frodo-lad begins to grumble for attention.

"I know," Frodo answers. "But still. Maybe another night, I'll stay longer."

Sam's expression of concern is so familiar and time-worn that Frodo feels as if he is still carrying a burden. But this weight is more complicated, stranger, and there is no easy goal in sight for the end of it.

The small carvings on the underside of banisters and in the nooks and crannies of storerooms are still there to trace with fingertips when Frodo visits Brandy Hall. He used to be so proud of them, angular little designs he'd scratched in with his pen-knife.

It's a little like saying hello to his childhood self, to see them again.

Merry and Pippin drag him on a kitchen raid, even though any culinary request could be easily filled by the usual channels. There's something about creeping in and sneaking about that makes the food taste better, they inform Frodo.

Of course, it all ends in disaster when Pippin upsets a large tub of soap flakes on the highest of the pantry shelves. It rains down on them in an avalanche, catching on their eyelashes and getting up their noses.

After a moment of stunned surprise, the three of them begin to laugh.

On this occasion the tablecloth is a blush peach color, patterned with swirls and coils of tomato-red. There are scones and jam, but neither Frodo nor Rosie moves to take one. Someone down the road is playing on a wooden flute and getting half the notes wrong.

Frodo-lad sits on his mother's knee and bangs on the table-top with a spoon gleefully, making small delighted baby noises at the sounds he's causing. Elanor is on the floor with her paints again, dabbing blurred shapes onto the paper with a look of concentration.

Tomorrow the four travelers will set off again together. It's the first time Frodo's found himself thinking of a morning yet to come for a very long while. The wooden flute stops, leaving only the sounds of Elanor and Frodo-lad in the quiet of the day.

"I shall not return." Frodo speaks softly. Rosie reaches across the table and takes his hand in hers. Her fingers are warm, her smile sad.

"You never really did," she says.

She walks him to the gate, seeming not to mind that her son is now hitting the spoon against her fingers for want of a table. The first of the butterflies have emerged from their slumber, dancing like dust motes in the light.

"Do not tell Sam. I don't want to spoil the time left with the knowledge." Frodo pauses, running his fingertip down the baby's plump cheek. "Live well, little one."

He pushes open the gate, steps through, and closes it. Doesn't yet move to walk away.

"Farewell, Frodo." Rosie leans over the gate and kisses his cheek. Her lips are like waking up under the chequered shade of a tree in summer.

"Are you going?" Elanor asks, running down the path to stand beside her mother. Her face is grave, and Frodo finds himself reminded of Galadriel's wise eyes by this child's gaze.

"Yes, Elanor," says Frodo.

Her expression remains still and serene for a moment, and then she smiles widely. It is as lovely as every one of Sam's smiles all at once. With a smile of his own, Frodo turns and begins to walk away.

"Goodbye! Goodbye-bye! Goodbye!"

Frodo turns back. Elanor is jumping up and down, waving at him. Frodo-lad is trying to reach far enough to hit his sister with his spoon; Rosie sees the movement and plucks the object from his fingers with a laugh.

Raising a hand, Frodo waves to them.

There seems no reason to sleep that night. Frodo spends the time tidying the last odds and ends left in Bag End, the few pieces he has yet to give away. At last, he comes to the clock, the hands still stopped at that second now years passed.

This time the brass catch does not make him hesitate, and the glass opens easily. He winds the key, sets the clock back up on the mantle. After a breath and a heartbeat, the ticking starts up as if it never paused.

Frodo stands by the window, and watches the dawn.

Salvage

Star Wars film triologies

Suitable for general audiences

The boy is nine, and prone to petulance, and when Obi-Wan catches sight of him at the markets it is unfailingly heartbreaking. Luke looks so like his father did, once upon a time.

The boy knocks politely at his door, now, and says "Ben, sir, you haven't been seen by anyone for almost two months. I wanted to see if you were all right."

"Thought you might see yourself a sand-weathered corpse, did you?" Obi-Wan asks him with a smile. The boy looks disturbed.

"You shouldn't joke like that. My aunt says death is nothing to laugh about."

"If you want to take up that argument, you must admit that life is a grave thing also, yet we laugh from start to finish."

"But we cry, too," the boy protests, still standing at the threshold of the small home. "And think, and talk, and chase the womp rats who try to get into the evaporators. We don't just laugh."

"All those things can be applied to our attitudes to death, also, Luke," Obi-Wan says, an old enjoyment at helping a child learn rising in his heart. "We cry, and think, and talk. I'm not sure about the womp rats, I must admit. Why can't we laugh as well?"

The boy looks thoughtful for a moment, and then shakes his head. "I don't know."

"'Knows he knows not, the wisest man does'," Obi-Wan quotes, motioning for the boy to come inside. "An old friend told me that when I was just a little older than you. His Master had told it to him, and he told it to me in turn. It's worth remembering. It keeps us humble."

The boy sits down on one of the worn, comfortable chairs, pulling one knee up to rest his chin on. "What's a Master?"

"Something like a teacher, but much more than that. I will tell you all about it when you're older, Luke, I promise."

"Oh, it's one of *those* things." The boy sighs. "Everything is 'when you're older', these days. I'm older now than I was a year ago, and nobody ever said it to me then!"

"I'm sorry innocence feels like such a burden for you." Obi-Wan pours the boy a glass of milk. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes, sir. Are you sure you're all right? I thought you might be sick."

Obi-Wan shakes his head. "No. Something unexpected happened to me, and I have been meditating in an attempt to make sense of it."

"For weeks?"

"It was very unexpected."

"Did I interrupt you?" The boy looks apologetic. "I didn't mean... I -"

"No, you didn't. I gave up yesterday."

"Oh." The boy looks down, then brightens. "Can I help?"

"No, it's all right. I am willing to let answers come in their due time."

That remark causes the boy to make a face. "Wonderful. More waiting."

It has been fifty days since Obi-Wan's mind went quiet.

There have been periods of silence in the past, but never without warning. Never so abrupt, like a door slamming down or a light switching off.

He had been working through a kata, trying to learn tricks to compensate for the growing stiffness in his bones, and remembering a long-ago sparring match.

"Really, Master, if you don't pin me soon, I'll begin to think you're letting me win."

"If only that were true, Obi-Wan. I fear youth will always have the edge over wisdom when opponents meet with equal skill."

He could feel the chuckle ripple through the Force around him a moment before Qui-Gon spoke. "What will it take, I wonder, to keep your concentration on the here and now? Once upon a time, the future held your attention, and now you wander back into the past."

"It isn't polite to tease an old man," Obi-Wan had answered with a smile, making a point of focusing on the world around him. Qui-Gon began to reply, amusement in his tone, and then the quiet fell like a blade.

Even the deepest of meditations have not quelled his disquiet, but to spend any more time thinking on it would be pointless. He shall trust the answers to come when they will.

And so the weeks pass, and the months. Luke begins to visit more often, spending afternoons tinkering with bits of old droids and chattering about the adventures he'd been on.

"... and then I fell off, so my uncle made me walk home, but that was all right because I still got home before him because the speeder broke down, which he said was my fault because I'm always taking things apart, and I said that I hadn't taken anything in the engine apart for weeks, and then he looked like he was going to make me scrub out the pipes with the sonic brush again so I came here instead. This is a good hide-out."

"I've come to think so," Obi-Wan agrees.

"Have you found out what happened to you, yet?"

"No. Not yet."

"Did you lose something? You look like you lost something."

"What makes you say that?"

The boy shrugs, and sets a small spider-like droid made out of scraps down on the floor. It begins to stumble unsteadily. "You just do. I guess I feel like that too, so I notice. You never used to, and now you do."

"Is that why you visit more?"

"I guess so." Luke pokes at the droid. It twitters at him, irritated, and he giggles. "Didja see that? Now I've made him mad!"

"Your aunt and uncle love you very much. It's just not their way to say so."

He makes a face. "I know. I just wish... I don't know anything about my parents except their names, and that my dad was a pilot, and that they're dead."

Owen and Beru Lars already view Obi-Wan's friendship with the boy as an idea of doubtful merit, at best. They will be vastly unamused if they hear that Obi-Wan has been telling him stories about things they consider best forgotten.

But Obi-Wan never was very good at choosing easy paths.

"Your mother was a compassionate, thoughtful woman. A born leader. The universe lost a champion of justice when she died."

Luke stares, his light eyes wide. "You knew them?"

"Oh, yes." Even now, the memory of them makes him smile.

"What about my father? What was he like?"

"A lot like you. You remind me more of him with every day. He wanted to run before he could walk, too. And he had a knack for fixing things."

Luke grins. "Not much like me, then. My uncle says I break more than I fix."

One evening, as the suns begin their slip down through the colors to darkness and Obi-Wan marvels that such a sight can be new every night even after almost a decade of observation, his contemplation is interrupted by a visitor.

"Ben. I'm glad I caught you at home."

Her worry surrounds her like a fogged halo. "Hello, Beru. Is there something I can be of help with?"

"Luke said you told him that you knew his parents."

"Ah. I know you and Owen disapprove of me talking to-"

"Never mind that." She holds up her hand to quiet him, and shakes her head. "You knew his mother?"

"Yes, I did. I was there when she died."

Beru shakes her head. She looks to be on the verge of tears, but her mild face does not crumble. "I don't know which of you is lying, but someone is."

"Lying?"

"She's here. Luke's mother. She's with him now."

Obi-Wan reaches instinctively for a weapon which has not been at his hip for years. "That's not possible."

"Believe me, I would rather you were right," Beru says softly. "We were not meant to be parents, I think, Owen and I. We are not skilled at it, and our bodies seemed to know we were not suited for it. But that boy is all my joy, Ben. I cannot lose him to her."

"You won't. It cannot be her," Obi-Wan says.

It is her. Her hair is braided back from her face, and her smile is warm and entertained as Luke shows her the gadgets he has created.

She turns as Obi-Wan and Beru arrive. "Isn't he a funny little boy?" she asks him, beaming. "Oh, Obi-Wan, it's so good to see you."

"Ben!" Luke greets him happily. "She isn't dead after all!"

"May I speak to you alone?" Obi-Wan asks as Beru leans against her husband, looking weary for the first time Obi-Wan can remember. When Luke makes a sound of protest, Obi-Wan does his best to keep his tone light. "Only for a moment. The droids will keep, I'm sure."

"Of course, Obi-Wan," she says, smiling again at Luke before releasing his hand from hers.

They walk together up to the surface, out onto the sand.

"There are so many stars out here," she says, drawing in a deep breath. "I forgot."

"Who are you?"

"Don't. Don't begin with suspicion. It has been -"

"I don't want to hear pretty lies. Tell me the truth."

Her face hardens. "I am General Amidala of the Imperial Army, and I am here to make sure my son is safely removed before the troops arrive."

"What?"

"You didn't think the Emperor would tolerate the suffering of innocents, even this far out of the central systems, did you? Tatooine needs regulation. It will be provided."

He watches her face and the movement of her hands, and puts his own hand to his mouth. He feels ill. "I never thought... oh, Anakin, what have you done?"

"He gave his children back their mother. He restored life where death should never have intruded. He remedied the errors of the past."

Obi-Wan can't look at her. He turns away, finding a little solace in the familiarity of the stars. "It's obscene," he says quietly, sickened. "Are you altered? Has he made you obedient and docile? Or has he simply grown himself a new copy of her, accelerated to the point where she left off? You are nine years too young for who she should have been."

"I am not a copy. I am her."

"That's not possible."

"While you've sat in your sand hut, the Empire has made leaps and bounds in technology. We live in an age of wonders."

"You know about the girl?" She had said *children*, after all.

"Yes."

Obi-Wan puts his hand to the lightsaber once again at his hip. It does not yet feel familiar there. "Is there any point to me killing you? Will another, exactly the same in all respects, simply spring up to take your place?"

She turns away. "I don't have time for this. If you try to stop me, I'll kill you and those who've sheltered him. If you kill me, your deaths will be difficult and prolonged, and Luke will still end up with his true family."

"I'm so sorry, Padme," Obi-Wan says.

"So am I," she says, and then something hits him, hard.

He wakes inside the sleeping quarters of a ship. Giving in to panic would serve no purpose, so he sits up carefully and checks his injuries. A nasty bump on the head, and marks on his wrists where Force-inhibitors were applied while he was transported. His captors do not underestimate him, then.

As Obi-Wan eases himself off the bed, the small room's door slides open and two children step inside. The little girl beside Luke has a serious, kind face and sleek dark hair, but she is obviously several years younger than the boy. It cannot possibly be Leia, can it?

"Ben, this is Shmi. She lives on a starship most of the time, can you believe it?" Luke gestures widely, making the heavy shawl draped across his shoulders slip down a little. It looks to be of high quality, colored the same dark plum Padme favored for such items. It reminds Obi-Wan of another child, a lifetime ago, who was taken by surprise by the cold of space.

Obi-Wan stares at the girl, who gives him a shy smile before ducking her head, embarrassed by the scrutiny. He'd never seen Anakin's mother, but he heard stories enough about her from his padawan that he'd always felt like she was someone he had met.

"We have to get out of here," he says to the children. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he is faintly surprised that he is still capable of being so horrified, after all else he has lived through.

Heavy footsteps approach outside the room, counterpointed by long rasps of a breather. "Leaving, Obi-Wan? My hospitality is offended."

Vader stands behind the children. Luke looks wary, unsure of what to make of him, but Shmi takes one black-gloved hand in her own small brown one, and tugs to get attention. Vader leans down, listening as she whispers something close to where his ear would be underneath his helmet. He shakes his head.

"Not yet, little one. Take Luke and go find Padme."

Shmi nods, and gestures for Luke to follow. The boy glances at Obi-Wan, who nods.

"Go. It will be all right." He hopes it isn't a lie.

"I want you to know you are forgiven," Vader says when they're alone. "Palpatine's rule was a time of insanity for many. I bear you no grudge."

Obi-Wan is too staggered by the words to find breath for a reply to them, so instead he contents himself with folding his arms and shifting stance. "The Emperor is dead, then?" he manages to say finally.

"I am Emperor now."

"And you've taken it upon yourself to play at being a god," Obi-Wan spits, regaining his voice. "How could you... your *mother*, Anakin."

"I had a lock of her hair. Now she will have the life she was denied. A safe and happy childhood."

Obi-Wan is rubbing at his forehead before he realizes his hand has moved. The whole situation feels surreal, like something from a feverish dream. "I knew you had gone rotten at your core, but I did not realize you were mad."

"I always knew I would find a way to stop death, sooner or later."

"This isn't stopping death, this is perverting life! What do you hope to gain by -"

"It wasn't supposed to be like this!" Vader snaps, as much as the voice synthesizer in the breather allows. "It..." He turns, and walks out the door. "You have succeeded in making me lose control, as usual. I should have expected that to stay as it was. I will return to speak to you later. For now, I will see to my family's wellbeing."

Obi-Wan kneels on the floor, ignoring the protesting creak his legs give as he does so. He can sense that the ship is not large, nor moving particularly fast. They are headed for a larger cruiser, then, rather than a planet.

He can feel Luke's Force signature, the edges jittery with worry and wonderment at this wild and strange adventure. Vader's roiling emotions would be audible to any Force-sensitive, and they lap at the edges of the old, discarded training bond still bridging between his mind and Obi-Wan's.

And there is something else, a breath of queasy recognition whispering through the Force, damped down by inhibitors and confusion. Obi-Wan strives towards it, like failing eyes trying to focus on faint words. It skitters away, dark with fear, and he lets it go for now.

Luke comes back alone a few hours later, still wearing the dark shawl around his shoulders. "Ben? Are you awake?"

"Yes. How are you?"

Luke shrugs, and sits down on the floor beside where Obi-Wan still kneels. "You sure can stay doing the same thing for a long time, huh?"

"It's a skill anyone can learn with practice."

"Not me, I bet." Luke is, indeed, fidgeting already. "Don't you get bored?"

"No. Where's your little friend?"

"Shmi? I think she's with my mom and dad."

"Did they tell you to call them that?"

Luke shakes his head. "No. But that's who they are, isn't it?"

Obi-Wan considers before speaking. "Do you remember, months ago, when you told me it was wrong to laugh about death?"

Luke nods. "Uh-huh."

"From a certain point of view, you were right to do so. I laugh at death because I recognize it as part of a circle, a circle which holds both joy and

sorrow in it. But many who laugh at death do so without understanding what it is they are doing. Do you understand?"

"Kind of." Luke looks confused, but stays quiet and lets Obi-Wan explain. His aunt and uncle taught him to be polite, at least.

"Your father has broken that circle, Luke. He has created life where it does not belong."

"He said you would say that."

"What else did he say?"

With a shrug, Luke traces one finger against the floor. "He says I'm coming back with them. I... I'm not so sure I want to." He whispers the confession, sounding ashamed. "Do you want to?"

"No, I don't."

Footsteps outside again. Luke springs to his feet, shaking a little with fear, while Obi-Wan rises more slowly.

"I thought I would find you here," Vader says to Luke.

"You didn't lock my door," Obi-Wan remarks. "Your faith is disturbing, all things considered."

"You cannot hurt me now," Vader says calmly. Luke flinches a little, doing his best to hide it. Vader turns to him. "Are you so afraid of your father, boy?"

Luke shakes his head. "No. It's just... your mask is strange. I've never seen anything like it."

With a nod, Vader taps his fingers against the side of the helmet. "Such things could never function in the sand and wind of Tatooine."

"Can you take it off?"

"Someday soon. When I have enough of those I trust around me, I will create a new body for myself. Then I will have no more need of this mask. Then we can meet face to face at last, my son."

All Vader's attention is focused on the boy, and Obi-Wan chooses the moment to strike. His options are limited without his lightsaber, but he has had hours to plan his attack. He unbalances Vader with a shove through the Force and heads for the door, grabbing Luke's hand as he does so.

"Run!" he tells the boy, and a split-second later his breath leaves his throat in a choked gasp as his windpipe is squeezed in an invisible vice.

"It's not that I don't want to best you in a fair fight, Obi-Wan," Vader says idly, flexing his fingers a little. Obi-Wan's vision begins to swim. "It's just I'm sure we both remember how well that went for all involved last time, and I'm in no hurry to repeat history."

Vader lets go, and Obi-Wan falls to the floor, gulping at air.

"I had hoped we could begin again, my old Master, but it seems you are going to make things difficult," Vader says, and Obi-Wan just has enough time to think *why must they always knock me out?* before the darkness takes him down again.

This new room is black as pitch, and there are inhibitors back on his wrists and around his forehead. They're locked on, and Obi-Wan can't help but wonder why Vader even made a pretense at civility and reason. Surely they both knew that things would end exactly as they have when Obi-Wan was brought aboard.

"Obi-Wan?" a voice asks hesitantly, and all the clues Obi-Wan refused to notice fall into place. The sudden silence in his mind, and the strange familiarity just on the edge of notice. "That's... your name, isn't it?"

It seems redundant, at this point, to boggle at the audacity and horror of what Vader is trying to do.

"Yes."

"I knew that was your name." The voice -- Obi-Wan has to think of it as that, and only that, for fear that sanity will leave him entirely -- sounds awed and happy. "I remembered it. Usually I have trouble with things like that, but not with you."

"Your memories are damaged?" *You should not be. This should not be happening.*

"Something went wrong... Lord Vader tried to put something in my mind, like the others have. Something to give me clarity about the Empire. But it... didn't work. And now I can't remember a lot of things."

"Are there any lights in here? Where are we?"

"It's a holding cell. There's no way out or in unless you have a key, or the Force... and we've got inhibitors on, and don't have the key."

"Yes, yes, I'll worry about all that in a minute. How do we get light?" Obi-Wan stands, leaning against a wall for balance. He can feel the hum of the engines through it, which places the room near the back of the ship.

"Here, let me." There is the sound of movement, and a dial being turned. Thin, pale light seeps in, casting thin shadows from what little cargo there is: some crates, a cold-storage device, and a heap of blankets on the floor.

Qui-Gon is dressed in black pants and a dark tunic, his feet bare and his hair cut haphazardly short. He looks to be perhaps sixteen years old.

"He wanted an apprentice," Obi-Wan says, and for the first time almost wishes he had the strength in his heart to end Anakin's life.

"My aging slowed two weeks ago. That's when he realized something was wrong in my head."

"That's why he's come for Luke?"

Qui-Gon nods.

Obi-Wan draws in a deep breath. "Show me the key mechanism for the door."

It's state-of-the-art, but the art in question is the Empire's, and that means corners have been cut. Obi-Wan prods at the wires, disconnecting one and twining it with another. It's finicky, difficult work, but eventually the mechanism chirps and the lock hisses as it unseals.

"Got it!" Obi-Wan says, and smiles at Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon looks thoughtful for a long beat, staring at the exposed circuitry, and doesn't seem to hear.

"I... there were lessons, and... you didn't like them. You wanted to be reading instead..."

Obi-Wan blinks hard, and swallows back his sorrow. "Yes. That's right."

"I never remember this much."

"There are meditations we can try which might help you. For now, we have to get Luke off this ship and away to safety."

Obi-Wan presses his palm against the door's electronic latch. The corridor outside is dark; the humming sounds of the engines stronger. Obi-Wan gestures for Qui-Gon to follow.

There is a light patter of footfalls, and Luke tears around the corner in front of them, stopping himself barely short of crashing headlong.

"Ben!" he pants, surprised. "I'm here to rescue you." He holds up a ring of cardkeys.

"Good, good." Obi-Wan holds his wrists. "Is there one to deactivate these?"

Luke sifts through the cards. "This one might work." He waves it over the inhibitors. They click open, followed a moment later by the band around Obi-Wan's forehead. It's like being able to breathe again.

"Here, let me," Obi-Wan says, and unlocks Qui-Gon's own encircled wrists. Their bond, strong when Obi-Wan was a student and made moreso over the slow years by the edge of the Dune Sea, flares between them like an arc of electricity. Obi-Wan was anticipating the jolt, and lets it pass through him, but Qui-Gon stumbles at the power.

"Easy, easy." Obi-Wan puts a hand on his shoulder to steady him. The familiarity of Qui-Gon's body, always a few degrees warmer than Obi-Wan's own, is an unexpected surprise. His throat chokes a little. "Let it flow as it will."

Qui-Gon nods, and regains his balance. "I'm all right."

"What do we do now?" Luke asks. Obi-Wan smiles at him.

"You're the one who rescued us. I assume you have a foolproof plan."

Luke looks exasperated. "Are you ever serious about *anything*?"

"We should find a pod, and return to the surface before the ship moves out of range. We must go collect Leia, and get her to safety," decides Obi-Wan. "Hopefully Bail has some knowledge of where... allies might be found."

Qui-Gon grasps at Obi-Wan's hand, drawing strength and focus. "I think I know..." His mind darts, skipping over the yawning blanknesses Obi-Wan can sense spotted across his memories and dreams, and his brow furrows. "I used to..."

"Save your searching until we are out of range. There would be little point in discovering the answers when they may be overheard by unfriendly ears."

"Yes, of course. I am sorry," Qui-Gon says, letting go of Obi-Wan's hand.

"No need to apologise. Any knowledge you have will be of great help."

Luke clears his throat. "You two remember the part where we're *escaping*, don't you?"

Obi-Wan pats the boy on the head, smiling at the growl of irritation the gesture earns him. "Come along, then."

He can feel that Vader is asleep, and that the onboard crew are clever but not Force-sensitive. Padme, who has always carried an amount of unconscious, unfocused power in her, is reading and thinking of... an ocean? No, a lake, and imagining children playing at the water's edge. Obi-Wan cannot tell if it is a memory or a hope.

They head down to the lower levels, moving as quietly and quickly as they can. Qui-Gon's bare feet aid him now, but will become a problem if they manage to reach the surface of the planet. He is already too tall and lanky to be comfortably carried. Obi-Wan hopes they land close to a settlement.

Luke points down one of the side corridors as they reach the bottom of a narrow flight of steps. "Here, I think it's -"

"You can't leave."

Shmi is standing at the top of the stairs, a small blaster clutched in both her hands. Her mouth trembles. "I won't let you."

Obi-Wan is about to react when Luke steps forward, his face stern. "Put the gun down."

She begins to shake. "No."

"Put it down. You're going to go to sleep now."

She glares at him furiously, tears in her eyes, but after a moment she puts the blaster aside and lies down, pillowing her head on her hands. Her face doesn't slacken as her breathing evens, a look of concentration and effort pinching her features.

"Luke?" Obi-Wan asks quietly. The boy's shoulders sag, and he turns. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

Luke shrugs, offering a tired smile. "I just knew, I guess. Like walking, or talking, or something like that."

Obi-Wan rubs his forehead. Two young would-be Jedi in his care, both in need of particular attention, and a third if they manage to reach Alderaan before Vader. He's too old for this.

"Come on," he says. "She's fighting it already. We need to move fast."

The pod they find is built for three, luckily enough.

"I'm not in the middle!" Luke declares, keeping his voice quiet, and clambers in.

"Neither am I," Qui-Gon says. Obi-Wan quirks an eyebrow. Qui-Gon gives him a small, nostalgic smile. It looks particularly haunting on such a young face. "I fear youth will always have the edge over wisdom when opponents meet with equal skill, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan tries, and fails, to hold back a small laugh. "Fine. I'll be take the center."

As soon as they close the door on the pod and set coordinates, an alarm begins to sound. It'll be pure dumb luck if they manage to evade capture for any length of time at all.

"I have a bad feeling about this," mutters Obi-Wan, hitting the release button.

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them: a book review

(alternative title: Newt Scamander is a bit of a bastard and even I know more about how to present objective facts than he does so it's a bit of a joke for us to have to act like he's some kind of authority)

a two-parchment essay for Care of Magical Creatures

by Sirius Black, fourth year Gryffindor

JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels

Suitable for general audiences

Note: all definitions and quotes are taken from the actual text of *Fantastic Beasts*, published in 2001 to raise money for Comic Relief UK. The only change I've made is to exclude one sentence from the werewolf definition, which reads as follows: *There is no known cure, though recent developments in potion-making have to a great extent alleviated the worst symptoms*. This omission is on account of the fact that Sirius's edition of the book wouldn't have any mention of the Wolfsbane potion, which was invented some time later.

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them is a cracking good textbook because it is light and the cover is sturdy enough to get used as a flyswatter when the screening charms on the dormitory windows act up in humid weather. My aunt Andromeda told me that if I couldn't find anything nice to say I should just keep my mouth shut or I'll end up with something nasty and uncomfortable happening to me one of these days, so I'm not going to mention any of the rampant stupidity that the reader is confronted with if they're unlucky enough to actually open this bloody stupid book.

For starters, there's hardly anything in it. Counting the different sorts of dragons as individual 'beasts', we're still only offered eighty-four different animals here. This not at all comprehensive list can be perhaps attributed to the fact that Scamander talks on and on and on in several different introductions before he gets to these so-called 'fantastic beasts'.

The first of these introductions we get is the always-masturbatory 'about the author' section. And I can say 'masturbatory', can't I? I mean, it's not like I used one of those slang terms that are technically swear words or anything. I didn't say 'bloody wanky' or 'revealing the writer as a hairy-palmed broom-servicer', or 'reads like he's had two ribs removed so he can work on his parselmouth skills unaided' or any of those atrociously uncouth phrases that would have absolutely no place in a homework essay, especially a homework essay done as a detention. But 'masturbatory' is all right, isn't it professor? I don't see why not.

Anyway, the 'about the author' section. Scamander reveals that he is "almost solely responsible for the creation of the Werewolf Register in 1947". Considering that few areas of magical creature classification are more contentious than the question of werewolf rights, I think it's pretty rich that the chap who devoted himself to treating a bunch of people like they were some kind of nasty bathroom grout with no rights or anything to be the one who now gets to write a book which is used to educate young wizards and witches about what kinds of beasts are dangerous. Seriously, professor, that's not really very comforting, is it? I know if some crazy git spent lots of time setting up a system to catalog everybody in the world who had red hair and then wrote a book telling... my analogy's a bit muddled and I forget now where I was going but is this really the sort of literature we should be forced

to refer to? I've half a mind to complain to the headmaster, only seems like Dumbledore's pretty chummy with the Scamander guy. Can't imagine why, because he seems like a bit of an idiot. Scamander, that is. Dumbledore's all right, especially when he revokes three weeks of detentions which are completely undeserved and it's not like the Slytherin common room didn't already smell like fertilizer and rubber shavings before I accidentally left that package in there anyway. Not that Dumbledore's ever actually revoked a detention like that, but I hear there's some kind of saying about there being a first time for everything.

After 'about the author', we get an introduction about 'what is a beast?', the other option being 'being'. Scamander says that a being is "a creature worthy of legal rights and a voice in the governance of the magical world", and then later on refers to the 1811 definition which classifies "any creature that has sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community and to bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws" as a being.

But when Scamander lists different animals that make the two categories difficult, the first animal he singles out for his own ridiculous and petty attention is werewolves. Because, honestly, it's not like they've got enough problems to worry about without some doddering old bigot getting his knickers in a bunch at the thought of them being treated like ordinary people. Scamander says "Werewolves spend most of their lives as humans (whether wizard or Muggle). Once a month, however, they transform into savage, four-legged beasts of murderous intent and no human conscience."

How's that for "when did you stop beating your wife" tactics in argument, eh? He claims to be exploring the problematic nature of a two-category division process and yet he uses the word 'beasts' as if it's fact. And murderous intent? There's a whole lot of plain ordinary two-legged 'beasts' who're humans all the bloody time who kill other people. Since when do humans automatically have a conscience? If I wasn't writing an essay and I could speak freely, I'd say it's all a load of narrow-minded bollocks. But, unlike Scamander, I know where my personal opinion's better left on the shelf, so I'll stick to purely the facts.

Later in the Beings versus Beasts waffling, Scamander says "werewolves, meanwhile, have been shunted between the Beast and Being divisions for many years; at the time of writing there is an office for Werewolf Support Services at the Being Division [in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures] whereas the Werewolf Registry and Werewolf Capture Unit fall under the Beast Division". Which just goes to show what horrible garbage can come of squidbrains like Scamander making up rules and definitions. Because, in the end, what all that gibberish about Beings and Beasts and having offices in both means is that werewolves don't get the rights and respect that Beings are supposed to be entitled to, but they don't get the protection and care and consideration that Beasts get under wizard law. It's all stupid and horrible and if I had another package of rubber shavings and fertilizer I'd divide it up into lots of smaller parcels and send it to all the old tossers who think like Scamander. I'd need a lot of the stuff, and do you know why? Because their stupid way of thinking is never challenged, and people read it and end up thinking it's just the way things are! It's disgusting! This book should be banned.

Eventually, we get to these ruddy 'beasts'. And there, under W, what do we find? That's right, "werewolf", right between "unicorn" and "winged horse".

Guess that whole debate about Being vs Beast didn't happen in Scamander's little list, did it? The definition for "werewolf" is as follows:

Werewolf: The werewolf is found worldwide, though it is believed to have originated in northern Europe. Humans turn into werewolves only when bitten. There is no known cure. Once a month, at the full moon, the otherwise sane and normal wizard or Muggle afflicted transforms into a murderous beast. Almost uniquely among fantastic creatures, the werewolf actively seeks humans in preference to any other kind of prey.

Now, the first bit's all right, though wasn't there debate a while ago about possible North American origins? But it says "believed", so I guess I'll let it pass without comment. So long as the author admits that it's just opinion, I'm not going to grumble. Not as much, anyway.

This 'sane and normal' still bothers me, though. And 'murderous beast', again! Maybe Scamander just really likes the way the words look together.

The last part is the thing that gets me, though. "Almost uniquely", you say, Mister Bigot-idiot-slimeball-gitface? You rotten liar. There are only eighty-four creatures listed in the book, right? I went through and made a list of all the ones which are referred to as preferring people as a snack. Not all the ones that were dangerous to people, or all the ones which sometimes hurt people. No, these are just the ones which Scamander, Mr Almost-uniquely, points out specifically that the animal in question likes a bit of Soylent Green in their daily diet. (That's a Muggle movie, by the way. A movie's a really long and complicated moving picture that they sit in the dark and watch on Saturday afternoons. They eat popcorn while they do it. I asked a mate of mine to explain why that was such an important part of it and he just shrugged. Muggles are weird, even ones with wizard kids. Soylent Green is a story about eating people, anyway. That's why I mentioned it. Wouldn't want you to think I was getting off the topic at hand.)

Here's the list, with the appropriate part of the definition included for reference:

Chinese Fireball (Dragon species) - "prefers pigs and humans."

Hungarian Horntail (Dragon species) - "feeds on bats, sheep and, whenever possible, humans."

Peruvian Vipertooth (Dragon species) - "has such a liking for humans that the international confederation of wizards was forced to send in exterminators."

Erlking - "high-pitched cackle that is particularly entrancing to children, whom it will attempt to lure away from their guardians and eat."

Kappa - "feeds on human blood." [no other food's mentioned, so by way of omission one can assume that this is their sole dietary source]

Kelpie - "having lured the unwary onto its back, it will dive straight to the bottom of its river or lake and devour the rider."

Lethifold - "once its prey has been successfully suffocated, the Lethifold digests its food there and then in their bed." [only human victims are mentioned, and since 'in their bed' is specified as the place of attack it's safe to say that a lethifold's diet is people all the way]

Pogrebin - "attracted to humans... will leap upon them and attempt to devour them."

Quintaped - "a highly dangerous carnivorous beast with a particular taste for humans."

Hags - "in search of children to eat."

Know how many that is? Ten. In a list of 84. That's approximately 12%, professor. How, exactly, are werewolves 'almost unique'? It's prejudice and it's rotten and it has no place in schools.

There's a footnote on the werewolf entry, too, which mentions that "when there is no full moon, the werewolf is as harmless as any other human". Have you even seen Kingsley, the Ravenclaw Beater, during a Quidditch match? Oh, yes, humans are completely harmless. Right-o, I'll tell that to my arm the next time it's nearly broken by a bloody Bludger.

But the footnote doesn't stop at that. "For a heartrending account of one wizard's battle with lycanthropy, see the classic *Hairy Snout, Human Heart* by an anonymous author." First of all, I wonder if it's ever occurred to Scamander that maybe it's anonymous because werewolves are frightened of flobberworm-headed idiots who couldn't tell their arse from their face with a map. I bet 'anonymous' had all kinds of stuff he could have spent royalties on, like a new cauldron. Did you know, professor, that forgetting even a little bit of scouring potion overnight can burn a hole right through the bottom of a cauldron? I felt really dreadful when that happened to a friend of mine, because I'd borrowed his equipment without asking and he wouldn't let me pay for a new one even though it was my fault his old one got ruined. I bet if something like that happened to anonymous then he'd buy a new cauldron and the friend who'd accidentally ruined the old one wouldn't feel guilty anymore.

And "heartrending"? Don't talk to me about heartrending, you stupid bastard of an author. What do you know about heartrending, when you're the one treating them like they've got the plague?

Since I'm almost at the required inch-length for this, I'll conclude my review: This book is tripe, and I mean that in the least complimentary way possible. It's nasty, stupid, full of lies and half-truths and stupidity and I already said that, didn't I? That it's stupid. But detentions are supposed to be awful and irritating and annoying, so I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything easy or fun. Honestly, though, this was downright dreadful and I hope in future I can just stick to having to clean out cupboards and bathrooms and punishments like that. Moaning Myrtle's got a bit of a thing for me, I think.

A sorta fairytale

JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels
Intended for adult audiences

Nearly a month after Sirius dies, Remus comes into her room and his hands are cold and make her skin prickle, and he kisses her all over and makes her sob and doesn't let her touch him.

The next morning he's not at breakfast. She doesn't see him until four weeks have passed and the moon's getting heavy again.

"Is this going to become a regular thing?" she asks afterwards, this second time, gathering the tatters of her torn nightshirt across her breasts. "Maybe I can alternate my hair for different seasons. Pink, green, blue, *black*."

"Nymphadora, this isn't anything..."

"Don't call me that," she snaps, and turns over to go to sleep. He leaves, and she can feel his sigh on the air behind him.

"I'm too poor, too -"

"Don't you *dare* say old!" she shouts at him, and throws a handy candlestick at his head. It crashes against the wall with a satisfying thud. "I'm hardly a child, Remus!"

He flinches, and she remembers about Greyback and the children. Well, so much the better that he feels the sting of what she's saying.

"You don't want me," he says now, calmly. His eyes are hollowed and sure. "You pity me, and you want to take care of me. This isn't -"

"You can go rot, for all I care!" she retorts, tears in her eyes. Then she shoves him against the wall and kisses him, until he gives up and touches her.

In that in-betweenest of in-between times, between Christmas and New Year, he rests his head on her lap and she strokes his hair and he cries a little, and she says "shush, it's all right". She's not sure why she says it, because it isn't true in the slightest, but it seems like the thing to say.

She falls asleep against the bedstead, the ironwork digging curlicues into her back. She dreams that someone kisses her hair, but when she wakes up Remus is gone and the room is dark and chilly.

"Why do you always get to set the rules?" she asks, watching him as he puts his robes back on. "Why can't we be together? Why can't you believe that I love you?"

"You deserve someone better."

"That's not an answer. Why is it all right that we do what you want, but not what I want?"

"You'll be glad we're not involved when you meet someone better," Remus says with a certainty like stone.

"Someone better, someone better. You're like a broken record." She's glad he's fully dressed, now. She doesn't think she could manage saying what she wants to say if he was still laid bare before her. "I think we have to stop this."

He looks shocked. "What?"

Her voice is snide. "Maybe I met someone better. Maybe I met someone who lets me have something from him. With him. We don't even have an anything, remember?"

"All right," he says, as mildly as if they were discussing sandwich fillings for lunch. "Goodbye, then."

When he's gone, she swears for a while, and breaks some things she doesn't need, and uses up half a box of tissues.

"We... we're not doing this anymore," she gasps out, the rough brickwork rubbing against her back. She digs her heel in against the back of his knee, pulling him in closer against her as he kisses her neck.

"Just this once," he promises, as if there wasn't a this-once last week, or one ten days before that. As if there won't be one next Thursday, or Saturday, or whenever they next end up urgent and fumbling and fighting.

"Yes," she agrees, as adept at lying as he is, pulling his hair so that she can move his mouth to hers. "This isn't anything."

He doesn't answer her.

Maybe he's scared that the hundredth time he says it (the thousandth, the millionth, whatever they're up to), it'll become the truth.

"This isn't anything," she says again, but the words sound as empty as the wind.

Spark

X-Men movie series, set following the third film
Intended for adult audiences

In the fourth week, on the Friday, Marie wakes up with the sensitive skin on the soft inside of her forearm, the stretch from wrist to elbow-hinge, across the bareness of Bobby's back. The texture of body against body is still novel enough that it takes her almost ten seconds to realize he's dead.

In the eighth week, when she's lost track of the days, Marie finds John holed up in a large house in a small suburb, the kind where everyone's too polite to pay attention to anyone else's business.

He's not at home when she gets there, so she sits on the step to wait. She's in no hurry. Not anymore. Every second drags like a fingernail, caught in the synthetic weave of a glove.

It's dark, and late, when he appears beside her. There's alcohol on his breath and something loose and sparking in his face. The same thing she's seen in her own eyes in those rare times when she forgets to avoid a mirror. The where-now-what-now-who-am-I-oh-God-please-I-didn't-want-**this**.

"How're you paying for this?" she asks, sturdiving herself against the front door's frame as she rises. She doesn't look for a hand up, and he doesn't offer one.

"There's bank accounts nobody found," he answers. "Are you coming in?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"Do you need one?" His mouth makes the same smirk-shape, but it's a hard and ugly thing now. Marie wonders how Storm can possibly believe in mutants remaining mutants no matter what the cost. Even the smallest costs seem far too high.

His house is empty and still and cold. As metaphors go, it's not subtle, but Marie's life stopped being subtle years ago. There's a haphazard pile of papers and books and scribbled-on legal pads strewn across the table; an oasis of chaos in the maid-tended calm.

"Are you back at school?" she asks, gesturing to the heap.

"Nah." John plucks a thin, cheap-looking paperback from among the sheafs. "I'm writing fuckbooks."

She just looks at him. The answer's so absurd she can't help but believe it.

"It keeps me occupied," he explains. The defensiveness he used to fight the world with has tempered into something else. Something that makes her think, of all people, of Logan. "The money's not bad. Not enough to keep me in a place like this, but that's not a problem yet."

She used to read books like the one in his hand, though she never called them by the name he used. They were romance novels, or erotica, or a guilty indulgence. Something beautiful and delicate. She'd wanted... oh, she'd *wanted*... and the books had been all she could have.

Her eyelids close, pushing the sting out over her lashes.

When she risks looking up again, hoping the darkness of the room will hide the sheen, he's staring at her. Reaching over, he flicks on the overhead light, and she flinches a little at the sudden brightness.

"You look like shit."

"He's dead, John."

He sways on his feet, just a little, and steadies himself against the edge of the table. They're standing close enough together that she can smell him. Her sense of smell's been good ever since she took a little bit of Logan.

"Was it the cure?" he asks, swallowing as if his mouth's gone dry. There's a tiny scar on his cheekbone, and Marie thinks it might be where Bobby's forehead hit him the last time the two of them met. She only heard about it second-hand, but the scar is new, and she hopes that's where it came from. At least one of them should keep a mark of him.

"It was me," she answers.

John shakes his head, turning now to pace across the smooth floor. His voice bounces from the bare walls, the echo muted by the design of the room. "It wore off?"

Few words have ever been as difficult to say. "Yes."

"Fuck."

The punch is violent and unexpected, and Marie jumps in surprise as John's fist connects with the wall.

"He didn't... he was asleep. When it happened," she stammers. "He probably didn't even -"

"Who the hell cares? What the fuck does it matter? He's dead because you bought into pathetic norm bullshit." The rawness in the words makes her tears rise again. She can't look at the expression on his face.

"Don't do that. Don't spout that crap at me. Not now!" The shout feels better than the crying. "Don't pretend you weren't disgusted by it when I touched you at his house."

"It doesn't matter! It's still who you are!" Now they're both yelling. It's probably the most noise the street has had in years. "The personal's not as important as the political, Rogue, and -"

Her teeth grit so hard her jaw hurts. "Marie."

"Rogue," he repeats. The movement is too unexpected and too fast for her to dodge away from, and then his palm -- clammy, hot, and somehow she'd forgotten how hot he always was -- is pressed inelegantly against her cheek, it's as good as it always is, the same rush, better than anything else is the world could ever possibly feel. Even sex didn't get her this close to someone. She sucks it in like water into drowning lungs.

John pulls his hand away, his face all pinched and heroin-chic now with the shadows and the fear she knows better than her own names. "Rogue," he repeats again on a panting breath.

"Nobody ever asked me!" she says, and wonders how much of the anger in her now is taken from him. "So what if they wanted me to be ordinary and boring when I wasn't? Magneto wanted to make me Joan of fucking Mutant-Arc. He was, Bobby was the only one who never made a decision on my behalf. I've got no loyalty to your fucking mutant cause, John. It's never done me any good."

"And going sapient, that was just cherries and roses, wasn't it?"

She punches him hard in the jaw, a wordless cry in her mouth, and then her knees give out and she's sobbing and he's holding her up. "It's not fair. It's not fair. I never wanted this. I just wanted to be normal."

His hand strokes her hair, booze-sweet breath near her ear. "Oh, baby, that's where you went wrong. You don't get a choice."

Bruised and Borrowed

Mutant Enemy TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, set in an alternate season 5 with elements drawn from the *Angel* episode 'Remember Me'

Intended for adult audiences

If she didn't love him as much as she did, who knows how things might have gone? She probably wouldn't be here, at any rate. One booted foot pressing down on the throat of the fair-haired, Teutonic soldier with broad shoulders and blood all over him. His blood, and hers too, because it's been a dirty fight and she doubts her hearing's ever going to get back to what it was before.

"Where. Is. He?" she asks again, head cocked to one side, speaking slowly, taking her foot off his neck so he can reply. She knows he'll reply. Nobody really wants to die.

"I don't know. The will of God -"

That's quite enough. Whether he knows or not she doesn't care anymore. She'll find someone else, another knight who's smarter and doesn't know what to shut up. This one's taken up too much of her valuable time for her to bother listening to more Byzantium garbage. She cracks his spine with a stamp of her foot and he goes limp, eyes open blankly in the evening rain.

"No luck?" Faith asks when they meet up again and Buffy submits to the second slayer's attempts to dress the cuts all over her arms and the bruises on the rest of her.

"No. I think he knew, but if he did the knowledge died with him." Buffy answers. Faith swallows her sympathetic sigh and nods, the lashes on her good eye blinking down.

"We've still got a few days, though." Buffy says resolutely. "We'll find him." and she sounds like she almost believes it, a mad waver in her voice betraying how long it's been since they slept, how close to the end of the world they are.

Tara and Dru are still out of it when Buffy and Faith get back to the old dorm building that's used by most of the humans in town as a hide-out. Buffy hopes they find what they're looking for, out in the ether. Hopes that they'll be able to decipher any clues they do find.

Oz has caught four of the scruffy helldogs that run the streets and he and Joyce are doing their best to prepare the meat, which is safe it eat provided the hungry people don't mind nightmares. And everybody has them anyway.

"Did you find anything out?" Joyce asks her daughter before Buffy and Faith even have the chance to greet everyone. Buffy doesn't answer, but Joyce's shoulders slump as she realizes that she'd have known without asking if the girls had found any information.

It's a little weird, Faith thinks to herself. Joyce knows that Johnny's not really her grandson, but still the ache's there like a fist in the woman's chest. If the monks hadn't done such a job on it, if they didn't all feel one hundred percent like Johnny was for real, then who knows where they might be?

Faith's anger at the monks never lets up. Couldn't have they been up front about it? "Oh, we've got all this energy stuff that a supreme being or two might want to get their hands on, can you mind it for a minute?" and she often tells them so, before she kills them.

The Gods are dead. Wiped each other out, after reducing most of America to a plate of month-old Jell-O. But that didn't stop the knights. No, Johnny

had to be destroyed. After everything they'd lost, lovers and friends and allies, and everything they'd given saving the world, the knights wanted to take away one of the few bright things they had left.

They still don't know what memories are real and which ones were made up later, but as far as their uncertain memories know Johnny was conceived in that golden time after Angel became human, when Buffy was visiting LA. For a little while, it had been like nothing could go wrong. Everyone was happy, everything was right. Faith looks back and feels sure the knights must have screwed with some stuff, because it's all too neat, and surely someone must have said something when Buffy found out she was pregnant and decided to drop out of college. Would Joyce have let her do that, in the real version of things? Faith doesn't know, and sometimes on the edge of nightmares feels the chill of other things changed. A man in an alley. Blood. Darkness. A pain in her gut, like someone's stabbed her. Dru, as if hearing her nightmare, murmurs crazy things to her until she falls back into restless, dreamless sleep. Vampires and humans can't afford to fight anymore. Not with the other things out there.

Once, Faith asked Tara about this stuff, because Tara's brain is so disconnected she probably doesn't know what reality she's in anyway. Tara told her that it didn't matter, because now this was the way things had always been. That makes Faith furious, because was that golden time that may not have happened at all really worth this, this rust, and blood, and cold, and gamy hellmeat for dinner and screams outside all night as the survivors cower in this old building with torn posters of rock bands that are undoubtedly dead now on the walls and the textbooks of dead students to put on the fires to keep from dying in the winter that's all over the world?

"We'll try again tomorrow." Oz soothes Buffy, and she nods, crouching by the fire and reaching in to grab out a tin of baked beans. They've only got a few dozen left, but Buffy's strict about her vegetarianism.

Faith can't say for sure, but thinks it may come from the sight of the sacrifices, when it looked like Glory was going to win and people started killing children in a frenzied worship of the god. Johnny had been a year old then, and with Angel and later Jonathan both dead Buffy had been caring for the baby alone. She'd entrusted Johnny to Spike and Drusilla to guard until the fanatics had stopped their madness. They'd complied -- old rivalries just didn't mean anything anymore. A mob had torn Spike apart but his sacrifice had given Drusilla time to run with the bundle of squalling child, time for Faith to find them and fight the crazies off. Faith lost her eye in the process, but Johnny was safe and that was all that was important. Luckily, none of the gods had ever found out the form the key was hiding in. Faith didn't like to think what she might have had to lose then.

Buffy ignores the way the can's burning her hand and pulls the ring top, dumping the contents onto a plate and beginning to eat it. Faith couldn't say for sure when they last ate, but it wasn't today or the day before.

"Would you sacrifice him?" Faith asks Buffy, sitting beside her and picking at the piece of meat she really should be eating, needs her strength. "If he turned out to be the key to a better world or something? Someplace without, you know, hell on earth?"

Buffy glares at her.

"Don't ask me bullshit questions like that. Of course I would. I love him, but what kind of life is he going to have here? Assuming that we find him before the knights kill him."

"Maybe you get to have him anyway. Maybe the only thing different is that he's the key."

"Maybe." Buffy doesn't sound like she believes it for a second, but it's a nice thought anyway. Maybe she and Angel did marry, and he did have a chance to hold his son before he died. Maybe Faith and Xander did run off to Mexico for four weeks and have a lot of drunken sex after he graduated high school. Maybe Johnny is the key to that better world, where all the good things are the same but Willow didn't get trapped in her own spell trying to seal off the second hellmouth that opened. Giles and Xander and Harmony weren't taken over by the gods to be their earthly forms.

Buffy wants to believe that. Wants to lie down and fall into a dream where her last memory of her watcher isn't the way he looked with Glory in him, dressed in red, sucking the mind out of Jonathan while Buffy cowered behind an overturned pickup truck with Johnny crushed against her breast, praying he wouldn't start screaming. That she wouldn't start either.

"What'll you do, if we find that world?" Faith asks, putting the meat aside. She's just not hungry enough tonight, even though she feels faint.

"Go on being the slayer. There's always darkness." Buffy answers, and offers Faith half her beans. Faith takes the plate with a small smile. "What about you?"

"Me?" Faith asks, and for a second her brain touches the dark bruise of her nightmare and she winces, the murky green tones of her dreams forming into shadowed shapes of a confined space, a hospital or a jail or a mental home or something. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's her that's crazy in that other world, not Tara. Maybe she's crazy now, and everything's just her lunatic imagination. No hell creatures outside in the night. No missing child being held captive by knights who are awaiting the solstice to kill him. Just the imagination of some crazy chick in a mental home. Faith shrugs. "I don't know. I think I might check myself into some place. Get a little r&r, you know?"

"Ok, I'm in on that. We'll go stay at a swanky resort for three weeks straight." Buffy smiles in the flickering light of the fire, her bruises a dark purplegreenbrown blotch on her cheek. Faith considers explaining that's not quite what she meant, that she's got the feeling the other, better world is still a dark place for her, but she doesn't say it. Why say it?

They go to sleep eventually, under blankets too thin at spots too far from the fire, but they have to stay a little distance from the flames in case anything comes out of them. Halfway through the night the television, which has been dead since the electricity went, flickers to life and Faith wakes up to see a grainy, green-gray image of Cordelia screaming inside the coffin that she'd been found in, too late, two years ago. Faith turns the television off before anyone else can wake up, and then smashes the glass for good measure.

Oz twitches in his sleep, Faith wonders if tonight was supposed to be a full moon. So much magic was lost when the moon fell, the seas swept coastal cities away all over Europe with the tides gone mad. Faith hasn't menstruated since then, but she doesn't miss it. Nobody would want to have children anymore, bring a baby into a dying world.

It's cold tonight, but it's cold every night and Faith's used to it now. Pulling the blanket around her bare shoulders (they sleep nude so they can wash their clothing and wear it again), she sits and wonders about another

world, somewhere else, somewhere not so broken. Not so aimless and lonely and desperate.

Then she goes out to find the knights.

The body of the one Buffy killed earlier is gone, but Faith's good at tracking and it's not too long before she finds two more that are burying the dead one. She kills one to get her point across and then asks the other for directions. He's rather helpful, but Faith's in a bad mood and breaks his wrist anyway. He doesn't scream.

Oz catches up with her; he found her gone and followed her trail just as she was following the knights. Faith explains what she's going to do and he nods, once, and they walk together without speaking.

As dawn breaks they find them, chanting over the boy and muttering incantations. Oz and Faith, standing side by side and filthy and tired and halfway to mad already, feel like their minds are being pulled through a wringer at the strange, weaving chant. The dusty ground is red-brown, with darker stains showing where old deaths occurred.

They explain to the knights why they're there. *A better world*, they say. *Somewhere that's better. Anywhere that's better. Is Johnny the key to that?* The knights nod, and Faith thinks they're probably lying, but she doesn't care anymore. Any ending is better than the continuation of things as they are.

She closes her eyes for a moment and remembers Xander, how wonderful it was in Mexico, sticky and hot (she misses summer more than she misses almost anything else from before) and just them and alcohol and days screwing in the heat. Buffy and Angel, kissing on their wedding day, the bride plump with pregnancy and everyone looking so happy for them. Giles crying and Joyce handing him a tissue. Faith doesn't pray, for fear that gods will hear her, but she does hope that at least some of them will have a chance to be happy in a different world.

Faith and Oz kneel either side of the baby in the circle of knights, and Faith hopes and hopes and hopes that Johnny will be happy in the new world. Not caring that she's interrupting the chanting again, she asks one of the knights about that. He tells her that the key will simply be destroyed. Faith looks down at Johnny and kisses the tiny child's, really still a baby, forehead gently. Energy can never be created or destroyed, so she knows that the knights are lying. She hopes that whatever Johnny becomes, he'll be happier than he would have been here. They all borrowed this world, these lives, for a little while, but Faith's ready to give hers back. To take whatever the universe spews up instead of this existence.

It's not the solstice, but perhaps she and Oz make a difference, because one of the knights steps forward and holds a sword up above the child's body. Faith doesn't want to watch but she can't make herself look away, expecting the knight to stab down and kill Johnny. But instead he continues to chant, and then, very calmly, draws the blade across his wrists, letting the first blood fall on Johnny. He hands the sword to the next knight, who does the same and then hands the sword to Oz. Oz hesitates, looks at Faith, then cuts across his arms and tries to join in the chanting.

Eventually it's Faith's turn and she does it without hesitation. One slayer dies, and the next is called. Somebody else can play the game now; Faith's tired. She doesn't care anymore if it's all a lie. Any ending is better than none.

Last thing she hears is Johnny begin to wail.

Electric Sheep

Mutant Enemy TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, during early season 6
Intended for adult audiences

*She's a teenager, she's a teenager, she's a teenager.
She's a kid.*

Faith keeps telling herself that, pointedly *not* looking at Dawn as the taxi splutters along through traffic, the shock of the new and still familiar scratching on her skin.

She's a kid. She's B's kid sister. Just stop it.

Faith's rarely felt so wired, like she's been slaying for hours without a single good kill. She never got into the prison sex thing; it was all skanky and nasty and Faith's had enough of skanky and nasty, thanks. So here she is, back out the outside, and just about ready to pop.

Of course Dawn's the one to come pick her up. There's some dark fire burning in the girl now; Faith can recognize something she's had herself for so long. In some weird way, they're kin. Faith's not feeling exactly sisterly right now, but she's got self-control. She is most certainly not entertaining the idea of jumping Dawn Summers in the back of a Los Angeles taxicab.

"There's uh, a thing. Back at the hotel. I would have brought her to come pick you up, but all the metal detectors and stuff..." Dawn says, watching the utterly unattractive view out the window as if it's fascinating.

"Huh?"

"It's kind of a long story." Dawn shifts on her seat. "Spike made a - a sex robot, or had it made anyway, he didn't make it himself I don't think. She got her head knocked off when we were fighting Glory but when Buffy, the real Buffy... Willow reprogrammed her a bit. Then the Buffybot -- we call her the Buffybot, usually -- got ripped apart by these biker guys, but I didn't want her to die like that. I mean, I know she wasn't really alive to start with but I'm kind of not either and I know I sure wouldn't like to die like that. So I asked this guy at school who has a bit of a crush on me if he could help. He fixed her up pretty well, her skin layer's a bit gross in some places but otherwise she's good old Buffybot. So I brought her to you."

Faith just stares without speaking for a long beat. The driver pays no attention, Faith's sure he's heard much weirder stories on this shift. Then Faith blinks, smiles, and shakes her head.

"Whatever. You know, next to real life, jail was almost normal."

"Dawn! You're back! I made salad!"

That voice. Faith's already antsy skin breaks out in a fine sweat. She hasn't heard that voice in so long, and hardly ever with such happiness in the tone.

"Um, Buffybot, this is Faith, I told you about her?"

"Yes, you did."

Faith looks up from the floor to stare at the Buffybot for the first time. She's perfect, even with the strange spacey light in her eyes; the one thing that reminds everyone this Buffy's not quite right. Faith had forgotten how lovely Buffy was when she smiled.

"Hello Faith. Did you have a nice time in jail?"

The question's so innocent, the tone so friendly and light, that Faith can't help but laugh.

"Yeah, I did. A real holiday."

"Oh crap crap crap!" Dawn looks at the chunky blue digital watch on her wrist and swears for a little while longer. "My Dad's meeting me at the movie

theater soon. He wants to take me to the new Pixar animation. I love those things, they're so cute. I didn't realize we took so long at the prison. I'll only be gone a couple of hours, ok? It's just," Dawn bounces from the heels of her feet to her toes and back again, rocking with childish energy. "My Dad and me haven't been on great terms lately, and I wanted to fix stuff."

"You should go. I can show Faith where all the rooms are, and make her salad if she wants some. I just learned how to make it, but I'm very good." Buffybot smiles her shiny berry smile again, earnest and bubbly at once.

"Yeah, go hang with your dad. I'll make sure robo-girl here doesn't get into any gunfights in Westworld."

Dawn looks puzzled. Faith rolls her eyes with a laugh.

"Old movie. Kids today, no respect for old stuff. Makes me feel all cultured to know a movie you don't. Go, go, you don't wanna be late."

"You sure?"

"Just go already!" Faith smiles, and it feels real good on her face. Dawn's a cool kid.

"Would you like a salad?"

Faith looks over at the Buffybot and smiles, leaving her unpacking for a minute and sitting on the edge of her bed, gesturing for the robot to sit beside her.

"No, I'm not really down with the salad situation. What do you want to do?"

"What do I want to do?" if Buffybot's smile could get more vacant, it does, as if she doesn't understand the question.

"That's what I said." Faith prompts. "You got all these microchips and wires in you, somewhere there's gotta be a list of hobbies, stuff you do for fun."

"I like to dream." Buffybot says, after a fractional pause. "I think it's dreaming. My thought circuits don't ever stop running, even when I'm being recharged. But my awareness setting has to be switched off whenever repairs are being done or I need to be out of everybody's way. I have strange thoughts then. Willow had a book, she read it last summer when she was fixing me a lot. It was called '*Do androids dream of electric sheep?*' and she used to look at me for a long time whenever she stopped reading. I don't dream of sheep, though. I have never seen a sheep, but I have pictures in my memory banks. Sometimes I dream about flying, or falling. And colors. I like colors, they're very pretty."

"You dream?" Faith asks. Buffybot nods.

"I think it was programmed into me so that I would dream about Spike, but I never have. I was made for him, to service his manly desires."

Faith feels incredibly ill for a passing moment. If she's ever back in Sunnydale she's going to beat the crap out of that William the Bloody guy. What a dirty rotten pervert, taking something as sweet and simple as this Buffybot and using it as a cheap inflatable doll.

Because Faith hasn't been entertaining similar notions, oh no.

"Did you like it? Servicing him?" Faith almost chokes on the fifth word.

"I was made to do it. I'm sure you like slaying the same way."

"Yeah." Faith nods. "I guess I see your point. You're pretty smart."

"Thankyou. Most people don't know that." Buffybot's smile is still shiny, still pretty, still vacant, but now Faith wonders if those things go bone deep, or wire deep, or whatever.

"Can I kiss you?" Faith asks, feeling a bit ashamed. Buffybot just closes her eyes and tilts her chin up, and Faith knows this is seriously screwed up but it looks so much like Buffy, but acts so different, better, not angry and hard all the time like the Buffy Faith has in her memory. And it's been so long since she felt other skin against hers, even if it's not real skin at all.

It tastes like any other kiss, Faith can't help but wonder if the flavor of Buffybot's mouth is deliberately created, the minty, sugary taste of summer afternoons, or if that's another strange thing most people assume not to know about the pretty little machine.

Faith's hand comes up to brush against the firm soft flesh of the Buffybot's breast, the pad of her thumb grazing one perfect nipple through the cotton dress she wears. Buffybot jumps, breaking the kiss and cocking her head to one side, looking confused.

"I think I had a malfunction. My circuits have never responded to touch in this way."

"What do you mean?"

"It must be something new Willow added to me." Buffybot muses, her own small hand coming up to touch the same way Faith's had, experimentally prodding the skin.

Faith almost laughs at that, a bitter feeling in her head. That's just the sort of crap that Red would have pulled, too. Some misguided notion about empowerment, and she gives the robot nerve endings in the pink bits without telling anybody.

"You like it?" Faith quizzes the Buffybot.

"Yes." Buffybot nods. "It feels a bit like dreaming. Is this what being sexy is?"

"Yeah." Faith grins. She loves this weird not-Buffy girl already, so many weird little twists in her personality that Faith can't predict.

"Can you do it again?"

"Yeah." Faith repeats, her breath a little less even, pressing her mouth to Buffybot's again.

There are marks on her body, like thick pale scars where tears have been mended imperfectly. Faith likes that, they're a matched pair in that way. She skates her fingertips over the lines, wondering at how much like skin it feels, warm and damp and real.

Buffybot responds in kind, with a hesitant slowness to her movements that makes Faith smile through stingy little tears that are catching in her eyes, touching the old wound on Faith's stomach as if it's beautiful.

Faith kisses a trail down Buffybot's arms and stomach and hips, thankful almost to the point of crying to have another body against hers again, even if it's a body that doesn't breathe. It shudders and shakes just like a real girl, and that's all Faith needs in a lover at the moment. When she nudges her tongue against Buffybot's thigh, moving it aside so she can get in closer, the robot girl shivers a bit as if she's short-circuiting, twitching against Faith's cheek.

It's like warm lightning, and Faith hopes that she doesn't get electrocuted because it wouldn't be that great for Dawn to come home and find her dead in this position. Buffybot shakes and whimpers a bit, and Faith knows that in some very real and significant way this is the Buffybot's first time. It makes her press in harder, hungrier.

"Oh." Buffybot says in a quite voice, as if her dictionary functions have shut down. "Oh, oh."

Buffybot's lipstick is smeared, her glassy eyes less obvious in this new, damp, intimate context, and she looks so real and human and beautiful that Faith keeps kissing her over and over until they're almost asleep.

"I think I like you best out of everybody I've known." Buffybot's tone is bright as always. "I'll make you waffles in the morning, and coffee. I can make good coffee. I'm very good at that."

"I'm sure you are. Now go to sleep, have nice electric dreams and stuff."

"I hope I dream of you." Buffybot snuggles against Faith's side and Faith didn't realize how hungry for touch she was until now. "I like having pictures of you in my head. And you smell nice."

"You can smell?"

"No, but I'm sure that you would smell nice if I could. Goodnight Faith."

"Goodnight Buffybot. Hey, why do they call you Buffybot, anyway? Why not just Buffy?"

"They don't need another Buffy."

"No, they never really did, did they?" Faith says softly, sadly.

"I'm sorry, have I said something incorrect?"

"No. You're not incorrect. Most people don't see that, that's all."

Power

Mutant Enemy TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*

Intended for adult audiences

Faith and Lindsey

Lindsey and Faith

I didn't get a taste of power, even secondhand, until I was eight years old. My mother's boyfriend, a service station attendant named Charlie, never had much to do with us kids. Dad was the one who made sure we all got to bed at night, but Dad never had any power. He tolerated Charlie coming over nights, for one thing.

And when I was eight years old, my mother's drinking got so bad that she often passed out before Charlie felt satisfied. So then he'd come to me, calling me things like little one and pretty thing. He'd give me a piece of gum when he was finished, and I'd break it in half to save for the next day's recess, where I'd boast to all my friends at school about all the great things my parents could afford and blow big sugary bubbles in their faces.

But Charlie wasn't my first taste of power, hell no. That happened one Saturday, when Mom sent me down to the gas station where he worked to invite him over. There was a shiny red car pulled up in front of one of the pumps, nothing like the beat up old rustbuckets the locals drove. It was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen in my life, the same color as my oldest sister's glossy red lipstick she wore on Friday nights. My sister was four years older than me, and used to sell kisses behind the gym at school dances. She used the money to buy sodapop, but would never share it. She said she had to rinse the taste of the boys away.

Charlie was talking to another man, and I knew right away this was the guy who owned the car. He had a suit on, and his hair was as neat and sleek

as his car. He looked at me the same way Charlie did when Mom was drunk, even though I was wearing a grimy teeshirt and cutoffs and covered in dust and dirt from the walk.

I got twenty dollars from the man with the shiny car. I sat on the back stairs with the note clutched between the fingers of my right hand, memorising the texture of the paper and the color of the ink. It was more money than I had ever seen in my life, and it was mine. I wiped my mouth with the back of my left hand distractedly. I didn't plan on using any of the money to buy sodapop, because I didn't mind the taste. It was power, and unlike my sister with her swollen mouth and real long showers that made everyone mad because she used the hot water up, I liked it.

Angel's got an ego even bigger than he is, with his wisecracking and redemption and, most eviable of all, his beautiful, haughty, blonde ice queen. She may never have loved me, not like she loved him, but she couldn't quite bring herself to actually kill me either. I had power enough to stay alive, at least. Angel has the ego to think he can walk in the dark and not be touched by it, and maybe he can with an attitude like that. Somehow I doubt it.

From that first moment in the office - *So who am I supposed to kill? His name's Angel* - it was like electricity. I hated it. I hate it when anything has power over me, especially other people. We went out for an expensive dinner and played the power game of sex versus money, and found ourselves perfectly matched opponents. We had as much ego as Angel back then, everything was in control and conscience was for the weak.

If only it really was that simple, if only the grit and grime didn't cling to the space behind my eyelids and everything I'd ever done didn't replay itself inside my head before I slept at night, on those rare occasions I slept at all.

We met up again a few years later, neither of us appear so different to how we did in LA if you don't look too close at our eyes. We match well, even though neither of us will ever be ready to talk about the demons of the past, literal and otherwise. When you look into the abyss, the abyss looks into you, and when you tear your gaze away it's comforting to catch the eye of another human being who's been there too.

Last summer we went back to the area I grew up in, it's just it was twenty years ago. Charlie's still at the gas station, I could recognize his profile from the car as we drove past. I didn't want to go in, because once you've achieved closure it's pretty damn stupid to go opening the door again. My older sister has grown up to become exactly like Mom, which was enough to make me break down and cry when we got back to the hotel. That's the other thing about being married that's nice, somebody's there to hold you when you cry, or wake up with a nightmare.

The next day we started the drive back to the house we'd bought in Chicago, and for a surreal moment I felt like instead of going home, I was leaving home. But then the feeling passed, because I left that home a long time ago. And living in the past isn't half as much fun when there's so much future ahead.

We walked through the valley of the shadow of death and came back out, and even though we're hardly unscathed I still consider that the closest thing to real power anyone in this world can have.

Stray Cat Blues

Crossover between the Mutant Enemy TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the WB/CW program *Supernatural*
Suitable for all audiences

"Check this out. Is this, or is this not, the fugliest nasty of the year?" Dean asks, dropping the book open on top of Sam's newspaper. They're killing time in the apartment that's been home for two months, waiting for Dad to get back from collecting his last paycheck from the local garage. Everything's packed up already, and so there's nothing to do but scan the papers and bicker.

"I don't know. Do you count?" Sam glances at the woodcut as he shoves the dog-eared copy of *Bogies of the New World, Revised Edition* off the front page of the broadsheet. "Yeah, okay, that's not winning any beauty contests."

"*Kakistos*." Dean hoists himself up onto the less-than-stable table, sitting directly atop the article Sam was attempting to read. "Worst of the worst. Demon with cloven hands and feet. Dude, ew. Someone else would have to pick your nose. Dad says he's got a lead on this guy showing up around Southern California. Place called Sunnydale."

"You're like a cat. Get off my paper."

"There's nothing in there. I already checked. Some coven upstate are making noise about their hair getting turned white, but it doesn't sound like anything we can help with."

"Some people actually want to read about the news, as well as just our stuff."

Dean shrugs. "Whatever. Read it later. We're gonna be in the car all day anyway."

"Or I could read it now, if you'd move your ass off it."

Dean gestures pointedly to the book. "Research, Sammy. Don't interrupt."

"Wondering how a demon picks his nose isn't research," Sam says, but there's a smile forming on his mouth. He likes this part of their routine, when everything's set to go and the road's ahead of them. He's been sick of moving for years, but it's hard to ignore the curl of excitement he feels at the beginning of a hunt.

"It might be his one weakness. Do you think a guy like this calls for the Stones or ACDC on the soundtrack?"

"Dean, I have homework to get done today. Important homework. Do we have to have music?"

"You're in correspondence school. You have nothing *but* homework. Thought you we gonna be reading the paper, anyway."

Sam gives Dean's legs a half-hearted shove as the front door starts to open. "Get off the table."

"Everything okay, boys?" Dad asks. He looks like he's in a good mood, which means there weren't any problems with the money. Sometimes the people Dad gets work from try to rip him off when they move around. It makes Sam angry in a strange way that doesn't feel personal at all, the same way Dean gets when they hear about some kid or old lady getting hurt by something they can stop. Sam wishes there were protectors for people who didn't hold down regular jobs or have regular lives. Someone who knew what the law was, and could make sure that everyone played by the rules.

Well, except if there was a good reason. Sam likes it when he can get new shoes and dinner and stuff, and he knows that the money they use for that is mostly stolen credit. The law-protectors would have to be guys who knew how

to tell what battles were the ones that needed to be fought, and which ones were stuff that could slide.

"Yes, sir," Dean answers cheerfully. "Sam and I were just discussing possible weaknesses of the Greek demon in Cali."

Dad gives them both an approving nod. "Good. Let's get going."

They see the hitchhiker mid-afternoon. Sam's been drowsing for the last fifty miles, and so he feels groggy and overheated and not really in the mood for unfamiliar company, but Dean's in the driver's seat and so gets the final say.

"C'mon, Dad, she's just a kid," Dean insists, slowing as they approach. "Let's help her out."

The girl waves to them as she sees that they're pulling over, and picks up her threadbare backpack from where it rests at her feet. Her clothes remind Sam of the kind of stuff most of Dean's friends-who-are-girls wear. Not the girlfriends, but the ones who try to give Sam cigarettes and who can drink as much beer as Dean can before they both puke.

"Youth doesn't have anything to do with whether someone's a kid or not," Dad says, like it's this piece of important wisdom or something. Sam wants to roll his eyes. Don't they know that better than anyone?

"Thanks, guys," the girl says, climbing into the back beside Sam. She smells a little travel-funky, like she's been washing up in rest-stop bathrooms, and Sam can see that her face is pale under her dark makeup. "I'm Faith."

"I'm Dean, this is John, and that's Sammy."

"Sam," Sam corrects out of habit, but nobody pays attention.

"Where are you heading, Faith?" Dad asks, meeting her eye in the rearview.

"As far as you can take me toward Southern California would be great," she answers.

"We're going that way ourselves. Any town in particular?"

"Place called Sunnydale."

Dad and Dean are both too cool to look surprised at the coincidence, and Sam follows their example.

They stop for dinner at a Mom-and-Pop cafe. The smell of garlic and herbs on the mild evening wind makes Sam's mouth water as they unfold themselves in the parking lot.

"I'm feeling generous from that paycheck. How's everyone feel about steak and shakes?" Dad asks. It takes Sam a second to realize that the offer means that it doesn't matter if Faith has money for dinner or not. Sometimes Sam gets surprised by the things his Dad does like that, and this time it's especially strange because Faith doesn't look like the kind of person people pity all that much.

She's older than Sam, but probably younger than Dean, and kind of mean looking. If she was a character in a book, she'd get described as 'scrappy'. Sam's willing to bet that she'll take Dad's offer without even thinking, just because she's so unused to kindness.

But she smiles in a way that's hard and knowing. "It's cool, John-boy. This one's on me."

The purse she pulls out of her bag is one of those crocodile-skin pocketbooks that prim women with sensible shoes use. Sam notices the things people hold their money in, because he so rarely has any of his own. The fifty Faith pulls out is the only note left.

"You know what they say about your last ten bucks," she says, shoving the money into the pocket of her jeans and stowing the bag in the car. "Gotta spend it on somethin' special."

When their dinner arrives, she eats like she's starving, and Sam wonders if she'd be getting food at all if she wasn't trying to prove something by spending her money on them. He's not sure if that makes him feel worse about eating his own food or not.

If Faith notices that they all leave her most of their fries, then she's too hungry to care about charity.

"Tell us about yourself," Dad says as the meal ends. If it was Dean asking that, Sam would kick him under the table and make the 'stop being a horndog' face, but Dad doesn't make the words sound like a come-on.

Faith chews and swallows before answering. "My Dad died when I was a baby. Mom when I was... eleven or something. I forget exactly. I was on my own for a while, and then I --" her eyes drop to look down at her half-polished plate, and suddenly Sam forgets how tough she looks and just sees a girl a bit older than himself. "I had a guardian, but she died too. Been on the road a few months, not really going anywhere. Then I --"

The moment she remembers herself is obvious. The smirk comes back down, the gaze comes up. "That's it. Not gonna be a movie of the week anytime soon."

She doesn't ask for their story in return. Sam's glad; he doesn't want to lie to her.

The motel they stop at a few hours later tries to charge them extra when Dad asks for use of the crummy little fold-out bed available, but he just gives the jerk behind the counter a really hard look and gets it for nothing in the end.

"Your dad is wicked cool," Faith says, and there's something in her appreciative tone that makes Sam want to kick *her* and and make the 'stop being a horndog' face.

"You know," Dean says as they lug the fold-out along the line of rooms to the one they've got for the night. "Sammy here's a growing boy. Maybe we should let him have this, and Faith can share the queen with me."

"Dean," Dad says in his boss-voice.

"I don't need you defending my honor, John-boy," Faith snaps, looking genuinely put out for a split-second before her swaggering smile returns.

Sam wakes up twice in the night. The first time is 11:08 by the digital clock on the stand between the beds, and Faith and Dad are fighting in quiet voices by the window. Their silhouettes are hard to see against the curtain-filtered light from outside.

"Put the money back in your bag. Your bed didn't cost me any more than the room would have anyway."

"Let me pay my way. I'm not taking your hand-outs."

"And I'm not taking your money."

"Fine. Then let me -"

"Go to bed." Dad's voice is sharp and angry. Sam's never heard Dad speak to anyone but him and Dean like that before. "This conversation is over."

Dean shifts beside Sam, and the soft noise of it is enough to make Faith and Dad both go quiet. Sam hears the sound of Faith sitting down on the fold-out, but falls asleep before Dad moves from the window.

The second time, the sounds of a nightmare pull Sam out of sleep. He's used to sharing a room with bad dreamers -- both Dean and Dad have their fair share, and Sam's had more than a few of his own -- but it's not often that he hears one this bad.

It makes him think of when he was really small, back in the very earliest of his memories. When Dad would wake up sobbing, and Dean would cup his palms over Sam's ears so that Sam didn't have to listen.

Faith is hiding the sounds of her gasps against her pillow, but they still sound amplified and harsh in the quiet room.

Dad's bed creaks as he stands, and the sound of a bottle being pulled out of his duffel and then being uncapped is followed by the smell of whiskey.

"Here. Take a good swallow," Sam hears Dad say gruffly, followed by Faith's sniffled "Thanks, man."

A few seconds of silence go past, measured by Dean's sleeping breaths behind Sam.

"I'm going out. Need a walk," Faith says. "I'll be back before dawn."

"You shouldn't go out on your own," Dad protests.

Faith gives a weary laugh as she unbolts the door. "Trust me, you don't know the half of it."

In the morning, when Sam wakes up properly, Faith is sitting on the hood of the car with a take-away coffee in one hand and a hash-brown wrapped in a napkin in the other.

"Fam still snoozin'?"

Sam nods, hunching a little lower in his jacket against the chill and biting back a yawn. The cover of his math textbook is cool in his hand.

Faith's already got her makeup on, the dark of her lipstick looking wildly out of place in the slow early world. Even with a layer of powder covering it, Sam can see a faint green bruise along her cheekbone. It looks like it used to be much worse, and is only just now beginning to fade, but Sam didn't notice any mark on her face yesterday.

"Still in school, huh?" she asks, nodding to the handful of books and notes in his hand. Sam makes a noise of assent, waiting for the inevitable teasing that girls like Faith always follow that question up with.

"That for English or something?" She's looking at one of the covers. It's the *Bogies* that Dean was reading yesterday. "Vera -- that was my, uh, guardian -- she had that one. I could never get into it."

"Dean likes grossing me out with the pictures."

"Must be cool to have a brother," Faith says, sipping her coffee again. She hasn't got a plastic lid on the top of the paper cup, and Sam can see that she drinks it black, like Dad. He prefers it with milk, when he drinks it at all, which is one of the many, many things Dean gives him crap for.

"Not the word I'd pick," he answers, which makes her laugh a little.

"Seriously. That's why I'm going to Sunnydale. There's this chick there, and she's... well, not family, exactly, but there's a connection that's older than either of us. I don't know if that makes sense to you, but I don't know what else to call it."

"Does she know you're coming?"

Faith shakes her head. "Nuh-uh. I'm kind of a spur-of-the-moment gal, you know?"

"I'd noticed," Sam agrees, as deadpan as he can manage.

"Can I take a look at it? Trip down memory lane."

He hands the book over. The pages fall open to where Dean bent them back; the blocky black-and-white of the *Kakistos* picture glaring up from the paper.

Faith drops it like it burns her, and the look she gives Sam is full of naked terror.

"What's -" he starts to ask, but then Dad opens the door and calls good morning to them both, and Faith picks the book up off the gravel like nothing's wrong.

"Sorry. Grease made my fingers slippery," she tells Sam.

Lunch is in the kind of bar that doesn't care about teenagers coming in so long as they don't mess the place up. Dean gets a game of pool going, out of habit more than any need for money, and Sam tries hard to beat Dad at darts. Sometimes he wishes that Dad would let him win once in a while, but knows he'd be pissed off if Dad ever actually did.

Faith's talking to a big, grizzled-looking guy over in one corner. There's something about him that makes Sam's skin crawl. He looks like he's going to swallow Faith whole or something.

"You just leave her be, Sammy," Dad scolds when he notices Sam looking. "It's not our business."

"But -"

"No," Dad says, and Sam knows that's the end of the conversation.

When Dean rejoins them a little later, looking very pleased with himself, Sam glances back over. Faith and her new friend are both gone.

"We'll head back to the car. She'll catch up soon enough." Dad sounds pretty sure of himself, so Dean and Sam just shrug and follow him out of the bar and down toward where they parked.

The sun's still pretty close to midday-high, so Sam's surprised to hear the unmistakable sound of a demon's cry from behind the dumpster at the bar's side door. Mostly, it's a sound he associates with night-time, with fear and muddy fields. Not down-at-heel outer suburbs of small cities in the early afternoon.

Dad shoves him against Dean automatically, and Dean grabs his arm and holds him back without hesitation. Sam's not sure which one of them he's angrier at for that. He's not some useless kid anymore.

"Dean, don't -" Sam protests, struggling. "Quit it! Lemme go!"

Dean just grips him tighter, so Sam raises one foot and stamps down hard, letting his heel crash against Dean's shin at an angle.

"Ah, you little -" Dean cries out, his grip on Sam momentarily loosening. "Sammy!"

But Sam's already running down the narrow side-street after Dad to where the noises are coming from, just as a gunshot splits the air.

The guy from the bar is sprawled on the asphalt. His hands have twisted into long, sharp talons, and his head -- what there is left of it -- is pointed and vulture-like. He's not moving, and Sam's seen enough dead things to recognize that the guy won't be getting up again.

Dad's holding Faith by one of her wrists, the other hand curled around his glock, and the look he's giving her is furious. Her expression is charged with anger, too, but there's something else crackling through it that makes Sam want to look away. Her knuckles are split and bloody, and her teeth are bared.

When Dad pulls her in the direction of the car, she complies, but the wild glimmer in her eyes doesn't fade. He shoves her down into the front

passenger seat and walks around to the driver's side, leaving Sam and a stormy-faced Dean to climb into the back.

"Pour this on your hand," Dad orders, breaking the speed limit as he drives them away. The flask he pulls from his jacket is one Sam's seen dozens of times, and Faith hisses as the holy water drips over her knuckles.

"Ah! That stings."

"Of course it does. You got its blood in the wound. That was the stupidest, most reckless thing I've ever seen in my goddamn life." Dad spins the wheel like everything, including the car, is to blame for Faith's behavior. "What the hell were you playing at?"

"I dunno, it kinda looked like I was killing a demon, didn't it?"

"No, it looked like you were looking to get yourself killed. If I hadn't shot it, your throat would be in shreds right now. This isn't something you go into green."

"Says the guy traveling with his own personal playgroup."

"Hey!" Dean protests. "I'm older than you."

"Neither of my boys would ever pull a stunt like that." Dad stops the car sharply enough that Sam jolts forward violently in his seat. Dean gives him a look of gloating revenge. "I taught them better than that before Sammy could talk."

"Well aren't you just father of the year," Faith retorts with a sneer. "Guess I shoulda dropped out of the game when Vera got ripped apart by that *Kakistos* fuck, huh? Little Faithy needs her chaperone, or else she might do something naughty."

"This isn't a game," Dad says, voice low, every word pointed. "And you're no good to her memory dead, are you?"

That freezes the look on Faith's face. The malice and anger drain away.

"If you want to keep doing this," he goes on, his tone not quite so cutting now. "You need to be re-trained. You're too sloppy and too young to have let it slip for as long as you obviously have. It's pure dumb luck that nobody got hurt. There are people who can teach you, who can -"

"I don't play well with others," Faith interrupts, as if determined not to engage with Dad's orders.

"You're a danger to everyone the way you are. If I'd had any idea that you were a hunter, I'd've -"

"You'd've what?" Faith cuts in again, with another burning-coal look at Dad, and Sam's glad that he's not sure what her tone means. "Does it change everything, John-boy? Rock your worldview?"

Dad is silent for an endless five seconds. "Boys. Could you give us a minute, please?"

Sam's only too happy to scramble out of the car. The street they're parked on is warehouses, empty of people and of life. The sun's glaring down, so Sam follows Dean over to a shaded space near a roller door tinted to the dark stain of gun metal. Dad's still shouting at Faith inside the car, the volume carrying without its words.

"I'm getting you back for that ankle, you little bastard," Dean says conversationally, squinting up at the hazy, overbright sky.

"Sorry," Sam says, genuinely feeling it. "Are you gonna bruise?"

"Not sure. Haven't checked."

"Think we're still going to Sunnydale?"

Dean grunts. "I dunno. Maybe not right away. Guess that demon guy's got a while longer to hang around, getting other people to pick his nose."

"How does anyone ever date you? I'm asking quite honestly. Do women secretly have some snot obsession that you tap into?"

"Ah, Sammy." Dean grins. "That's a trade secret. Nerdy geekboys don't get to know."

"I hate you."

"That's because you've got no taste." The punch to Sam's arm is friendly, but still hard enough to hurt a lot.

"Jerk."

"Demon nose picker."

"Boys!" Dad calls from beside the car, beckoning them back over. "We're heading off."

Everybody's quiet as they leave the city limits, until Dean reaches between Dad and Faith and pushes play on the tape deck. The music whines and screams, drowning out the tense silence, and Sam feels like it's okay to breathe normally again.

He picks one of his school notebooks up off the floor of the backseat and tears half a page out.

Mark this day: it's the only time I will ever be GLAD you put Metallica on.

Dean smirks, and makes a score-one mark on an imaginary blackboard.

Highway is for Gamblers

CW/WB program *Supernatural*

Suitable for all audiences

Once upon a time, a girl lived in a house in the woods. The house wasn't too big, and it wasn't too small. It was just right for the girl and her brothers and her daddy.

They were hunters, this girl and her family, but sometimes hunters can be caught by other hunters. Like the wolf in a fairy tale, lured by a red hood between the trees, they picked the wrong prey to stalk.

Then the girl's whole world fell apart, and she had to start again.

The state gives her a new name, after the court cases are done with. She becomes Susan Underwood, and gets a whole set of papers saying so. She can't read 'em, but that's what she's told they tell.

One time, about three months after she moves in with the first foster family, she's down at the drugstore picking up headache pills (she loves that she don't have to ask her brothers to pick her up a bunch when they're next in town, and then wait for weeks and weeks until that happens. She gets powerful bad pains in her skull after her nightmares) and sticking them in the pocket of the baggy Goodwill jacket she always wears, and the bitch behind the counter says "I'm onto you, Missy".

But that's just 'cos she noticed the stealing. Nobody here knows that her name was ever anything but Susan Underwood.

She gets remedial classes for the reading, and the dentist says her teeth are rotten and gases her up so she falls asleep, and when she wakes up she's all gummy in front. She gets a dumb plastic plate with fake teeth on it to wear,

and her foster parents say it gives her a beautiful smile. She don't smile much, so it seems like trouble for no good reason.

Her new teeth look like little white picket fences, like the ones that line the street she lives on now. She hates those teeth and those fences so much she wants to throw up all over the carpet. This isn't the life she was meant to have. What do these stupid, soft, dozy people know about being alive? Real alive, powerful alive, with the world all dark around you and a knife in your hand and a hunt ahead?

Some of the nightmares she gets are about the night it all went to shit, when her Daddy got shot and those brothers locked her in that closet. She remembers the smallness and the dark and the feral, snarling rage she felt, and she remembers the quiet snicking noise of the second lock sliding into place, the deadbolt above the latch.

This was the punishment closet for when she misbehaved, and the key to that second lock was one her Daddy wore around his neck and would threaten her with when she was being churlish. The door wouldn't lock without that key, but that snicking noise slides through her dreams all the same. Those brothers did something, something magic.

She flirts with boys at school and then she cuts them, never so much that they'll cry to the police but enough to get her feeling lively. One of them tattles anyway, the lousy bastard, and she nails his cat to the back porch of his house. That gets her sent back to the hospital for a coupla months, and then off to a different family.

These are even worst than the last, all smiles and sweet words and a pink bedroom just for her. She practices her knife throwing against the back of that shiny lacquered white door.

Her fifteenth birthday is spent at a local park. There's a dead bird on the ground. She throws it at a dog. It yelps and runs away, and she laughs with her mouth fulla fake teeth.

That's the summer Jared dies. She ain't seen him since the trial, but it's on the TV. A shank in the prison showers. Cannibals who mess with their baby sisters don't last long in jail. She writes to Lee, careful-like with all the letters she knows so far, but he doesn't write back. Ain't much she wants to talk about with him now, anyways.

At school, someone finds out. Everyone starts callin' her Leatherface and Sawney Beane and some look at her all sympathetic, which is even worse, and so she punches Trisha Malvern out in the lunch line and then keeps on punching until they pull her off.

That night, she sneaks out the window of her bedroom and goes to the park, and hunts critters down and kills them, one by one. Little squeaky things, rats and squirrels. It's not satisfying at all, and she comes home spoiling for another bust-up at school. It's the only reason she bothers going.

Books ain't ever gonna open up for her, not in any useful way. Too little, too late, the teachers say, and she wants to spit at them and tell them about those evenings out in the middle of nowhere, when the hunt was done and Daddy was in a good mood and her brothers were cleaning the guns, and she'd sit and watch them and just feel happy and safe and loved.

Sometimes, if she were feelin' especially good, she'd ask Daddy to tell the story of what happened just after her Mom went and died of fever.

She was just a little baby, then, and still called Missy Bender like she always will be in her heart -- Susan Underwood's just a name, as fake as the teeth in her smile -- and on a night six months after she'd come squalling into

the world, 'bout three weeks after her momma perished, a man had come visiting.

Now, the visitors they had tended not to stick around, as it were. Daddy didn't like anyone but the prey ever coming anywhere near the house. But this fella turns up, chipper as the morning, one night when the rain's bucketing down. Says he's little Missy's guardian angel, but says it in a way that makes it sound like some big joke on the universe.

Daddy always said that the guy stood over the drawer where she slept and held a pretty little hair-clip shaped like a bow in his hand. Just held it, like he was thinking of something else, and watched her with a smile.

"And then that clip jumped outta his hand and landed down in yours, and I ain't never heard a laugh like that. Sounded like the devil hisself had found something damn amusin', down in hell," Daddy would put it, and slap his thigh, and laugh himself.

The knife'd come from the stranger, too, and nobody could make it fly and land as true as Missy could. It was like it were made to fit her palm.

She doesn't think about that stuff from her old life, 'cept when she can't help it. It all hurts too much to recall on any kinda regular basis.

But when she's sixteen and a little bit, she remembers again, because she starts being able to move stuff. There's probably books about it, but books is no help with problems for her.

It ain't something she can ask her case worker about, or anyone at school, or the foster parents. It's just another thing she's gotta keep to her ownself, the way she can make pens roll off people's desks when she watches them, or eggs crack on market shelves, or pins fly outta corkboards.

So that's when she figures that she's most likely a witch.

They learned about witches in school. Witch-finders went around the country and picked 'em out and drowned them. She's never been swimming; she'd be easy as a kitten to drown. She kinda likes showers, which is like being rained on but warm, but doesn't take baths.

Being clean still feels like a luxury, like there's some special occasion coming. Her hair's all shiny and soft. Far as she can tell, she's growing up pretty, and she wishes her Daddy and her brothers could see her now.

'Cept that they'd call her traitor, and maybe they'd be right. Traitor, witch, Leatherface, Susan Underwood -- they's all just names that get stapled onto her like ribbons. Don't need to mean a thing inside her head, unless she lets them.

The dreams get clearer after the movin'-stuff starts. They flare, sunshine-bright inside her bones, and make her whimper with the sharpness. She sees a room with photos framed on all the walls, and a couch rumbled up with a blanket, and a computer sitting on a table, and newspaper clippings strewn all around and getting stirred up by a wind. There's blood all over the place. She ain't never been squeamish about blood before, but this just don't feel right. There's something bad about this blood.

She hitches back to where she started sometime near her seventeenth birthday, when the third foster home starts getting too small for her to feel comfy in and she feels another bad fight start to boil up in her.

"That's where Dylan's from," one of the motorists says, cheerfully conversational, as she climbs in beside him and says she's aiming for Hibbing.

"I never met him," she says gruffly, and grips her knife inside her jacket sleeve when the driver laughs. She won't be messed with.

She's just got herself and a rucksack with some spare clothes, and the knife in her jacket, and that same bow clip twisted up in her hair. The amount of crap people end up hauling around in their life makes her damn puzzled.

It's late when she gets into town, so she heads to a diner for some dinner. All the money she could find in her foster house is rolled up in the pocket of her nice clean jeans.

The owner's chatting to a couple of old guys in caps down the other end of the counter, holding a coffee pot by its handle and laughing at a joke, so it's a coupla minutes of squinting at the menu and trying to sound out words before the question comes. "Can I help you, kiddo?"

She looks up from that stupid, too-wordy menu and there the nametag is, big as life: KATHLEEN. And it almost figures, because she came back to chase the past and she's always been a fast hunter.

"Hi, Kathleen," she says, quiet-like. There's no grudges being held in her heart, not for this lady who shot her daddy in the face and killed him dead.

Since Jared got himself stabbed, it's been easy as pie to forgive that bullet. Brothers and sisters is meant to stick together, thick and fast as blood and guts, and revenge is what it is.

Kathleen gives a little gasp. "Missy?"

"I'm s'posed to be Susan, now," she corrects half-heartedly, because the doctors keep telling her over and over that saying it'll make it true. "Got myself a brand new life. Least, that's the idea. I don't reckon I done so good at it."

Kathleen pours her a cup of coffee, black and strong, and waves away the quarter she puts down on the counter for it. "You seem okay to me. You look --"

"A lot better than I did?" she cuts in, with a smile that she tries to keep from being too twisted up. "Got myself some brand new teeth, too." She bares them for inspection. "But how come you're here? Ain't you a cop no more?"

"Nah."

"Cos you shot my daddy?" The question's not mean or angry. Just curious, and quiet. She's good at being quiet.

Kathleen glances around, but those that're in the diner aren't listening to some kid and a waitress having a jaw. "Yeah."

"Did your boss find out, and fire you?"

"No, I quit. I don't regret what I did, Missy --"

"Susan."

"Sorry, right. Susan. I don't regret it, 'specially not now that I see you clean and healthy and fitting in. But that doesn't mean that it was lawful. I couldn't stay a cop after what I did. I had to answer to my own reflection."

A reflection's just some face that blinks back at you all dumb in bathroom mirrors. Kathleen's words don't make a lot of sense, but they seem like they're supposed to. Everyone talks twisty, and even after years of listening it's still hard to follow.

"So now you got a diner."

"Now I got a diner. What're you doing with yourself? You must be nearly done with school."

It seems cruel to tell Kathleen how crazy and ugly and bad everything's been, how hard the world is if you don't belong in it. So she just shrugs and smiles and says "I'm tryin' to see the world, work out what I wanna do."

Then, like a shovel to the head, the idea hits her all at once. The nightmares, the knife, the clip in her hair, drowned witches in History class, and that little snick sound that's echoed in her dreams. "Hey, you ever hear

from them brothers again? The ones that -" and it don't even hurt a little bit to put the words like this. "Saved me?"

Kathleen's eyes widen, just a little, but then she shakes her head. "No, sweetheart, I'm sorry. I haven't."

The frustration boils up. Kathleen used to be a cop. She's gotta have connections; ways of finding stuff out about where people go.

But a good hunter knows when to strike, and when it's better to let the deer think they're safe for now. And she has always been a good hunter. "Oh. Okay. Hey, you got any apple pie? I love apple pie."

Kathleen smiles, and turns to the kitchen door. "I'll see what I can do."

"Hey, Kathleen?" she speaks up, frantically sorting through what she remembers of that old life, and of the court cases and social worker interviews, searching for the memory of Kathleen's brother. "My brother Jared, he used to remember all the names. Like how some guys know football stats, y'know? I don't remember all of 'em like he did, but I remembered some, an'... well, Susan Underwood's middle name is Riley. I always thought it had a pretty sound, even if it ain't really a girl name."

Jackpot. Something softens and maybe breaks a little in Kathleen's face, and she swallows as she says "I'll get you that pie, now."

And it's just a lie to start with, a smart way to get Kathleen feeling sentimental, but that night with a belly full of pie and a boarding-house bed to curl up on it starts being true. Susan Underwood stops just being a name, after years of blank and empty use, and it's like a grub turnin' into a moth in the night.

Sometime before morning, she shifts and stretches and starts being someone new. Susan Riley Underwood. Susie for short.

She goes back to the diner for breakfast, and offers to help with washing up when Kathleen won't let her pay.

"I've been thinking about that question you asked me last night. I can't do much, but I've got a name. That'll be a start, right?"

The newly-named Susie nods, keeping her face smooth and serious. School didn't teach her to read, and the foster homes didn't teach her to be normal, but she damn well knows how to fake being good and sweet for a minute or two.

"Sam Winchester. That was the brother that... that was kidnapped."

"Thanks," Susie answers, and gulps her coffee so it burns her mouth and tongue. A name's a start, anyway. She's gone this long without knowing what she is, so even if it ends up taking years and years again before the trail gets warm, she'll ride it out.

In the end it barely takes a month before something else happens. She hangs around the diner a bit, a week or so, but figures there ain't gonna be nothing else in Hibbing that'll do her any good, and it'll be the first place the authorities come to flush her out. So she bids Kathleen a goodbye and gets back on the road, and leaves Minnesota for the first time in her whole seventeen years of living.

In Wisconsin she meets a guy named Lou who offers half a candy bar to her and then watches closely as she eats it. His car is old, and rattles, and is damn cold. She huddles in her coat and watches the chilly landscape in front of the windscreen.

His eyes are covered by dark glasses, even though it's getting to dusk and the light of the dashboard is thin and pale. He smiles a lot. His smile makes her think of home.

"Where're you from?"

"Hibbing. Other places since."

"That's where Dylan's from," Lou answers, and Kathleen explained who Bob Dylan was, so Susie knows better now than to say anything. "More of a Cash fan, myself. Ever been to Reno?"

"No."

"Ever kill a man just to watch him die?" He asks, and slaps the steering wheel with one palm in his amusement.

There's something about the way he says it, some tone in his voice, that makes her feel like the honest reply's the one he'd respect the most.

But that's just wishful thinking on her part, of course. There's nobody like her left in the whole world.

"Yeah," she says, but makes it sound like she's joking. He laughs, and keeps looking over at her all the time.

"Got any family?"

"Did have. Brother's in jail, Other brother and pa got killed a few years back." she answers simply. She's been lying her whole damn life, to someone or other. It's getting stale. "You?"

"Lost two years ago, same as you," he answers, still watching her face. "Son and a daughter."

She would've pegged him as just a year or two above her. "You don't look old enough to've had two kids."

"Darlin', I ain't much like I appear," he answers, and laughs again.

He lets her off in the daybreak, in a little town with pretty trees lining the streets. When he says "I'll see you around, Missy," she just nods her head and climbs out of the cold car into the cold morning. She's used to the way folk call young girls *missy*, now, after years of starting at the word. But there's something uncanny-like in the way this fella says it, nevertheless. She's glad to see him pull away.

A family with two little kids and a mom and a dad let her ride in the back of their station wagon, curled with her knees up to her chest among suitcases and basketballs. They don't make her feel uneasy, like Lou did, and she drifts into sleep at the sound of their chatter.

The room with its pictures and its couch and the blood all over looks just the same behind her eyeballs, and she wakes up startled and with a headache bad enough to rouse a dead man.

"Last stop, kiddo," the mom says, in that same kind voice that foster parents and social workers have been using since forever. Susie climbs out and stretches her legs out best she can, watching as the kids and the dad carry their stuff into a holiday home.

"Thanks for the ride," she remembers to say.

"You're gonna be okay now?"

"Sure," she answers.

Lake Manitoc seems like a nice little town, but she's seen enough nice little towns to last her until judgment day comes and throws her down to hell. The streets are nice, the weather's nice, the schoolkids painting a mural on the side of the public library are nice, nice nice. It makes her feel churned up like bad butter, all lonely and proud and strange at once.

The kids, more different than her than anybody watching could ever guess, splash bright colors around all over the place. Little girls screech in protest as boys pour bright crimson over their hair, leaving them looking like they're splattered with gore.

She's been watching them for a coupla minutes when a lady with long brown hair and a baby resting on her shoulder comes and stands beside her.

"They're having the time of their lives, aren't they?" Her voice has that open, chatty tone that always sets Susie's teeth on edge. How can people be so dumb and trusting with the people they meet?

"Looks like."

"Is one of them your little brother or sister?"

"Nah. I'm the youngest of mine." And the only one left, or near enough, now that she's lost touch with Lee. "Is one of them your kid?"

The lady nods, then raises the volume of her voice. "Lucas! Come on, kiddo, we're heading home now."

A boy just starting to get tall and lanky, t-shirt covered in blue paint, breaks away from the group at the mural and jogs over. "Hey Mom. Did the flight get in okay?"

"Sure did. Your dad called a half-hour ago; they'll be home soon. Here, you take sleeping beauty here and get her back in the car while I run into the store and pick up some extra stuff for dinner, okay?"

The baby barely stirs as it's lifted from one shoulder to another, settling onto Lucas with a soft sigh. The lady turns to Susie. "It was nice to meet you..."

The pause is there, waiting for her to offer her name up for filler, but she just smiles and nods. "Nice to meet you, too."

Alone again, she wanders around the town for a while, working her way out into the edges and beyond, ending up on the lip of the lake itself. The stones skim out over the surface when she throws them, and the quiet feels comfortable around her.

She's always had a sense of whether a place has seen deaths, and this has. Not just old ones; all lakes have had a drowning or two at some stage. This one's still fresh and thrumming, probably less than five years or so since a whole bunch of souls got pulled out of their skins.

She could make a map of the whole world, and paint traces of blood on all the haunted bits.

Sometime after midnight -- even after years in picket-fence, shiny-teeth suburbia, she can still tell time by the sky -- something stirs her out of her restless, violent nightmares. The shore is bitterly cold, and her skin shivers like the hide of a beaten animal.

There are things moving in the underbrush, quick chittery little things that dart back and forth so fast she feels drunk watchin' them. She's only been drunk the once, back before the world went sour, and Jared held her hair back off her face when she puked it all back up after.

The knife slides into her palm easy as a murder, and she creeps in close enough to see the shapes scuttling about. Lotsa legs and sharp teeth, like some kid's drawing of a spider from a horror movie or something. Their short, coarse hair looks in the moonlight like it's a dark blue, and that more than all the rest tells her that there's something mighty peculiar about them.

Maybe, she thinks, it'd be wrong for her to hunt them. If they're magic, and she's a witch, then maybe they're closer to kin to her than the rest of the world. It might be awful bad to kill something like that.

But their bodies move so fast and graceful, and the knife in her hand feels like it's singing a blood-song all the way up her arm to her elbow.

So she crouches, and waits, and, after a few seconds, pounces.

After the quick endlessness of a few good stalks and kills, she becomes aware of another human being close by. People are the game she tracks the best, even now, and it's not long before she's worked out that it's male, tall, fast, and killing the same little beasties that she's chasing.

When he notices her -- not that long after she noticed him, she has to give him credit for that -- he gives her a smile of fierce solidarity in the near-dark. He thinks she's like him. Maybe he's not so wrong.

Eventually, all the blue spider-things are dead. The man picks one up gingerly, its legs still spasming in freaky little twitches. It smells like rot.

"It's like the Muppet from hell," he quips. Her face must show that she's got no idea what he means, 'cos he puts the body back on the ground, wipes his palm on his jeans, and offers it out to her. "I'm Sam."

"Susie," she answers, switching her knife to the other hand so she can shake his.

"Want to go get an early breakfast?"

It's not dawn yet. She's starving. "You paying?"

He nods, and doesn't sneer, so she decides to like him. "Sure."

It just plain figures that, after all this time and distance, she'd find him in the woods on a hunt. It's practically poetic.

Sam's car is dark green, and rattles when he turns the key.

"It's a rental," he says, as if she's gonna care one way or the other. Cars are something she knows less than nothing about. Hell, she'd rather read a book than talk cars.

They find an all-night diner back in town, and she eats just about enough bacon to make up a whole pig. The hot chocolate she gulps along with it sits warm in her belly, and she feels real good and fired up from the hunt.

Sam hasn't recognized her, but that don't surprise her much. He ain't like Kathleen, who most likely never had anything else remarkable happen besides losing her brother and that one night. Sam's likely seen so many weird things that he can't remember half of them.

"What brings you to town?" he asks when she's gobbled down as much as her belly'll fit. She shrugs.

"I dunno. I'm hitching."

He gets a frown between his eyebrows. "That's dangerous."

"So's hunting those things with the teeth," she answers, smirking with her own pearly whites.

There's something in Sam's face that stirs up memories like a flood in her. It's much the same as it was back that night, 'cept for the hair's a little longer and there's scruff along his jaw. The difference is in his eyes.

Back when she was small, no more'n five or six, a skinny little wild dog got itself caught in one of the bear traps that they kept scattered around the hunting grounds. She found it when it was mostly chewed free, and used her knife -- even then, it was always about her somewhere -- to help it finish the job.

Then, getting blood all over herself, she carried it back to the house and made it comfy near the fire. Dog lived near five more years, yipping at her heels when she was working about the homestead, limping around with its funny three-leg hop.

Happy little thing, mostly, but there was always something in its eyes. Like it could never forget that it'd once realized that the only way it was gonna survive was biting a bit of itself off, and that it'd gone ahead and done it. Sam reminds her of her dog.

"What about you?" she asks, hoping that she hasn't been staring too obviously. "How come you're here?"

"I'm visiting family."

He says it with the same cagey, shut-up voice she uses when people ask her questions, so she knows to back well off.

"Those things, the ones in the woods. What're they called?"

Sam's face relaxes when he realizes she's not going to stickybeak into what's his own business. "In medieval Scandanavia, people called them the Devil's lice, though actually their physiology shares more similarities with the common tick than a louse."

"And here I thought I'd left biology behind in school," she mutters, stabbing the remains of her meal with the tines of her fork. Sam gives a rueful little laugh. She reckons he's probably a kind guy, so long as he's not pissed at you.

"Are you staying in town, or moving on?" he asks her.

"I dunno. No plans either way. Why?"

"Those things'll have a nest somewhere in the forest. I'm going to be here for quite a while, so I thought I'd start looking for it tonight. Are you interested?"

The answers she was hoping to get from him aren't hers yet, and the mystery just keeps growing, so she nods.

The rest of the day she spends wasting time with walking, hoping maybe to see those painter-kids again. Jared and Lee were both too much older than her for there to ever be that kinda fun between 'em all, really, and so there's something nice about watching them. But the wall's all alone, half-covered with pictures. Kids must be in school.

She grabs some candy bars at the general store for her lunch, offering silent thanks to her daddy's memory for teaching her how to be neat and quick with her hands. A guy buying bread gives her a look when she takes the bars from the shelf, but he doesn't rat her out or look that pissed.

He gives her a second look, a real old-fashioned double-take, and she hunches lower in her jacket against the force of his stare and glares right back. It takes her a couple of seconds to place his face, even though she saw it for longer than she did his brother's.

Sam Winchester's brother looks real different to how he did back then, maybe even more different than Susie herself looks from Missy Bender. He's thinner, for starters. Not leaner. Just skinnier, like he stopped being able to do as much with himself.

Paler, too, and he moves in the careful way that tells her that there's something always sore inside his guts. All kinds of things'll do that to a man. Blade in the wrong spot and you ain't dyin' or dead, but some of who you used to be goes away and don't come back.

He got hurt real bad, she's guessing, and hadta stop whatever it was that he and his brother did with themselves. Hunting monsters? Helping people like Kathleen?

Part of her feels bad for him, the bit of her that remembers all too clear what it was to be cut off from all you knew and thought about your place in the world. The rest of her's almost glad, because maybe Sam Winchester wouldn't have let her help him out in the woods if he'd had his brother there alongside him.

She makes her glare twist up into a beaming smile, and it does the job. The spark of almost-recognition fades from his eyes at the sight of her shiny white teeth, and he turns tactfully away from her shoplifting.

The second night of hunting is even wilder than the first. She hasn't felt this alive in all her years, because her body's changed since the days when she helped her family with their hunts. Now it sings to a grown-up tune, and she knows down in the cores of her bones that she's more'n just a kid who got

raised up twisted and ended up weird for it. She was born to do this, to chuck her knife at a creepy thing and watch the death that followed. She's a hunter.

Sam seems glad of her company, and she knows she's glad of his.

When they're sitting down to another breakfast, her belly giving grateful gurgles at the thought, she screws her courage up tight and says "Tell me about your family."

He looks wary for a moment, then gives a nod, like he's agreeing to a challenge she's laid down for him.

"My brother's got two kids. His stepson's a few years younger than you, and his daughter's just over five months."

She remembers her daddy's stories about when she was a baby, and the visitor that came calling. "You're her guardian angel."

Sam blinks and gives her a look that's sharp as tacks. "What?"

"You're here to keep an eye on her. The baby. She's getting to just the right age."

He opens his mouth, then closes it again. Feeling wicked, she nudges the napkin dispenser with whatever invisible fist is stuck in her head, and makes it fall sideways onto the tabletop. "Your family ain't unique, y'know," she points out.

His eyes get even kinder, and she wishes that he were her guardian angel, instead of that strange Lou guy she might never see again. Yeah, she worked that one out fast enough, and feels none too happy for it.

She clears her throat. "That nest's still out there in the woods. We lookin' again tonight?"

Sam just nods.

Third night's the night it all goes pear-shaped, as one of her old foster moms would put it. They find the nest and they're torching it -- and the fire's right pretty too, all merry and quick over the dry leaves and twigs they find to kindle it -- when a giant bastard of a critter drops down from a tree onto her shoulder and bites before she knows what hit her.

Her skin and muscles and bones all flare up with a pain like thunder, so bad she barely feels it when a slug from Sam's gun whistles past her ear and splats the beastie against a tree trunk.

There's blood all over. She can't rightly see, because it's splattered up over her face and got in her eyes. Now, she knows the ways a body bleeds, she's seen it oftentimes enough, and this is wrong. There's way too much for a shoulder wound, and the pain's just getting worse and worse.

Sam carries her like she weighs next to nothing, and every pound of his running steps sends a new jolt of fire up and down her soul.

He makes her stay awake in the car, forcing her hands to press down on a towel against the wound as he drives. He tries to get her to sing songs, but she don't know the words to any of them 'cept one, so they sing that one over and over as they roar back into town. It's a song she's always known, though she can't remember hearing Daddy or Jared or Lee ever sing it along with her. Maybe it was a lullaby she heard from her Momma, back in those first months of her life.

The words lull her into a grey, half-awake world as the first lights of buildings come ahead.

It's all over now, Baby Blue.

The next few hours come in flashes of voice and pain.

"...Lucas, you said you wanted to learn this stuff, grab me the packet marked 'vervain' and the one with the powdered silver and bring them here. Then get some ice and crush it..."

"... What's going -- oh God."

"She's gonna be fine, Andrea..."

"... Dean, can you do the sutures? I've put a basic cold v-and-s on it to keep the infection from bleeding out. You're better at stitches than I am..."

The first time she's anything like awake again is when Sam's brother is sewing her up. The little in-out-pull pain brings her back to herself a little, and she opens her eyes carefully.

She's on a couch, with a blanket pulled up to her armpits. There are photographs on the walls, and an old-fashioned looking desk kinda like the one she'd had at home in the corner, with a laptop computer and a stack of newspaper bits on it. There's blood all over the floor and the couch. Her blood. No wonder her nightmares leave her feeling squeamish, if they were telling of her own death.

"Hi there, Susie," Sam's brother says, quiet-like, like he's speaking to a stirred-up stray animal that'll bolt or bite at any second.

"Not m' name," she manages to mumble. Even if she lives to see the morning, she thinks maybe this is the end of Susan Riley Underwood's road. "Not really."

"Yeah, I used to have a whole bunch of different names I used. Got 'em from music and TV, mostly." His voice stays smooth and calm. She bets he's a great dad. "Anything else you'd like me to call you?"

She can't remember any names at all, save one. "Lou..."

"That short for anything? LuAnne? Marylou? Lucy?"

Lucy. She could be Lucy for now, maybe. "Lucy."

"Well, you've got enough blood on you to be called a redhead. Don't know if you really look that much like a madcap fifties housewife, though."

The words don't make much sense, and they don't mean to. He's drawing her back down into sleep, into the silent black where she won't hurt so much. She hopes she don't get any nightmares.

Next time she wakes, the den's all tidied and scrubbed. Nobody'd know that some girl bled nearly half to death in there. There's light coming in careful and soft through mostly-closed blinds, and she's dressed in nothing but her drawers and a red flannel robe under the blanket. The bandage looped over her shoulder throbs. She needs a bathroom real bad.

Her feet feel stumbley under her, like she's a newborn deer just standing for the first time, and her head goes whirling. Still, it ain't so hard to keep a hand on the couch and then the wall to steady her as she steps.

Outside the den is a short, wide hallway, littered with boots and umbrellas and rollerblades and all that kinda stuff. On one side there's a door leading into a kitchen, where the blinds are open all the way and the morning sunlight makes her wince. Other side's a laundry, and down the other end it opens out into the front living room.

Sam's asleep on his back on the couch here, which don't look as long or as comfortable as the one she herself woke on. She realises that he musta put her in the spot where he's been sleeping. It makes her feel guilty. Those long legs need all the room that they can get.

Sam's brother's in there, too, dozing in a rocking chair with his baby on his shoulder. He looks peaked, just as he did in the general store, but happy as well.

Course he looks happy. He's got his kids and his wife and his brother all safe under his roof with him, don't he?

Looking at the two of them, she misses her own kin like a punch to the lungs.

The bathroom light makes her blink a few times when she switches it on. The toilet flush sounds loud enough to wake the dead, when she's done her business, and she's real scared that they'll tell her that she ain't supposed to use this room.

Her reflection in the mirror startles her so bad her eyes go wide as headlights. Most of the blood's been wiped away carefully, but with the bit of it that's left and her hair all tangled into snarls on her head, there ain't no way that Sam and his brother are gonna look at her and see anybody but Missy Bender.

She does what she can with her palms and water, and gets herself looking a little less feral after a little while. Then she takes a slurping drink from her cupped hands, and that was a plain dumb idea because it's just set her belly off feeling empty.

When she comes out of the bathroom, there's a smell of pancakes in the air, and she follows her nose back to the kitchen.

"Hi, Lucy," the lady with the long brown hair who's standing by the counter says. "I'm Andrea. Would you like some breakfast?"

She manages a nod, then shuffles her feet. "Sorry about the commotion I caused."

Andrea's smile is real kind. "If you think that's a commotion, your life's easier than mine. Don't worry about it."

So she tries not to. She eats some pancakes hot from the stove, and gulps orange juice down until her head feels a mite less swimmy.

"You'll stay here until your strength's back, of course," Andrea's saying. "And then... you can stay longer, if you like. You're welcome to."

She thinks about it, but not for too long. There are answers here, just as she knew she'd find if she caught up with Sam Winchester. But they're not the answers for her. She's snuck outta too many windows in these past years to believe that fancy even for a second.

Maybe Sam's the kinda guy who can come a-visiting to this sorta life; to slip into the edges of his brother's world and feel like he's a part of it. But that ain't her.

Maybe she'll find Lou again, out there on the roads somewhere. He might have different answers for her. Sam's got family of his own, but she and Lou are both the last ones left of their lots, far as she can tell. Maybe that means something.

Lou and Lucy. Lucy-lou. Might be that there's somewhere she'll fit again, one day.

"I guess we'll see what happens," she says to Andrea, and smiles her picket-fence smile.

With Teeth

WB/CW program *Supernatural*
Intended for adult audiences

They'll get to Bobby's with another hour's driving. Maybe less if Dean puts the car through a little punishment.

The gas is running low and Dean's never been stupid about letting that happen even at the lightest of times, and right now the light times are so far off they're barely a dim flicker on the periphery of his fucked-up life.

Sam's the one who leads them around the back of the tiny station before they've filled the tank, who pushes the door to the restroom open, who pins Dean to the wall. The chilled grey tiles are clean against Dean's back. The whole room is neat and tidy. Dusty and unused. They're off any beaten path that might have twisted its way through this country once.

Dean opens his lips and gives it up under the press of Sam's mouth, because scoring with hot people is practically a second job for him. Sam doesn't say anything, doesn't try to explain or excuse himself, and Dean's glad of that. Words complicate the things that flesh makes simple.

There is something wild and terrifying loose inside Dean. Some caged creature, clawed and fanged, furious and raw, whose chains snapped in that second Meg answered his father's phone. Over the years he's gotten used to its pacing and snarling, like a banked fire in his chest. But now it's breached all the breaks inside him, and is razing everything to ash.

Sam's hand is scrabbling up under Dean's shirt, mouth still working hard and slick against Dean's. Fingernails on his skin and maybe it'll let some of the fire out, leaving burning trails there to scorch.

No. This is not a release. The thing inside him, inside Sam, won't give them that. This is...

Sam's teeth are at his jawline, now, and their hips are finding a pace to rock at, and Dean knows what this is. This is a regret of things never done, chances never taken, that Sam doesn't want to have when his life flashes before his eyes.

Dean wants to grab Sam's head between his hands and glare into his eyes and say *no* through gritted teeth, and shake him until it sinks in. But Sam wouldn't understand. Sam would think Dean meant this, this tiny flicker of touch and feeling in the center of an immense and endless dark. Sam would think Dean didn't want him, and thereby miss the point in typical Sam fashion.

Dozens of hunts and thousands of miles ago, Sam said *I'd die for you*, because that's what Sam thinks love is. How he can think that, after everything, is something Dean will never begin to fathom. Dean saw Sam after Jessica's funeral. Being left behind can never, ever feel like being loved.

Dean can still remember being a child, being a halfway-orphan, and not giving the slightest damn whether his mother had really loved him or not. Things like that don't matter when someone's gone. The only love he cared about was the one still inside him, the small and mewling thing that wanted the thing *he* loved *back*.

That thing is all grown up within him now, and wants to rip shreds from the world to get back their father.

"Dean -" Sam starts to stammer, his eyes shocky and bright and his face flushed, the determined certainty that's sending him hurtling towards destruction momentarily gone.

"Shut up, Sammy," Dean growls, and hooks him in with a hand at his nape and a heel behind his knee, crushing their mouths together again. Sam still has one hand under Dean's shirt, up over where his pulse must be thudding strongest, and Sam's body is beginning to shiver with need.

That's when Dean spins them, shoving Sam against the wall so hard his head bounces. At another time, with the world different around them, Dean might've made some crack about Sam's dumbass college-boy haircut cushioning the knock, but now and here he drops to his knees and opens Sam's fly. They don't have time to change their clothes, and they can't afford to be distracted by discomfort when they get where they're going, so Dean takes Sam in his mouth and looks up at Sam's face and thinks, determined, *I'm not gonna lose you. Not to this bullshit thing that's taken so much from us already.*

The jerks of Sam's hips are becoming erratic, and Dean steadies him with a hand on each side. Sam stifles a groan as he climaxes and Dean swallows easily, taking in the things Sam needs to let go of, just like always.

For the barest of seconds, Sam looks relaxed and at ease. But the smile he gives Dean is crooked and sharp, and Dean knows, just as he's known from the second they stepped in here, that the things that've snapped in them can't be fixed this simply.

Dean doesn't want to come. He wants to keep his frustration locked up inside. He wants things left unfinished, because then he can convince himself that they'll have another chance when it's all over. But Sam is sliding down the wall to kneel in front of Dean, and opening Dean's jeans enough to slip a hand inside, and Dean can't help but arch at the touch and start swearing under his breath.

Staring up at the ceiling as Sam nips and sucks at his throat, Dean feels something like a prayer or maybe a plea buzzing through his mind. He offers it up to whoever might be listening, because Sam's not the only one who knows how to damn the consequences.

If they're not meant to survive this, then at least let me go with them.

Decade

WB/CW program *Supernatural*
Intended for adult audiences

After watching bad game shows for hours and talking about nothing, Dean turns the TV off with the remote and says "I think whatever pain meds they've got you on are actually menopause pills. Wet eyes will only pull you chicks with a mothering complex, Sammy, so unless you're into wearing diapers, I'd work on looking a little more manly."

Sam wants to roll his eyes and say something bitchy in return, something to remind Dean that Dean is a jerk who's lucky that anyone loves him at all, so he should just shut up and let Sam get a little emotional about the fact that they're both alive. But the idea of going on without Dean, of being the one left behind, still feels too real and recent to be joked away.

Dean's mouth is dry and chapped, and tastes like sickness and sleep and stale pain, but he's warm and living and yeah, maybe Dean had a point about the menopause pills, because Sam can feel his tears finally spill over as he kisses Dean.

Dean pulls back, smirking. "You might want to remind yourself that we're checked in here as *brothers*, princess. They see you getting frisky, they might take another look at the medical insurance. Dad might see."

"I don't care," Sam answers, feeling mulish. He doesn't care if John catches them kissing, or fucking, or playing pool just for fun without a hustle going. Sam had to teach himself not to care what John thought a long time ago, and the lesson stuck.

"We'll be outta here soon enough," Dean promises, and turns the TV back on.

Sometimes, Sam knows things without knowing them. Maybe it's part of the premonitions, but he can remember them from back before everything went to hell so they're probably just the same twinges everyone gets. It doesn't take a didn't-wannabe psychic to pick up on a bad vibe.

He got one in the hospital hallway, just after Dean woke up. John asked him to go get coffee and as he brought it back, something hit Sam like a ton of bricks.

Something was *wrong*.

But when he got around the corner, feet squeaking on the linoleum in their hurry and the paper cup in his hand threatening to crumple and spill, John was just sitting alone on the edge of a bed. Sam can't remember if there's ever been a bed he'd thought of as a possession, rather than just an object. They're all hospital beds or motel beds or beds stolen from rubbish collection outside dorms with busted springs. Never a thing to be owned, just to be used for a while.

John looked worn the hell out. On anyone else who'd just had their son wake up from dying it'd be nothing unexpected, but Sam wasn't used to seeing John give in to the luxury of weariness. "Dad?"

John looked up at the question, something dull and defeated in his eyes. "Hey, Sammy. You didn't put any of that syrup shit in it, did you?"

"No, sir. Just beans and water."

"Good kid," John said in a flat voice that sounded like it was trying not to be flat.

Kid, sir. The 'behave' routine. Sam gave it three days of peace, tops, before they were back to normal. Not even a near-death experience could knock them out of it for long.

"Sam -" John started, then hesitated. It was hard to read his voice in that monotone, but Sam's nervous system went automatically into impending lecture mode anyway.

"What?" he asked, a little snappishly, when John remained silent. So much for three days of peace.

"What happened when Dean was dying?"

Sam's fingers felt the memory of the planchette under them, moving back and forth across the board under the push of Dean's will. He remembered the cold, heavy sickness behind his breastbone. His face drained pale.

"The first time, I mean," John went on.

"Oh. Uh." Sam shrugged, shuffling his feet a little. "We found a faith healer. Turned out his wife had trapped a Reaper, but we didn't know that. She was trading terminal conditions off onto people who she thought deserved them."

"Someone else died for Dean?"

Sam met John's eyes and locked on, refusing to be cowed. "Yeah, Dad."

In that moment, Sam remembered Dean, back just before they fell down into their own private hell in the cabin. Talking about how it scared him to be so ready to kill for Sam and John. Sam doubted Dean would appreciate knowing that for Sam it's always been the clearest, simplest, least scary thing he's ever felt.

He doesn't even feel bad that he doesn't feel bad about it. Sam would've taken them to LeGrange's faith tent no matter what kept the scales there balanced, and he thinks he maybe even knew at the time. That same wrong-bad-run feeling he gets sometimes.

And if John was going to hate him for that, *fine*. At least Sam did something to keep Dean alive.

But John just nodded, like he suspected already. "Soon as Dean's good for travel, we'll move ourselves in with Bobby. You know Dean won't feel fixed up until we've got that car in shape again."

"And then what?"

"Same as always. No reason to stop now, is there?" John replied, and drank his coffee.

The first night after Dean woke up, Sam fell asleep in the chair beside his bed. The hospital was darkened and hushed, and it was easy to believe that the halls might be full of ghosts.

When Sam awoke in that dark, it was to the sight of John leaning over close to Dean's face. At first, Sam thought John was whispering something, but then his vision got a little clearer, and he could see that John was pressing a long kiss to Dean's wounded forehead.

As John straightened, Dean reached out to grasp at his arm. "Don't go. C'mon. Nobody'll hear."

"Get some sleep," John told Dean, glancing at Sam. Sam hoped the dark was enough to hide the fact that his eyes were open.

They're out of there soon enough, just like Dean said they would be, and Bobby's better at getting along with John when he has to than Sam is, so it's almost relaxing to watch Dean heal and nurse his poor battered car. They're

still all twitchy and anxious, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but things could be worse.

If John knows that Dean gives Sam a sloppy, eager blowjob the first time the engine grows back to life, or that Sam's spent more than one night making Dean come and then crying into his sleeping skin, then he's good at hiding what he knows. Just like Sam's good at pretending that he can't see the raw, hungry, worried looks Dean gives John when John can't see, or the way John won't even hug Dean any more.

Everything John does these days seems like it's a half-measure, an afterthought. Sam's never seen him so close to defeated.

Sam doesn't know how to love John, not like he knows how to love Dean. They all know how to screw each other up and make each other angry, but at least with Dean Sam knows how to keep the bad balanced with the good. With John, it's like the keel's never been remotely close to even. They don't click comfortably, and now it seems like John's not clicking with anything else in the world, either.

When John borrows one of Bobby's vans to go out on a job by himself, Sam's not sure whether to be relieved at the break.

When John comes back, he's just as blank and monotone as ever, only now he's decorated with a fresh set of dark bruises and livid cuts. If Sam'd ever come home looking half that bad, he would've gotten a lecture about recklessness and letting himself act like an unprofessional amateur. Or, at least, that's what he thinks he'd get. But when Sam manages to get his wrist snapped in two places by a zombie during a standard enough job a month later, John goes very quiet and doesn't say a word about it. They're still, theoretically, placed at Bobby's. It's weird to have a touchstone to drive back and forth from between hunts.

After getting the bones set, while he's nicely stoned on a couple of pain pills -- and, really, it's probably their good luck that they can't afford regular prescriptions to these puppies, or else Sam would be on the fast track to the Betty Ford Clinic -- Sam overhears John say "Dean, if something happens to me, Bobby's got a letter I wrote. He'll give it to you. Don't forget."

"Dad?" Dean asks, obviously unsure how to phrase a response with any more specificity than that. It's not the first time John's said something fatalistic and unexpected since the accident, but they're still not used to it. Sam hovers in to doorway, unsure whether to intrude. They haven't given any indication of noticing him.

Sam's used to that. The John And Dean Variety Hour would've been enough to send any kid into teenage rebellion, even without all the other crap that went on. He'd like to think he's a little above resenting how close they are, but it'll always sting a little. It must be nice, Sam thinks, to know exactly where you fit with someone.

"Keep an eye on your brother. Don't let him get hurt like that again. You boys... you boys're the only thing that matters, got me? You gotta do something stupid, do it to protect him."

"Dad," Dean says again. Sam knows that tone. That's the 'if you act like a chick flick for a moment longer here, I'm going to set your head on fire with my zippo' tone. Sam's used to hearing it, but it's a weird twist to hear it used on John.

Dean reaches a hand out to touch John's shoulder and John stiffens, moving away quickly. It reminds Sam of nothing so much as Lenore, the vampire woman they met a few weeks back who'd sworn off blood. John

moves like he's scared he'll suck the life out of Dean if they get too close.

"Something's wrong with Dad," Sam says that night, face against the swell of Dean's upper arm as they settle for sleep. It's late, much too late for John or Bobby to notice that Sam's crept into Dean's room yet again. He expects a 'shut up, Sammy' or a 'Dad's fine' or maybe even a 'man, why'd you wake me, I was having a dream that we were extras on the *Bring It On* set. You owe me a dozen cheerleaders'. But Dean just rubs an idle hand against Sam's hair and stares up at the dark, rain-warped ceiling. "I know," he answers. After that, he's quiet for so long that Sam starts to drift off before he speaks again. "I asked about the Colt. He says we shouldn't worry about it."

Sam feels a chill of *wrongwrongwrong*. "What can we do?" Dean's hand stills on Sam's hair, and he lets out a tired sigh. "I don't know." "You and he don't -" Sam starts, then pauses. Lets the silence cover all the words he doesn't want to say. "Anymore. Do you? Not since the cabin." "Not since the cabin," Dean echoes by way of confirmation. Then he shifts, rolling onto his side so Sam's spooned against his back. "Shut up now, okay? I'm tired."

When Sam starts getting the nightmares again, that's when the shit *really* hits the fan. Sam wants to go where the visions lead, and Dean seems all for it, but John puts his foot down

They're in Bobby's living room, a pile of books leaning crazily against the doorframe beside Dean as he watches Sam and John argue.

Dean's gotten into reading up on lore lately, which is unexpected but not enough for Sam to worry. They've all got to be smarter, better. They won't get caught out again.

"No. I need you boys in Nebraska. Kid of an old friend's got the notion to become a hunter, and I figure it'd do the two of you some good to go through the basics yourselves."

"Dad, come on," Sam protests. "This is the first lead to anything we've had in forever, and you want us off babysitting some kid while he learns how to salt a window? Give me a break."

"*She* deserves your attention. We need all the hunters we can get, with Caleb and Jim dead. If there's a war, we'll need an army."

Sam flinches a little at the stern words, then shakes his head. "You just want me out of the way. You think I'm too stupid to see that?"

"Well, you're not acting like a smart guy lately, I gotta say," John snipes back, glaring. "Letting that vampire go -"

"Lenore wasn't hurting people!"

"- getting your arm broken. You've been acting reckless ever since..."

"Yeah, Dad, let's say it. Ever since the accident. Let's talk about *you* since the accident, huh?" Sam knows he's shouting, and doesn't really care. Bobby's in town doing the groceries, so there's just them and a whole lot of unsaid crap to get out in the open. "What the hell's been wrong with you? It's like you're barely even alive."

"I'm just trying to *finish this*," John growls. "There's stuff out there that needs killing, and none of us know how long we've got left. Especially when you go around letting those sonvabitches break your arms --"

"That's not true, though. Is it?" Dean asks, and even though his voice is quiet there's steel in it. Last time Sam heard that tone in Dean's voice was in this same room, when they trapped the demon inside Meg. He walks over to

them, pace measured, and his eyes lock on John's. "Not for you. You know exactly how long you've got left, don't you, Dad?"

John's eyes drop from the shared gaze and his face loses what little spark it had been holding. Sam's so surprised by the movement that he can feel his jaw fall open.

"You *bargained* with that son of a bitch, didn't you?" Dean's voice is still ice and razors. "For me. You made a trade."

The silence seems to freeze the world on its axis for a long, long moment.

"Yes," John says.

They're standing too close together for the punch to have much momentum when it connects with John's face, but the dull crack of impact is still enough to jar Sam out of his stunned stupor. He tries to get between them before Dean get throw a second hit, but it's like trying to contain a whirlwind.

"It's okay, Sammy. Let him get it out," John says, fingertips staunching the blood welling at the corner of his mouth.

"Let me *get it out*?" Dean tries to shove past Sam to get another swing in. "How could you do this, Dad? How could you even think of it?"

"What was I supposed to do? You were DYING!" John shouts.

"Then you should have LET ME DIE!" Dean roars back. Sam tries to shove him away with the unbroken arm, get some distance between all of them. Dean's obviously got no intention of moving an inch, but it gives John the opportunity to back up a couple of feet. Sam wishes, not for the first time by any means, that he knew how to make his brain work on cue. He could do with some invisible restraints to use on the others right now.

"How long've you got, Dad? Another month? Another year? Twenty years?" Dean asks, voice quieter but no calmer. His mouth is trembling.

"Ten years," John says, and he sounds tireder than Sam's ever heard him. That sets Dean off trying to shove past Sam again. John lifts his fingers away from his bloodied mouth and stares at them, as if surprised to see that his veins still run with red.

Dean slumps, falling to his knees with a sharp sound, staring up at John in disbelief. "This isn't real, right? There's gotta be a way. I'll tell that thing that I want to reverse the deal. I doubt we'll get the Colt back, but we can --" "It's done, Dean." It's John's no-bullshit voice; the one they've always known better than to argue with.

Dean's expression is bleak and broken. Sam tries to help him back up to his feet, but Dean doesn't move. It's like he's begging. "Dad."

"This doesn't change anything. I want you boys in Nebraska." He turns to go, and that's when Sam snaps, grabbing John's arm with his good hand and holding him in place. John glares.

"No," Sam demands. "Don't you dare leave us to deal with your mess again. Don't you run away."

"Big words from you, Sammy," John snaps back. Out of the corner of his eye, Sam can see Dean standing up on shaky feet. "We all know that you'll be back at school as soon as all this is done with."

"At least I won't be in *hell*." And, okay, low blow. Sam can hear the pained hiss of Dean's breath at the words.

"Ten years is a long time," John says, like that's any kind of answer. Then he shakes off Sam's grip, and leaves them in shellshocked quiet.

Sam keeps pushing Nebraska until Dean caves in and agrees to go.

"Thank you," John says to Sam in the quiet, flat voice that's becoming distressingly expected.

"I'm not doing it for you," Sam snaps in reply. He can't bear to look at John anymore.

He's doing it for Dean. To get Dean away from Bobby's library and all the books that might have the ways and means to summon up deal-makers.

Being at the Roadhouse is okay. Jo, the hunter they're supposed to be training, is just what Dean needs as a distraction. She answers back, hates being ordered around, and never listens to 'no'. "It's just like training you all over again, except she's prettier'n you," Dean teases on the third night. He doesn't smile, but it's good to hear a joke in his tone again.

Sam spends his days talking to Ash, the resident research brain.

"Only two ways to get out of a demon contract," Ash explains in his beer-loose voice, making incomprehensible gestures with his hands as he speaks. "Traditionally, a deal like that is very... traditional. You prove the dude a liar, and he's gotta give your soul back. So if I sold mine for a five year subscription to a select variety of websites, and then the sites went out of business three years later, bang." The flat of his hand struck the table, making the empty bottles dance and clink. "No deal."

So if Dean died, John would be safe. "No good. What's the other way?"

"A better deal. Like paying off one credit card with another."

Sam nods. "Only two options. Got it."

"Ain't a scene you want messing with, that's for damn sure."

Sam makes himself smile. "You got that right."

He'll look through Bobby's books when they get back.

John meets up with them Philadelphia to take care of a murderous ghost. Jo wants in on the hunt, too, but Sam promises to make it up to her later and she reluctantly agrees to stay put. He wishes there was a way to tell her how lucky she is to have normalcy; how she should cling to it, but Dean's right. She's too much like Sam used to be to listen to advice like that.

Sam wishes he could say that the hunt's nothing like the three of them together used to be, but it's just the same. Dad's just as bossy and just as good at what he does; Dean's just as infuriatingly obedient; Sam's just as redundant. It's almost like everything's okay.

They share one motel room, because Sam's the one who goes in to the desk to book. He's the one who digs the half-full bottle of Jim Beam out of the trunk and keeps Dean's glass topped up. He's the one who keeps an eye on the slow, mechanical rise and fall of John's chest on the far bed. He knows John isn't sleeping.

"I've done everything he's ever asked of me. *Everything*. And he's just going to leave me. He's going to let it take him away from me, too," Dean says, when he's drunk enough not to care what he's saying.

"Ten years is a long time, Dean," Sam tells him in a quiet voice. "We'll work it out."

"He doesn't wear his ring anymore, did you see? Every day since she died, he's worn it. Now, what? He's not good enough for her? He's a goddamned hero. A friggin' jerk, but a hero."

Yeah, a goddamned one. Funny how people say things without thinking what they mean.

"We gotta work this out, Sammy." It's a plea. Dean never begs for anything, except not to be abandoned.

Later, when they're sprawled out as much as they can be on one queen bed for the both of them, Dean lets Sam work a lazy hand in a wandering path up his chest. Everything is motionless and hushed, and ten years feels like infinity. Dean arches up as Sam sucks and bites at the hard lines of Dean's shoulder. His body's got a new toughness to it. If Sam didn't know better, he'd think some of Dean's vulnerability was burned away.

"Sammy," Dean mutters thickly, clumsy hands tracing the planes of Sam's face.

"Shh," Sam soothes, glancing up at the other bed. Somehow he knows John is watching them. Sam's eyes narrow a little.

He wants John to see. He wants John to see how Dean cries out Sam's name; how they fit together.

How even that much isn't enough.

You can't leave me to pick up the pieces you leave him in. Not again.

He needs you more than me.

"There's stuff. In my... in my bag..." Dean says, eyes rolling a little in the near dark as Sam slides the zipper of his jeans open slowly.

"I got it." Sam pulls both layers, denim and boxers, down at once, and smiles a little at the whimper Dean chokes back. It might be Sam's imagination, but he thinks he hears John's breath catch and falter. A break in that fatalistic rhythm is more than Sam hoped for, and gives him a small, tight smile of triumph as he calms the shift of Dean's hips with his hands and takes Dean into his mouth.

"Yeah, like that." Dean grunts, fingers threading through Sam's hair. They're both still a little grimy and gross from the hunt, but it doesn't matter. The smells of dust and hauntings permeate their lives anyway. "Yeah. Yeah, Sammy."

Sam holds back a sarcastic snort. How Dean ever got the idea that he knew how to talk smooth, Sam has no idea. The guy's about as suave as a teenager going parking for the first time.

Despite his approving noises and jerking thighs, Dean doesn't bother waiting until he's come before he starts pushing Sam off him. "C'mon. Enough of that foreplay shit. Hurry up."

"See if I ever blow you again," Sam snipes without malice, repositioning them so he's got Dean's legs bent up, one at a sharper angle than the other.

"Ow, man. I'll get a cramp if you leave it like that. Why'd you have to go and be freakishly tall anyway?"

This time, Sam lets himself snort out loud. "This is why it's better if I get you off first. It shuts you up for ten seconds."

"Whatever." Dean fidgets. "Get on with it."

Sam slicks up his fingers with the stuff from Dean's bag and pushes one in, knuckle by careful knuckle. Dean's drunk and horny enough to open quickly, and so Sam adds a second finger. He hears the other bed shift and creak in the quiet and his heartbeat begins to thud. He doesn't know what he expected to happen tonight, but it wasn't the quiet scuff of a careful footfall on the carpet between the beds.

John touches Sam's shoulder, and Sam has to look away. John's hand looks stripped naked without its usual wedding band. Out of all the evidence they've seen of what John's given up for them, that hurts hardest.

But Sam's going to fix this. Whatever it takes.

He moves out of the way, easing his fingers out of Dean as he goes. John moves his hand from Sam's shoulder down to cup Dean's cheek and Dean's eyes fly open.

"Dad."

"I got you, Dean," John promises, and Sam notices that somewhere on the journey from bed to bed John took off the shorts and tee he was sleeping in. Sam's still dressed in the clothes he was hunting in; a jacket and shirt and undershirt and jeans. He's glad. He wants a dozen layers, a thousand. Anything to protect him from the feeling of this margin he's forced himself into.

Everyone seems to stop breathing as John pushes into Dean. Dean's hands are grasping at John's forearms tight enough to white the skin, and he's not wisecracking or bitching now. He looks almost calm. Laid bare. John's hand moves down from Dean's cheek to stroke at the tender underside of his jaw, and Dean tips his head back with a sigh.

"More," he mutters, and John's next thrust is harder.

Sam knows he should move away. This isn't his to see. This is the thing he'll never be a part of, no matter how close or far he is from them, no matter what stupid-ass plans they cook up to throw themselves between evil and bystanders. He bows his head. He should go.

"More," Dean says again, and then. "Sammy."

Sam's head whips back up in surprise. Dean's eyes are bright and tracking his face. Each shove of John against him earns a stifled sound, a moan or an 'oh, fuck'. "Sam."

Sam's breath stutters in his throat. He can feel John staring at him, too. They're completely lost in each other, and he's... he's part of that. Of them. His mouth bites a kiss from John's; his undamaged hand carding carefully through Dean's hair and tugging lightly. The roughness of John's beard scrapes at Sam's cheeks and it's not the same as the feel of Dean. It's something new. They've never done this before, John and Sam. Things between them were fucked up enough without adding any more complications.

But it's not like it's actually possible to get more fucked up than they are now, so it doesn't matter.

Sam and John fuck like they fight, neither willing to give ground to the other. Their mouths click and snap, almost too violent to be intimate. Sam can feel Dean watching them, gaze so heavy it's a part of the equation along with lip and tooth.

Dean moves his head under Sam's stroking hand, catching the end of Sam's thumb in his mouth and swiping the rough flat of his tongue across it. The unexpected wet heat jolts an orgasm out of Sam. His cry is crushed against John's mouth.

The night seems to stretch forever, blurring longer and thinner as it goes on until finally they collapse together, spent and webbed with spit and tears and come. When Sam wakes up with the first light of the new day, it's almost unfathomable that the night's ended.

Everything ends, he reminds himself as he carefully sits up. *Even things that feel endless.*

But ten years is a long time. And maybe, for Sam, the demon will offer even longer.

Give Anything

WB/CW program *Supernatural*, begins in episode 2.01
Suitable for all audiences

1.

... but, before John can go through with the summoning, and make deals with the sonvabitch, Dean slips away quiet as a sleeping kid.

Even the life support monitor shorts out and goes blank-screened, like it doesn't dare make a flatline whine with John and Sammy standing there at Dean's bedside.

"He said there was a Reaper after him. I guess even Dean couldn't fight... time," Sammy babbles between his tears, three nights later, as they watch the pyre they've made.

It's not hard to steal a body from a hospital. That's a thing they learned long ago.

"Yeah," John says.

2.

"We need to summon it and end this NOW," Sam demands for the thousandth time, and for the thousandth time John scrubs his face with the hand that's not in a sling and does his best not to snap. For Dean, he'll make that effort.

"We need to recover our strength. Be sure we're ready to face it," he tells his son in a dull, patient voice. "I'll come get you when it's time."

Sam's eyes widen as comprehension dawns.

"Go back to your life. He'd want that."

The punch is sloppy, driven by anger more than thought.

It's good to feel something.

3.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," is the only thing Ellen says about it. She finds him jobs around the place, keeps him occupied.

Jo's gone and grown up. John can't stand the thought that time's marched on in these years he's been hunting. A whole damn lifetime for some.

A week after the sling comes off Ellen sends John to keep an eye on Jo's first solo hunt. Goddamn demon clown, just like Dean used to scare Sammy with.

Jo plays a Led Zeppelin tape on the drive home.

She sings the words wrong on 'Stairway', with a smirk, just like Dean did.

4.

"You do her wrong, I'll kill you. You die on her, and break her heart that way? I'll bring you back, then kill you," Ellen warns, and John knows she means every word of it.

Jo sleeps in a pale nightgown made of old silk, the white going to ivory where the hem joins the lace. When her back's turned and her young, dark eyes can't be seen, it's like looking at a ghost.

Against his instincts, John begins preferring the light off whenever possible.

They help Gordon with a nest. Jo gets nightmares, but she's gotta learn.

5.

When the time comes, John doesn't call Sam.

"Playing with fire, aren't we?" the Demon taunts. "You might get yourself burned that way, John."

"I want to make a deal."

"Is that a fact?"

"Another chance for Dean. I'll give you the Colt."

The Demon's smile goes inhuman-broad in its borrowed face. "Let's both take... a minute. To think about it."

The world whirls and reshapes itself, and for a time John's eyes fail, and all he can sense it the blip of a life support monitor.

He can feel Sam watch him, as he watches Dean breathe.

He's got an appointment in the basement to keep.

FOUR SATURDAYS IN THE JANUARY OF 1991:

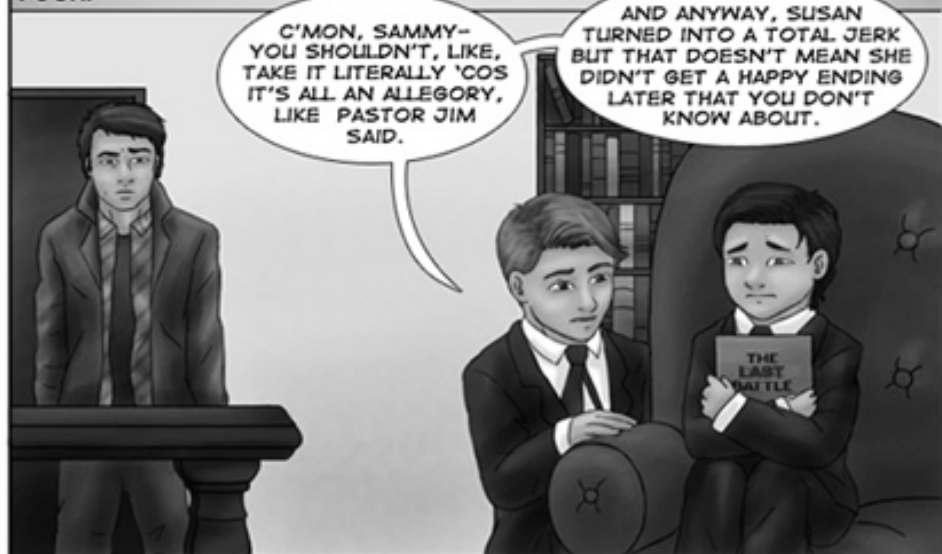


WORDS BY MARY
PICTURES BY AUDREY

TWO:



FOUR:



May 2, 1993



Sammy's tenth birthday today. His nightmares haven't let up, even with the .45 I gave him last month to keep by his bedside, and he's been finding any excuse he can to argue with me lately. The only problems I've ever had with Dean were when he was about the age Sam is now, so I know it'll pass soon enough.

He's had his heart set on joining the local under-12s soccer team this coming summer break. I'd be happier if he'd sign up for bow hunting with Dean, but he won't budge on it. I told him this morning that he can play, so long as he puts in extra practise with Dean. The smile he gave me was just like the ones he used to have when he was a baby. My boys are growing up so fast.

May 2, 1993

I used my new bow and arrow set today. My arm feels sore, but I am going to keep trying until I am perfect. There was a fire in the kitchen before, but Mommy put it out fast. It was caused by oil, I think. When everything was fixed up and safe again, she came out to watch me and Daddy shoot the targets we set up. They both say I am getting really great.



Looking Glass World

WB/CW program *Supernatural*
Intended for adult audiences

2009

It's the car, of all things, that gets down under Sam's skin and makes his step falter on the path.

Black and polished and self-satisfied, like a fat glossy cat there in the driveway. Too real to be a ghost; too impossible to be real.

There is a knife strapped between Sam's shoulder blades, under his jacket, and the buckle on his left shoulder bites a little into the scar tissue there, and he's glad of the pain. It's familiar.

Sam's brain, treacherous, conjures the string of words that go with that one. *Familiar, familial, family.*

A second step becomes a second stumble. The house is low-set and neat. There's no furniture on the porch.

The Demon (it's always, *always* capitalized in Sam's head) slipped away from him a hundred miles and a universe ago, down into a portal opened by the cultists Sam's been tracking for nearly three months.

And Sam jumped right in after it, because revenge isn't just about wanting a world without one's enemy. Revenge wants justice, the old kind that burns in the blood and has nothing to do with the law.

It's a long time since Sam was that boy who wanted to learn the intricacies of the law.

And so here he is, in a brave new world, a place he's never been.

None of his credit cards work here, and the stores of cash left in safety deposit boxes and storage lockers never existed in this version of the world. He's made do with what he can get from some quick and dirty hustles in seedy pool halls, but that's never been Sam's preferred method. His charm has never had the right tone to it, especially not since the accident and the scars that came after.

Sam looks at the car in the driveway again. The heavy gold of the afternoon light catches the curve of a headlight and the edge of a window, and Sam swallows hard.

He's killed a hundred scary monsters and banished scores of spirits. There's another four steps or so to the front door of the house. He doesn't know if he's strong enough to take them.

There's no choice. He needs supplies and he needs to research, and everyone he's talked to has pointed him in this direction.

It's so easy to lie to himself, to say that he wouldn't come if it wasn't necessary. Perhaps he's not so far from lawyer-Sam after all.

His knuckles shake as they strike the wood of the front door.

The footsteps inside are even and only someone who remembered them like breathing would notice that they're a little slower than once upon a time.

"Hang on," Dean says, and just like that Sam's not twenty-six and he's not the hardest sunvabitch in the business and he's not the stone-cold hunter who took down those banshees in Jersey last fall without batting an eye. He's just Sam, and he hasn't heard his brother's voice in (a lifetime) three years and he's going to lose it any second now.

Then the door's open, and Dean's mouth is hanging open and his eyes are wide.

He doesn't say anything.

Sam swallows down on the tears threatening and makes himself smile shakily. "Hi, Dean."

"Oh God." Dean's voice is a whisper. His hand is slow to rise to touch Sam, but then he reaches over the threshold quick as a striking predator and grabs Sam's shoulder. And it hurts, because that shoulder always hurts if it's knocked, but Sam has never cared about pain less than he does as his brother hugs him.

"Sam," Dean says against Sam's jacket, and Sam cries for the first time in three years.

Later, much later, sitting at the kitchen table with two empty bottles and two mostly-full beers between them, they trade stories.

"Dad wanted you to shoot him," Dean recounts quietly. He's staring at the rim of his drink as if nothing else exists around him, but his hand is grasping Sam's fingers across the scratched wood, hard enough to bruise. "You wouldn't. It grabbed the gun, and --" the breath is deep and measured. "And shot you in the heart, and then Dad wrestled control back for long enough to get the muzzle to his temple, and that was that. Last bullet spent. I thought I was gonna die there, too. I wasn't exactly clinging on with all my might. But I didn't. I just lay there. Then I got up."

Sam squeezes Dean's hand. There's nothing he can say, nothing he can offer. He's stared into that same darkness.

"In my... whatever it was. Universe. Reality. We all got out of that room alive. The Demon left Dad's body. It made a truck driver smash his rig into the car when we were in it. You died instantly. Dad... Dad woke up for a little while, before anyone found us. There was part of a message written on the dash. But he died before help got there. I woke up in the ER."

"Hell," Dean manages to say, taking another long gulp of beer. "I wish I had something stronger than this, man. I'm usually stocked up, but a bunch of the new wave of kids have been through in the past few weeks, and I haven't topped the supplies up yet."

Sam thinks of the hunters he knew back in his own reality. "Does Jemima have that sword here?"

Dean's weary face breaks into a sudden grin. "You mean the *katana*? The one she coos at after a kill?"

"Yeah, that one." Sam's smile is weak, he knows, but at least it's honest. "Funny how some stuff stays the same, huh?"

"And some stuff's so different," Dean finishes the thought. "The car? Seriously? That son of a bitch killed my car?"

"If it's any consolation, dude, I've been trying to get vengeance ever since." Sam can't smile with those words, and the only way to soften all the things that go with them is to squeeze Dean's hand again.

"I can't even imagine what it'd be like picking up the pieces from that night with that thing still out there," admits Dean. "It was hard enough when it was just working out what to do next."

Sam looks around the large, welcoming kitchen. "You seem to be doing pretty well." Better than Sam, if the criteria for assessment is a place to live and a life to lead that's not just tracking and killing. But then, Dean's Demon has been dead for years.

Dean makes a noncommittal noise. "It's okay, I guess. Money gets tight if too long goes by with nobody asking for research, but that hardly ever happens. Everybody knows I'll get them the info they need faster than if they

hunted it themselves. Thank the good sweet lord for Google-illiterate exorcists."

"How's the leg?"

"Okay, mostly," Dean says after a couple of seconds' thought. "Hurts like a bitch if the weather's cold or wet. I got it on the first hunt after you and Dad died. Stupid ghost knocks me out of the top story of this old plantation house. I figured it was the universe's subtle hint that my life was in a new chapter now."

Sam notices that he's still holding onto Dean's hand, and that Dean's hand is still holding his. It makes him realize how long it's been since he's been touched beyond wound-tending or incidental brushes. Dean's grasp feels as hungry as Sam's, but there's no way that it can be, really. Dean has always been a tactile creature. He attracts companions as with as much ease and constancy as he brings to his handing out of smiles.

Dean's smile is very different to what it used to be.

"I never burned your bones," Sam blurts out guiltily. "I know I should've, Dean, but I couldn't. I couldn't stand the idea that you wouldn't be able to come back if you wanted to. I'm sorry."

Dean just squeezes Sam's hand. "It doesn't matter now, Sam."

"It does. I'm sorry. It was just so hard, with you both gone, and I never wanted this, you know I never wanted this but you left me with nothing else, and I..." Sam can hear the hitch in his breath but it feels distant, like it's someone else having this freak out. The cold hunter Sam is still hanging back. Same as always. "I shoulda shot that sunvabitch when Dad ordered me to, and oh God I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Dean."

"Sam," Dean says in a voice that's enough like their father's was that Sam responds without thinking. "I won't pretend there haven't been days when I didn't wish you'd fired that gun. At least then I'd've had you, you know? But we had our limit, and that's okay. That makes us human."

Sam swallows, and nods, and feels like he's about fifteen years old again, getting comforted from his big brother for something that happened at school. It's always surprised Sam how Dean makes the years fall away so easily.

"I'm gonna need guns," he says. "I know how to cook up a solution that sanctifies them strongly enough to hurt it, now. Other supplies, too. I'm tapped out."

Dean nods, all business now. He releases Sam's hand and stands stiffly, keeping his left leg from bending as he straightens. Sam's palm feels like a layer of skin has been stripped away at the loss of contact. He ignores it. He's good at that.

"I'll show you the store rooms. There should be everything you need in them. I'm more diligent with keeping them stocked than I am with the booze."

Considering the circumstances, it's not the most normal thing in the world to smile, but Sam gave up on normal forever three years ago. "Between the two of us, it doesn't stand a chance."

Dean's own smile is nowhere near as grim as Sam's, though it's just as fierce. "It never did, Sammy."

Some of the weapons are one Sam recognizes, from the old supply that lived in the car's trunk, or from Dad's own stash. Some are vaguely familiar, and he figures those are ones he's read about in books or has seen in the hands of an ally.

He takes a shotgun down off the wall nearest to him, weighing it in the curve of his palm.

Dean nods approvingly. "That's a good one. Charlie and Budd keep trying to buy it off me, instead of just hiring it all the time. Here, there's a trick to the safety, lemme show you."

Plucking it out of Sam's hands, Dean concentrates on what he's doing. His face tightens in frustration and Sam's breath catches like he's been punched.

This is real.

This is Dean, making a face that Sam can only half-remember. This is Dean, familiar and unfamiliar, with the same old eyes and a new rhythm of walking.

"Dean," Sam says, voice ragged, and Dean looks up in surprise. He'd been caught up in his Gun Zen, then. Sam remembers that; the happy fugue state Dean goes into when he's got weapons to play with.

Sam's got enough presence of mind left to take the gun from Dean and put it back on its pegs. Then, hands shivering like he's freezing, Sam cups Dean's face with his hands and kisses him.

Dean grabs Sam, fingers digging into Sam's upper arms with iron hardness, and kisses back like their mouths can fuse together. There's a sharp-edged broken tooth in Dean's mouth, too far back to notice in a smile, and the unexpected edge drags surprise across Sam's heat-fogged thoughts.

The taste is just like Dean. Like every home and every love Sam has ever grabbed for and had taken away from him, and if Dean ever thought that he knew more about being left behind than Sam did then the scales are well and truly balanced now.

Dean's hand brushes over Sam's hair, like his fingers expect to be able to tangle in it like once upon a time, and Sam realizes how much more changed he is than Dean. Dean moves a little differently, looks a little older and tired, but his voice is the same and his taste is the same and it's all like something Sam remembers with his bones rather than his head.

Sam's hair is shorter, now. He doesn't think about it at all, but it must have been shocking for Dean. His face is scarred and his thin tallness has matured into something rangy and honed. The person Sam used to be died with his family.

But his family is here, real and breathing and moving in his arms, and so who does that make Sam?

"Bed," Dean says, and Sam can hear a whole world in that word, a world where Dean is still trying to get used to a body that won't let him just drop to his knees and administer blowjobs whenever the impulse takes him.

"Uh-huh," Sam agrees, nodding, but then he works out that no, finding a bed would have to involve not kissing Dean anymore, and Sam disapproves of this plan on a fundamental level. His thumb strokes at the thin, vulnerable skin just below and behind Dean's earlobe, and Dean's lashes flicker like whispers against the skin of Sam's cheek.

"Come on," Dean insists, but doesn't move to lead them. Sam forces himself to take a step back, just enough that Dean can turn and head for the door. Dean's skin is flushed and glowing, and Sam's heart feels like it's being squeezed in a vice.

Dean's bedroom is, thank God, just next door to the supply room. It's sparse (*soldier's quarters*), just like all their rooms were growing up.

Dean pulls his shirt off and tosses it aside, then starts on Sam's clothes. Jacket, knife harness, t-shirt, undershirt. Sam lets him do it, too busy

drinking in the sight of Dean to help. Scars that were never anything but open wounds in the world Sam knew, and other scars that never were at all.

When Sam's clothes are gone above his waist, Dean blinks in surprise and skates his fingertips over the amulet hanging around Sam's neck. The twin of it lies against Dean's breastbone, above the claw marks left from That Night.

"I always wear it," Sam admits, and it doesn't make any sense for his eyes to tear up and for him to miss Dean all over again, because Dean's right here. "There wasn't much else to salvage from the wreck."

"Sam," Dean says, like to say anything else would be not enough and too much.

They take off their own shoes and pants, because to try and help each other would just slow things down. Then they're on the bed, skin to skin, and Sam's had sex with people in the last three years but he hasn't had a lover since the moment the doctor couldn't meet his eyes when Sam asked about his family.

Dean's body is ever so slightly softer than Sam remembers it. Still toned and strong and deadly, but a little unwound. A little slower. Sam, in return, knows his own body is far harder than the one Dean remembers, as if he's a blade tempered by fire.

"Tell me if your leg's uncomfortable," Sam instructs. Dean just gives him a Look, the one that says 'you are in serious danger of finding string cheese in your shoes if you don't shut up', so Sam shuts up and lets Dean press him down so his bare back rubs against the soft, crumpled sheets of Dean's bed.

Sam feels like his body has been trapped in a dark room, and every brush and push of Dean's skin against his is a light, bringing parts of Sam back into visibility and reality. He can feel the slip of a tear from the edge of his eye down to his temple, but he doesn't care. There's no weakness in this reveal, and Sam can let go for the first time in too long because Dean is here, and Dean has always kept him safe.

Dean's mouth is murmuring things into the crook of Sam's neck; breathless, secret things that Sam doesn't need to hear in order to know them. There is flesh on flesh and heat on heat and slick on slick but the only thing Sam is really conscious of is the greedy, wanting part of him that needs Dean closer, always closer, inside where he can't leave Sam again.

"Dean, please, I need you," he begs, too wild and lost to clarify, hoping it'll be enough.

It is. Dean slows them down, obviously restraining himself from pushing against Sam with the urgency he feels. He reaches over to the bedside stand, arm trembling, and pulls out lube and a condom.

"Always prepared," Sam teases.

Dean grins. "Just like a boy scout, that's me." His concentration-face slips back on, only this time it's Sex Zen rather than Gun Zen, and Sam is almost certain he has never loved Dean more than he does at this moment.

Dean repositions them, resting one of Sam's legs up against his shoulder. Sam lies back, forcing himself to breathe slowly and to calm down, but the first press of Dean's finger inside him is too much.

"God, Dean, I don't care, I don't care, let it fucking hurt, I want it to hurt, just, you, now, please..." Sam babbles.

"Shh, Sam, it's okay. I got you," Dean soothes. "Just another minute."

Another finger. Sam makes a noise that could be politely described as keening and feels his hips roll of their own accord. His vision is sparking with spots of white and black.

Dean is staring at Sam's face, like he's afraid that if he looks away Sam's going to disappear.

"I'm here," Sam promises in a whisper, and Dean's eyes flare with dark hunger. "Dean, *now*."

Dean nods, moving his hand away and positioning himself at Sam's entrance. The first push is almost too much for either of them, leaving them both stilled and shut-eyed as they struggle to retain some tiny grip on their control.

Sam's eyes open first, and he can hear the sobs on his breaths as he pants.

Then Dean's eyes are open too, locked on Sam's. His lower lip is white where his teeth bite down on it. There's a hand on Sam's dick but Sam doesn't even care, because the whole world is Dean, Dean, Dean. He wants it to last forever but he can tell it's not going to last very long at all.

"I'm gonna -"

"It's okay," Dean says again, the words carried on gasps in tandem with the thrusts of his hips against Sam. "It's okay."

The words shoot straight down Sam's spine, ignoring his brain entirely, and he's coming with a hoarse cry and a scrabbled clutch at Dean's shoulders. Time seems to freeze and stretch and then slam down on Sam, knocking everything out of him and leaving him sticky and emptied.

Dean says "fuck" like it means more than they can comprehend, and crushes their mouths together with messy, hungry abandon. Sam clenches around him and strokes at his face, at the wetness in the shadows under Dean's eyes, and the joy in him feels so total that letting some out of it in a smile is like pricking a tiny hole in a dam of water.

Dean's face is so vulnerable as he comes that Sam feels like he should look away and knows he can't. He wants this, he wants all of Dean, he wants to take everything and give everything and never have to remember what it was to be alone.

The comedown feels longer than the sex, feels like air after drowning. Dean eases out and throws the condom into the wastebasket, and they curl together with Sam against Dean's back, hands drawn forward and knotted together over the scars over Dean's heart.

"Sam?" Dean asks quietly, the words sending a vibration through the skin against Sam's cheek.

"Yeah?"

"Are you still gonna be real in the morning?"

Sam hugs him in closer, and lets another smile dance on his lips. "Yeah. But you're cooking breakfast."

"'s my house. Guests are s'posed to be all grateful and stuff."

"Hosts are supposed to... host," Sam manages, mind already drifting into comforting black. If Dean answers, he doesn't hear.

Grounding

WB/CW program *Supernatural*
Suitable for all audiences

The fifth time in his life that Dean feels like the floor's fallen out from under him is when his phone rings at one in the morning and it's Jo crying on the other end.

"Josie, calm down. Are you hurt? What's wrong?"

"I wanna come home. I'm the freak with a knife collection here. I hate it. I hate all of it. I don't want to be here."

Oh, man. Dean rubs his eyes and turns the bedside light on. Trust this to happen on the one night in the month that he gets to bed before three. "Okay. I'll come get you. Pack up any stuff you want, because I'll be there in the morning. You're buying me breakfast."

She sniffles. "Really?"

"Yeah, and I want the works. Real maple syrup on the hotcakes. Most places charge extra for that these days, y'know."

"No, I mean... you're just gonna come get me? You're not going to make me stay to the end of semester to see if it gets better?"

"Do you think it will?"

"No."

"Then what's the point? Plus, you know me and crying chicks. Even if they are my crazy kid sister."

"Thanks, Dean."

"Whatever. Go pack."

The first time Dean's world ends is the fire, when Mom dies and their ordinary life dies with her. The second time is five years later, when Dad drives them to a roadhouse in the middle of nowhere and leaves them with the man and the woman who run it.

Dean doesn't get to play with other kids all that much, so he's excited when he sees a bike leaning against the watertank out back, but it turns out that the kid here, Joanna, is a *girl* and anyway, she's just a baby like Sam, not almost double digits like Dean.

There's something tired and old and sad in Dad's face, which scares Dean because Dad's not meant to look like that. Dad hugs him and says "it's your job to take care of Sammy and Josie, okay? You look out for them."

"How long are you gonna be gone?" Dean asks, and Dad hesitates before he answers.

"I dunno, kiddo. I'm sorry."

Dean pats Dad's shoulder. "It's okay. I'll look after them."

A month later, Ellen and Bill ask Dean and Sam if they'd like to try going to Joanna's school with her for a while, and that's when Dean knows.

The third time is one night when Sam's twelve and he's pushing his meatloaf all around his plate and mashing it up with the ketchup, so Josie and Dean know that Sammy's Thinking About Something. That never ends well, so after dinner they drag him into Jo's room and sit him on the bed and say "What?".

"Nothing."

"Can't lie to me, Sammy," Dean points out, diplomatic. "So quit trying."

Sam's reply is a mulish mutter. "I changed my name. Bill got the letter today. It's official."

"Huh?" Jo looks extremely puzzled. "You're not Sam anymore?"

"No, my last name. I'm Sam Harvelle."

"What." Dean's voice is so flat it doesn't count as a question.

"Dean, this is our family. These are the people we belong with. I don't even remember Mom and Dad, and I don't... I just... I knew you'd freak out."

"Well, yeah, maybe that's because this is something we should've talked about first, huh?" Dean isn't even sure exactly why he's so furious.

"I just wanted them to know I love them. Bill and Ellen."

And, shit, now Dean's the bad guy, the sixteen-year-old punk kid who works in their bar and gets paid for it and eats their food and sleeps in their home and doesn't want their last name. Shit.

Fourth time is when Gordon nearly gets Jo killed with that Rawhead bullshit, and Ellen and Dean are less than a hair's breadth away from out and out bloody murder.

He stitches the cut on her calf up carefully. Scars aren't the same for girls; she's gonna want it as small as possible.

"When we're ready," Dean says, pointedly. "We'll go on the road together and hunt every last nasty sonovabitch in the country. Just you and me and Blue Oyster Cult and Metallica and Zep and --"

"REO."

"-- and REO, fine."

"What about Sam?"

Dean concentrates on the stitches. "You know Sam. He wants to be the good son. Make your Mom and Dad proud. He'll end up a lawyer or a doctor or something. Josie, hold still, you're wriggling like crazy here."

"I told you, it's Jo. Not Josie."

Dean smirks, back on solid ground. "Whatever."

Sixth time is after they've got all Jo's stuff stashed in the trunk beside the weapons pile, and jumbo-sized cokes from the 7-11, and a whole stretch of blank road and a whole day to drive it. Jo's still kind of morose, so Dean's thinking that maybe they'll swing out to the west coast and see that idiot brother of theirs. Nothing like seeing how dull and stupid a normal life is to make her stop wanting one for herself.

A phone trills noisily, even over the extra-loud black album tape.

"You have to get a better ringtone," Jo complains, opening it for him.

"Hey, PRIVACY, Josie. Look it up. You might get an eyeful of a racy video message or something."

"Nah, it's just a bunch of numbers. Someone sat on their phone or something."

Dean's blood feels cold. "Pass it here."

35-111

Like a cheapass flashback effect on TV, Dean feels like his vision's gone wobbly.

"They're coordinates," he tells Jo, his voice short. Everything he's known since he was nine years old is faultlining apart under him. "I guess visiting Sammy's gonna have to wait."

by Audrey

& Mary

WINCHESTER TALES:

THE HUNTERS' JOINING



Winchester Tales: The Hunters' Joining

WB/CW program *Supernatural*

Intended for adults, provided they have smoked a lot of crack beforehand

"Goddammit."

The road zips under the tires, black-slick by the beams of the headlights.

Dean wants them to go faster. Always faster. Not to or from anything urgent but simply moving; in motion forever.

Sam, shoes off so he can stretch his legs along the back seat as he sits against the door, isn't thinking of anything. Kid needs a rest. Deserves a bed in a real home and real food, not the vending machine crap and dive motel he'll get.

Sammy jolts and straightens, meeting John's eyes in the rearview.

"Don't, Dad. It's okay. I'm too tired to care where I sleep, and the vending machine might have red vines. I haven't had those for ages.

What is there to say when your fifteen-year-old can hear you beating yourself up in your head?

"Goddammit," John repeats under his breath, gunning the gas.

Soon as they're back inside the salt-lined margins of their room, Sam crashes out on his side of the second queen. John opens his mouth to ask if any of the cuts on Sam's arms need stitching, and then he realizes that he already knows every ache and sting on the boy. Sam's thoughts slow to flickers as he falls into exhausted dreams.

Dean's got a shiner coming up on his left eye, lid swollen low as he checks over the bag of weapons that started this clusterfuck of a night.

"Leave it. Get some sleep." John rests a hand on Dean's shoulder, surprised when Dean stiffens at the touch. A wave of the same smarmy, insincere charm John's seen turned on a dozen witnesses and waitresses when they've been working radiates out from Dean like an invisible halo, coupled with a forced smile.

"Sure, Dad. Thanks."

Once Dean's breathing softly on the bed beside Sam, John picks up the task of looking over the weapons.

There's a short, surprisingly heavy bow, the string frayed to remnants; a quiver with five arrows -- the fletching'll need to be replaced -- and a cracked but intact shoulder strap. The shield's a scarred circle of thick wood, overlaid with a dull bronze hub of metal at its center.

And then there's the sword, hilt and blade gleaming candy-bright by the neon of the vacancy sign outside the window. They'll have to get a scabbard for it. Maybe Jim can help them out with that.

John's got cultist blood drying on his jeans and his fingers feel a damn lot like they're sprained, and then there's this freaky telepathy spell shit they've been whacked with.

Magic. John *hates* magic.

Maybe that's because you can't get it to work for you nine times out of ten, a thought with a tone a lot like Dean's Sammy-teasing voice suggests quietly, but when John turns a sharp glance at his boys they both give every indication of uninterrupted sleep.

John sends a push of stern amusement back in return. Trust his kids to use this mess as just another chance to act up.

Too wiped to shower, John shucks his jeans and shirt, collapsing onto

his bed in boxers and t-shirt. They'll have to sort out this mind-reading thing tomorrow. The few references John's seen about it haven't mentioned how long the effect lingers after a blast of the sort the high priest whammied them with.

Dean seems to have picked up the knack of keeping his thoughts to himself already, so even a day or two should be all right. It's not like Sam knows how to keep his feelings quiet even in normal circumstances.

Most nights, John dreams of failing Mary. Sometimes in the fire; sometimes she's there among the faces of those poor kids who didn't make it back from Nam.

But, tonight, he's somewhere new, a low-set house with a broken front step and peeling yellow paint on the windowsills. They'd lived here for three or four months when the boys were six and ten.

"Dean?" John hears Sam call. His petulant whine has a strange edge to it, almost like a yowl. Then the kid crawls out from under the short flight of stairs.

"You feeling okay, Sam?" John manages to ask without laughing. Poking out of Sam's unruly mop of hair are two large, lightly furred kitten ears, the same tawny color as the twitching tail coming out from below the hem of his flannel overshirt.

"Dad?" Sam's eyes widen. "Did I get drugged or something?"

"I think this might be part of that curse we got hit with," John answers. "I think we're sharing each others' dreams."

"You dream about me as a cat." Sam's voice is flat. John chuckles.

"You'll have to ask your brother about that one, I think."

Sam turns toward the house, stepping up to test the doorknob and then heading inside. "Dean? I'm gonna kill you."

They find him in a room that could be any of the hundred small libraries they've stopped in for local research over the years.

"Didn't know you still thought about that," Dean remarks, gesturing to an open book full of Sam's tenth birthday, the day Dean taught Sam to drive the car on a blank, straight stretch of road.

Sam clears his throat. "Can we leave the nostalgia until after we've discussed my *ears*?"

Dean looks up from the pictures and makes a sound quite like a muffled yelp. "Oh, man, Sammy. I'm sorry, dude."

"Why the hell do you dream of me as a CAT?"

It's not fair to the kid, but Dean and John are both on the verge of losing the battle against hysterical laughter.

"It's not funny!" Sam complains, tail swishing with irritation.

"I had that little stray when we lived in this house, remember? We gave it to that Andrew kid in your class when we left."

"Cheetara? I'm *Cheetara*? Da-ad!"

John spreads his hands wide, showing his empty palms. "Sort it out between yourselves, boys."

Dean, no longer attentive to Sam's dilemma, looks thoughtful. "This could be okay, even if it lasts a coupla days. It's like Jedi mind reading or something. We're like Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Anakin."

Sam glares daggers at Dean's teasing grin. "I can't believe you just invoked *Episode One* on me."

"Fine. Dad can be Obi-Wan, you can be Luke. I'll be my man Han."

"Han Solo wasn't a Jedi. He didn't even believe in the Force. You can

be -" Sam squeezes his eyes shut, concentrating hard. There's a loud popping noise, and a smell like ozone.

Dean stares down at his brand new gold bikini. "Oh, you're going down for that one." He waves a hand at Sam, who spontaneously sprouts whiskers.

There's something strange about Dean now, here. It's not the lean, tanned lines of his body in the tiny, absurd costume, which are nothing a life of shared space hasn't revealed before. It's something in his... aura, in the set of him. A heat John's never sensed before, most of it still banked behind that same wall of charm-camouflage John felt in the motel room. Even dreaming, Dean can lie.

Dean's face colors, flush rising in his cheeks and spilling down his neck as he notices John taking stock of him.

"Gotta go," he says, and vanishes.

Sam pats his abruptly earless head and looks around. "This looks like one of my ordinary dreams now. Hey, Dad, why isn't any of you here?"

John doesn't know the answer to that, but he's glad it's true all the same. He's always wished there was a way for the boys to know their mother, but not as John sees her when he sleeps. Not the punishment his dreams provide.

Dean heads out before John and Sam wake up, leaving behind a note claiming that he's gone to find them some extra cash. John's guess is that he's taking a last chance to flirt with that spunky gas station attendant with the pink hair. She's had her eye on Dean since they got here two weeks ago, and now that they've got what they came for they'll be heading out as soon as they can.

What they came for. The sword.

John can feel a tight, triumphant smile on his face as he punches Bobby's number into his cell. "Check the papers for another job," he orders Sam as the earpiece rings.

"Bob Singer here."

"Bobby? It's John Winchester. I found it. I found the damn sword. It's real."

Bobby's silent for an overwhelmed second. "Damn."

"There's a bow and some other stuff too. No sign of the Colt, but the sword's sitting here beside me. Runes are just like in the book: *Slayer of all dragons, winged or flamed, scaled or demonic, this tooth of heaven.*"

"I can give you some protection work to keep it safe and hidden if you swing by the yard."

"Yeah, we're heading your way soon. I'm calling ahead because the boys and I got knocked around by some nasty-ass magic getting the sword. Think you could look it up? It -" John hesitates, not sure how to describe the situation so it doesn't sound crazy and stupid. "It's screwed up our dreams a bit, and -" John pauses to check. Sam's in a bad mood; it's all around him in brittle spikes. "Some empathy stuff. I caught a little of their chant, let me repeat it back to you."

Bobby makes him recite the incantation fragment through a couple of times, then says "I'll give you a call when I've got something. Sounds like a bonding spell. Cults like to build hive-minds with them. Sticks one soul to others. Until I get something, stay out from under each others' feet -- curses like this can mess with a man's head."

"Sure, thanks."

John ends the call and turns to look at Sam again. The kid's checking the papers through, just like John told him, but inside he's a tangle of resentments and wistful thoughts of his unfinished Math homework and the momentary lie of normalcy that doing it would provide.

Usually, John gets pissed off when Sam pulls his insolent routine, but seeing it from the inside's a different thing. On this occasion, at least, Sam's not looking to pull rank out from under John or fight for the sake of argument. Kid just wants to do his homework.

"You go learn your stuff for class. I'll do the papers," John offers. Sam looks up, surprised, and his thought-self glows grateful.

There's not much to pick from in the news. A few suspect deaths up north; maybe a haunting work a look in Virginia. The routine scouring for useful leads is comforting nonetheless, and it's a good ninety minutes before John raises his head again.

When he does, it's with a start of surprise. Sam's posture across the table has stiffened too, but his eyes are locked on a page of algebra as if he can hide amongst the numbers from the feelings buffeting them.

Dean's with that girl, in the back room of the gas station down the road, and despite himself his walls are coming down. Love, wanting, fire, fear -- Dean's a hurricane under his bright laughs and careful skills. And, like a whetstone along a blade's edge, everything's compounded by the secrets he locks deepest. The low, hot pang of desires too shameful to face head-on, especially not when Dean's whole life is spent side-by-side and back-to-back with the same strong shapes lurking in those dark dreams.

It's not that they can feel the shoves and touches on Dean's skin; it's more that they can feel him feel each one. John and Sam are audience to the pulse of pleasure Dean feels when the girl puts her mouth to the thick white scar that cuts between the freckles of his shoulder. Their own blood pounds with his as she slips her bra off and presses against him.

"Stay here," John growls at Sam, standing on shaky feet. It'll be almost as fast to walk to Dean as it would be to drive, and John's pretty sure he's in no condition to get behind the wheel.

Every step closer to Dean makes it worse. The girl's got silver rings on all her fingers, the warm metal a heavy touch on Dean's belly as she traces her way down slowly.

John's knuckles rap sharply on the old flyscreen door of the gas station, and hears second-hand the panic of Dean and his partner at the sound.

"Dean! Gotta go!" he calls. "Come on!"

"Dad, what's -" Dean starts, coming out from the back room half-dressed. His words die in his throat when he sees John's face. "Carissa, I have to run. I'm real sorry!" he yells over his shoulder as he hurries to join John outside.

Unable to wait any longer for contact, John grabs Dean's arm at the wrist and pulls him closer. The touch doesn't alleviate the want, though, it just makes it worse, and one of them groans quietly. This is Dean's need, Dean's wish, but with no barriers left between the cores of themselves it's impossible for John to feel it as anything but his own honest response.

Dean's got his undershirt sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans and his flannel unbuttoned, leaving an expanse of warm gold skin on display. John's not gonna be able to make it back to the motel room without something more than the thud of Dean's heartbeat under his fingertips, so he drags Dean behind one of the three empty stores in the space between the

station and the motel, and for the first time John's glad of an economy that leaves some small towns half-dead.

It's a feedback loop of want and want, breath and thought alike caught and shared in the space between them before John pins Dean back against the rough brick wall, wrenches his flannel off and away, and mimics gas-station-Carissa's slow lathe of tongue on scar.

It feels good, John can tell. Dean likes it. But it's not good enough. John shoves harder, inhaling the faintest traces of girlscent from Dean's skin, and lets his teeth scrape at the tender hollow below Dean's chin.

Jackpot. Dean's head snaps back against the brick with a brutal crack, but the stars in their heads aren't from pain. If John could think, he'd wonder at the old, old animal instincts at play; the acquiescence to the alpha's claim. As it is, he's hypnotized by the urgent buck of Dean's hips against his own.

Their life on the road doesn't hold many sensual pleasures -- their meals are bland and hasty, their surroundings rarely welcoming -- but John can feel now how Dean soaks up every scrap of sensation he encounters.

And now even the senses are no confinement for them, with everything beyond language laid bare as John unzips Dean's fly and slides his hand inside. The whimpers against John's mouth are the barest of echoes of what Dean shares from inside his head.

When they step back into the motel room, Sam's distress fills them like static and white noise. There are no words to it, but if there were they would be a furious hiss.

YOU ALWAYS LEAVE ME OUT OF EVERYTHING IMPORTANT I'M NOT A KID IT'S NOT FAIR.

"Sammy," John manages to croak, near-flattened by the onslaught.

Sam's sitting against the headboard of his bed, eyes narrow and glittering. "Bobby called back. He says we're stuck. It doesn't wear off for five to nine months." His chest heaves under the thin knit of his old t-shirt. "He said he was sorry."

The air smells like sweat and jerking off. It's hardly the first time John's been confronted by that atmosphere -- he's been sharing space with his teenage sons for years -- but never before has it hit him like the whirring teeth of a chainsaw, ripping him open.

Sam's lower lip is bitten red, swollen plump and damp. It's obvious he's been crying from the red on his eyes and the uneven hitch of his breath, and even without the signs John and Dean would know.

"Sam," Dean tries, and Sam jumps from the bed and runs past them for the door. When his arm connects with John's, skin on skin for barely a moment, it's like the burn of a brand. It's only years of self-control that keep John from staggering back.

"Sammy!" Dean calls, racing after his brother out the door and across the asphalt of the parking lot.

John sinks own onto the edge of the nearer bed, resting his hands on his knees and staring down at the stained, faded carpet.

He can feel it when Dean catches up with Sam, the crack and hurt of an argument and then the burst of lust and crush, the nip of teeth on lips. It floods John's head until there's room for nothing else, and he's never felt so turned on in his whole life. If this is what Sam felt when John and Dean were together, it's no wonder he was pissed off that they left him out.

John's got no clue how they'll cope with this.

Five to nine months.

"Goddammit," he says.

Seven Songs: Jo Harvelle

WB/CW program *Supernatural*
Suitable for all audiences

2006: Reo Speedwagon - I Can't Fight This Feeling

It's her crush song. It's the sticks of gum she used to give the shop class boys after school, and the movie stars she tore out of magazines to stick on her wall.

When she listens to it, it still makes her feel happy. It reminds her that other people can make her happy, sometimes, and that maybe there's still something good about letting them in close.

2005: Led Zeppelin - Stairway to Heaven

She lost her virginity to the album, and this song takes her back to lying on the bed with Rick beside her, his fingers tracing up and down her bare belly. They had eight months, and then.

She envies military wives. At least they get a flag and a funeral when their soldiers never come back.

2003: Dido - Hunter

She's not into this kind of music, mostly, but this song was on a mix CD that her roommate at college had, the one who told everyone that Jo was a giant freak who was into, like, gutting animals and stuff.

2003: Lloyd Cole and the Commotions - Rattlesnakes

This is one of the other songs that take her back to college. She found a bar near campus that was full of her kind of people, and they had this on their juke. She spent more time there than in class, which wasn't any big accomplishment considering that she dropped out after half a semester.

2003: Hole - Paradise City

She took a class called Gender Studies because she was tired of being treated differently by men, but when the professor started talking about how knives and guns were phallic metaphors and women who used them weren't really feminist, Jo got tired of trying to fight back when she didn't know the right language to argue in.

She turned this song up loud on her stereo, threw that fucking Dido CD out the window, and packed her bags for home.

2002: Belinda Carlisle - Summer Rain

It's totally weird and lame, but this is the song Jo likes to listen to when she misses her dad. A part of her, somewhere deep inside her, is still curled up safe in his arms, inside the smell of his leather jacket. She wishes she wasn't forgetting what that smell was like. It makes it hard to keep going, when something that important slips away so easily.

2001: The Eagles - Witchy Woman

This is one of the only songs Jo's got in common with her mom. They're both happy to have it playing while they're getting the bar set up in the afternoons. They argue so much, and more with every passing week it seems, so it's nice to have *something* as a common ground.

Cuckoo

Crossover between WB/CW program *Supernatural* and DC Comics, between *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and *Infinite Crisis*

Suitable for all audiences

They do an easy poltergeist job and a couple of simple low-grade hex clearances, nothing noteworthy, and Dad's jaw heals up fine, and Dean is climbing the walls with boredom.

It's another endless afternoon, with Sam sitting on an empty upturned drum beside the car while Dean tinkers under the hood, when things start happening again.

"It's as good as it's gonna get. You'll break something if you don't leave it," Sam says, unhelpfully, and Dean glares at him. They've both got dark crescents decorating below their lashes, and small new lines at the corners of their eyes and mouths.

The summer has been hard and lethargic, like the frustrated overheated funk at the end of a fever. The car's fixed up, and they're mending slowly, and if the silence got any heavier at the dinner table then they'd all end up pinned to the floor by it.

Bobby's been great, letting them all stay. He's only threatened Dad once, and that wasn't even with a gun, just a two-foot-long iron bar. The hunter network is still reeling from the bloody swathe Meg cut through their ranks, and nobody wants to lose any love with those left.

"You check the newspapers yet today?" Dean asks. Sam nods, tossing pebbles down against the ground.

"Yeah. There's nothing. It's like last year used up all the supernatural stuff, and there's deficit now."

"Or we're in the eye of a hurricane," Dean offers, straightening up from where he was bent over the car and looking up at the sky, as if there'll be some visible sign of the trouble he's predicting.

Dad announces his presence in the doorway into the house with a clear of his throat, and Dean can see Sam's posture straighten almost imperceptibly. It's almost pathetic, how careful they're all being with each other all the time. Figures that this stupid screwed-up family can forgive years of betrayed radio silence more easily than it can a display of heart-deep loyalty.

"I think we've got something to take a look at," Dad says.

Dean doesn't roll his eyes. "Some kid's ghost kitty trapped up a tree? A haunted washing line, maybe?"

"No, this is something real." Dad doesn't scold Dean for sass, and Dean is really sick of being allowed to get away with crap. "Seems like it's shown itself again."

"It?" Dean stands straighter, his sluggish blood going fast for the first time in too long. "The demon?"

Dad gives a nod. Dean glances over at Sam, and sees that twitch in his jaw that means he needs to hit something.

"Another baby?" Sam asks.

"No. A little girl. Julia Fellows. Lived with her grandparents. She's six years old." Dad glances between Dean and Sam, like he can't let his eyes fix on one thing. "A fire got the family last week. I checked. Pattern's the same. They're even calling it faulty wiring."

Dean swears and runs a hand through his hair. He may've been chomping at the bit for something like this to show up, but that doesn't mean he's happy about it.

"The little girl's okay?" Sam asks. Dad nods.

"Yeah, not a scratch on her. Get your stuff packed up."

For all that Dean might proclaim that the idea of normalcy makes him twitch, there's a shiver of comfort that goes through him when he's offered familiar, special stuff like that. There's some part of his brain that's still wired to feel at home in that moment, in that *Dad and Dean and Sammy are going on another trip* idea.

There's a bounce in Dean's step as he follows Dad and Sam back into Bobby's house.

When they're on the outskirts of the town, Dad calls Dean's cellphone from the truck.

"I want you and Sammy at the hospital. Go meet the girl, see what she remembers. I'll get us a room and secure it. Call me when you're done."

The call ends before Dean can affirm, and he sits back in the passenger seat with a slight frown.

"What?"

"We gotta charm our way into a children's ward."

"She's still in the hospital?"

"s what Dad said. I guess they don't know where else to put her yet."

Julia Fellows has wavy dark blonde hair and green eyes and freckles, and the second Dean sees her he feels ill.

Sam's still chatting to the nurse, about how Julia's a long-lost cousin and they heard the news about the fire and isn't it terrible.

Dean swallows back the near-overwhelming desire to flee from this tiny girl, and sits down on the floor of the playroom beside her.

"That's a nice wedding dress Ken's picked out for his big day, there. I like Barbie's cowboy boots."

She grins at him, and he doesn't flinch. "You wanna be her? Their wedding's about to be attacked by alien space monsters."

"Is she gonna waste 'em?"

"Yeah!"

"Okay, I'll be her." Dean takes the proffered doll.

"What's your name?"

"Dean."

"Nonna and Poppa called me Julia, but someone wrote Julie on the chart when I got here. I haven't made them change it, so that's what the nurses keep calling me. Hey, you're braiding her hair, that's cool! I can't make it go right."

Dean looks down at how his hands have been idly fiddling with Barbie's hair, and clears his throat. "Is it okay if we talk about your Nonna and Poppa a bit, Julia?"

She shrugs. "Guess so. But you can't tell Danielle, okay?"

"Who's Danielle?"

"She wears a suit and she thinks I'm crazy. And if I'm crazy, Daddy won't be allowed to find me somewhere new to live."

"Why would she think you're crazy?"

"Cos I told her what really happened. Now I tell her that I made it up, but I didn't really."

"What happened?"

Julia makes the Ken doll walk over to stand near the Barbie still held in Dean's hand. "First he says 'I got big plans for you, kiddo'. Then he makes Nonna yell, and her dress gets all bloody, and I scream a bit. Make Barbie scream."

Dean swallows, this throat dry. "Aah?" he manages, quietly.

"And then Poppa falls down dead, and Nonna too. The fire goes WHOOSH and the smiling man grabs me, but the blonde lady picks me up first and we run out the door to where Mrs Degraives from down the road is standing with a bunch of people looking at the fire."

"The blonde lady?"

"Uh-huh." Julia nods. "She talks to me when I'm asleep. So does the smiling man, but those are bad dreams."

"My brother gets those."

Julia's eyes go wide. "The same as me?"

Dean glances up at Sam again, then back to the little girl. Inside his head, he's still freaking the hell out. "Yeah. Can I take a picture of you with my phone? I want to ask my Dad something about you, but I need to be able to show him what you look like."

"Okay. Can Barbie be in the picture too?"

Dean grins, despite himself, and nods. "Sure."

"What do you mean, she looked exactly like me? She's a blonde with light eyes and really fair skin," Sam says, not looking away from the road as he drives to the motel Dad picked for them.

Dean scowls. "You didn't see her hands up close, dude. They were *exactly* like yours at that age. The shape of the nails, the width of the palm, all of it. And the way she moved her eyebrows when she talked. And, just, everything, okay?"

Sam shakes his head. "So you think, what? It's a genetic condition? We met Max, Dean. He and I didn't look anyth-"

"I don't know what it means! It just creeped me the hell out, okay?" Dean snaps, reaching over to turn the radio on loud so they don't have to talk anymore. Sam sighs, and lets him.

"This is one serious clusterfuck," Dean says, scrubbing his face with his palms. Dad looks like he wants to tell Dean off for his language. Sam looks exactly like Sam scowling always does. Dean forgot how small motel rooms could feel with the three of them all in one together.

"Most important thing is being sure that it's our guy. I'm not wasting a bullet on something we could banish another way." Dad's sitting in the other chair at the small table, opposite Dean. Sam is leaning against the doorframe leading to the bathroom, shifting restlessly.

"Unless there's a copycat, it's our guy. But it's not just that, it's all the other stuff Julia said. About how her Daddy's gotta find her a new place to live, and about the how some blonde lady saved her from the demon."

Sam straightens, face unreadable. "She said that?"

"Yeah. I think we gotta do some digging on her parents. If they're still alive, why's she living with her grandparents until now? If they're not... was that her mom? What if she's..." Dean shuts himself up. They haven't told Dad about what happened in their old house when they went back, and if Dean's got any say in it they never will.

"Like Mary was?" Dad finishes for him, and that's just too fucking typical for words. Yeah, Dean's not sick of not being told stuff at *all*.

"But her grandparents' house wouldn't be the same place Julia was a baby in, even if her mother did die like that. We don't know if spirits like... like Mom was, if they can leave the houses they got attacked in."

"I think they can." Sam's voice is quiet. "I saw Jess in Ohio."

"What the hell?" Dean stands up, hearing the clatter as his chair falls backwards onto the worn carpet. "Thanks for mentioning it!"

"I didn't think she was real! I thought I was hallucinating!" Sam snaps back.

"Newsflash, Sam, the things you hallucinate are usually true! Jesus, I can't believe... no, I can. I can believe too goddamn easily."

Grabbing his keys, Dean stalks his way to the door. "I'm going researching. If anybody's got any startling revelations they wanna share, they'd better do it now."

He waits a beat. Dad and Sam at least have the decency to stay quiet.

Dean doesn't slam the door on the way out, but hopes they know how much he wants to.

It takes a few hours of serious digging, but Dean's glad of that. It stops him thinking about other stuff, like how he can't get the image of Julia's perfect little Sam-hands out of his head.

Finally, he finds a little of what he was hoping for. Ben and Laura Fellows lived in New Jersey, until Laura died in a fire. Since then, Ben seems to have taken jobs anywhere but where his daughter's been growing up with Laura's parents.

A little more work and Dean finds a cell number, and leaves a message on the guy's voicemail. Just *hey, you don't know me, I think you might need my help, call me*.

How people got any hunting done before the age of instant technology, Dean has no friggin' idea.

Dad's waiting against the car in the library's parking lot when Dean emerges back into the world outside research.

"I sent Sam off to find us dinner. Said I'd ride back with you," he explains. "Guess you're pretty steamed at me, huh?"

Dean nods, not trusting himself to speak an answer. "C'mon, let's go."

Once they're in the car and ready to move, Dad starts talking again, because heaven forbid they'll ever let something just drop. Dean's spent most of his life trying to educate his family on the finer points of not acting like a Bette Midler movie, but it's a losing battle.

"I didn't see the point in talking about what happened in Lawrence, that's all."

"Dad..." Dean rests his hands on the wheel, and does his best not to get worked up. "I can't carry it all, y'know? I try, but you and Sammy... it's like you just keep piling it on, like I'm not already drowning under it. Do you have any idea how many times over the summer I woulda liked to talk about what happened with somebody who remembered Mom?"

"I didn't see the point," Dad repeats, like that's any kind of answer at all.

"And this Julia kid. She's so much like Sam, Dad. It's not coincidence. It can't be. Look at this picture." Dean fumbles with his phone, getting the photo he took at the hospital up on the screen. "See?"

Dad narrows his eyes and nods. "Yeah, I see it."

"It means something, but I'm not sure I wanna know what."

Dad squeezes Dean's shoulder. "We'll figure it out. The three of us. We always do, sooner or later."

Dean can think of about twenty exceptions to that rule, but he bites his tongue and guns the car.

He hasn't had to share a bed with Sam since Sam was a teenager, and if Dean gets his shin kicked one more time he's not going to be responsible for his actions. So he's not actually sleeping when his phone goes off quietly sometime after two, and he's glad of the excuse to get up and head outside.

"Dean Winchester? My name's Ben Fellows. You called me."

"Yeah, hi. Look, I know you don't know me, but I think I know what's going on with your daughter, and --"

"Where're you staying? I'll come to you." Poor guy sounds tired. Dean thinks about the stuff they're gonna have to talk about, and feels bad. Guy's about to get a whole lot tired.

It's only about twenty minutes before Ben gets to the motel. He doesn't look a thing like his daughter, with dark hair and a deep tan. Dean hasn't gone back inside. Might as well let the others sleep for as long as they can.

"Hey, I'm-- whoa, okay, let's take it easy," Dean says, holding his hands up in protest as Ben aims a pistol at his face. "What the hell?"

"You stay the hell away from her. I know what you are," Ben says coldly. The gun is shaking a little as he trembles.

"I don't know what you think you know, but I promise, you got the wrong idea."

"You're gonna try to tell me that you're not a hunter? That those chalk scuffs on the door frame there aren't a protective seal?"

"Uh?" Dean manages. "Can we back this up a bit, preferably without firearms?"

"I won't let you touch her." Ben's words would be a hiss, if they weren't so much like a cry. "You hear me? You can't have her. Go find something else to kill."

"What the hell makes you think I'd-- I don't know who you've been talking to, but I'm not exactly in the habit of killing innocent girls!"

Dean's mind does *not* conjure an image of Meg's broken, peaceful body.

Ben's expression goes from furious to confused. "But you know what she is. You know... about Laura?"

"Your wife? Yeah, I know. The same thing happened to my mom, actually, since we're sharing. Why the hell would you think your baby had anything to do with it? And can we please drop the gun from my face now? I think the conversation's moved on."

Ben, thank Christ, lowers the pistol. His eyes are shiny with tears in the dim light. "You don't know, do you?"

"Don't know what?" Maybe Dean's tone is a little pissy, but he's had just about enough shit in the last 24 hours to last him at least another couple of months.

"Julia's not... we couldn't have kids. Laura got into trouble when we were in college, and there was an infection after, and... we waited so long to get a baby. It was... people say you don't love adopted babies in that same way. That it can't replicate biology, no matter what. But I tell you, that first day we held our daughter, that was family. That was something bigger than blood. And then for Laura to die like that." Ben shakes his head, wiping his eyes with

the back of the hand still holding the gun. "I'd look into my little girl's face and it was like she could see every thought in my head. If I put too many blankets on her, a pane in the window would crack open and let the cold air in. I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't be near her. Not after Laura."

"You." Dean can't even finish the thought. He's not even sure what he was going to say. "That's why she lived with her grandparents?"

"You're not a parent. You don't understand. She's still my little girl. I couldn't hurt my little girl. And I won't let you hurt her either."

Dean's new best friend, Mr Gun, comes back up into view, but this time Dean's got enough warning to duck low and tackle Ben down to the ground.

"Sorry," Dean says, and genuinely means it, as he punches the guy out.

The sun's up and Dean feels like death warmed over when Sam comes to join him in the front seat of the car.

"Remember when you were twelve, and you'd sit in here all the time? Dad would have to ask your permission to drive us anywhere."

Dean smiles a little, just a little, at the memory. "It was my space. We didn't exactly get much alone-time. How's he doing?"

"Ben Fellows? Okay. I think Dad's finally convinced him that we're not here to kill his daughter."

"That's good," Dean says, and then he turns to stare really hard at Sam's face.

"What? Do I have drool or something?" Sam asks, pretending to wipe his mouth. "What, Dean?"

"You know that, no matter what, you're my brother. Right? Nothing'll change that."

Sam looks surprised for a moment, then puzzled. "Okay? What's with you?"

"I just wanted you to know."

Another quizzical look, and then Sam shrugs. "Whatever. Dad wants you to drop me at the grocery store. Then he wants to talk to you, and he wants you and Ben to get Julia from the hospital."

"How come I get all the grunt work?"

"I guess 'cos you're just so good at it," Sam says with a smarmy grin. Dean smacks his arm, and feels a little better.

Ben's asleep on one of the beds -- lucky bastard -- when Dean gets back from dropping off Sam, and Dad's checking the laptop.

"Ever seen this?" he asks Dean, pointing to the screen. It's a photo of Mom when she was about thirteen, with her face painted up for Halloween, standing with her parents and some of her cousins.

"I keep a bunch of the photos that got saved from the fire in my email," Dad explains. "I like being able to hold a thing in my hand, but digital's a good failsafe. See this guy here? That's Mary's uncle Bert. You kids never got to meet him. Got lung cancer from all those damn Lucky Strikes he was always puffing on. Sammy's smile's the spitting image of his. Height's from him, too."

Dean swallows, and blinks. "Yeah?"

"I know all the lore about changelings and stuff. I wouldn't let something like that get past me. I can't say I wouldn't react in a way damn near to how Ben there did, if I did find something, but I didn't. You got me?" Dad's got his no-bullshit face on.

Dean nods. "Yes, sir."

"Why don't you go get Julia on your own, and let Ben get some more sleep, huh?"

Glad of an excuse to get away before his face betrays him any more than it is, Dean nods again. "I'll be back soon."

Julia's drawing pictures when Dean gets to the hospital. A fish; a tree; a collection of shapes she helpfully explains is 'Hogwarts'.

"Wanna come see your dad?" he asks. Her small, inexplicably familiar face looks unsure.

"Is he mad at me?"

Dean smooths her hair. It's gotta be how much like Sammy she looks; he can't stop himself from wanting to take care of her. "No. He's not anymore. Not ever again."

The smile on Julia's face is heartbreakingly sweet. "Really?"

"Really. C'mon, let's sign you out."

"You mean we're not absconding?"

Dean laughs. "Where'd you hear a word like that."

Julia shrugs. "I forget."

A nurse tries to take the Barbie and Ken back, but Dean gives her a fifty and a wink and gets her to let Julia keep them. It's the least Dean can do for the kid.

The first time he glances in the rearview on the drive back to the motel, he's sure he imagines the faint white shape visible there. The second time, Dean chalks it up to tiredness.

The third time, he glances into the back seat, where Julia's staring out the window at the passing scenery.

"You okay, Julia?" he asks, turning back to the road.

"She's fine."

Dean jumps at the unexpected voice and looks in the mirror again. A young, blonde woman is sitting beside Julia, her edges fuzzy and her color desaturated in that tell-tale cheapass-horror-movie way.

"Shit!"

He pulls the car over to the curb, and turns. He can see her even without the mirror, now. She's... he's seen her before. He knows that face.

"We took on a bunch of thugs together, once," she prompts, her voice musical and amused. There's something of Julia in her smile, or maybe that's the wrong way around.

The penny drops. All the pennies. An avalanche of pennies. Dean can feel his eyes widen. "Steph."

"You guys know each other?" Julia asks, completely unfazed by the situation.

"We met once," Steph answers, the same serene smile still on her mouth.

Dean doesn't know what to say.

"I tried to call you when I found out," Steph goes on.

"My phone got busted in the quake."

"I know that, now."

"Did you... was it the demon?" Dean asks, choked.

She shakes her head. "No. Just Gotham. It's that kind of town."

"I remember," Dean agrees. Then, quietly: "I'm sorry, Steph."

She reaches out to touch his cheek. It feels like a breeze. "You take care yourself, okay? The day might come that Julia needs you."

Dean's eyes are welling up, and they're gonna spill the next time he blinks. "You'll keep watch on her?"

"I'm right here, you know," Julia pipes up. They both look at her, and Dean feels a shaky smile on his mouth.

"Yeah," Steph answers him, after a moment. "It'll take more than death to keep me from fighting the good fight."

"Knew there was a reason I liked you."

"Yeah. It was because I was a *hottie*."

"That, too," Dean agrees, and when she smiles it makes his chest hurt.

"Daddy!" Julia cries with delight, throwing herself into a sleep-haggard Ben's arms. He hugs her back awkwardly, like he's not sure if he remembers exactly how.

Dean busies himself double-checking that they've packed everything, only half-listening as Dad gives Ben a bunch of contact numbers and orders him to call if anything happens. Ben and Julia are planning to go on the road themselves; to stay one step ahead as long as they can. Until the battle's won.

When their stuff's all packed, and Dean's staked himself a claim on the back seat so he can get some sleep without Sam's feet bruising his ankles, Julia approaches the car with her toys clutched in her hands.

"You keep Barbie, and I'll keep Ken, okay? Then, when we meet up next time, we can play again," she says earnestly, shoving the present into his hands.

Dean's fingers curl around the doll, and he nods. There's a lump in his throat the size of a baseball.

She gives him an ageless, just-like-Sammy look, and goes back to stand with Ben as Dad and Sam join Dean at the car.

"We headed back to Bobby's?" Sam asks, before Dad parts with them to go to the truck.

"Nah. Thought we'd try the road for a while. See what we find," Dad answers. "You okay there, Dean? You look like something's up."

"Nah," Dean answers, after a few seconds. "I'm good."