

1. Home Again

“C’mon, dude, admit it. You’re just jealous ‘cause I was such a big hit with the ladies, while you spent the whole trip stuffing your...”

Beast Boy’s voice trailed off as he entered the common room of Titans Tower, sheer bewilderment having stopped him dead in his tracks. As a result, Cyborg nearly tripped over him.

“Hey! What the--?!”

“We have house guests,” Raven observed, peering out from behind her massive teammate’s bulk. Her tone was, predictably, less than ecstatic.

“Hey, guys!” Kid Flash called, darting over to them from the far end of the room in the blink of an eye. There was at least one other unexpected person present, and busily rummaging through the refrigerator, hidden from view by the open door.

“Back from Tokyo, huh?” Kid Flash was saying. “Didja have a good trip – well, except for the part about Robin getting thrown in jail for murder, anyway?” He grinned mischievously.

“Ummm...” Beast Boy started, but didn’t get much further than that.

“Uh...yeah, Kid Flash – it’s Kid Flash, right?” Cyborg attempted, pausing for the teen speedster to nod in affirmation before continuing. “Don’t take this the wrong way; it isn’t that we’re not happy to *see* you, but, um...what are you *doing* here?”

“Yeah, and how’d this place get so, so...*clean*?” Beast Boy added. “It was kind of a mess, when we left.”

“Oh, that?” Kid Flash shrugged dismissively. “Things have been slow, and *she* insisted on tidying the place up a bit.” He nodded toward the kitchen area.

“I hope it’s all right,” Wonder Girl said, looking hesitant as she closed the refrigerator door. “I figured you’d all be tired, after such a long trip, and it seemed like the least we could do.”

Beast Boy and Cyborg exchanged a brief glance, wordlessly asking each other if this were too good to be true. Raven rolled her eyes.

“As for what we’re doing here,” Kid Flash explained, stifling a yawn, “Robin asked me to keep an eye on the city for you while you guys were in Japan, and I happened to meet up with WG on my way over. ...Didn’t he tell you?”

“Uh...no, he didn’t.” Cyborg frowned, rubbing the back of his head. “But I guess he *has* been kinda...distracted, lately.”

“Where *is* Robin, anyway? And Starfire, for that matter?” Kid Flash asked, craning his neck in an effort to look around and behind them.

“They’re still in the landing bay,” Raven answered as she raised her hood, “Being *more than heroes*, probably.” With that, she retreated toward the corner with a book.

“‘More than heroes’?” Wonder Girl repeated, raising an eyebrow. “What does *that* mean?”

Beast Boy’s answer was a series of exaggerated kissing noises.

There was an awkward pause, while everyone absorbed that.

“Well, *took* ‘em long enough,” Kid Flash commented.

“Yeah, you’re tellin’ *YOU FIXED THE SOFA!!!*” Cyborg exploded with glee, suddenly noticing the undamaged furniture. He rushed over to it, beside himself with joy.

“Eheh...replaced, actually,” Wonder Girl corrected. “I’m afraid the old one was beyond help. But, we tried to find one almost just like it...I hope it’s okay...?”

Cyborg solemnly turned to face her. “I could kiss you,” he told her, “if I didn’t think you’d break my heart – and I mean that physically.”

Now it was *her* turn to laugh, while in the far corner, Raven muttered something under her breath about moving to a different area code.

From there, Cyborg launched into an involved discussion with Wonder Girl and Kid Flash about Tower repairs and possible renovations, while Beast Boy rummaged through what he now found to be a bafflingly *organized* kitchen in search of a vegetarian snack. Tucked off in the opposite corner, Raven effectively disappeared into her book, which was where she remained a few minutes later when Robin and Starfire finally entered the room, hand in hand.

Upon sighting their guests, Starfire’s eyes widened and she broke into an impossibly broad grin. “*Wonder Girl!!!*” she exclaimed, releasing Robin to launch herself across the room and catch the other girl in a hug that would surely have killed anyone who wasn’t an Amazon. “And Kid Flash, as well! Your presence is unexpected and joyous!!”

“It’s good to see you, too, Starfire,” Wonder Girl smiled, responding with a superhumanly powerful embrace of her own.

“Welcome back,” Kid Flash added, looking slightly grateful for a change of subject from Cyborg’s tech-talk.

“Yeah, Robin, about that.” Cyborg rubbed his chin meaningfully. “Was there something you forgot to mention?”

Robin stared at him for a moment, his expression blank. “What...didn’t I tell you guys that I’d asked Kid Flash to house-sit for us, while we were in Tokyo?” The Boy Wonder looked mildly embarrassed. “Sorry...I guess I was so focused on the whole Saico-Tek thing at the time, it must’ve slipped my mind.”

“*‘Slipped your mind’*, huh?” Cyborg repeated, relishing the opportunity to get in a dig at his leader. “S’okay, s’okay...we all know you’ve had a lot on your plate, lately.”

Robin and Starfire simultaneously blushed, right on cue.

Suddenly, Kid Flash was leaning conspiratorially over Robin’s shoulder. “So, Robin,” he winked, “welcome to the ranks of the romantically entangled.”

The Boy Wonder's expression went from shocked to embarrassed to indignant, and he opened his mouth for a retort, but Beast Boy interrupted.

"Hey, dude, he's not the *only* one who got lucky in Japan! I brought back, like, *a hundred an' fifty-eight* phone numbers!" And he whipped out an impressively long sheet of handwriting-covered paper as supporting evidence, but when he turned it around for his own viewing, his ears drooped. "...Too bad they're all overseas numbers, an' I can't read any o' the names next to 'em."

"*Silkie!!*" Starfire was gushing, meanwhile, as she bent down to scoop up the happily cooing mutant maggot that was wriggling across the floor toward her. "Hel-lo, my little *bumgorf!* I have missed you terribly, as well!"

Wonder Girl suppressed a nervous giggle. "Yeah, um...we weren't exactly sure what he ate, so, we, uh...sort of let him eat what was left of the old sofa. He seemed to like that all right."

To the Titans' surprise, the main doors behind Robin slid open yet again.

"*Dude!!!*" Beast Boy yelled, leaping over to high-five the blond, green-eyed youth who'd just entered the room. "Jericho, my *man!* What is *up!!*"

Robin raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Yeah, he showed up yesterday," Kid Flash filled them in. "Let himself in, and the Tower's defense grid gave him the green light, so we figured he was cool."

"Oh, he is *definitely* that," Beast Boy grinned, nudging the newcomer affectionately. "We never coulda beat the Brotherhood, in Paris, without him."

Jericho smiled and rubbed the back of his head, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Huh." Kid Flash scratched his chin. "Thought he looked familiar. Yeah, he doesn't say much, but he wrote something down about having an urgent message for you guys, when you got home."

At this, all eyes turned toward Jericho, who nodded earnestly, then...hesitated.

"Well, *this* could be tricky," Cyborg frowned, recalling Jericho's inability to speak.

"Ah!" Starfire exclaimed, raising her 'idea finger'. "Perhaps I could—"

"**NOT. NECESSARY,**" Robin grated, just a little bit too emphatically, holding out a hand to restrain her. While the others looked on in confusion, he stepped up to Jericho and fired off a series of rapid hand gestures.

Jericho's face lit up, and he responded with his own series of gestures. The two of them quickly became engrossed in their sign language conversation.

"Oh," Cyborg raised an eyebrow. "Well, that works too."

While the boys stood around waiting to see what would come of all this, Starfire turned back to Wonder Girl, hugging Silkie like a wriggling, maggoty teddy bear.

“Truthfully, Wonder Girl,” she said in a quiet voice, her eyes shining, “I must confess, I am particularly overjoyed at your presence. For some time, I have been longing for the companionship of someone with whom I could do...the Girl Talk.”

“Really?” Wonder Girl blinked, taken aback at this. “What about...?”

Her voice trailed off as she followed Starfire’s awkward glance toward Raven’s corner, where she was sitting with her back to them, her nose buried in her book.

“...Ah. I understand.” Wonder Girl gave Starfire a reassuring smile. “Okay, then, where’s your room?”

Family

A **Teen Titans** story

Written by Corey W. Smith

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(This story is based on Warner Animation’s version of those characters.)

2. But we just got back!

A short time later, Titans Tower's main viewing screen flared to life, displaying the image of an elderly gentleman in formal attire. He looked somewhat surprised.

"Well, well! The Teen Titans!" he exclaimed, with a noticeable British accent. *"So, you must have received the message, after all!"*

Robin nodded politely, almost managing to completely hide his impatience. "Yes, we were given your frequency by our friend Jericho, who also said you had some urgent information for us. Mister...?"

"Ah, forgive me! Where are my manners?" The man straightened his tie.

"My name is Wintergreen. I am actually an acquaintance of Jericho's mother, who happens to be a private investigator. I recently came across some disturbing information pertaining to a case she has been working on, involving a girl who has apparently been kidnapped. Upon reviewing my findings, she decided that you might be better equipped than either of us to resolve this matter. So, knowing of her son's honorary membership in your organization, she dispatched him with instructions on how to contact me...and well, now, so you have!"

"So we have," Robin nodded, still polite, but wanting to get to the point of all this. "What can you tell us about this girl?"

"Ah, yes." Nodding, Wintergreen produced a portrait photo of a girl who looked slightly younger than Beast Boy. Her appearance was mostly unremarkable, save for the fact that her long, straight hair was completely white.

"Her name is Rose, and she is a very special child. You see, she has the gift of precognition. And that, I fear, is also the reason she has been abducted."

Robin pretended not to hear Beast Boy and Cyborg whispering about the definition of 'precognition' behind him. "Do you have any idea who's behind this, or where they're holding her?"

Wintergreen nodded again, his expression grave. *"My information points toward a most sinister character, who goes by the name of Brother Blood. I gather you are already familiar with him."*

Robin frowned. "Yes, we've dealt with Blood before...so, I take it he's planning to brainwash Rose into joining the H.I.V.E. Academy, then?"

"I'm afraid I'm not privy to his specific intentions, but needless to say, they are surely not benevolent. I fear I do not have their precise location, either...however. I have been in contact with an...informant, who has been tracking their activities." He looked down for a moment, and the sound of typing could be heard.

"I am sending you a set of coordinates where you can make contact with my informant, in person. They should be able to lead you to Brother Blood, and help you to unravel his plot."

Robin glanced down at his own computer monitor, to verify that the data had come through. It had, and the location appeared to be a small island several hundred miles to their south, off the coast of Mexico.

Looking back up at the main viewer, he nodded firmly in confirmation. "Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Mr. Wintergreen. We'll get right on it."

"*Quite so.*" The older man smiled, then paused. "*There's...one other detail I should mention.*"

"Oh?"

"*I must confess that even I do not know the identity of the informant I'm sending you to meet; their anonymity has always been a condition of our interactions. However, given the nature of this situation and the kinds of knowledge they have access to, it is likely that their own record is not without...blemishes, if you take my meaning. In fact, the last message I received from them hinted that your paths have crossed before...and, I suspect, not amiably.*"

Robin's expression darkened. *Great.* "In other words, to find what's been stolen, we need to ask a thief."

"*Precisely so, I'm afraid.*" Wintergreen smiled apologetically.

"Well, in that case," Cyborg interjected, "How are we supposed to tell your informant apart from the *other* bad guys we're expecting to run into?"

"*I'm glad you asked! You will know them by this password: Sweet Lilli.*"

"*Sweet Lilli, huh?*" Robin sighed in mild annoyance. "All right, then. Thanks again for the information, we'll keep you posted."

Wintergreen nodded agreeably, and they signed off.

"So!" Beast Boy blurted as the screen winked out, unable to restrain himself any longer. "Y'think that dude has a brother named Spearmint?"

No one laughed.

"Doublemint?" Beast Boy tried again. "Pepper...?"

"We got it," Cyborg interrupted.

Robin turned to face them. "Well, you heard the man. Let's get ready to move out. The sooner we stop Blood, the better."

"Dude, I didn't even get to unpack!" Beast Boy complained.

"Well then, that saves you the trouble of having to pack *again*, doesn't it?" Cyborg pointed out.

Meanwhile, Jericho was signing enthusiastically.

"Oh? Um...sure, you're welcome to come along," Robin replied, slightly taken aback by the offer. "What about you, Kid Flash?"

The yellow-clad youth grinned sheepishly. "Well, actually, I should probably be getting back to Keystone City...but, if you need an extra hand, just beep me and I'll be there!" He held up his communicator.

Robin nodded. "So noted. Will Wonder Girl be going with you, too, then?"

"Good question. I'll ask her on my way out. Catch you guys later, it's been real!" And with that, Kid Flash darted out of the room, leaving a strong breeze in his wake.

"You do realize that the T-Ship only has five seats, don't you?" Raven suddenly pointed out from behind them.

The others nearly jumped at her voice; they hadn't noticed her approach during the conversation with Wintergreen.

"Hmm, that could be a problem," Robin admitted. "Cyborg...?"

The cybernetic teen rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Eh, I think I can throw something together...might not be pretty, but it should get the job done. Give me about twenty minutes, and I'll meet you outside."

* * *

Kid Flash didn't have much trouble finding Starfire's room; all he had to do was follow the laughter.

"—You've got to be kidding. He actually *said* that...??"

"Oh, not only that, but furthermore—!"

"Knock knock, ladies!" he called out as he slowed down to 'normal' speed, before approaching the open door. He didn't want to be accused of eavesdropping, after all.

Starfire and Wonder Girl looked up from where they were seated on Starfire's circular bed, with Silkie happily wriggling back and forth between them.

"Hey, you two. I was about to take off, and...wow. It certainly is *purple* in here," Kid Flash commented, noticing the room's décor.

Starfire beamed, and Wonder Girl cocked an eyebrow, prompting him to continue.

"Right, anyway...it looks like the team's got a mission, something about rescuing some girl from Brother Blood. Jericho's going with them, and they're gearing up to head out now. As for me, I need to check in back at home, so, can I give you a lift back while I'm at it, WG?"

"Well..." She cast an uncertain glance at Starfire. "Maybe I'll come along on the mission, too...that is, if it's all right?"

"Oh, how joyously delightful!" the alien girl exclaimed. "Your assistance is most welcome and appreciated!"

"Alright, suit yourself." Kid Flash shrugged. "I already mentioned this to Robin, but if you guys need another extra hand, just give me a ring and I'll come running." Grinning, he turned to leave.

"Kid Flash?"

"Yes, Starfire?" He paused at the doorway.

“Even though she does the black magic, has committed many serious crimes and hurt many people, has repeatedly attempted to cause us severe harm on many occasions in the past, has willingly worked for both Slade and the Brother Blood, has nearly always chosen to do the Wrong Thing and is devious, deceitful, villainous, generally untrustworthy and possibly still evil...” she paused for a breath. “...Please convey my genuinely fond greetings to Jinx.” And she smiled warmly.

Kid Flash blinked as he processed all of that, then laughed, despite himself.

“I’ll, um...do that. Thanks, Star.”

As he raced back across the continental United States, he reflected that only Starfire could say something like that with such total sincerity and complete lack of malice, veiled or otherwise.

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3. The Invisible Wall

Twenty minutes later, the remaining six heroes had gathered outside the Tower, where they were presently greeted by a strange sight.

A large, grayish-green, dome-shaped vehicle of some sort came roaring around the island from behind the Tower, kicking up waves as it turned toward them. It was ringed at the base by what looked like a very large, fully inflated rubber inner tube, its front and sides were lined with sloping viewports, and it was propelled by four large, powerful turbine fans mounted on the rear. But the biggest surprise was to follow as it aimed straight at the shore, but instead of running aground in the shallows, it continued to travel up onto, and then over, the land as easily as it had over the water! The vehicle finally came to a halt just in front of its amazed audience.

A large hatch swung open on the side of the vehicle, and Cyborg's head popped into view. "Well, what do y'all think?"

"What *is* it?" Beast Boy asked, still mystified.

"It's a hovercraft," Cyborg replied. "I threw it together with parts I salvaged from that mobile weapons platform thing we confiscated from Dr. Chang, last month. Like I said, it may not be pretty, but I think she'll get the job done." He pressed something inside the hatch, and an extendable boarding ramp obediently slid down toward them.

"You threw *this* together in twenty minutes?" Robin asked, in disbelief.

"Well, it's an idea I've been working on for a while, now, and I already had a lot of the separate components ready to go...was just a matter of putting it all together, but that didn't take long." Cyborg rubbed his chin. "Give me a few more days, and I'd have her all properly decked-out, but I figured you'd all want to get underway...so, that can wait 'till we get back."

"It resembles a giant, amphibious *glorg!*" Starfire announced happily.

"So, is this...the *T-Craft*, then?" Wonder Girl guessed.

Cyborg shook his head. "Not yet. She's cruisin', but unproven. Needs a proper breakdown run, and a few more personal touches before I'll be ready to officially slap a 'T' on her, in good conscience."

"Sounds really safe," Raven commented.

"No, it ain't like that, I just want to add some more features before I'll consider her a proper T-vehicle, is all. But as it is, she's practically unsinkable," he assured her, patting the hull affectionately.

"So was the *Titanic*."

Before Cyborg could respond, Beast Boy started jumping up and down, waving his arms.

"Ooh! Me! I've got a temporary name! Let's call it...the Hover-Turtle!"

Cyborg glared at him. “Hey now, that’s...” Suddenly he stopped, blinking in amazement. “...Actually, not all that bad.”

“*Yessss!*” Beast Boy promptly launched into a victory dance.

Robin cleared his throat impatiently. “Well then, if that’s all settled, can we *leave* already?”

“Thought you’d never ask! *All aboard!*” Cyborg waved a huge arm at them, before ducking back inside the vehicle.

Jericho positioned himself next to the boarding ramp and held out his hand, inviting the others to board ahead of him. Which they all did, one by one, until only Raven was left.

She stepped up to the ramp, then suddenly stopped, and turned to look at him.

“You’re...*his* son, aren’t you?” she asked, her expression hidden within the shadows of her hood.

For a moment, Jericho blinked in surprise, caught off guard by her question. Then he smiled, and shrugged apologetically.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, and swept past him up the ramp.

* * *

“The interior of this vehicle is most expansive,” Starfire observed, once everyone was aboard.

“Who cares, as long as Cyborg’s payin’?” Beast Boy quipped.

“Well, this *is* a rescue mission, after all,” Cyborg pointed out, ignoring him. “I figured we’d need some extra room. In fact, we could even load the T-Car on board, if we took out some of the seats.”

The Turtle’s cabin *did* have room to spare. There was easily enough space to comfortably seat the seven Titans in attendance, and then some. Once they’d all settled in for the ride, Cyborg engaged the turbines and sent them skimming over the water at an impressive speed, heading due south.

Once they’d gotten underway, Beast Boy insisted on hanging his head out a porthole as a dog, much to Cyborg’s and Raven’s annoyance. Meanwhile, Robin and Starfire made a concerted effort to inconspicuously sit in close proximity with each other, while chatting with Cyborg and Wonder Girl, respectively. And despite the cabin’s roughly circular shape, Raven managed to find a far corner toward the back, below a porthole, where she resumed her reading.

As for Jericho, he found a seat across from her, though still a comfortable distance away. After they’d been at sea for about half an hour, he pulled out his acoustic guitar and began casually playing a soft, mellow tune. The other Titans took turns glancing back at him, initially surprised at the sound, but made no comment. Robin, Starfire and Cyborg

eventually began absently nodding their heads (or clapping, in Starfire's case) to the music, however.

After a while, when it appeared no one else was paying attention, Raven peered over the cover of her book at the blond musician. "That's...nice," she told him, hesitantly.

Jericho immediately looked up and smiled warmly at her.

In response, Raven turned an interesting color and retreated back behind her book.

Meanwhile, Robin was studying the cockpit instrumentation and GPS displays. "I have to admit, we're making pretty good time," he remarked. "But even at this rate, it'll be close to nightfall by the time we reach the rendezvous point."

Cyborg nodded. "Yeah, I might try adding a retractable hydrofoil when we get back. But I'm glad I at least had time to add the extra turbines, and boost their collective output strength."

"I wonder if this island we're headed to is populated?" Wonder Girl mused aloud. "Even if it's not, the jungle can have its own charms."

"Oh, I wish that I could show you the vast, untamed wilds of Tamaran!" Starfire sighed wistfully. "To see the moons rise over the tallest mountain peaks, in the glow of twilight...but sadly, it is so very far away..."

Wonder Girl smiled at her sympathetically. "Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes," Starfire admitted. "But, the last time I was there...I realized that the Earth has now become my home. And it is here, among my friends, that I feel most at ease." She brightened. "Perhaps, someday, you might permit *us* to visit *your* island home, Wonder Girl? I have heard many tales of its beauty!"

The other girl fidgeted. "Well, um...I can't make any promises, but maybe, they *might* be persuaded to allow *you* to visit someday, Starfire. To be honest, I think you'd fit in pretty well there!" The alien girl clapped her hands excitedly at this.

"But..." Wonder Girl continued, looking uncomfortable, "I'm afraid they probably wouldn't allow the other Titans to visit there."

Starfire's face fell. "No? But why not? They are our friends!"

Wonder Girl nodded apologetically. "I know, but it's one of the most important Amazon rules...no men are allowed to set foot on Paradise Island, ever. They're *really* strict about it."

Beast Boy suddenly returned to human form, and pulled his head back inside. "Dude! A whole *island* full of nothing but Amazon chicks??" he exclaimed, sounding far too interested for his own good. "That's *awesome*—!"

He broke off as he realized the others were glowering at him with various degrees of disapproval.

He frowned. "What? I'm just sayin'..."

* * *

Raven remained absorbed in her book for the next several hours, until the vehicle stopped moving, which led her to assume they'd arrived at their destination.

She'd read this particular novel before; several times, in fact. But it gave her something to focus on, helped her to block out the torrent of emotions all around her...it wasn't quite meditation, but it was the next best thing, as far as she was concerned.

She supposed the others might have found it odd for her to take such comfort in a book like this one, as it dealt primarily with suicide, loss and disintegrating family bonds. Yet, to her, it felt...fitting, somehow, to be reading this book on this mission. She didn't fully understand exactly *why*, but anyway, it gave her something to focus on that wasn't tied to her friends' emotional states.

Speaking of whom, as the others were preparing to disembark, Robin paused just inside the hatch and turned to address the team. "Okay, everyone, listen up. Even though the person we're here to meet is supposed to be Wintergreen's informant, I want us all to be on our guard. Remember what this mission is about: we're going to be going up against Brother Blood. Anything could happen. Expect the unexpected – and that goes double for you, Cyborg."

Cyborg grunted his agreement. "You don't have to tell *me* twice – or even once, for that matter. I wouldn't put it past that creep to try and attack me with my own baby pictures, next. Or maybe he'll send my sixth grade math teacher after us..." he shuddered.

Wonder Girl raised her eyebrows. "I take it there's some...history, between you?"

Cyborg grimaced. "You could say that. I'll fill you in later, after we've got this meeting over and done with."

They began to file out of the hovercraft, and Raven reluctantly lowered her book to find Jericho smiling at her again.

She blinked. "...What?"

He pointed at her book, then made an 'OK' sign with his fingers.

She looked down at the book, then back at him, slightly incredulous. "You've read this?"

He nodded eagerly and clapped his hand over his heart, then drew a finger down his cheek, as if wiping away a tear.

She blinked again, somewhat amazed at this turn of events. "Uh...yeah, I like it a lot, too."

Jericho beamed, then jumped up and practically danced out the hatch, clearly overjoyed at their successful 'conversation'. Still a bit baffled, Raven followed him out.

* * *

The sun was setting as, one by one, the Titans stepped off the Turtle's boarding ramp and into the sand and surf. It cast a brilliant orange glow across both the ocean and the gathering clouds overhead.

"How beautiful!" Starfire breathed. "It is as though the sea and the sky have both been set aflame!"

"Wish I'd brought my camera," Wonder Girl added, smiling in agreement.

The island itself was tiny, only a couple of miles across, but teeming with dense tropical vegetation. An ideal place for a clandestine meeting...or an ambush, Robin observed privately.

As the team gathered along the beach, he flipped open his communicator to check the GPS display.

"It's about...five hundred yards that way," he said, pointing toward the tree line.

Beast Boy groaned in dismay, then his eyes widened and he straightened up. "Hey, wait a second, what am *I* complaining about?" He shifted into a monkey and immediately disappeared into the foliage.

"Beast Boy, don't get too far ahead!" Robin called after him, already annoyed. "We need to stay together." Gritting his teeth, he brandished a Birdarang as a makeshift machete and waded into the growth.

The others followed suit, fighting their way through the dense vegetation. It was even darker in there than it had been on the beach, and they had to rely on Cyborg's shoulder lamps and Starfire's low-intensity starbolt charges for light. Although there was no conversation, they were still making a lot more noise than Robin would have liked. After what seemed like an eternity of nearly-blind fumbling, they finally emerged into an empty, moonlit clearing.

While the others were relieved to simply be out of the brush, Robin checked and then double-checked his GPS. "According to this," he announced, "this should be the place. We're standing at the exact coordinates Wintergreen sent us."

A green monkey swung down from a nearby tree, and then Beast Boy was standing next to them. "Wasn't somebody supposed to meet us here? There's nobody here but us."

Frowning, Robin visually scanned the clearing, looking for any possible clue. His trained eyes quickly picked out a single tree branch that was hanging at an angle it shouldn't have been, and he immediately rushed over to investigate. The rest of the team followed close behind, curious to see what had caught his attention.

"Well," Robin muttered, as he pulled the branch aside. "There's our answer."

Hidden beneath the branch were four words carved into the trunk of the tree.

See you at dawn.

Somewhere in the distance, a low rumble of approaching thunder could be heard.

"Nice," Raven commented.

“So...we must wait here until the rising of the sun, then?” Starfire asked, looking to the others for confirmation.

“Sweet!” Beast Boy exclaimed. “Who knew this would turn into a camping trip? Let’s build a tree house! I saw the perfect spot, right over here—!”

Robin frowned. “Remember, everyone, we’re on a *mission*, here. And besides, if we have to wait, we don’t want to be that conspicuous. Cyborg, is there any way we can camouflage the Hover Turtle?”

The cybernetic teen scoffed, as if the answer was obvious. “You better believe it! Wouldn’t leave home without a holographic generator, or ten.”

“Okay, then.” Robin nodded, satisfied. “Beast Boy, Starfire? The three of us will scout the rest of the island, just to be on the safe side. The rest of you, head back to the Turtle, and get everything set up for the night. All agreed?”

Everyone nodded, and the team dispersed to carry out their orders.

“Now then,” Robin heard Cyborg say to Wonder Girl, as they made their way back through the jungle, “About me an’ Brother Blood...”

* * *

After a fitful night’s rest, Raven opened her eyes to find a green cat curled up on the seat next to her, mere inches from her face.

She sneezed, startling Beast Boy awake and causing him to jump down to the floor, leaving a small flurry of green hairs behind him. He looked back at her apprehensively, still in cat form, as she glared at him. Then he spent several seconds stretching, before shifting into a rooster and strutting toward the hatch.

Rubbing her eyes and nose in annoyance, Raven glanced around the cabin, and found it empty. She and Beast Boy were evidently the last ones to wake up. Somehow, that figured...

Cyborg had volunteered to keep watch through the night, since he didn’t physically need sleep to the same extent that the rest of them did. Raven was also fairly sure Robin had hardly slept at all, judging by the way his tension and paranoia had been tugging at the edges of her consciousness all night. Stifling a yawn and wishing she’d thought to bring a tea thermos, she rose stiffly, then pulled on her cloak and headed for the hatch.

As Raven emerged from the vehicle (which had been camouflaged to look like a large rock formation), Wonder Girl nodded to her from where she stood a short distance away, stretching her long limbs through a series of martial arts forms and exercises. “Good morning!” she called.

“Close enough,” Raven muttered. The sun had not quite risen yet, but was threatening to peek over the horizon in the next few minutes. It had rained off and on throughout the night, and was still raining, if very lightly...just enough to add a definite chill to the early morning air.

The other Titans were scattered around the immediate area, with the notable exception of Beast Boy, who was nowhere to be seen. Raven could still feel his presence nearby, however, so she wasn't worried about him. Cyborg stood between the beach and the tree line, checking something on one of the display panels on his forearm, while Jericho perched on a fallen log to Cyborg's left, plucking idly at his guitar.

Raven eyed the blond youth for a moment. She wasn't precisely sure what to make of this boy. Despite his heritage, she hadn't sensed any guile or deception from him...and the fact that he hadn't attempted to dodge her question, back at the Tower, also seemed to suggest that he was trustworthy.

Of course, they'd been fooled before...*she'd* allowed herself to be fooled, before.

As for Robin and Starfire, they were seated together on a rock further down the beach. They were holding hands and talking quietly, with their backs to the others.

On the other side of that invisible, intangible wall which now existed between them, and the rest of the team.

Raven shivered involuntarily, and pulled her cloak more tightly around herself.

Having finished her morning workout routine, Wonder Girl straightened up and looked around at the others. "Um, I don't suppose anyone brought any food along...?" she asked, clearly feeling awkward for it.

Beast Boy chose that moment to reappear, sliding down a nearby tree as a chimpanzee, then returning to human form and approaching them with a large bunch of bananas in hand.

"Hold on to your appetites, fellow Titans! Breakfast is served!" he called, and proceeded to toss a banana to each of them.

After catching his, Cyborg pointedly cast a suspicious glance from the bananas to Beast Boy, and back again.

"What?" the green changeling asked, predictably taking the bait.

The older Titan made a show of running one of his sensors over the fruit. "If this turns out to be some kinda tofu-substitute fake banana or something, you'll be changing your name to *Bacon* Boy, got it?"

"Oh, come *on!*" Beast Boy protested. "They're real bananas, I picked 'em off that tree, right over there! Right, Jericho?"

The green-eyed musician gave them the thumbs-up, already chewing his banana.

Beast Boy turned back to Cyborg, his arms spread wide, pretending to be more offended by his friend's lack of trust than he really was. "See? *See?* What'd I say...?"

Robin cleared his throat, interrupting the playful bickering as he and Starfire returned to the center of the group.

"It's almost dawn," he pointed out, jerking a thumb toward the horizon. "We should return to the meeting place."

Without further discussion, the team moved out.

Raven eyed her banana for a moment before finally deciding to save it for later. With a sigh, she fell into step behind her friends.

* * *

The first rays of sunlight were just beginning to filter through the treetops as they returned to the clearing. However, there was still no sign of the mysterious informant.

“Man, what gives?” Cyborg griped, preparing to run a sensor sweep of the area.

Robin’s brows knitted. “Beast Boy, what do you hear?”

“Nothin’ but the rain,” the green shape-shifter replied, after pausing to listen for a moment. “Dude, I’m starting to think that Doublemint guy is pranking us. This is like a lame rerun of last night.”

Robin sighed in annoyance. “Well...let’s wait a while, and see if anyone shows up. I don’t like it, but I don’t see any alternative.”

Even Starfire was beginning to look worried. “Perhaps—”

Raven abruptly sucked in her breath. “*No--!*”

“Well, if it isn’t the Teen Titans,” a chillingly familiar voice observed from above them. “It really has been *far* too long.”

At the mere sound of the voice, weapons were drawn, powers were readied and the team collectively spun around to face its source, the name of its owner already on Robin’s lips.

“*Slade.*”

The Titans’ most hated enemy stood on an overhanging tree branch a few meters above them, dressed for business in his usual armored uniform. His single eye stared calmly down at them.

Cyborg and Robin attacked at virtually the same moment; a shot from Cyborg’s sonic cannon blew Slade’s branch out from under him, while Robin hurled a barrage of Birdarangs toward him.

Their target, however, was ready for this. He leapt clear of the branch a split second before it was blasted off the tree, and a deft slice of his arm through the air deflected the other projectiles. He rebounded off a lower branch on his way to the ground, narrowly dodging the enraged green gorilla which leapt after him, before landing just behind the group. He then sidestepped Starfire’s fist, which actually *toppled* the tree behind him, and knocked her back with a side kick.

By this time Robin had his staff out, and he lunged toward Slade with a fierce yell and a vicious swing. The older man parried the blow with his own staff, which he’d produced with such speed that it seemed almost magical, and forced Robin back a step with a counter-strike of his own. Then he jumped away again, an acrobatic back flip carrying him out of reach.

Or, rather, it would have, had Wonder Girl's glowing lasso not snared him and brought him crashing back to the ground with a pained grunt.

Robin was on him in an instant, kicking his staff away and holding his own weapon poised above his fallen opponent's chest, ready to deliver a finishing blow. Over the sound of his own heart pounding in his ears, he heard Cyborg and what he assumed was Beast Boy (unless there was another angry grizzly bear in the area) take up supporting positions just behind him.

"Talk, Slade!" Robin demanded. "What are you *doing* here?! Are you working with Brother Blood? What have you done with the informant we were supposed to meet?!"

In spite of his current situation, Slade actually *chuckled*. "It's nice to see you, too, Robin. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves, there's something you should know."

Through a supreme feat of willpower, Robin managed to restrain himself from splitting the man's head in half, right then and there. "*What?*" he hissed through clenched teeth.

Slade's eye narrowed shrewdly, and Robin could practically *hear* him smiling, under that mask of his.

"I happen to be here on behalf of...*Sweet Lilli.*"

* * *

4. Trust?

It took several seconds for the team to fully absorb the implications of what Slade had just said.

“You *can't* be serious,” Robin said, his disbelief obvious.

“I’m always serious,” Slade replied easily. “I thought you knew that, Robin.”

“So, wait, *you're* the contact??” Cyborg asked incredulously.

“*No, way,*” Beast Boy growled, having reverted to human form.

“I don’t buy it!” Robin snapped. “There are a hundred ways you could have found out that password.”

“True,” Slade conceded. “And there are probably also a hundred ways I might have learned that you were sent to this location by one William Wintergreen, on a mission to rescue a uniquely gifted young girl named Rose Worth from the clutches of Brother Blood and the H.I.V.E. Who are currently holding her at a location which...I also *happen* to be familiar with.” His eye glinted in the early morning light. “But that does seem like an awfully *long* string of coincidences, don’t you think?”

Robin heard Cyborg shift uncomfortably behind him. “Uh...I hate to say this, Robin, but it *does* match up with what the man told us...”

Robin clenched his teeth, still holding his staff poised above Slade’s chest. “I *still* don’t believe it. How do we know you didn’t just capture the contact, and torture the information out of them?”

“You don’t, of course,” Slade replied. “But *think*, Robin. If this were all part of an elaborate trap...wouldn’t I have *sprung* it, by now? Furthermore, the longer we delay here, the longer Brother Blood has access to Rose and her powers.”

“*We?*” Robin repeated.

“Robin. Get off of him.”

“Raven, *you* of all people,” Robin began, twisting to look back at her, “You can *not* believe what he’s—!”

He broke off as he realized that she was telekinetically holding the severed tree branch above them, aiming it down at Slade like a jagged, oversized wooden spear. He barely had enough time to dive out of the way, along with Beast Boy and Cyborg, before she flung it downward.

As for Slade, his superhuman reflexes allowed him to backflip out of the branch’s path at the last moment, before it plunged several feet into the rain-soaked ground where he’d been lying a split second earlier.

“Raven!” Wonder Girl exclaimed, grabbing the smaller girl by the shoulder. “Calm down. This isn’t helping matters.”

Raven whirled on her, her eyes crackling with gray energy, but whatever she was going to say or do was interrupted by Slade's voice.

"Well. I gather there are still some lingering hard feelings, then?" the older man observed dryly, as he wiped the mud off his armor. "What a pity...ah!" He straightened up. "I see you've also brought my son with you. Excellent." And he held out a hand, to clarify exactly who he was referring to.

Except for Raven, all of the Titans turned to stare at Jericho with varying degrees of shock.

The blond musician frowned, then shouldered his guitar and calmly walked up to Slade, until he was standing directly in front of him.

"Hello, Joseph," Slade said. The two of them stood there regarding each other for a long moment, while the other Titans looked on.

Then Jericho threw a lightning-fast body blow into the taller man, and followed up with a roundhouse kick which sent him sprawling to the ground several feet away.

"Yeah!" Beast Boy exclaimed.

Slade used a nearby tree to pull himself back to his feet, rubbing his jaw. "Hmph. So, you *do* remember me," he observed.

Jericho glowered at him briefly, then turned on his heel and walked back over to where the Titans were assembled. Robin stepped in front of him, however.

"So, it's true, then?" he asked intently. "Slade is your father?"

The green-eyed youth frowned, then nodded reluctantly.

Robin ran a hand through his damp hair. "This just gets better and better..." he muttered.

"Oh, don't worry about *him*," Slade called to them. "He takes after his mother, I'm afraid. In fact, I haven't even *seen* him since he was a child."

"No wonder," Beast Boy said, giving Jericho a supportive nod. "I *knew* you were too cool to have anything to do with that creep."

"So what's your game, here, Slade?" Cyborg asked, crossing his arms. "Or, more to the point. Why shouldn't we just take you *down*, right here and now, once and for all?"

"You certainly have that choice," Slade acknowledged. "I doubt that even I could successfully fight off all seven of you, simultaneously. But of course, if you did that, you would then lose any hope of rescuing Rose and stopping Blood's plan."

"And why would either of those things concern you?" Starfire asked, her tone as reproachful as any of the others'. "You have never displayed the altruistic intentions, in our previous encounters."

"An accurate assessment," Slade responded. Then, he sighed. "Given our history, I don't expect you to believe this. But the truth is, having seen this world nearly brought to its End at the hands of Trigon, knowing that I was an active contributor to that situation, and subsequently working alongside you to reverse it all, has caused me

to...*reexamine* certain things. I have decided to begin taking steps to change the direction my life had previously taken.”

“You’re right,” Robin growled, “We don’t believe it.”

Slade nodded, undaunted. “As expected. In that case, perhaps you might find it easier to believe that I simply think the knowledge of future events is far too dangerous a gift to be left in the hands of Brother Blood...or his new associate, Psimon.”

“Psimon?” Beast Boy repeated. “Wasn’t he that geezer with a glass jar on his head that joined up with the Brotherhood of Evil, when they had their big supervillain recruitment drive? He wasn’t so tough.”

“You only saw the barest fraction of his power,” Slade replied. “He deliberately held back in order to conceal his true strength from both you and the Brotherhood, biding his time and waiting for an opportunity...such as this one.”

“And how do *you* know all this?” Cyborg asked pointedly.

“One of my spies has infiltrated their ranks, and has been feeding me information,” Slade answered, pausing to pick up his staff. “Not the most *original* plan, perhaps...but what can I say, it’s worked for me before.”

A threatening growl issued from Beast Boy – and he was still in human form.

“So, what *are* they planning, then?” Wonder Girl asked quickly, before things could escalate further.

Slade retracted the staff and put it away. “Truthfully, I don’t know *precisely* what their plot entails,” he admitted. “But I think we all know enough about them to agree that for these men to possess a power such as Rose’s can only spell disaster, and possibly for the entire world.”

“Well, if you’re so worried about it, why not go after them yourself?” asked Cyborg, remaining skeptical. “Why try to drag us into it?”

“Three reasons,” Slade answered readily, and proceeded to tick them off on his fingers. “One...if memory serves, averting the plans of power-hungry evil-doers is something of a specialty of yours...is it not?”

“You would know,” Robin said dryly.

“Indeed.” Something in Slade’s eye told Robin he was smiling again, under his mask. “Two...rescue missions aren’t exactly my forte. As I’m sure Joseph could tell you...or not, things being as they are.”

Call me Jericho, the blond hero signed, followed by something a bit less polite.

“Lovely. And third...I have learned that Psimon received his powers as a ‘gift’ from none other than...Trigon, himself. Which leads me to believe that the only person who is truly capable of defeating him, would be Raven.”

Raven simply continued to stare icily at Slade, as she’d been doing for the past minute or two. But judging by the way all of the plant life in her immediate area was wilting, she couldn’t have been in a very good state of mind.

Gritting his teeth, Robin turned back to the man he hated more than any other he could think of offhand. “What are you proposing?”

Slade’s eye narrowed, and now Robin *knew* he had to be smiling. “Cooperation. Nothing more, nothing less. We have a common interest, both in rescuing Rose, and in stopping Blood and Psimon. If we work together, our chance of achieving those goals increases dramatically. It’s that simple.”

Robin eyed him suspiciously for a long moment. Slade stared back at him, as calm as ever, his gray eye unreadable.

“Give us a minute,” Robin said finally, abruptly turning on his heel and walking away, aware of Starfire’s inquisitive eyes on his back. As he passed Raven, he motioned for her to follow him.

With some apparent effort, she managed to tear her Death Stare away from Slade and followed Robin back to the tree line, out of earshot from the others.

He put his back to a tree, waited for her to catch up with him, and got right to the point. “What can you tell me about him?” he asked her.

“That we should tie a big rock around his neck, throw him in the ocean and go home,” she replied curtly.

He ignored her sarcasm. “I’m serious. Are you able to gauge his sincerity, at all?”

She looked at him in disbelief. “You’re not actually *considering*—!”

“I *have* to,” he grated through clenched teeth. “If *any* of what he’s said is true, it’s too important for us to ignore. We can’t just walk away from it. But *you’re* the only one who can tell me if he’s being honest with us. So, I’ll ask again. What can you sense from him?”

She stared at him for a moment with something close to horror creeping into her eyes. But she quickly regained her composure, bit her lip and looked down, apparently concentrating.

He hated to make her do this, but he saw no other choice. For all he knew, their lives could all be riding on it.

Thirty seconds passed, then a minute. Finally, she shook her head and blew out her breath in a frustrated sigh.

“I’ve never been able to read Slade well, if at all,” she admitted. “The problem is that most of his emotions are dead. And the ones that aren’t...” She shuddered slightly, almost imperceptibly, but he caught it. “The fact that I *hate* him doesn’t help, either.”

“I understand that,” he told her, “but I need you to try to set it aside, and focus.”

She bit her lip. “The best I can do is vague impressions. I’m...sorry, Robin.”

He grimaced. “Well, it’s better than nothing. What kind of impression can you get about this story of his, about Brother Blood, Psimon and Rose?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “As far as I can tell...*he* believes it’s true, or at least he’s convinced himself that it is.”

Robin pursed his lips. That was what he'd been afraid of, but also what he'd suspected. "Can you tell if he's hiding anything?"

Raven scowled at him. "He's *Slade*, Robin. Of *course* he's hiding things."

"You know what I mean. Is he holding anything back?"

She continued to glare at him, rain beading off her hood.

"All right, all right, I get the picture," he muttered. "Um... what about Jericho?"

Her annoyed glare reverted into her normal deadpan stare. "What about him?"

Robin fished around for the right words. "Is he... on the level? Can we trust him?"

She glanced down briefly, as if searching her mind for something, then looked back up. "He seems pretty open, actually. Sincere."

He frowned. "So did Terra."

"Yeah," Raven acknowledged. "But... this seems different. More genuine. He definitely doesn't trust Slade, I can tell you that much for certain."

"Well, I guess that's something." With that, he pushed away from the tree and headed back toward the others.

Starfire was about halfway between them and the rest of the group; evidently she'd just decided to come and check on them. "Is the situation... acceptable?" she asked hesitantly, as he drew near.

"As close to it as it's going to get," he answered grimly. The others looked up expectantly as they rejoined them, Raven straggling some distance behind.

"Tick tock, Robin," Slade said, his arms crossed imperiously. "Time's wasting."

Again, Robin had to resist a fierce impulse to punch him. But what he had to say next was even harder.

"All right, Slade... you've got a deal."

Beast Boy's and Starfire's jaws dropped.

"Excellent," Slade replied, as casually as if Robin had just agreed to buy him a sandwich. He pulled out a GPS device and punched a few numbers into it. "I'll meet you at—"

"Hold it," Robin cut him off, jabbing a finger at him for emphasis. "Let's get one thing straight: *we don't trust you*. And even if you *do* help us stop the H.I.V.E. and rescue Rose, you still have a long list of crimes to answer for. Until then, we're not going to let you out of our sight. You're riding with us."

To Robin's satisfaction, Slade actually looked somewhat taken aback. "Oh? Well, if you insist... assuming there's sufficient room in your vehicle, of course."

"Yeah, yeah, lucky us," Cyborg muttered, clearly not thrilled about this. "Come on, then."

He stomped off into the trees back toward the shore, followed by Raven, Wonder Girl, Jericho and Slade.

Robin was about to follow suit when Beast Boy abruptly stepped in front of him. “We’ll catch up in a minute,” he called after the others.

Robin scowled. He was *not* in the mood for this, but he hadn’t expected it to go down smoothly either, so he waited for Beast Boy to say his piece.

“Okay, Robin,” the green shape-shifter began. “Don’t take this the wrong way or anything, but *have you completely lost it?!*”

“Save it, Beast Boy,” Robin snapped. “I’ve thought this through. The decision’s been made.”

“Like *hell!*” Beast Boy practically shouted. “How can you even *think* about trusting him, after everything he’s done?!”

“I *don’t* trust him!” Robin shot back. “You just heard me say it, in front of everyone. But like it or not, right now he’s our *only* way to get to Brother Blood and save that girl!”

Starfire, meanwhile, was standing off to one side and looking back and forth between the two boys, her expression growing more distraught as their voices rose.

“Yeah but this is *Slade* we’re talking about, here,” Beast Boy retorted. “How do we know this whole thing isn’t part of some big complicated trap? In fact, I bet that Winter-fresh guy was even working for him, giving us this big, important mission just to get us on the hook--!”

Robin had wondered when Beast Boy would get around to the fishing analogy. “But, you trust Jericho, right? And he vouched for Wintergreen, and his information.”

At that, Beast Boy hesitated. “Yeah, well...”

“Even though the information itself may appear to be in order,” Starfire pointed out, “I cannot help but feel trepidation, merely knowing that Slade is involved with it.”

“Believe me, nobody knows better than I do the kind of risks involved in dealing with Slade,” Robin insisted. “But if *any* of it is true, it’s too important for us to ignore. And we can’t leave an innocent girl to die, or worse, just because *he* happens to be the only one who can lead us to her.”

Beast Boy’s shoulders slumped, though he still looked somewhat defiant. “Well...I’ll go along with it, but don’t ask me to *like* it. I’m telling you guys, somehow, someway, he’s gonna stab us in the back. Just wait and see.”

“Then we don’t give him the chance,” Robin told him, crossing his arms decisively. “The first step in avoiding a trap is knowing it’s there. We watch him, like hawks. Think you can do that?”

“You better believe it,” Beast Boy snorted, before taking wing as the raptor in question and quickly disappearing over the treetops.

As soon as he was gone, Robin sighed, feeling himself deflate a little as Starfire stepped closer to him. “First Raven, now Beast Boy. We’re not off to a very good start, here.”

Starfire blinked. “I fear I do not understand...what is your concern with them, and why is our start not good?”

She placed a supportive hand on his shoulder, and he gratefully covered it with his own. “Don’t you think they’ve been acting a little bit...different, even moody, the past couple of weeks?” he asked her. “Especially Raven, she’s been really distant since...well, since Tokyo, I guess. Or even before then. But that was when I started to notice it.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m imagining things.”

Starfire appeared to ponder this. “Perhaps you are correct...or, perhaps it is we who are different?” She began to look worried. “Could it be that they are displeased with the choices you and I have made, in recent days?”

“That’s none of their business!” Robin snapped a little too quickly, then managed to rein himself back in. “Besides...they’re our *friends*, Starfire. They were happy for us, weren’t they? We *all* care about each other, we all want each other to be happy...don’t we?”

“I thought we did.” She didn’t look very reassured.

They stood there in thoughtful silence for a long, uncertain moment.

Finally, Robin shook his head and squared his shoulders. “Well, if something *is* wrong, it’ll have to wait. We have a mission to worry about. And with Slade around, we can’t afford to think about anything else.”

* * *

5. Heaven Beside You

Slade and the Titans waited on the beach in a tense silence until Robin and Starfire finally emerged from the jungle.

“We were starting to wonder if we should send out a search party,” Wonder Girl teased them. Starfire smiled in response, but Robin’s eyes immediately locked onto Slade, his expression darkening as he approached him.

“All right, let’s have those coordinates,” the Boy Wonder commanded.

“Certainly,” Slade replied in his most agreeable tone, producing his GPS device and entering the correct numbers before holding it out to the Titans’ leader.

However, as Robin reached for it, Starfire suddenly inserted herself between them. “I will take that,” she announced curtly, practically snatching the item from Slade’s hand and passing it off to Cyborg, who boarded their vehicle without further comment.

As Beast Boy, Raven, Wonder Girl and Jericho marched up the boarding ramp, Slade regarded Starfire with mild amusement. “While your caution is understandable,” he told her, “you’re treading very close to the line between prudence and paranoia. I assure you, I wasn’t about to *bite* him.”

Starfire’s response was polite, but firm. “Understood, but please be advised: if you touch my friend-who-is-a-boy, I will break your arms.” She smiled cheerfully.

“Your...” Taking note of Robin’s mortified expression, Slade smirked. “Why, Robin, you sly dog.”

“Tick tock, Slade,” Robin shot back. “Time’s wasting. Get on board.”

“Touché.” The older man grinned beneath his mask, and complied.

* * *

“I must admit, this certainly *is* impressive,” Slade remarked, admiring the interior of the Hover Turtle as Cyborg fired up the turbines and pointed them toward the middle of the Pacific.

“Uh... thanks,” the cybernetic hero muttered, clearly uncomfortable but also evidently feeling obliged to acknowledge the compliment.

“Indeed.” The corner of Slade’s mouth twitched beneath his mask. “The extra gas turbines are a particularly innovative touch. It’s a pity you and I have never had the opportunity to exchange notes on mechanical design.”

Cyborg tossed a dirty look over his shoulder. “Save the pity for yourself, Slade. I plan to die of old age before I exchange anything with you that isn’t punches.”

“Even with all the things we might have in common? How unfortunate.”

Cyborg swiveled in his seat. “We don’t have one, single--!”

He stopped abruptly when he saw Slade tapping the right side of his mask, where his eye should have been. A dark look crossed Cyborg's face and he angrily turned back to the controls, leaving Slade to chuckle to himself.

He stood near the center of the Turtle's cabin, one hand braced against the ceiling to maintain his balance while the craft was in motion. The Titans had spread themselves out across the vehicle's interior, all apparently wishing to sit as far from him as possible.

And that suited him perfectly. It meant he'd have the opportunity to approach most of them individually, during the lengthy trip to their destination. And the best part was, Robin even believed he'd been planning to travel separately from them. While the boy was undeniably intelligent and resourceful, he was easily distracted, and his emotional weaknesses remained as exploitable as ever.

In truth, so far everything was unfolding almost precisely as Slade had planned.

Well...nearly everything, he corrected himself as he eyed the dark-haired Amazon who'd managed to bring him to ground earlier. She was the only unexpected factor, here. But Slade was nothing if not adaptable.

So, he nodded to her in greeting. "You must be the famous Wonder Girl," he ventured. "I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure."

"Yeah, I've heard that about you," she replied, giving him a distasteful look.

"Charming. Not one to mince words, are you?" he chuckled, genuinely impressed. "I'd hoped you might be able to approach this mission with a more...objective viewpoint than the others, since your perspective is not colored by any past dealings with me."

She continued to eye him as one would a particularly repulsive breed of insect. "I know all I need to know about you, from reading the Titans' reports on your activities. They don't paint a very pretty picture."

"I'm sure not," he admitted readily, "and I'm not about to dispute their validity. Nevertheless, I can assure you that on this mission, *I* am not the enemy you should be concerned with."

Her expression didn't soften. "That will remain to be seen," she pronounced.

"As you wish." He bowed slightly, theatrically, while smirking behind his mask.

Off to his left, Joseph – or Jericho, as he apparently wanted to be called, now – took out his acoustic guitar and began playing a vaguely familiar-sounding, bluesy tune. It was fairly mellow, even catchy, and certainly not what one would think of as an angry-sounding song. Yet it was clear from the *way* he was playing it that Joey was channeling whatever resentment, frustration or anger he felt at his father's presence into his fingers, and his music.

Slade silently watched him play for a minute or two, deep in thought. Here was his son, whom he hadn't seen in over a decade, and who he'd expected to find here, whose presence was, in fact, a pivotal component of his larger plan. Yet, as he watched the boy playing his guitar, whatever words he'd had prepared to say to him, whatever questions he'd wanted to ask, fell away and left him at a loss. Unarmed. Unprepared. Empty-handed.

It was a feeling he associated with death, and a state he'd spent most of his life avoiding. Uncomfortable, to say the least.

Joey happened to glance up and catch his eye. There was no hatred in his eyes, nor was there any affection, or even pity...only regret, sorrow and disappointment. He turned his attention back to the guitar soon enough.

Perhaps there would be time for him later.

Shaking himself internally, Slade casually glanced about to see who else was nearby. Ah! There was the green one, sulking a couple of rows behind Joey. Perfect. Careful not to appear too deliberate in his movements, he made his way back toward him, and settled into a spot a few feet away.

With this one, he suspected he may not have to make the first move. And he wasn't disappointed.

"I still want to know what you did to Terra," Beast Boy growled at him after a few minutes.

Slade was glad the mask concealed his smile. *Nothing she didn't want me to*, he wanted to reply, if only to see the look on the green boy's face. But that wouldn't do, it wouldn't be productive. He didn't want to pick a fight, at least not yet.

"I'm sorry," he replied instead, feigning distraction as he half-turned in his seat. "Did you say something?"

Beast Boy stared at him with pure, undisguised hatred. "*Terra*. The truth. Spill it."

"Hmph. If you're referring to her...reappearance, I've already told you the truth: I had nothing to do with it."

"You're a liar."

"Really." Slade met his eye. "In that case, what's the point of this conversation? Whatever I might tell you, you've already decided not to believe it. You refuse to recognize the truth, simply because it comes from me."

Beast Boy continued to stare daggers at him.

"For example," Slade continued, shifting in his seat so as to face the shape-shifter more directly. "Suppose I were to tell you that, during my time as Trigon's servant, I used the powers he'd granted me to resurrect Terra, to restore her stone body to one of flesh, because I planned to eventually pit her against your team once more. And at the same time, I also erased her memories of us all, to make her easier to manipulate and control when the time came. *However*...after Robin helped me to recover the flesh that I had lost, and after fighting alongside you to defeat Trigon...I realized that I owed a debt. A debt to Terra, and a debt to yourselves, for the pain I'd caused you all. So, I decided to abandon my plans, and leave Terra as she now is: happy, ordinary, and free from my influence...or yours."

Beast Boy remained silent.

Slade's eye narrowed. "Would that 'truth' be more agreeable to you...even if I just made it up, on the spot?"

The coiled cobra which now occupied Beast Boy's seat flared its hood and hissed threateningly.

"You see my point, then." Slade grinned, and wouldn't have cared if the changeling *could* see it. Even so, it seemed a prudent time to relocate.

The only other Titan sitting nearby, at the back of the Turtle's cabin, was...Raven, her hood raised and her nose buried in a book. Perfect. Slade slowly drifted over toward her, keeping his movements casual, finally settling into a seat in front of her.

She studiously ignored him, as he'd expected her to. In fact...after spending several minutes covertly studying her, he began to suspect that she was very deliberately ignoring *everything* except her book, and not just him. Interesting.

"That's an ironic choice, given the circumstances," he commented finally, referring to the book she was hiding behind.

"Don't talk to me," she said, keeping her eyes focused on the page.

"Hm. I suppose you're still angry about that business with your father," he sighed. "Not surprising, but for what it's worth, it wasn't personal. Besides, you were right. He did betray me, in the end."

She peered over the cover of her book at him, and the degree of venom in her eyes made Beast Boy look friendly by comparison.

"Maybe I wasn't clear," she hissed. "I would rather *kill you* than talk to you."

"Oh, I noticed!" he exclaimed. "And I was quite impressed, too. Those are precisely the instincts you'll need to overcome Psimon."

She stared at him for a few seconds, as if waging an internal struggle for control of her emotions, before finally looking back down at the page.

The corner of Slade's mouth twitched. He allowed his gaze to drift lazily around the cabin, casually sizing up the other young heroes present, while deciding his next move. At the cockpit, Robin was leaning over Cyborg's massive shoulder, pointing to the navigational instruments and presumably discussing their course with him. As Slade watched, Robin's free hand drifted back behind him, and into Starfire's, in a way that was probably intended to look either accidental or unconscious. Her fingers glowed very faintly as they interlocked with his.

Slade leaned back in his seat, his eye narrowing. "Hmm. Do you suppose they'll get married?" he asked Raven, over his shoulder.

"What?" She glanced up from her reading with an expression of severe annoyance.

"Robin, and...Starfire, wasn't it? The redhead."

"How should *I* know," she snapped, retreating back behind her book.

"They *do* make a striking couple, don't they? Very...colorful." Slade's lip curled beneath his mask, his attention now focused totally on Raven. "It's a strange thing, though...the *concept* of marriage, that is. Have you ever thought about it?"

She didn't respond, was ignoring him. But he was sure she was listening, so he continued.

"The binding together of two separate lives, enforced through law and ritual. But does not the very fact that it involves such formal, legalistic agreements suggest it to be...an *unnatural* state, to which people must be forcibly bound? Human beings are highly social creatures, yes. But at the same time, we are just as individualistic. Why, then, are so many of us so eager to trade away a measure of our independence, by permanently attaching ourselves to one other person?"

The cover of the book which was so deliberately positioned to block his view of her face shuddered ever so slightly. It could easily have been attributable to a shifting of the waves beneath them...had there been any such shift, of course. In any case, he continued.

"I've had quite a few years to ponder this question, particularly since the end of my own marriage. And I've arrived at an interesting conclusion. Would you like to hear it?"

She said nothing, as expected.

"The most outwardly transparent reasons for marriage – procreation, companionship, physical and emotional support – are actually not the most fundamental. Oh, they're certainly factors, for some more than for others. But there is an underlying, unspoken reason beneath it all, and it serves to explain the gradually increasing desperation of so many, as their lives progress, to find a spouse."

He paused for effect.

"It's because sooner or later, they all begin to understand that anyone who *doesn't* marry...will eventually, inevitably, lose everyone else in the world."

The window above Raven's head cracked, causing the other Titans to look back at them in alarm. Her book lowered just enough for her to stare over it, at Slade.

"I *told* you," she hissed, "to *leave...me...alone*."

"Very well, if you insist." He stood and, smiling inwardly, made his way toward the front of the cabin.

"I think she's still angry," he commented to Robin, glancing back over his shoulder at Raven's corner.

"Gee, I wonder why," Robin growled. "Couldn't possibly have anything to do with you attacking her, stalking her and helping her demon father use her as a portal into our dimension, could it?"

"Hmm." Slade stroked his chin. "That reminds me. What are you planning to do, the next time?"

Robin frowned. "What next time?"

Slade favored him with a very deliberate look of surprise. "Why, the next time Trigon attempts to conquer the Earth through his daughter, of course."

Robin's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about? Trigon's dead. Raven destroyed him. Remember?"

"Destroyed...? On the contrary, Robin. She injured him, yes, and cast him out of this dimension. But Trigon is an elemental force of the universe. As long as evil lives on in the hearts of people, *anywhere*, he can never truly die. Make no mistake: he *will* eventually return, once he has regained his full strength. And since her new body is unadorned by the Azarathian sealing runes, Raven will be far more vulnerable to his influence, when he does." Slade cocked his head to the side. "...I'm surprised she hasn't told you this, herself."

"You refer to the angry red marks you placed on Raven's body to make her become the Trigon's portal, yes?" Starfire interjected.

"The *angry* and *red* parts were my doing, yes," Slade replied. "But the actual runes themselves were inscribed by the monks of Azarath during her childhood, to protect her from her father's influence. I merely introduced a catalyst to awaken what lay dormant, and erode the runes' power."

"Why should we believe anything *you* say about it?" Robin retorted.

"Well, to begin with, I have no reason to lie about it," Slade answered. "I don't like the idea of the planet I live on being destroyed by an omnipotent demon any more than you do. But furthermore, you don't *have* to take my word for it; you can just as easily ask her." He gestured invitingly toward Raven.

Robin scowled, but said nothing. Starfire looked worried.

"So, Slade. What's your interest in this girl, this Rose, anyway?" Wonder Girl asked suddenly.

Her seat was on his blind side, so he just turned his head toward her general direction to address her. "As I've already told you, I believe her powers should not be left in the hands of Brother Blood and Psimon. But furthermore, since you're obviously curious...I also happen to owe a debt to Rose's mother."

Robin's brows came together. "Her mother?"

"Yes...Lilli," Slade replied, nodding, privately amused by their reactions as they realized the password's significance. "She saved my life, many years ago. The least I can do in return is to prevent her daughter from being enslaved by those H.I.V.E. maniacs."

"I am unaccustomed to hearing you speak of repaying debts and obligations," Starfire told him bluntly.

Slade smirked at her, though she couldn't see it. "Perhaps you don't know me quite as well as you believe."

"We know you well enough not to take anything you say on faith," Robin retorted.

"A prudent response, given our history. I am pleased, however, to see that you haven't extended that same distrust to my son."

“He hasn’t earned it the way you have,” Robin answered. “To be honest, I’m still having trouble with the idea that you’re even related. Or that someone as twisted as you could have ever had a family, in the first place.”

Slade chuckled. “Which only goes to proving my point, Robin. Joseph is actually the second of my two children; he had an older brother, named Grant...though you might be more familiar with him as the Ravager.”

“The Ravager?” Robin’s eyes widened. “But, isn’t he—?”

“Yes, sadly,” Slade sighed. “He tried to follow in my footsteps, and it cost him his life.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over them, until Cyborg looked up from the instruments.

“We’re almost at the coordinates,” he announced, “but I don’t see anything out there, except more water. Something you want to tell us, Slade?”

“Ah, yes! From here, proceed to the northwest, until we reach an island. It’ll be another ten miles, or so.”

Robin scowled. “Why not just give us the exact location, in the first place?”

“For the same reason you insisted I ride along with you, of course,” Slade replied. “A question of trust.”

* * *

6. Precipice

“We’re here,” Slade announced as he stood on the shore, seemingly oblivious to the rain pelting his armor.

“Seems deserted,” Beast Boy muttered as he clambered out of the surf.

“That’s not coincidental,” Slade replied, ignoring his tone.

By now, it was late afternoon. They’d had to leave the Turtle about fifty yards offshore, so as to avoid the jagged rock formations that ringed the island in place of a more hospitable sandy beach. The girls had flown (or in Raven’s case, levitated) in from there, while the guys had simply waded in; the water was pretty shallow, most of the way. No big deal, and even less when you were a sea otter.

But as for the island itself, it looked to be an empty, forbidding place, at least from where Beast Boy was now standing. It was bigger than the island where they’d met Slade, though still small enough to be left off most maps, and it was all jutting rocks and winding, moss-covered, overgrown trails leading up and in toward the interior. There was no sign of any inhabitants or man-made structures, at least none that were visible from the shore, and the fact that it was now raining steadily only made the place seem that much more unfriendly.

“All right... what’s the plan?” Robin growled at Slade as they all gathered along the shore, spitting the words out like they tasted bad. *Well, tough*, Beast Boy thought to himself. It was *his* bright idea to bring the guy along; he’d just have to suck it up.

Slade, meanwhile, whipped out some sort of small gadget from wherever he kept all that stuff, pushed some buttons on it, then put it away just as quickly. “I’ve just signaled my contact,” he explained. “I’ve instructed him to meet us at a prearranged spot, further in. As soon as I get his confirmation, we can be off.”

“Great,” Robin muttered. “Raven... could I talk to you for a second?” He waved for her to follow him a short distance down the shore.

“Beast Boy.” It was Slade. Talking to *him*.

The shape-shifter gave the one-eyed villain his best ‘*What do you want?*’ look.

Slade tossed a small object to him. Reflexively, he caught it, then opened his hand to see what it was. When he did, his eyes widened in shock and disbelief.

It was a plastic hair clip, shaped like a butterfly.

It was *Terra’s* hair clip.

He looked up at Slade in utter confusion, trying to decide if he should thank him, or strangle him. “Why...?” was all he managed to say.

“Let’s just say you deserve to have it more than I do,” Slade responded.

Before Beast Boy could say anything further, another sound drew his attention – and everyone else’s, too, for that matter.

Raven had just *slapped* Robin.

The Boy Wonder hardly flinched, and said nothing. Neither did Raven, as she stared at him for a moment before turning on her heel and walking quickly off down the beach, in the opposite direction.

All the other Titans were too thunderstruck to say, or do, anything.

His mouth hanging open in total disbelief, Beast Boy looked back and forth several times between Raven's retreating form and Robin, who was still just standing there with a dark look on his face.

"Dude, what...?" he finally managed to get out, then realized, from the look on his face, that Robin wasn't going to tell him jack. So he turned and ran after Raven, instead.

She was crouched at the water's edge behind a large rock formation when he caught up to her, her hood raised, cloak wrapped tightly around herself. The tide washed rhythmically over her feet, and her shoulders were visibly shaking beneath the blue shroud.

He glanced back to see if anyone else had followed him, but they must have all been busy (he hoped) trying to pry an explanation out of Robin. Cautiously, he took a couple of steps toward Raven. "Uh...what happened, back there?"

"*How could he ask me that,*" she whispered fiercely, practically hissing the words through clenched teeth.

"Ask you what? Raven...what's wrong?" He rubbed the back of his head, feeling helpless and confused. He wanted to get closer to her, to make her look at him, but he was afraid that if he tried she'd withdraw even further and shut him out completely.

"No." She shook her head. "I, I can't. It's..."

Beast Boy was really starting to get worried. "What is it? What did Robin ask you? It's okay, you can talk to me."

He could tell she was fighting to get hold of herself. She took several deep breaths and, after a long moment, slowly stood up, though she kept her back to him and her head down.

Suddenly, Wonder Girl came flying into view. "Slade's boy just beeped him back," she called to them. "We're ready to move out, if...is everything all right?" She looked genuinely concerned.

"Well, uh..." Beast Boy faltered, wishing he knew the answer.

Raven quickly rubbed her sleeve across her face, then turned back toward them. She kept her hood up, however...and not, Beast Boy suspected, simply to block the rain.

"...Yeah, everything's okay," she said finally. "Let's get moving."

Wonder Girl didn't look convinced, but she nodded in agreement and flew back toward the rest of the group. Raven moved to follow her, but she stopped next to Beast Boy and caught his eye.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you,” she told him. “Let’s, um...talk about it later, okay?”

“Uh...yeah, sure, that’s cool,” he answered lamely, still completely confused, but willing to play along. He patted her arm in a way he hoped would seem reassuring.

Without saying anything further, she looked back down at the ground and swept past him, heading back the way they’d come.

Beast Boy blew out his breath in a frustrated sigh. “Man, this is *so* not a good idea,” he muttered to himself.

* * *

Robin scrambled over rain-slick rocks and fought his way through soggy underbrush, trying to channel as much of his inner turmoil as possible into his efforts to keep pace with Slade.

The group had been moving steadily inland for the past twenty minutes at what amounted to a forced march, and in near silence. Normally, he would have been pleased to see his team taking a mission so seriously. Except he knew their silence had little to do with the mission, and a lot to do with what had happened on the shore.

Starfire and Cyborg had tried, hesitantly, to ask him about it. He’d simply told them “Later,” and left it at that. At this point, he didn’t trust himself to elaborate without his own feelings getting in the way and clouding things further.

He hadn’t expected Raven to react so angrily. But unfortunately, her reaction did seem to indicate that at least some of what Slade had mentioned earlier was probably true. Which was...troubling, to put it very mildly.

Why hadn’t she told them? That Trigon was not only still alive, but that he could potentially return someday? He didn’t understand. Was she afraid of how they’d react? Didn’t she trust them, even after all this time, and all they’d been through together?

She could have at least told *him*, if not the others. She had to know that. He’d *literally* gone through Hell and back, for her. Wasn’t that enough?

And she *must* have known about it. If *Slade* knew, there was no way she didn’t.

He just couldn’t understand.

Speaking of Slade, so far he’d wisely kept his mouth shut about the whole incident. A smart move on his part, particularly since Robin was privately *hoping* he’d say something about it, just so he’d have an excuse to finally lay into him.

But he didn’t, which left Robin no convenient outlet for his frustration.

They entered a dense grove of trees, and as he hacked his way through hanging vines and twisting branches, he found himself reminded of the dank, swampy terrain of an alien planet in some old sci-fi movie. So much so that he expected Beast Boy would surely bring it to everyone’s attention, any minute.

But he didn’t. And that probably wasn’t a very good sign, either.

Suddenly, Slade came to an abrupt halt. “Wait a moment,” he said quietly, holding up a hand so the others, behind him, would see the gesture.

“What is it?” Robin asked him in a low voice, instantly freezing where he stood. He hadn’t *seen* any signs of movement ahead of them...

Slade stood totally still, staring at him with an intensity that was rapidly becoming unnerving. Suddenly his hand shot out with uncanny speed, missing Robin’s face by only a couple of inches.

“What the--?!” His reflexes taking over, Robin automatically jumped back into a defensive stance. Slade simply stood there, his arm outstretched, tightly grasping one of the hanging vines Robin had been about to brush out of his path.

...A vine which was now writhing and thrashing about, because it was actually a very large, and possibly venomous, snake. It struck at Slade’s arm several times, but its fangs couldn’t penetrate his armor.

“Mind your surroundings,” he said, his voice carrying a hint of amusement, before casually tossing the snake away from their path.

Robin glared at him briefly before resuming his forward pace. “What do you want, a medal?” he muttered sarcastically.

“No, but a little gratitude might be nice,” Slade replied as he fell into step alongside him. “Especially if you knew just how long I’ve been looking out for you.”

Robin shot him a derisive look as he ducked a tree branch. “When was that, in between all the times when you were trying to kill us?”

Slade *laughed* – not his usual quiet, sinister chuckle, but a full-throated laugh, and it nearly brought the entire group up short.

“What, has he finally lost it?” Beast Boy muttered.

“Come, now, Robin,” Slade began, still chuckling a bit. “You’re smarter than that. You, of all people, must surely have *some* idea, tactically speaking, of just how many opportunities I’ve had to liquidate all of you...both individually, *and* as a team. And yet, you’re all still here, aren’t you? You’re good, certainly, but we both know you’re not *that* good. Not all of you, and not twenty-four hours a day.”

Robin scowled. As fiercely as he wanted to, intellectually, he couldn’t deny it. “What’s your point?”

Slade’s eye narrowed. “If, at any point in the past several years, I had ever truly wanted you *dead*...do you honestly believe you’d still be breathing?”

Before Robin could answer, they emerged from the swampy grove into a small clearing – right at the foot of a steep cliff which loomed in front of them. He judged it to be nearly a hundred foot climb, straight up.

“Did we take a wrong turn, or something?” Wonder Girl asked.

“Hardly.” Stepping forward, Slade brushed at the cliff’s earthen face, quickly producing a thick rope that had been camouflaged to look like part of the terrain. He

tugged on it a few times, shaking the dirt away from it and revealing that it went all the way up.

“See you at the top,” he tossed over his shoulder at them, and immediately began climbing.

Without hesitation, Robin fired his grappling line to the top of the cliff and began climbing also, quickly matching Slade step for step.

“Uh, wouldn’t it be easier to...oh-kay, never mind then,” Cyborg called after them as they ascended, clearly ignoring him.

Slade glanced over at Robin as he pulled up alongside him. “I’m surprised you didn’t catch a ride with your *‘friend-who-is-a-girl’*,” he remarked, mockingly.

Robin glared at him briefly, before deciding two could play at that game. “What, are you saying this is the *hard* way up? I climb twice as far every morning, before breakfast.”

“Hm. I’m sure,” Slade grunted. He was probably being sarcastic, but Robin didn’t care. He was tired of simply reacting to him. Instead, he changed the subject.

“All right. If you haven’t been actively trying to *kill* us, all this time...then, what was the point? What’s it all been about?”

Slade glanced over at him. “I thought you’d never ask! The truth, then, at long last. My real interest in your team, from the beginning...has been in *preparing* you.”

Robin nearly lost his grip on the rope. “*Preparing...?!*” he repeated incredulously.

“Precisely. Preparing you to face true evil, those who *truly* threaten our world...and who must be stopped, at any cost.”

Now it was Robin’s turn to laugh. “Beast Boy was right. You really *have* lost it.”

“Think about it, Robin,” Slade insisted. “What better way to forge your team into an effective unit than by presenting you with a capable, credible threat? One which would constantly demand that you operate at the peak of your abilities, challenge you to exceed your limitations, and push you right to the brink of oblivion...but never quite over it?” He paused, and caught Robin’s eye. “...Sound like anyone else you know?”

Robin stared at him in utter disbelief. “You can *not* be serious.”

“Ha! You already know my answer to that. And you also know that I’ve had *many* opportunities to permanently rid myself of you, had I ever actually wanted to. Can you really come up with a better explanation?”

“What about Terra?” Robin demanded angrily. “You *destroyed* her life, when you turned her against us. How do you justify *that*?”

Slade sighed. “Terra’s life was destroyed long before she ever met me. I did what I could to channel her destructive tendencies. By steering her into your path, I believe I ultimately *limited* the damage she would have randomly caused, otherwise...because I knew you could *take* it. It was a brutal, but necessary, lesson – and one you still haven’t successfully learned, if that fiasco with the Brotherhood was any indication.”

They climbed the next several meters in silence.

“I still think you’re full of it,” Robin muttered.

* * *

The other Titans stood there a moment, briefly perplexed as Robin and Slade scaled the cliff, neither of them sparing so much as a backward glance to make sure the rest were following.

“Whatever,” Raven finally muttered as she began to levitate. Beast Boy followed her lead as a green eagle, and Wonder Girl joined them in the air, with Jericho in tow.

“Um...” Cyborg rubbed his head, watching all of his friends ascend from below.

“I shall assist you, friend!” Starfire announced, suddenly grabbing him by the shoulders and launching into the air without further warning.

“Er...thanks, Star,” Cyborg grunted a few seconds later, once his stomach had caught up with them, as they soared upward.

“I welcome you,” she responded cheerfully, but then lowered her voice. “Truthfully, Cyborg...I wish to seek your advice.”

“Oh yeah?” He craned his neck to look up at her. “What’s up?”

“Well...” She hesitated. “Robin feels that Raven and Beast Boy have been behaving...unlike Raven and Beast Boy, in recent weeks. Particularly since we journeyed to the land where the sun always rises, even when it is not.” She frowned briefly, but managed to stay on topic. “I have thought about his words, though I had not noticed such a change in them myself. However, I must also admit that I have not been very...attentive, recently, and such a thing could have escaped my notice. So I must ask you; have you observed our friends behaving uncharacteristically?”

“Hmmm.” He thought about it. “Not offhand. I know BB was kinda bummed over the last time he ran into Terra, but he seemed okay with it the last time it came up...’course, the kid *is* better at hiding that sort of thing than you’d think. As for Raven, I hadn’t really thought about it ‘till earlier, but maybe she *has* been a little bit gloomier than usu-*whoa!* Pull up, Star, pull up!”

They’d suddenly begun to lose altitude, and the trees rushed up to meet them with alarming speed. Starfire hastily corrected and they resumed their upward climb, with Cyborg’s feet narrowly missing the treetops.

“Eep! Fervent apologies!” she squeaked, clearly embarrassed.

He looked up at her sympathetically. “This is really bothering you, isn’t it?”

She pursed her lips and gave a quick nod, as if almost afraid to acknowledge it. “My...my fear is that it could somehow be related to Robin and myself, having become...more than friends.”

“What? No way! Starfire, we’ve all known how you two felt about each other, probably even before *you* did! We’re *happy* that you finally got together! Don’t you doubt that.”

“I – wish to believe that, also,” she hedged. “And yet...I find myself fearing that something terrible may happen. And I do not know why.”

“I do. Look, this mission’s got *everybody* on edge, and it’s all because of Slade. We both know Robin, Beast Boy and Raven all have particular reasons for hating the guy. I think *that’s* a big part of what’s going on. Once we get this over with and ditch that creep, things’ll get back to normal. You’ll see.” He smiled at her as they swooped toward the cliff’s summit, where the others were also converging.

“I hope you are correct,” she said, smiling in return, though it seemed slightly forced. “I am grateful for your insights, Cyborg. I believe you have helped me.”

“Anytime, Starfire” he grinned.

* * *

“Alright, so...what’s this thing?” Beast Boy asked as Robin pulled himself up to the cliff’s summit.

“Looks like some sorta radar nest,” Cyborg answered, as he inspected the cluster of partially rusted metallic dishes and antennae situated among the rocks and vegetation around the plateau where the team now stood. “And an *old* one, too, from the looks of it.”

“Very astute,” Slade remarked, stepping forward. Outwardly, he didn’t seem to be the slightest bit fatigued from the climb.

“This island was secretly used as a forward observation post by the Japanese, during World War II,” he continued, slowly circling the partially-camouflaged sensor array as if looking for something in particular. “It’s been abandoned since the end of the war, but some parts of the infrastructure should still remain...ah, here we are.”

He pulled aside a large, flat rock situated toward the rear of the radar nest to reveal a hidden trapdoor. After brushing some of the dirt away from it, it opened with the loud, telltale *creak* of metal hinges that hadn’t moved in decades. The rungs of an equally old service ladder descended from there into a dark, narrow tunnel, just wide enough for a single person to fit through.

“This maintenance shaft should get us close to the main bunker, where I suspect Brother Blood has probably established his current base of operations,” Slade told them. “My contact will meet us near the exit.”

“Man, that’s gonna be tight.” Cyborg shined his light down the ladder, which went straight down about fifty feet before it appeared to link with a larger underground passage. “I hope it’s not that narrow the whole way.”

“I doubt the original architects had large, partially mechanical crime fighters in mind,” Slade commented, clearly amused by his discomfort. “After you?”

The cybernetic teen glared at him briefly before retorting. “Nah, you first. That way, there’ll be something to break my fall if I slip.”

Slade chuckled. “If you insist.”

The climb was cramped and claustrophobic, but thankfully, the shaft opened into a normal-sized passageway at the bottom, leading off into the darkness. Cyborg did get stuck at one point on the way down, but only briefly. His shoulder lamps were already scanning their dust-covered, concrete surroundings when Robin reached the bottom. Beast Boy was just behind him, with the girls still on their way down from above. If nothing else, at least they were out of the rain.

“As you can see, there’s only one way to go,” Slade observed, his voice echoing slightly in the tunnel.

“No electricity?” Cyborg wondered aloud as he fingered one of the old, small light bulbs strung along the ceiling.

“It’s better that way,” Slade remarked. “That means no one has been using this tunnel. If all goes well, we should be able to approach the base undetected.”

“Then let’s get going. Beast Boy, eyes front,” Robin ordered, without bothering to look at him.

“Dude, I wasn’t even – ah, forget it,” the green shape-shifter grumbled.

* * *

7. Point of No Return

The Titans and Slade proceeded through the winding passage as quietly and cautiously as they could, with only Cyborg's shoulder lamps and Starfire's low-intensity starbolt charges to light their way. Although it was both tall and wide enough to allow them all to walk normally, it was still tight quarters, and the slightest sound seemed to echo throughout the tunnel. This, combined with the near-total darkness, made for quite a claustrophobic journey.

Beast Boy would periodically start to say something, only to be hushed by either Cyborg or Wonder Girl. Even so, the way that even their footsteps carried in here was enough to set Robin's nerves on edge – even more than they already had been.

The single exception to this was Slade, who moved with such silence and efficiency that it was unnerving. It would have been easy for the Titans to lose track of him completely, had it not been for Cyborg's and Starfire's ever-present lights on his back.

As they proceeded, Robin found himself shoulder to shoulder with Jericho, and decided to capitalize.

Do you mind if I ask you a question? His sign language was still a bit rusty, but he remembered enough to get by...and this way, he could 'talk' to the mute hero in confidence.

Jericho nodded. *Go ahead*, he signed, watching Robin attentively.

Robin hesitated, then gritted his teeth and plowed ahead. *What Slade said back on the boat, about your brother...was that true?*

The other boy nodded again. *I'm afraid so. He always admired our father and wanted to be like him, even after what happened to me. To that end, he became the Ravager, and ultimately got himself killed.*

Robin had to look away briefly before summoning the strength to face his mute comrade again. *I'm sorry to ask you such unpleasant things. But, with this situation...*

...You're trying to figure out how honest my father is being with you? Jericho finished, when Robin paused.

The Boy Wonder nodded grimly. *Yes, that's right. Forgive me, but...your voice. Was he...responsible...?*

Jericho only paused for the briefest moment before answering. *Not directly, no. My mother blamed him for what happened, but I don't hate him for it. He also lost something that day.* And he winked, with his right eye.

"I see..." Robin murmured unconsciously, then realized Starfire was looking at him quizzically. "Uh, nothing, never mind," he told her hastily.

I'm not uncomfortable with the others knowing this, Jericho signed, *if that's what you're worried about.*

Robin shook his head. *It's just...easier this way, for now,* he signed. *I don't have to worry about him overhearing.* He nodded toward Slade's back, at the front of the procession. *One last thing...while we were climbing the cliff, he...suggested something strange to me. He implied that he's never truly been our enemy, and that he's indirectly been trying to **help** the Titans all this time, by fighting against us. I don't trust him, but...I have to admit that some of what he said made sense, in a perverse way. Do you think...well, is this possible? Could he be telling the truth?*

Jericho sighed, and appeared to think about this for a long moment before answering.

...My father has always done what he believed was right, he signed, finally. *The problem is, his definitions of 'right' and 'wrong' are not the same as yours and mine.*

"That's an understatement," Robin muttered, then realized Starfire was looking at him again and clammed up.

They rounded a corner, and Robin saw a dim ray of light up ahead...as they drew closer, he could tell it was coming from the ceiling; another maintenance shaft like the one they'd climbed down earlier. It had to be the exit, finally.

But an unfamiliar voice suddenly brought the group to a halt.

"It took you long enough to get here, old man. I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

A single, armor-clad figure stepped into the light. He wasn't much taller than Robin, and covered head to toe in an elaborate suit of what looked like ivory plate mail, highlighted in places with decorative ruby inlays that gave off an eerie crimson glow where the light shone on him directly. An assortment of blades and other medieval weaponry hung from his belt, and he also carried a beautifully crafted ceremonial spear.

"I thought you'd be in church," Slade said, as the Titans tensed.

"I'm going to the late service," the armored figure answered readily.

Slade nodded, apparently satisfied as to this person's identity. His body language relaxed visibly and he stepped forward so that he was between the newcomer and the Titans, then turned back to address them.

"Allow me to introduce my agent...Sebastian," he announced, as the armored figure nodded in greeting.

"What, like the singing crab?" Beast Boy asked.

Slade ignored him. "He'll lead us the rest of the way to the H.I.V.E.'s base of operations, and help us to infiltrate the facility."

"What's with the fancy getup?" Cyborg asked.

"I'm one of Brother Blood's personal bodyguards," Sebastian replied. "He counts me among his most loyal and trusted followers. An obvious advantage for our purposes, here."

“Uh-huh.” Cyborg rubbed his chin skeptically. “Hey, Slade. How do you know Blood hasn’t secretly hypnotized your boy, here, and turned him into a *double* double-agent? He’s tricky like that.”

“We’ve taken precautions,” Slade answered. “Sebastian is immune to Brother Blood’s mind-affecting powers.”

“Really? Y’don’t say. And how’s that, exactly?”

“It’s...complicated,” Sebastian said, “but rest assured, what he says is true.”

“Maybe we’d like to know details,” Wonder Girl insisted.

“And you shall have them, soon enough,” Slade interrupted. “But first, we should proceed to a vantage point up ahead, where we can plan our strategy.”

Robin eyed the two of them thoughtfully, trying to discern any hint of treachery. Slade was as unreadable as ever, and Sebastian’s features were completely hidden under his armor, but his body language didn’t convey any obvious warning signs.

He glanced over at Raven, wordlessly asking for her assessment. She caught his eye, and pointedly looked away.

He scowled. “All right, then...let’s go.”

* * *

The access tunnel brought them up to a cave at the base of the mountain, which must have been used to store emergency supplies a half-century earlier. Like the maintenance shaft and the radar nest, it was littered with time-worn relics of an era long gone, among them a number of wooden crates labeled with *kanji*. The mouth of the cave was almost completely hidden by vegetation, which would hopefully allow them to remain unseen until they were ready to make their move.

Slade silently moved to the front of the cave, his back to the wall, and peered between the vines which hung across the entrance. Robin dropped to the floor and did the same a few feet away, keeping as low as possible and trying to ignore the way Slade’s proximity made his skin crawl.

An overgrown trail led away from the cave’s entrance and out into a wet, grassy field. It was still raining and the sun hung low in the sky below the dark clouds overhead, nearly disappearing behind the treetops and casting long shadows across the landscape. A bit over a hundred yards away, the earth sloped gently into a large, moss-covered mound...with a low, dark, but unmistakably man-made doorway just barely visible on one side.

“There’s the bunker,” Slade observed quietly.

Robin studied the view intently. His trained eyes quickly picked out several H.I.V.E. troopers patrolling the area in staggered intervals, their distinctive yellow-and-black body armor painted with camouflage patterns to blend into the environment.

They definitely hadn’t come all this way for nothing, that much was certain.

Cyborg crouched next to him, careful to keep his reflective surface panels out of the dwindling sunlight. “I count four sentries,” he whispered, “and if they have any electronic security measures in place, I can’t see ‘em from here.”

The three of them silently pulled back from the entrance and rejoined the others toward the back of the cave.

“Okay, the bunker entrance is about a hundred yards away,” Robin told them, keeping his voice low. “We spotted four H.I.V.E. sentries patrolling the area above ground. It’s pretty open between here and the bunker, but it looks like the grass might be tall enough to provide decent cover if we keep low and move slowly.” He looked at Sebastian. “What can you tell us about their security, and what kind of opposition are we looking at down below?”

“There’s a large access shaft leading down from the old bunker itself, which connects the main levels of the H.I.V.E. base,” the armored figure replied, drawing a crude diagram in the dirt with his finger. “The actual base branches off from there, and is quite extensive. It goes down about half a mile altogether. Physical security is fairly light, with the base being as well-hidden as it is. The only thing I’m aware of is an active laser grid crisscrossing the main shaft.”

“If there’s a laser grid,” Cyborg cut in, “how do you and those other grunts get in and out without tripping it?”

Sebastian detached a small, practically unnoticeable device from his armor. “IFF transponders,” he replied. “They interrupt the lasers when we pass through them. Those guards should each be carrying one.”

Robin nodded. “Alright, good. What about their garrison strength?”

“All together, there are about a hundred on-site,” Sebastian said as he reattached his transponder. “A quarter of those are Brother Blood’s personal entourage, like me. The rest are either H.I.V.E. soldiers or technicians. There are some mechanized infantry, but it’s difficult to keep an accurate count of those, since many of them are shipped out to other locations as soon as they’re assembled. There are also a handful of recent Academy graduates and, of course, Psimon and Brother Blood, himself. I’m sure you’d consider them the main threats.”

“Academy graduates?” Wonder Girl repeated. “You mean, like the H.I.V.E. Five? Kids with powers?”

Sebastian nodded. “I think there are more than five of them, though.”

“Yeah, their math isn’t so good,” Beast Boy grunted.

“Like yours is,” Raven sniped. “Where’s the girl, then?”

“There’s a holding area about halfway down,” Sebastian answered, pointing to a spot in the middle of his drawing. “I believe they’re keeping her there.”

“Alright, well...what’s the plan?” Beast Boy asked, after pausing to stick his tongue out at Raven.

Slade raised a hand. “If I may offer a suggestion...?”

Robin gritted his teeth. "What is it?"

"I think it would be beneficial for Joseph to...*utilize* Sebastian, and slip into the base undetected. That way, he'll be able to gather information, monitor the enemy's activities, and help the rest of us gain access to the facility when the opportunity presents itself."

"*Utilize?*" Cyborg repeated, scratching his head. "What, you mean with that body-jumping trick of his?"

But Jericho was shaking his head. *First, I told you to call me Jericho*, he signed. *Second, it won't work. I may be able to control his body, but as long as he's conscious, I won't be able to control his speech.*

"Actually, I think you'll find that advantageous," Slade calmly answered. "Being a member of Brother Blood's private guard, Sebastian is versed in all of their security protocols, rituals and codes of conduct. He'll be able to actively guide you, and if necessary, he'll also be able to speak for you if you are questioned."

Jericho eyed the armored figure, clearly skeptical.

"No way!" Beast Boy exclaimed. "Send him in there all by himself, with no backup or nothing?! You've gotta be kidding--!"

"The danger to our silent friend would be unacceptable!" Starfire added.

"...It's a good plan," Robin said quietly, already hating himself for it as six-and-a-half pairs of eyes turned to stare at him in disbelief.

"I know it's a risk," he sighed, "but if one of us could sneak in there undetected, get the lay of the land and locate Rose before we try a full frontal assault, we'd have a much better chance of getting her out safely. And if that person can also help the rest of us slip in unnoticed, so much the better. After Rose is out, *then* we can cut loose and bust up Blood's operation. But as long as they're holding her hostage, we need to try to avoid a destructive battle if we can help it. I don't like it any more than the rest of you, but Slade's right. Jericho's unique ability makes him the perfect man for this job."

"I see you've thought this through," Raven remarked, her tone neutral.

Robin nodded grimly. "I have."

Jericho sighed, and for the first time that Robin had observed, he looked genuinely sad. *So...this is why you were happy to see me*, he signed, regarding his father with an air of bitterness. *I should have known.*

Slade leaned back against the cave wall, crossed his arms and said nothing.

"Look, dude...you don't have to do this, if you don't want to," Beast Boy insisted, giving Jericho a pleading look.

The blond youth looked back at him for a moment, then smiled sadly and shook his head. *Yes...yes, I do*, he signed after a brief pause. *And I will. Because I'm the only one who can.*

Robin squared his jaw and nodded again. "Thank you for understanding."

“Not to interrupt this touching and heroic moment,” Sebastian cut in, “but there’s a shift change in ten minutes. I’ll be expected back before then.”

Cyborg shifted uncomfortably, then addressed Jericho. “Alright, well, if we’re gonna do this, let me...” He suddenly broke off and looked at Robin. “Wait a sec, do you need to translate or anything?”

I’m mute, not deaf! Jericho signed.

Robin shook his head. “He can hear you fine, he just can’t talk is all.”

“Oh.” Cyborg looked embarrassed as he turned back to the blond Titan. “Sorry ‘bout that. Anyways, you’ve got your communicator, right?”

Jericho nodded, holding up the small yellow device.

“Okay, good. Lemme just take a minute and show you a couple things, here...”

While Cyborg went over some of the communicator’s more obscure functions, Sebastian stood up. Facing Raven, he bowed slightly, much to Robin’s and her surprise.

“Milady,” he said, “it’s been an honor to bask in your presence.”

She blinked in confusion for a few seconds, then waved a dismissive hand at him. “Whatever. Break a leg.”

The armored figure chuckled. “Thank you, I shall.” Then he turned toward the cave’s entrance, pausing a few steps short of it to wait for Jericho.

“Alright, we’re good to go,” Cyborg announced as he and the green-eyed musician climbed to their feet.

Sebastian spread his arms wide. “Then, I’m all yours.”

Jericho nodded firmly and squared his shoulders, his posture one of determination. He paused one last time to look over his shoulder, grin, and flash a ‘V’ sign at the rest of the team.

“Be careful,” Wonder Girl told him.

After giving her a brief nod, Jericho stepped up to Sebastian and stared intently into his helmet’s tinted visor.

Contact.

Sebastian stiffened briefly as Jericho’s body suddenly turned intangible, and then quickly merged *into* his.

Beast Boy shook his head. “This sucks and everything, but...I still can’t get over how *cool* that is.”

“Hm.” Despite himself, Robin smirked in agreement.

“Well...that *is* an odd sensation...” Sebastian muttered, as he – or, rather, Jericho – looked down at his hands, flexing and clenching them, getting a feel for his ‘new’ body.

Suddenly, his head snapped up to look at Robin and Slade. *There is...some kind of wall around his mind!* He signed, clearly alarmed. *His thoughts, his memories...they're hidden from me!*

“Very perceptive,” Sebastian remarked, apparently able to follow Jericho’s sign language.

Robin frowned. “I take it this isn’t...normal?”

Slade was nodding to his son, meanwhile. “The ‘wall’ you refer to is precisely what shields him from Brother Blood’s influence and Psimon’s scrutiny,” he replied, his tone reassuring. “And as long as you’re in there, it will shield *you* from them, as well.”

“You see?” Sebastian said, as his body, under Jericho’s control, appeared to hesitate. Which was surreal to watch, to say the least. “It *is* an ideal situation.”

Finally, Jericho/Sebastian straightened up, his determined posture returning. *Okay then, let’s get this over with,* he signed.

Robin nodded. “Okay. Get in there, gather as much information as you can, and report back to us by communicator in one hour. If we don’t hear from you by then, we’re coming in after you. Got it?”

“You should give him more time,” Slade argued. “A single hour may not be enough for him to...”

“*One*, hour,” Robin repeated firmly.

Jericho nodded in agreement, and stepped toward the mouth of the cave.

“Jo—*Jericho*. One last thing,” Slade said.

Jericho stopped just short of the exit, half-turning to look back at his father with what Robin guessed was not a pleasant expression, under Sebastian’s helmet.

Slade’s voice was quiet, but insistent. “I know I’ve caused you pain, and given you plenty of reasons to hate me. I don’t expect your forgiveness. But please, listen to what I’m about to tell you. If anything goes wrong in there...no matter what happens, no matter what you see or hear, you must *stay hidden* at all costs. If something should happen to the rest of us, you will be our only hope. Do you understand?”

The armored figure stared at him for a moment, then nodded briefly and ducked outside, accompanied by another timely rumble of thunder.

Robin and Slade returned to their lookout positions to watch their comrade wade through the tall grass, climb up the hill and disappear through the bunker’s entrance. The H.I.V.E. sentries didn’t pay him a second glance. As soon as he was out of view, Robin released the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

“So far, so good,” Slade murmured.

Robin cast a bemused glance at him, then shook his head and slid back away from the cave’s entrance. The others were awkwardly settling in to wait for Jericho’s signal, with Raven the furthest back, levitating and probably trying to meditate. Robin caught Beast Boy’s eye.

“It’d be good if you could scout the area while we’re waiting, and make sure there aren’t any other guards that Cyborg and I didn’t spot,” he told the green shape-shifter when he came over.

Beast Boy nodded, surprisingly serious. “On it,” he replied, before shifting into a snake and slithering out of the cave. As his tail disappeared from view, Cyborg sat down next to Robin.

“I guess all we can do now is wait,” Robin murmured, glancing up at his large teammate.

“Yeah...” Cyborg sighed. Though he seemed outwardly agreeable, Robin knew him well enough to tell that he was far from comfortable with this whole plan. “I probably don’t have to tell you this,” he muttered after a moment, lowering his voice, “but I’ve got a *bad* feeling about this, man.”

“You’re right,” Robin grunted, looking back toward the mouth of the cave. “You didn’t have to tell me.”

* * *

Starfire sat on a box toward the back of the cave, and watched Robin and Cyborg do the Angry Whispering. Although they had seemed to be in agreement only minutes earlier, it was clear, now, that they were not. She wanted to go and calm them, to somehow bring them back into harmony, but...she was uncertain how to. And furthermore, she suspected they would not be receptive, even if she tried.

It made her feel...small, unimportant, and horribly unnecessary.

As if sensing her discomfort, Wonder Girl sat down next to her and nudged her sympathetically. “You’ve been awfully quiet,” she observed.

“I did not wish to disturb Robin while he was planning our strategy,” Starfire replied, while also trying to convince herself that was the only reason.

Wonder Girl raised an eyebrow, then looked over at Robin and Cyborg, who were still unsuccessfully attempting to conceal the abrasive tone of their current exchange.

“It doesn’t look to me like he needs your help in that area...being disturbed, I mean,” the dark-haired Amazon remarked quietly. “I gather this isn’t how most of your other missions would normally go, huh?”

Starfire frowned, hoping her inner misery was not overtly obvious. “On a ‘normal’ mission, we would be more likely to be fighting *against* Slade, rather than travelling with him.”

“Hmm.” Wonder Girl nodded slowly, her gaze shifting to their uneasy ally, where he remained stationed at the cave’s entrance. “I hope it doesn’t turn out to be a mistake.”

“While none of us trust Slade, I believe Robin has properly measured the mass of all situational variables, and chosen the most prudent course of action.”

Wonder Girl's eyebrows came together in confusion. "Measured the mass of...oh, you mean he's weighed all the possibilities?"

"Er...yes." Starfire nodded, slightly embarrassed. Even after all this time, it seemed her grasp of English, and its more informal expressions, was still lacking.

Finally, Cyborg stood up, made a final inaudible comment to Robin, and then moved to the opposite side of the cave. In response, Robin turned his head away quickly in what Starfire had come to recognize as a mannerism indicating frustration and anger.

Beside her, Wonder Girl sighed. "I can imagine how much pressure he must be feeling," she murmured. "I know he feels responsible for the team's safety, and it's clear that no one is exactly happy with his decision to cooperate with Slade." She smiled at Starfire. "I'm sure he's especially grateful to have you standing with him, at a time like this."

"I..." The Tamaranean princess faltered. "Truly, I would like nothing better than to go to him, and ask him to share his thoughts and feelings about this mission with me. But...I do not think he would be willing to. Right now, the mask which covers his eyes is not the only mask he is wearing."

Wonder Girl frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Presently, he is also wearing the mask of the Leader," Starfire explained. "It is a persona he frequently uses to hide his true thoughts and feelings. When there is danger, he feels that he cannot afford to reveal those things to our enemies...nor even to his friends, at times." As hard as she tried, she was unable to completely disguise the raw *hurt* in her voice, at the end.

The other girl gave her hand a sympathetic squeeze. "It's hard...when you care about someone, but they won't let you help them. Isn't it?"

Starfire glanced over at her, then back toward Robin. "Earlier, I saw him conversing with Jericho, in the language of dancing fingers. But when he noticed my attention, he pretended they were not. I...do not understand why he would do that."

Suddenly, she realized that her confusion was becoming a ball of misery growing in her stomach, threatening to weigh her down. She recalled what had happened during her flight with Cyborg, and made a mental effort to banish these feelings while also forcing herself to straighten up and smile.

"But...but, I cannot allow myself to dwell on these things! At least, not right now. It will accomplish nothing. I must be confident and focused, if I am to contribute to our assured victory. For the sake of the Titans, if not for myself."

Wonder Girl looked concerned. "Because of your powers, you mean?"

Starfire nodded. "Like all Tamaraneans, many of my abilities are both fueled and influenced by my emotional state...somewhat like Raven, in a sense."

At that, they both cast an inadvertent glance toward the back of the cave, where the other female Titan sat, hovering a few feet off the ground. She appeared to be in a meditative trance, or at least trying to attain one.

The Amazon gazed thoughtfully at their blue-shrouded friend for a long moment, before looking back at Starfire. “That may be so, but...it doesn’t mean you have to deny or suppress the things you’re feeling, the way she does. You should *own* your feelings, Starfire. They’re honest, and they give you strength.”

The Tamaranean princess stared at her friend for several seconds with unabashed awe. “There is...much wisdom in your words,” she said at last, smiling, and trying as hard as she could to feel it.

* * *

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

Raven sat cross-legged, shrouded in her damp cloak, silently repeating the mantra to herself while trying to meditate. It was hardly the ideal environment for it, but she needed to use what time she had to try to bring herself back into balance as best she could.

So she sat, alone, at the very back of the cold, dusty cave, as the perpetual drizzle continued outside and unknown dangers lurked below. Closed her eyes, levitated and focused inward, searching for her too-elusive center, separating herself mentally from everything around her and striving to block it all out.

The fighting hadn’t even started yet, they had yet to face their expected enemies, and already she was tired, she was sore, she was wet and she was cold.

She breathed in her discomfort...breathed it out...and let it fall away.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

Her companions, her friends, her family. The most important people in her world, and she loved each of them, in different ways. But as deeply as she cared for them...that was also how deeply they could hurt her, without ever knowing it. The turmoil of their emotions was so difficult to keep at bay, especially when her *own* emotions were already so raw and inflamed, weakening her mental barriers that much further. She wouldn’t be able to block them indefinitely, and isolating herself was simply not an option right now, and probably wouldn’t be for hours yet to come. But...but, perhaps if she could parse through them, focus on one at a time, she could filter some of it, find a way to adapt. Yes...in any case, she could see no other choice.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

Wonder Girl was both physically closest to her, and also the most emotionally removed from the rest of the team. Ironically, she felt like more of an outsider in the group than Raven was used to feeling, herself. But in this case, that could be a genuine advantage. She was certainly uneasy about the mission and unsure about her place in the team dynamic, yes. But compared with the rest of the Titans, her emotional state was like a calm, tranquil island in the middle of a raging sea. While apprehensive, she was also resolute. Her inner strength and clarity were remarkable, and Raven was grateful for the chance to draw on them.

She breathed in that strength...breathed it out...and held fast to it.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

Next was Cyborg, the self-appointed '*big brother*' of the other Titans. More than anyone else except Robin, he always felt responsible for them all, to some extent. And while his emotions often ran high, there was always a gentle, protective undercurrent beneath them that Raven had learned to appreciate.

But...right now, he was agitated. Much more so than he would allow anyone else to see. And not because of his annoyance with Robin over their current strategy or some perceived slight; that was only a smoke screen. The truth was...Cyborg was *scared*. He was *really* scared, and growing more so by the hour. He would never admit it, probably not even to himself, but the closer they came to their inevitable confrontation with Brother Blood, the more his sense of dread increased.

Raven had never sensed anything close to this from Cyborg before, and...it unnerved her, to say the least. It was almost as though he was *expecting* something really horrible to happen, for reasons she couldn't fathom, and didn't think she wanted to.

She breathed in that fear...breathed it out...and turned away from it.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

Then there was Beast Boy, who was still scouting around outside in one animal form or another. His emotions were slightly harder to discern when he wasn't human, though still distinctive and recognizable. But regardless of that, she was already acutely aware of what he'd been feeling ever since they'd encountered Slade that morning. And it could best be characterized as a mixture of distrust and simmering, but controlled, anger. It overrode most of his usual social anxieties, which was why he seemed so unusually focused on the mission at hand, and that wasn't necessarily bad.

He'd also been very worried ever since the *incident* that afternoon between herself and Robin, though not in the same anxious way that Cyborg was. In fact, she found it...oddly comforting, which surprised her. Strange to think that, after Wonder Girl, it seemed to be *Beast Boy* who was presently faring the best among them, emotionally. He'd really come a long way from the nervous, insecure kid he'd been when they all first met him.

She breathed in that concern...breathed it out...and tucked it away.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

Speaking of Robin. Raven felt closer to him on many levels, and he *meant* something more to her, than any of the others. And he had, for some time.

Which was why his apparent distrust had cut her so very deeply.

It had taken her completely by surprise. The way he'd confronted her on the beach and all but demanded to know if what Slade had told them, about her father's inevitable return, was true. With the unspoken follow-up questions '*Why didn't you tell me?*' and '*What else have you been holding back?*' right behind it, had she waited long enough for him to ask them.

She just couldn't believe he'd do that to her, after everything. That Slade's assertions were pretty much dead on was irrelevant. If Robin had concerns, he could have

waited until *after* this mission was over, he could have talked to her in private when they were all safely and comfortably back at the Tower. Instead, he'd chosen to put her on the spot, on a cold, rainy beach in the middle of the Pacific, and in front of their worst enemy, to boot. Practically at his prompting, no less.

It wasn't enough that she had to endure the presence of this man whom they *all* hated, and with good reason, and the way everyone *else* felt about his proximity, too. Or that she'd hardly been able to find a moment of real, genuine privacy in weeks. Or that she'd had to put up with being constantly reminded, nearly every hour of every day for at least the past month, of Robin's and Starfire's euphoric realization of their feelings for one another. And how...shamefully *depressing* she'd found their happiness to be.

And now, that he would look at her with such uncertainty, such doubt, and such dismay. This, on top of everything else.

It had just been more than she could take.

And what was worse, she'd scarcely felt a hint of sympathy or remorse from him in the hours since then. But then, he'd been in such a heightened state of tension and paranoia – all of his attention fixated on Slade, his brain undoubtedly working overtime trying to anticipate any way he might conceivably double-cross them – that he probably hadn't spared it a second thought.

All that thought and effort spent on analysis, deduction, and strategy...and he was blind to what Slade was *already* doing to them, simply by *being there*.

She breathed in that paranoia...breathed it out...and pushed it away.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

As for Slade...she had been consciously trying to avoid focusing on him too much, all day. Because whenever she did, all she could feel or think about was how much she *hated* him. She'd meant what she said to Robin about him that morning, and every word she'd told Slade, himself, during the sea voyage. For all the pain, humiliation, and grief he'd caused...both herself, and each one of her friends...she sincerely wanted to *kill him*, painfully, and so badly she could almost taste it. In fact, she couldn't think of another human being for whom she felt such all-consuming hatred.

She felt her eyelids starting to burn, imagined **Him** beginning to smile, and quickly decided it was time to shift her focus.

She breathed in that hatred...breathed it out...and, with all her strength, forced it down and denied it.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

Finally...Starfire. Her best, most unlikely friend. The first and, for the most part, still the only other Titan to ever show a genuine interest in Raven's history, her habits, and her reasons for being the way she was.

Of all the people she knew, no one else experienced life with such vivid immediacy, or *felt* things with such unrestrained passion, as did Starfire. When they'd first met, just being around her had often felt like sensory overload, especially having just

come from the reserved climate of Azarath. But eventually, Raven came to admire Starfire for her passions. And, not infrequently, she envied her for them, as well.

On rare occasions, but more often of late...she even caught herself hating her for them. That she was free to *feel*, to *live* with such glorious abandon, while Raven herself was forced to hide away from those same things, always a step removed from everyone and everything.

And when she found herself feeling that way, she hated herself for it.

But right now...Starfire felt anxious, isolated, brushed aside. *Lonely*. These were not things Raven was accustomed to sensing from her Tamaranean friend...though she was all too familiar with them, on her own terms.

Being an empath sometimes made it difficult for her to distinguish her own emotions from those of others. And Starfire's present mood was bringing Raven face to face with things that she spent most of her time trying *not* to allow herself to feel.

It was pointless to dwell on her own, omnipresent feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and loneliness. She *was* fundamentally different from other people; this was a fact, and no amount of wishes or lamentations would change that. As such, she couldn't reasonably expect to have the same kind of life or relationships that others did. Not now, and probably not ever. Her emotional limitations were too great; she knew she couldn't offer another person the same things she longed for, herself. And furthermore, it was simply too dangerous. She couldn't afford the risk, not after what had happened the one time she'd allowed herself to give in to these feelings...to wish impossible things.

But even so, in spite of every rationalization she could muster...sometimes, no matter what she tried, it still caught up with her. And when it did, it *hurt*. *So. Much*.

So much that she would find herself wishing desperately and beyond all reason, simply for a strong arm to support her...to comfort her...to *hold* her, and grant her the peace and understanding that nothing else ever could.

Even if that arm was only made of paper and lies.

She breathed in the endless pain...breathed it out...and swallowed it.

Azarath...Metrion...Zinthos.

* * *

Robin checked his stopwatch for the fifteenth time. Fifty-seven minutes, and counting. Scowling, he wondered if *anything* was going to go according to plan today.

He glanced around the cave. Cyborg was still sulking along the opposite wall, where he'd been since their earlier argument, while Starfire and Wonder Girl sat on the crates further back, chatting quietly, and Raven meditated at the very back. Beast Boy had returned half an hour earlier to report that he'd only seen the four guards Robin and Cyborg had already spotted, and then went back out again to keep watch.

Steeling himself, Robin caught the eyes of each of his teammates in turn, pointing meaningfully to his watch. They got the message, and began readying themselves for what was to come next.

Fifty-eight minutes. Robin checked his communicator for the eleventh time, making sure it was on, functioning properly, and hadn't somehow missed Jericho's expected call. Yes, yes, and no. Just like every other time he'd checked it.

He crawled forward to the mouth of the cave until he was just across from Slade, who hadn't moved from his lookout post in the past hour. "See anything?" Robin asked him quietly.

"Nothing unexpected," Slade replied, without turning to face him. "The guards have continued their patrol, apparently unaware of our presence, or of Beast Boy shadowing them. He *can* be a useful asset, can't he?"

Robin ignored the comment. "The hour's nearly up. We're going to have to move."

Slade sighed. "I still maintain that we should give him more time."

"Yeah, well, you're not one of us, so you don't get a vote," Robin snapped, his patience nearly exhausted. He'd been putting up with his *friends'* doubts and second-guessing all day; he wasn't about to take it from *Slade*. "Anyway, don't you even care that your son might be in trouble?"

"Or he might be in a briefing, or listening to one of Brother Blood's interminable sermons, or any of a dozen other situations that would preclude his being able to radio out within the very limited time window you insisted on," Slade countered. "Besides, he knew the risk going in."

"We agreed on *one, hour*," Robin grated. "He knew *that*, too, so he'll be expecting us. The Titans don't leave their friends twisting in the wind."

A flash of lightning from outside momentarily highlighted Slade's silhouette. "And what if you're charging headlong into a trap?"

Robin snorted. "That's a risk *we* accepted the minute we agreed to cooperate with you, this morning. Besides, since when have you been so cautious?"

"I've always been cautious. It's the main reason I've lived this long."

"Is that so..." Robin stopped, suddenly sensing the kind of opening he'd been waiting for all day. "You know...I kind of wondered why you stayed quiet for such a long time, after Trigon was defeated. But I think I just figured it out. When all is said and done...without Trigon's power, or Cinderblock, or an army of robots or demons to back you up...you're really just all talk, aren't you?"

Slade's eye, and only his eye, moved to stare at him. "I don't think you want to go down this road, Robin," he said, his voice deadly calm.

But Robin wasn't about to let it go; not after having finally found a chink in Slade's armor. "That's it, isn't it? To think, I almost bought that garbage about the *capable threat*, and you passing up all kinds of chances to kill us. What a joke."

Slade stared at him for several seconds, unblinking. Another flash of lightning, followed by another low rumble of thunder.

Robin's stopwatch beeped. The hour was up.

As soon as it did, Slade pushed away from the wall. Robin's training and reflexes took over and he leapt back into a defensive stance, peripherally aware of the rest of the Titans jumping to their feet behind him.

Slade stood there for a moment, continuing to stare at him, but making no aggressive movements. Then, he abruptly turned and strode out of the cave.

The Titans simply stared after him for a full three seconds, eyes wide and mouths agape, unable to believe what they'd just seen.

"What th--?!" Cyborg began, while another well-timed thunderclap censored Robin's own exclamation as he lunged toward the cave's entrance, nearly forgetting to stop himself short and just peer through the vine cover to avoid revealing their position.

Slade, meanwhile, appeared to have no such concerns, as he was walking straight toward the bunker and the H.I.V.E. patrol without even trying to conceal himself. As such, the guards spotted him immediately.

"Halt! Who goes there?" the nearest one barked, as all four raised their energy carbines.

"I surrender," Slade called out, raising his hands and continuing to approach them.

"*What is he doing?!*" Cyborg whispered, he and the girls having crowded in behind Robin at the cave's entrance.

"We have to move," Robin snarled, reaching for his concussion disks. "If those guards radio in--!"

Meanwhile, as the lead guard moved toward Slade, the one farthest back let out a surprised grunt as he suddenly found himself in the coils of a giant green anaconda.

This drew the attention of the other three troopers for a split second, which was all Slade needed to close the distance between himself and the patrol leader, seize him in a chokehold and use the man's own weapon to put the third guard out of commission.

The fourth guard looked back and forth helplessly, clearly trying to choose between firing on Slade or Beast Boy, who was rapidly choking his own target unconscious. The point became moot as Raven's shadowy talons rose out of the ground beneath the last trooper's feet and rendered him catatonic.

"*What are you thinking?!*" Robin exploded as he burst out of the cave with the rest of the team on his heels. "If they'd called in an alert--!!"

"Which they didn't, thanks to Beast Boy and Raven," Slade interrupted, still restraining the struggling patrol leader. "I'd suggest gathering the transponders, so we can proceed."

Cyborg hastily did so as Robin stared at Slade, seething. The older man met his gaze steadily, his demeanor eerily calm despite the sputtering soldier thrashing in his grip.

“I take it Jericho’s time is up,” Beast Boy observed, having returned to human form. “So, are we done here, or what?”

“That would seem to be the question,” Slade remarked, when Robin didn’t answer immediately.

“Yeah, we’re done,” the Boy Wonder growled, and pointed to the guard Slade was holding. “Put him out, and let’s move.”

“Very well,” Slade replied.

Before the Titans could react, he abruptly lifted the H.I.V.E. trooper over his head, then slammed him down over his knee with enough force to shatter the man’s spinal column.

“*What are you doing??!*” Robin demanded as he snapped out his staff, nearly on the verge of attacking Slade, while his friends gasped as the older man let the trooper’s now-lifeless body slump to the ground.

“Making a point,” Slade answered evenly. “Cinderblock and my robots served to protect *you*...not me.”

His hand shaking with rage, Robin pointed to the body at Slade’s feet. “*We...don’t...do...that,*” he grated through clenched teeth.

“Of course you don’t,” Slade replied smoothly. “But *I’m* not one of you, am I?”

With that, he turned and strode up the hill to the bunker’s entrance, pausing at the door to glance over his shoulder at the stunned heroes.

“Are you coming?”

* * *

8. Lions' Den

The bunker's interior was dimly lit, primitive in construction, and only slightly less musty than the cave in which the Titans and Slade had spent the past hour. While just as old, it had clearly seen more use in recent times than had the maintenance tunnel.

Starfire perceived that Robin was still extremely angry at Slade for his casual execution of the H.I.V.E. trooper outside, yet he said nothing further about it after Slade voluntarily relinquished the dead guard's IFF transponder to him. She hoped that the anger he still held would not manifest itself in any other ways. This mission had already proven to be unpleasant enough, otherwise...

In a storage room toward the back, they found a large, hexagonal hatch built into the floor which obviously did not fit the motif of the original architecture. Below that, there was a thankfully unmanned security checkpoint, and that, in turn, opened to a large chamber. At the center was an open pit about forty feet in diameter, also hexagonal in shape. The walls, floor and ceiling were painted with the H.I.V.E.'s distinctively garish choice of yellow, and there was an access ladder built into the wall to the left of the door through which they'd entered, leading down to the next floor below. As she took in their surroundings, Starfire also noticed another such ladder, similarly placed, on each of the room's six walls.

"Well, at least we're finally out of the rain," Raven muttered, dropping her damp hood as they cautiously moved into the large chamber.

"This must be the central shaft Sebastian described," Robin observed, as they cautiously peered over the edge. The pit descended a *very* significant distance below them, with another landing, like the one they now stood on, approximately every two hundred feet by Starfire's estimation. It reminded her somewhat of the grand conservatory in the palace on Tamaran; except, of course, for the access ladders. She could not see the bottom of the shaft from where they stood, and it seemed unwise to fly out over it merely for the sake of curiosity. There was also a substantial updraft due to the sheer size of the place, and a faint, salty smell on the breeze suggested that the shaft went all the way down to sea level.

Cyborg touched the side of his head as he looked down over the shaft. "Yeah, there's a laser grid up, just like he said," he reported, and produced the transponders. "Alright, let's divvy these things up. We've got four total, so...one for me, one for Robin, one for Starfire, and one for Wonder Girl," he narrated as he handed out the devices.

"Dude, what about me an'—?"

"*I* can teleport, and *you* can shrink down small enough to pass between the beams undetected," Raven interrupted Beast Boy.

Cyborg blinked. "Er...yeah, what she said."

"Oh...uh, I mean, I knew that," Beast Boy mumbled.

"Well, we might as well take the most direct way down," Robin said, turning to head back toward the entrance.

As the group gathered at the ladder, Robin held his transponder over the hole which granted access through the floor and down the shaft. "Well, is it working?" he asked, looking up at Cyborg.

Cyborg peered down the ladder, and nodded. "Yep. Looks like the transponders send out a frequency that deactivates all the lasers that cross within...I'd say about eight feet of the signal. We should all be able to get past the security grid this way, if we stack up on the ladder and stick close together."

Robin nodded. "Okay then, let's pair up. Beast Boy, stick close to Cyborg. Raven, you're with...Wonder Girl. And Starfire..."

She watched him attentively.

"...I'm counting on you to guard Slade. Any questions?"

Beast Boy's hand shot up. "Yeah, why are we even bringing this psycho along with us? I mean, it's not like we still need him to show us the way, now that we're here."

Slade leaned against the wall and stifled a yawn.

Robin scowled. "I don't trust him to stay here by himself. Do you?"

Beast Boy hesitated, then lowered his hand.

"I'm touched that you care," Slade commented.

"Save it," Robin spat. "Let's move out."

They descended the ladder, Robin leading the way. Cyborg followed next, with Beast Boy clinging to his back as the sloth of three toes, and Raven and Wonder Girl followed close behind. Starfire and Slade followed last; instead of climbing, she simply allowed herself to float downward along the ladder's path. This allowed her to more easily keep a vigilant eye on Slade all the way down, both to ensure that he remained within range of the transponder she was carrying, and to preclude any possibility of treachery on his part.

They reached the next floor down without incident, and were about to proceed down the next ladder when Cyborg called for them to wait.

"My sensors are showing a lot of magnetic interference from the rock down here," he reported, examining a panel on his forearm. "As a result, I can't get a fix on Jericho's communicator...in fact, it also means that *none* of our communicators will work down here, at all."

"So, that could be the reason we haven't heard back from him yet?" Wonder Girl asked.

"Imagine that," Slade chuckled, indifferent to the venomous glares he received in response.

"Does this mean that he may not be in danger?" Starfire asked, her spirits rising. What a relief that would be!

"It means we still don't know," Robin answered in a low voice. "Raven, can you get a fix on him?"

She shook her head. "I haven't been able to sense him at all since he possessed Sebastian. Whatever shields him from Brother Blood and Psimon also hides him from

me. I *do* sense a lot of other people down here, but the layout of this place makes it hard to tell exactly who, or where they are.”

An anxious silence settled over the team.

“Well...now what do we do?” Beast Boy asked after a moment. “Should we go back and wait to hear from Jericho, after all?”

Robin shook his head firmly. “No. We’ve already come this far; we stick to the plan. Find Rose, get her out, find Jericho, stop Brother Blood. Okay?” He looked at each of them in turn.

“Agreed,” Starfire confirmed, nodding.

As the others also indicated their assent, Robin nodded in return.

“Okay then...let’s move out.”

* * *

The group descended to the next level without incident. As Starfire’s feet touched the floor, Cyborg spoke up.

“Yo, hold up a second. Didn’t Sebastian say they were keeping the girl ‘about halfway down’? Maybe we should take a look around before we go down any further. If we can find a computer terminal, I might be able to access their network and get a better idea of the place’s layout.”

Robin nodded in agreement. “Good idea. But I think we should just send one or two people to scout the floor; that way, it’ll reduce the chances of *all* of us getting spotted or captured. I’ll go, and...”

“Ooh! Me!” Beast Boy’s hand went up again. “I am *totally* down for another *sneaking mission*.”

“He *does* probably stand the best chance out of all of us to avoid being spotted,” Wonder Girl pointed out, when Robin paused. “Better than you, in fact.”

“Well...all right,” the Titans’ leader allowed. “Just remember, we do *not* want to be detected, at least not until we’ve gotten the hostage out of here safely. We need to be silent, and invisible.”

“No sweat. Just call me Solid Bea—” Beast Boy stopped abruptly, his eyes lighting up as though he had just received some profound revelation. “—no. *No*. Call me...*Green Fox!*!”

“I’ll call you Decoy Octopus, if you don’t get it in gear!” Cyborg retorted.

Starfire was about to ask them to explain the significance of a small canine which shared Beast Boy’s pigmentation, and how an aquatic cephalopod could be used in diversionary tactics, but Raven spoke first.

“Well, that’s *still* an improvement on Garfield.”

Beast Boy physically flinched at her utterance of the name by which the Patrol of Doom had addressed him. “Dude, that is *so* not fair!” he protested.

“What, that your parents named you Garfield?” Raven responded, unfazed. “For once, we agree.”

“No, not *that!*” He jabbed an accusing finger at her. “The fact that *you* know *my* name, but *I* don’t know *yours!*”

“Yes you do,” she replied, frowning.

“No, I—wait, what?” Beast Boy stared at Raven in disbelief. “You mean... all this time, you’ve been using your *real* name as your—?”

“*Beast Boy*,” Robin interrupted, glaring at him. “Let’s *go*, already.”

“Okay, okay, coming. Geez...”

“Exercise caution, please!” Starfire called to them, as they headed down one of the hallways leading away from the main shaft. Robin nodded back to her just before they turned a corner and disappeared from view.

Starfire bit her lip, feelings of anxiety and doubt beginning to well up within her once again. If her other friends felt the same way, they were not displaying it outwardly. Raven withdrew into her cloak, probably attempting a form of light meditation. Meanwhile, Cyborg and Wonder Girl took up positions on either side of the corridor Robin and Beast Boy had taken, assuming a posture of silent vigilance.

While her friends’ outward demeanor was somewhat reassuring, Starfire nevertheless felt a need to speak with *someone*, if only to distract herself from inner, nameless fears. And, as distasteful as she found it, the nearest conversational prospect was...Slade, who was leaning against the wall next to the ladder.

Besides, Robin *had* specifically assigned her to watch him.

“You seem quite relaxed,” she observed, “considering that we are presently in enemy territory.”

He regarded her for a moment in silence, before responding. “That’s a fairly relative term, if you think about it...but, to address your larger point. To master one’s emotions is one of the first and most important lessons every soldier must learn...and one that was imparted to me many years before you were born.”

“I have heard Raven say that most of your emotions are dead.”

“Has she, now...?” Something, some emotion the Tamaranean princess couldn’t identify, briefly flickered in Slade’s eye. “Well...perhaps she’s right about that.”

Starfire frowned. “I do not understand how a person’s emotions could ‘die’. But I will not ask you to elaborate, as I suspect your explanation would...not be helpful to me.”

He chuckled at that. “Are all Tamaraneans as refreshingly honest and forthright as you are?”

“They are not,” she told him, “just as all humans are not as manipulative and deceitful as you are.”

“Hmm. A fair point,” he replied in what, coming from anyone else, would have seemed like a pleasant tone of voice. If her assessment offended him, he gave no indication of it. “I imagine that often causes problems for you, living in such a...frequently dishonest world, as ours.”

She paused, considering the idea. “I suppose that it does,” she acknowledged, “though I do not often think about it. For me, it is the only way I know how to live, and I would not change that even if I could.”

“Hm.” His single, gray eye continued to study her. “Pray, then, that you never have to.”

She could not think of an appropriate response for such a statement, so she chose instead to change topics. “Outside...why did you kill that man?”

He did not seem surprised by her sudden question. “As I told Robin: to prove a point.”

She met his gaze defiantly. “What point could possibly be served by such an unnecessary act?”

“That some of his assumptions about me are dangerously flawed,” Slade replied, steadily meeting her eye. “And that clinging to those beliefs can carry unexpected, and dire, consequences.”

“You speak as though Robin could somehow be held responsible for *your* actions.” At this thought, she felt herself becoming angry.

“Ah. And now, you begin to see my point,” he answered, sounding pleased. “For Robin undoubtedly *does* hold himself at least partially responsible for what I did.”

“How would you know such a thing?” she demanded.

“Because I have studied him, very carefully. Robin’s greatest flaw is that he overestimates himself, and holds himself accountable for things which are far beyond his control...as I’m sure you must also be aware.”

As fiercely as Starfire wanted to deny Slade’s words...she suddenly found herself unable to honestly do so.

“In fact,” Slade continued, “I would even say that Robin is...*dangerously unaware* of his own limitations. But, in any case. For you all to expect to be able to force your way into a mortal enemy’s inner sanctum, foil their plans and emerge unscathed – without anyone on either side losing their life – is terribly naïve.”

“It is not,” she argued, “when we have successfully done so on numerous occasions, in the past.”

“Hmmm.” His eye narrowed. “And what makes you think this is anything like your past missions?”

She blinked, slightly confused by his question. “Because...I have no reason to think otherwise.”

His eye narrowed further, and she somehow suspected he was smiling, though she could not see his mouth. “Are you sure...?”

Before she could answer, they were interrupted by Beast Boy's return.

"We found a computer room where Robin thinks Cyborg'll be able to plug 'n play," he reported, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "C'mon, follow me."

* * *

Beast Boy led the group through a series of winding corridors lined with empty, barred holding cells on either side, before finally arriving at the guard station where he'd left Robin. Who was still standing in the exact same place, trying to hack his way into one of the computer terminals, while the three unconscious H.I.V.E. troopers they'd gotten the drop on lay piled in the corner.

"Well, at least you guys were tidy," Raven commented.

"I wanted to build a pyramid or something out of 'em," Beast Boy told her, "but Robin thought that'd be a little over the top." Granted, Robin was smart and cool and brave and better than Beast Boy at pretty much everything, plus he got girls like Starfire without even really trying to. But the guy could seriously stand to lighten up a little bit, every now and then.

Raven didn't seem to think so, though, since she was giving Beast Boy a look that said she wanted to teleport him into an active volcano or something. He'd always been struck by her way of saying more with her eyes than she did with her mouth. It was *creepy*.

"Any luck with that?" Wonder Girl asked Robin as she stepped up next to him, nodding toward the computer.

He shook his head. "Not yet..."

"Well then, step aside and watch the master at work," Cyborg boasted as he joined them, cracking his knuckles for show.

Starfire lingered near the door. "This place reminds me of my time with the Gordianians," she murmured, rubbing her arm and looking *really* uncomfortable.

Beast Boy raised an eyebrow and glanced around, trying to draw a comparison with what he remembered of the alien ship Starfire had escaped from just before they all first met. "Well...this place is more yellow and hexagon-y, and smells less like lizard, but...I can kinda sorta see what you mean. I think."

Starfire didn't laugh. Aw, man, he'd gone and said something really stupid, *again*, hadn't he...why couldn't he ever keep his big mouth shut, when it really mattered?

Meanwhile, Cyborg had plugged a wire from his finger into a port on the computer. A rapid-fire torrent of images and information flashed across the screen as he interfaced with the system. It was way too fast for Beast Boy to follow, even if he'd been trying to, and it didn't look at *all* like any of the 'hacking' sequences in any of the video games he'd played.

“Alright...I’m in,” he announced after a few seconds. “Downloading the base schematics now...looks like there’s ten levels altogether, plus the old bunker topside, and some kinda sea level access point at the very bottom.”

“That must be why we could smell the ocean earlier,” Wonder Girl reasoned.

Cyborg nodded. “Yeah. Looks like this floor, and the next one down are the main holding areas, and the one below *that* is the main barracks...hm, interesting. Fifth floor down houses the main power grid...plus, they’ve got some sorta stasis chamber set up there, and it’s suckin’ up a whole lotta juice.”

Robin rubbed his chin. “Well, that *would* be the halfway point, and it would make sense that they’d have a special containment area set up for their big prize...I think we should check there, first. Besides, marching into the detention area is not what I had in mind...what?” He frowned at Beast Boy and Cyborg, who were now both staring at him in amazement. There was *no way* he could’ve just said that, totally by accident. Could he...?

“Uh, nothing, never mind,” Cyborg answered quickly. “Anyway, looks like we caught a lucky break. According to the duty roster, the majority of on-site personnel are supposed to be attending a ‘service’ down on level seven for at least the next hour, maybe longer...probably one of those *power meetings* Brother Blood likes to have, or some crazy thing like that. Guess that’s why the place seems so empty.”

“You don’t say,” Slade remarked. Everyone ignored him, ‘cause he was a jerk.

“Well then, let’s not waste any more time standing around here,” Robin said, already on his way to the door.

* * *

“Well, it looks like we picked the right floor,” Robin observed, as the team gathered around the stasis capsule.

They stood at the center of a large room which Cyborg had identified as housing the base’s main power generators. It wasn’t very well lit aside from their immediate area, and there were a large number of odd-looking pylons scattered all about the room at regular intervals, jutting up from beneath the floor, which was itself a raised metal grate. The pylons appeared to be constructed from a mixture of both ceramic and metal and terminated about a foot short of the ceiling, with an open vent aligned directly over each one. Cyborg had said these served to disperse heat from the generators, which were actually beneath their feet, functioning much like a giant heat sink. There was a high volume of ambient ventilation noise, probably from the central air conditioning system, and the air smelled heavily of ozone. A cool mist rose from the floor, creating a layer of fog at their feet which was chill to the touch. It raised gooseflesh up and down Raven’s bare legs and led her to think, not for the first time today, that perhaps she should consider redesigning her costume.

The object of the group’s attention was a transparent cylinder about six feet in length, elevated a foot off the ground and tilted back at a reclining angle, with a number of electronic monitors and displays along the sides. A large concentration of wires, tubes

and hoses were connected to the back, and ran beneath the floor. Inside the cylinder was a young girl; the same one from the photograph Wintergreen had showed them. Her eyes were closed and she was so still that Raven might have thought she was dead, had her senses not told her otherwise.

They'd been able to reach this area with surprisingly little difficulty, having encountered no other guards or H.I.V.E. personnel on their way down from the detention level. And the only other automated security measures they'd had to contend with had been some additional laser grids and a couple of closed-circuit cameras, all of which had been easily circumvented.

In fact...it seemed far *too* easy, considering the supposed gravity of the situation and this girl's apparent value to her captors. But while she didn't consider herself superstitious, Raven still knew better than to tempt fate by actually saying this out loud.

Besides, she knew Beast Boy would beat her to it.

"Okay, seriously, you guys...doesn't this seem almost *too* easy...?"

Cyborg, who was intently studying one of the display panels on his forearm, suddenly bared his teeth in an expression of utter fury and raised a clutching hand toward his younger teammate. After an almost visible internal struggle, he evidently managed to convince himself that strangling the shape-shifter would not help matters, and forcibly lowered his arm again.

"What, what? C'mon, I'm just *sayin'*..."

"What's the problem?" Robin asked, trying to steer Cyborg's attention back to the situation at hand.

Cyborg cleared his throat, but continued to glower at Beast Boy out of the corner of his eye. "Well, I *thought* the wiring in here looked a little strange in the blueprints, but I didn't want to say anything 'till I got to see it up close...but now that I have...basically, this capsule's keeping her in a state of suspended animation. The problem is...uh, what's up, Starfire?"

All eyes turned to the alien princess, who suddenly looked inappropriately *happy* and was even bouncing up and down slightly. Noticing their stares, she quickly stopped and turned a deep shade of red.

"Oh...it is unimportant! I was merely reminded of the tale of fairies. Please, continue detailing the technological tribulation we face."

"Um...okay..." With some effort, Cyborg managed to get back on topic. "Anyway, our problem, in a nutshell, is that this thing can't be shut off from here. Which I realized right *after* somebody went and opened his big, green mouth."

"Hey, how is this *my* fault?!" Beast Boy protested, and was predictably ignored.

Wonder Girl frowned. "But then, what are all these controls for?" she asked, pointing to the display panels along the sides of the machine.

"These are just minor diagnostic tools," Cyborg explained. "The main controls for the revival process are clear on the other side of this floor. What's more, they're isolated

from the network, so somebody's gonna have to physically go over there to run it." He held out his arm so the rest of them could see the diagram on his display panel.

"Why can't we just unplug it, pull her out and make a run for the surface?" Beast Boy asked, his indignation already forgotten.

"It ain't that simple," Cyborg told him, shaking his head for emphasis. "Right now, this machine is maintaining the girl's circulatory system at an artificially decelerated rate. If we just unplug it or bust it open, we'll end up killing her in the process. We'll need to let it cycle through the entire revival program before we can safely get her out."

Raven sighed, growing impatient with the lingering spikes of trepidation he was continuing to throw off. "Why do I have the feeling that's not the worst of it?"

Cyborg cleared his throat again, obviously uncomfortable. "Well, uh...from what I can tell, the whole cycle's gonna take a good ten minutes or so...and, if I know Brother Blood, it's a sure bet he's got some mechanism set up to notify him personally the second it starts."

"Hmm. That's right, he modified himself with your technology, didn't he?" Slade noted, thwarting Raven's fervent efforts to forget that he was present.

Beast Boy, meanwhile, weighed his dislike for Slade against the opportunity to affect a cheesy British accent and recite movie dialogue, with predictable results. "He's more machine now than man. Twisted, and evil. -Uh, no offense," he added hastily, as Cyborg slowly turned to glare at him.

With another sigh, Raven gave the changeling an obligatory smack to the head.

"He already had a pretty good leg up on the *twisted* and *evil* parts to begin with, anyway," Cyborg muttered, while Beast Boy rubbed his head and scowled at Raven.

"Oww...! Just for that, I'm gonna turn into a mosquito and bite you when you're not expecting it! And then you'll be all...itchy, and stuff!"

"Consider me terrified," she deadpanned in response.

"Knock it off!" Robin snapped. "I guess we've got no choice, then: we'll have to split up. Someone will have to go and start the system, while the rest of us hold here, since this is probably where most of the guards will show up."

"That 'someone' should be me," Cyborg said, nodding agreeably and with enough confidence to effectively hide the dread he felt at the prospect from everyone present who wasn't supernaturally empathic. "I know exactly where to find the controls, and I'll have the easiest time activating the process, since I can probably interface with the computer directly."

Robin nodded in return. "Agreed. Take Raven with you, that way you can both teleport back here once the system is up and running."

Part of her wanted to seize the opportunity to rebuke him for the way he'd treated her that afternoon by sarcastically asking whether he trusted her enough for this job. But that wouldn't be appropriate, she told herself. They were in the middle of a mission, they

were in the enemy's lair, and this was serious. This was life and death. Her petty, hurt feelings would have to wait.

So, she swallowed the emotional impulse and simply said nothing. Thinking about it later, though, she wasn't completely sure which part of her had made the decision...the rational part, or the part that was afraid of how Robin might have answered the question.

On top of that, she was beginning to realize that one of the reasons Robin's lack of trust was gnawing at her so fiercely was because...on some level, she had never believed that she'd ever truly deserved his trust, in the first place.

But in the meantime, he wasn't finished outlining the plan. "Starfire, Wonder Girl and I will stay here with Slade, and hold off the guards until the girl wakes up. They'll probably throw everything they have at us, too, so hurry back. Beast Boy, while Cyborg and Raven head for the control room, scout the rest of this floor and make sure there aren't any nasty surprises waiting to sneak up on us, then come back and help us hold the line. Everyone clear?"

They all nodded except for Slade, who was leaning against one of the temperature control pylons and generally looking bored. But as she still found herself unable to look at him without being reminded of how badly she wanted to disembowel him, Raven quickly turned her attention elsewhere, moving to follow Cyborg.

"Oh, hey, you guys! Wait a sec, I just remembered something important," Beast Boy said suddenly. They stopped, and looked back at him.

"If you run into Psimon," he told them urgently, "*don't forget to plug the controller into the second port*, so he can't read your minds."

They stood there staring at him for a few seconds longer, all rational thought processes having completely ground to a halt.

"Beast Boy! *Go!*" Robin barked.

"Alright already, *sheesh!*" He morphed into an emerald green dragonfly and buzzed away, dropping almost completely off of Raven's sensory 'radar' in the process. His emotional profile was practically invisible to her whenever he was an insect; something she'd never explicitly told him, but she thought he'd probably figured it out for himself since she'd been unaware of him spying on her as a literal fly on the wall during the Malchior incident.

"C'mon, we'd better go too," Cyborg tossed over his shoulder as he marched off in the opposite direction. Nodding, she fell into step behind him.

* * *

9. Ravage

The hexagonal corridors were eerily silent as the two Titans made their way toward the control room. It almost felt to Cyborg as though the very walls themselves were holding their breath, waiting for something to happen.

“Hold up,” he whispered, waving for Raven to get behind him as they reached an intersection. Flattening himself against the wall, he reached out with his free hand to grasp the corner for a moment, inching his finger around the edge, before nodding to himself in satisfaction. “Okay, it’s clear.”

He glanced back to see Raven looking up at him, one eyebrow quizzically arched. “Finger cams,” he told her with a grin, holding out his hand to show her the retractable lens on the end of his digit. “‘Green Fox’ ain’t got nothin’ on *Cyborg Snake*.”

She continued to stare at him blankly until he realized he should probably attempt some sort of explanation. “It’s, um...a video game thing.”

She kept staring just long enough to make him feel stupid for it. “...Right. So, how much further to the control room?”

“Two more right turns should get us there,” he replied, pulling up the blueprint on his forearm display and holding it out for her to see.

“Then let’s go,” she said as she swept past him, her cloak billowing slightly behind her. “The sooner we’re out of here, the better.”

“I hear that,” he agreed, following.

They proceeded in cautious silence, passing through two more laser grids and dodging another security camera, before finally arriving at their destination. It turned out to be another generator room almost exactly like the one where they’d left the others, but on the opposite side of the floor, and unfortunately just as noisy and poorly lit. They crept through the forest of cooling pylons, keeping a wary eye on every shadow, and finally found a small control room nestled along one wall.

The door slid open obediently at their approach. The room inside was practically empty and featureless, save for a series of display panels which all but covered one wall.

“There’s no keyboard or controls,” Raven observed.

“Yeah, but I’ll bet...aha!” A quick search of the wall’s surface revealed a subtly camouflaged access panel which popped open at Cyborg’s touch. Inside was a single high-bandwidth data jack, of a configuration he was intimately familiar with. “Here we go, perfect! Blood must jack into the system directly from here, figures he’d design it so that no one else could physically use it. No one else but *me*, that is...!”

He pulled a retractable interface cable out of his forearm and was about to plug it into the port, but...then, he stopped.

Raven noticed immediately. “What’s wrong?”

Moving slowly, Cyborg lowered his arm. “This... is *exactly* what I was hoping to find,” he explained, his mouth suddenly dry.

“And that’s a problem, because...?”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “Because *Blood* knows it’s the first thing I’d look for, too. The man’s got my schematics memorized. Granted, we’re ‘built’ with the same tech, but still... yeah, that’s what I thought.” He took a closer look at the jack with image enhancement, and swallowed hard. “It’s wired to trip an alarm *and* shoot about a million volts into the first thing that plugs into it. That was a close one.”

Her eyebrows went up again. “Good thinking... so, now what?”

“Well, let’s hope there’s a backup system someplace close by,” he hedged as he switched over to electromagnetic field imaging with his cybernetic eye, allowing him to visually see the path of the electrical currents flowing through the wiring beneath the floor and inside the walls. “And hopefully not too... wait a sec. This jack *isn’t* tied into the lines that lead back to the stasis pod – it’s a fake! But the *monitors*, on the other hand... alright, I can follow this straight to the jackpot!”

Returning to the larger room, they were quickly able to find the real controls, situated just out of view behind one of the cooling pylons in a corner of the room near the door they’d originally come in through. Ironically, they’d walked right past it on their way in.

“Okay, *here* we go,” Cyborg announced, nodding to himself as he examined the control panel. “Doesn’t look like it’s booby-trapped, from what I can see... but still, I’m sure somebody’s gonna notice when I start it up.”

Raven nodded. “Well, if there’s no way around – wait.” Her head snapped up, and she looked toward the door. “Somebody’s coming.”

“*Knew* this was too easy,” Cyborg grunted as he charged his sonic cannon, preparing to blast whoever entered the room as soon as they came into view. “Quick, get behind me--!”

“Better idea,” she interrupted, stepping in *front* of him instead, positioning herself between him and the door, just as three armored H.I.V.E. troopers rounded the corner. They spotted the Titans immediately but before they could raise their weapons, Raven unleashed a massive burst of black energy that swept over them, knocking them all to the ground. They didn’t get back up, and Raven fell back against the pylon as the dark energy came flowing back into her body.

Cyborg made no effort to hide his amazement. “Um... wow?”

“They’ll be out for a few hours,” she reported, slightly out of breath.

“Uh, great, but what about you?” he asked, noting the way she was still leaning on the pillar to support herself.

“I’ll be fine in a minute or so,” she assured him.

“Okay, cool.” He turned to access the controls, but paused to shoot her a grin. “If anybody else comes before then, I got your back... so don’t be scared, huh?”

It had been sort of a private joke between them ever since the night her powers had run out of control and terrorized the team, after they'd all watched *Wicked Scary* following their first battle with Control Freak. However, she didn't respond to his jab with her usual sarcasm.

"Maybe *I* should be telling *you* that."

"Huh?" He blinked. "What do you mean?"

She sighed in annoyance. "All right, look. Go ahead and lie to the others, I can understand that. And you can even lie to *yourself* if you really want to. But don't lie to *me*, okay? *I know* how you've been feeling all day, and it's only gotten worse since we came down here." Wincing, she pushed away from the thermal pylon to lean on the control housing, instead. "Ow, these things are hot."

But Cyborg was still absorbing her observation about his emotional state. It was a feeling he'd been trying to ignore for most of the day, telling himself it was just nerves, and not worth worrying about. But, now that she was forcing him to face it directly...

"I guess, the thing is...the last time we went up against Blood, it took *everything* I had – and then some – to beat him." He looked down at her, plaintively. "And I really don't know if I can do that again. I'm not sure I have it in me."

"You're not alone," she reminded him. "We're all in this, together."

"Yeah, well..." He looked down, but was suddenly struck by the irony of her statement and couldn't help smiling at it. "Hey, don't forget, that goes for *both* of us, y'know? I don't need your senses to tell something's been eating you, too."

She looked surprised for a second, then bit her lip and looked away while he got busy initializing the revival program.

"It's...complicated," she murmured after a few seconds.

"Yeah, I'll bet..." he grunted, keeping his eyes on the task in front of him. "Well if you're gonna make me guess, then I'll put my money on Slade, Robin, or maybe both of 'em combined."

She remained silent, which told him he was on the right track.

"Personally," he continued when she showed no sign of speaking up, "I'm starting to have trouble deciding which one's a *bigger* pain in the rear. It's hard enough for everybody just being *around* Slade, after everything he's done...especially for you and Beast Boy, I'm sure. But on the other hand, Robin sure ain't making things any easier with his my-way-or-the-highway attitude about the whole thing."

A long moment passed before she spoke again, during which he finished configuring the system to begin the revival program. "We...shouldn't be doing this," she said, finally.

He froze, his finger poised over the 'execute' button, and cocked an eyebrow at her. "Uh, this *is* why we came over here..."

She waved a dismissive hand at him. "No, not *that*. Robin. We shouldn't be...*talking* about him, like this."

“Hey, hold on, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying I don’t trust or respect the guy; he’s *more* than earned it. We both know that. But we also both know how he gets, whenever Slade’s involved...in fact, I’ll bet you know even better than I do.” He favored her with a conspiratorial grin. “But aside from all that...yeah, we’re still sneaking around in Brother Blood’s basement, but admit it: it’s been nice to get away from *both* of ‘em, even for just a few minutes.”

She frowned, but her expression quickly turned thoughtful. “Actually...I *do* feel better, being away from him.”

“See?” He nodded, then looked back to the controls. “Well, this is it, everything’s set. Time to ring the bell. You ready?”

Shaking out of her reverie, she straightened up and gave a quick nod. “Do it.”

He pressed the button, and the program started up. He watched the data feed for a few seconds, then nodded in satisfaction. “Alright...it’ll take a few minutes for her to rise and shine, but the good news is, it looks like the process can’t be interrupted once it gets going. Let’s just give it a few more seconds to make sure it doesn’t need any more input from this end, then we can get back to the others.”

She nodded in agreement. “Just say the wor—ow! Beast Boy, *quit it--!*” she hissed, swatting at something small and green at her neck.

Cyborg had to stifle a laugh, despite their situation. “What, is he doing the mosquito bit? Well, he *did* warn y—”

He broke off abruptly, seeing Raven’s eyes widen as she pulled a small, jade-colored *dart* out of her neck.

“Cy—*borg...!*” She took one step forward, hastily trying to summon a protective barrier with her powers, but the black energy dissipated almost immediately as she fell.

“*Raven!!*” he exclaimed, barely managing to catch her; she was already limp, and barely conscious. Before he could react, he felt a tiny pinch and looked down to see an identical dart protruding from the exposed flesh on his upper arm. He quickly pulled it out with his free hand, but his vision was already going fuzzy and a powerful wave of dizziness staggered him. He managed to stay on his feet through sheer willpower, peripherally aware of his cybernetics’ blood-scrubbers kicking into overdrive to counteract the toxin that had just been introduced into his system.

Blinking rapidly in an effort to clear his head, he charged up his sonic cannon and frantically peered around the room in hopes of locating their attacker, but saw no one. As his mind shook off the effects of the drug, he thought to switch over to thermal imaging with his cybernetic eye – *there*. He spotted a heat source where there shouldn’t have been one, between two of the cooling pylons about fifteen feet away, and immediately fired on it.

With a startled yelp, the hidden assailant dove out of the sonic blast’s path, becoming visible in the process: a lithe, dark-haired girl clad in an emerald green mini-kimono, her face hidden behind an eerily grinning cat mask. The infamous villainess Cheshire, if Cyborg’s memory served.

“Wanna try and stick me again, Miss Kitty?” he growled, leveling his sonic cannon at her while still supporting Raven’s limp body with his other arm. Cheshire tensed as they squared off, her movements slow and silent, like a predatory feline stalking its prey. Her mask added an even more unnerving element to her mannerisms, and the claw-like blades protruding from her sleeves made it clear that this was far more than mere theatrics.

But before either of them could launch another attack, they were interrupted by the sound of someone clapping.

Keeping his cannon leveled at his opponent, Cyborg spared a glance behind him, and swore inwardly as his blood – what there was of it – ran cold.

Standing in the doorway, smiling, applauding and flanked by at least a dozen Cyclone combat androids, was none other than Brother Blood, himself.

“Bravo, Cyborg, bravo!” he called out. “I had hoped it would take more than Cheshire’s poisons to dispatch you. And you certainly don’t disappoint, do you? I can’t begin to tell you how very pleased I am to see you again, after all this time...oh, and welcome to my new home. What do you think of it?”

“Same song, different dance,” Cyborg grunted through clenched teeth, his mind racing as he tried to keep an eye on both opponents.

Noticing this, Blood waved a dismissive hand. “That will be all, my dear; I’ll finish this.”

At his words, the masked girl executed a quick bow, then leapt away and disappeared again. Cyborg immediately spun around to target Blood, instead.

Blood’s smile didn’t fade; if anything, it broadened slightly. “Ahh...now that’s more like it. Just you and me, Cyborg, the way it should be. Don’t you agree? Pity your companion has nodded off, she’ll be missing quite the show.” He shrugged off his ceremonial robe, revealing his armored, cybernetically-modified torso. His visible circuitry cast a faint, ominous red glow over his immediate surroundings and the androids directly behind him.

“Yeah, well...sorry to rain on your parade, but I’m in kind of a hurry,” Cyborg retorted, trying to ignore the bead of cold sweat slowly making its way from his temple down to his neck. “So could we can the rest of the speech, and just skip to the part where I stomp your face into the ground?”

Blood chuckled as he eased into a combat stance. “If you insist on getting right down to business...nothing would make me happier. But why don’t you set the girl aside, first. I don’t want you distracted, and we both know how important she is.”

Cyborg gritted his teeth and kept his eyes on his enemy. “What are you talking about?”

“You know very well, but it isn’t relevant right now.” Stifling a yawn, Blood straightened up and crossed his arms. “Go on; I’ll wait.”

Cyborg hesitated, but had to admit that trying to fight with Raven tucked under his arm wasn’t going to work very well for either of them. So, keeping his sonic cannon

trained on Blood and his entourage, he gingerly laid her down next to the control panel, pausing briefly to assess her condition before he stood back up. Her pulse and breathing were shallow, but steady. She was completely sedated.

So...he was alone, after all.

“All right, let’s do this thing.”

Without further delay, he snapped around and fired off a rapid series of sonic blasts at Brother Blood. Who parried or deflected all of them, of course, his eyes and hands flaring red as they sliced through the air, effortlessly redirecting the focused bursts of sound and energy as if by magic. He sent the last one straight back at Cyborg, forcing him to dive behind the nearest cooling pylon for cover. He tucked himself into an evasive roll just before he hit the ground, ready to keep up the pressure as he came out of it on the other side.

Blood, meanwhile, was already rushing forward, aiming for the spot where he expected Cyborg to land, grinning maniacally as his glowing hands swept toward him like talons. But Cyborg was ready and met him with a volley of missiles from his shoulder-mounted launchers as he came out of the roll, forcing his enemy back as he hastily batted the projectiles aside. Seeing an opening, Cyborg wound up and flung out a hand on a retractable grappling line, catching hold of Blood’s arm as he was parrying the last of the missiles. He immediately retracted his detached appendage at full speed, yanking his opponent through the air toward him and savoring the brief instant of surprise on his enemy’s face as he met him in mid-air with the other fist.

Metal struck metal with the force of a head-on automobile collision, sending a brief but jarring vibration through Cyborg’s entire body as Brother Blood was flung backward by the force of the blow. He smashed through several of the cooling pylons before finally slamming into the opposite wall and falling to the floor.

For a moment Blood didn’t move, just laid there in a heap. Cyborg held his breath, almost daring to hope...

Then his cybernetic arms jerked into motion, his feet found the floor and he pushed himself upright again. But he swayed unsteadily, his upper torso bent backward at a horrific angle by the force of Cyborg’s punch, until his mechanical spine realigned and straightened itself, abruptly snapping his upper body back into place.

Cyborg clenched his teeth, mentally readying another set of offensive programs as he cursed himself for thinking he might get off so easily.

“Ahhh...still as full of surprises as ever, I see,” Blood taunted, flexing his neck and shoulders to make sure everything was now aligned properly. “I really have *missed* that.”

“Can’t say I feel the same,” Cyborg growled, charging up his sonic cannon and bracing himself for the next round of combat.

“More’s the pity,” Blood sneered as he flexed his mechanical hands, which had begun to crackle with scarlet energy. “You know, the other H.I.V.E. Headmasters think I should give up on you, Cyborg. They think you’re a lost cause. But me...I just had to make one last, final effort to...*salvage* you.”

“Yeah? Well then bring it on, old man,” Cyborg retorted, mentally rerouting additional power to his weapons. “Gimme your best shot.”

Blood grinned, energy arcing from his eyes and hands. “Oh, believe me, I intend to.”

The room practically exploded in a cacophony of light and sound as they clashed.

* * *

On the opposite side of the floor, Robin watched intently as the displays on Rose’s capsule lit up, and the entire machine began to hum softly.

“Looks like Cyborg and Raven have done it,” Wonder Girl observed. “They should be back any minute, then.”

Without taking his eyes from the capsule, Robin gave a short nod. “Beast Boy should have been back by now, too.”

“Want us to go find him?” Wonder Girl offered, anxiously shifting her weight back and forth from one foot to the other.

Robin spared her a glance as he shook his head. “Right now, Brother Blood is probably sending most of his goons up here to find out what’s going on...we need to be ready.” Frowning, he glanced about. “And, what’s taking Cyborg and Raven so long? They were supposed to teleport back as soon as they got the revival program started.”

“Maybe they’re taking an extra minute to make sure it can’t be interrupted?” Wonder Girl suggested.

“Um...friends?” Starfire said suddenly. “Where is Slade?”

Were it not for his mask holding them in place, Robin’s eyes might have popped out of their sockets as he whirled around to face her. “*What?!*”

Already clearly alarmed, Starfire physically flinched away from the force of his exclamation. “I, he – he was standing next to me, but now, I – I do not see him...!” she stammered.

“I asked you to *watch him!!!*” Robin exploded, frantically looking around the room. She was right; Slade had disappeared without a trace.

“Robin, don’t blame her...!” Wonder Girl began, taking a step toward him. “Calm down, we’ll find—”

“You dweebs’ve got waaaaay bigger problems than *that* to worry about,” jeered a grating, high-pitched and nauseatingly familiar voice.

Cursing silently, Robin snapped out his staff as he and the two girls spun around, ready for battle.

Moving into a threatening formation a few meters away were the Titans’ rivals and frequent opponents, the team of teenage criminals collectively known as the H.I.V.E. Five: Gizmo, Mammoth, Kyd Wykkyd, See-More and Billy Numerous. Robin quickly

positioned himself between them and the capsule, and his two teammates followed his lead.

Gizmo didn't seem to care, if he'd noticed. "So, ya little worms thought you could sneak in and outta here without us knowing, huh?" the diminutive inventor sneered, perched above his comrades' heads on the four-legged mechanical chassis he often used in battle. "What, were ya afraid of gettin' yer butts handed to ya for the hundredth time?"

"Did *he* just call *us* 'little'?" Wonder Girl asked.

Gizmo lapsed into incoherent sputtering at her remark while See-More giggled, his oversized eyepiece flashing as he cycled through vision modes, preparing an attack. "Nice one...but, c'mon, seriously. You guys are in *our* house. You might as well give it up...if you surrender without a fight, maybe we won't pound you *too* bad."

"Speak for yourself," Mammoth grunted as he cracked his massive knuckles.

"I believe it is *we* who will be doing the pounding!" Starfire declared, her emerald eyes flashing with defiance as her hands began to glow brightly.

"Guess again, darlin' – we gotcha all outnumbered, but good!" Billy Numerous cackled, instantly creating a dozen identical duplicates of himself to reinforce his point.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Robin shot back confidently. While the cocky grin he was showing them *was* mostly theatrical, it was prompted by the approaching sound of heavy metallic footfalls from behind them, which could only have meant Cyborg's return.

...Or, someone else wearing an oversized suit of powered armor, he noted with dismay moments later.

"Adonis has arrived!" bellowed the newcomer, flexing his suit's mechanical musculature. "Let the smackdown begin!"

"Adonis?" Robin blinked, briefly taken aback, then cast a deliberately skeptical eye at the H.I.V.E. Five. "Wow, you guys must *really* be hard up for new members."

"*That's it!!*" Gizmo shrieked. "*Flatten 'em!!!*"

As they charged forward, Robin spared a quick glance over his shoulder at the stasis pod. The revival program was running, but it looked like it would still be a bit longer before it was finished. "Protect the capsule!" he barked to his teammates. "*Go!*"

With that, he swung his staff and swept the front legs of Gizmo's walker chassis out from under him, but the pint-sized mechanic leapt clear as it pitched forward and launched into the air via his rocket pack, immediately followed by Starfire and a hail of starbolts.

Before he'd even finished following through on his swing Robin threw down a flash-bang, which left the other H.I.V.E. kids stumbling and disoriented as they waited for their sight and hearing to recover. He took the opportunity to send See-More and Kyd Wykkid sprawling with a series of kicks and precision strikes, then turned his attention to Mammoth. But before he could attack, he was swarmed by Billy Numerous and suddenly found himself trying to fight off dozens of identical red-clad assailants.

* * *

While Robin disappeared into the crimson crowd, Wonder Girl vaulted over the stasis capsule as Adonis charged forward and narrowly managed to intercept one of his suit's huge mechanical fists as it swung toward them. In his charge to attack the Titans, he'd been about to knock the capsule out of his way! Wasn't he aware of its importance?

She'd been able to stop his swing before it connected, but not without some effort – his suit had a *lot* of power behind it. But now that she'd caught his attention he changed direction, driving her away toward the wall. For a few seconds she let him, just so they could get a safe distance away from the capsule while the revival program continued to run. After they'd gone about fifteen feet she dug in her heels and started to push back, quickly grinding him to a halt.

“Oooh, who's the new girl?” he leered, leaning over her as his suit's mechanical muscles strained against her Amazon might. “You're even *feistier* than—”

She cut him off with a quick body blow, then took a measure of grim satisfaction in watching the lust on his face turn to disbelief as she tore his suit's arm right out of the shoulder socket. Ripping it completely away from the body, she wound up and brought it around in a backhanded swing that sent him hurtling across the room.

Hefting the severed arm like an oversized cudgel, she rose into the air to take stock of the battle's progress. Robin was still trying to fight his way out from under the rapidly swelling crowd of Billy's, but it was Starfire's situation that attracted her attention. She'd been chasing Gizmo around the room in an aerial dogfight, but as Wonder Girl watched, the tiny inventor made a low swoop past Mammoth, who was now shaking off the effects of Robin's flash grenade. Starfire followed Gizmo's flight path and Mammoth grabbed her ankle as she flew past him, swinging her around and smashing her *through* two of the cooling pylons before flinging her against the wall with enough force to make Wonder Girl wince sympathetically.

The Amazon hoisted Adonis's arm and launched it at Mammoth javelin-style, catching him blindsided and driving him into the other wall before he could follow up his attack on Starfire. Seeing this, Gizmo banked toward her, firing a barrage of energy bolts she parried with her indestructible bracelets. Undeterred, Gizmo continued to rocket toward her, now brandishing what looked like an overpowered cattle prod. Like a matador, she waited for him to close the distance and spun out of the way at the last second, snagging him with her lasso on his way past. He flew behind a pillar and tried to come around it for another pass, only to have the golden tether catch on the beam as he turned. With a high-pitched squeal Gizmo spun around and around the column in a tightening spiral, finally slamming into it and knocking himself senseless with his own momentum.

“Idiot...” Wonder Girl muttered under her breath, pulling the mystical rope back to her with a flick of her wrist before turning her attention back to helping Starfire. Who was once again airborne and pelting Mammoth with a steady torrent of starbolts, but it didn't appear to be doing much more than slowing his advance. Worse, now *he* was wielding the mechanical arm Wonder Girl had thrown at him, using it like a flail to take wide swipes at the Tamaranean.

Seeing an opening, Wonder Girl launched herself into the air and dove toward Mammoth with an Amazon battle cry, catching him across the face with a right hook that could have dropped an elephant...but, to her surprise, it hardly staggered him. He responded with a vicious backhand that knocked her into the wall behind him.

Shaking off her disorientation from the impact, she realized Mammoth was still focused on Starfire, who was rapidly running out of room to maneuver. Gritting her teeth, Wonder Girl called on whatever strength the gods might see fit to grant her, and pushed herself back to her feet.

“Hey, you!” she shouted at the brutish giant. “Let’s try that again.”

* * *

Much to Robin’s chagrin, his ongoing fight against Billy Numerous was starting to wear on him. It wasn’t that Billy was a good fighter – he really *wasn’t*, at all – but there were just *so many* of him that for each one Robin dispatched, two or three more would literally pop up to take his place.

Adding insult to injury, one of them began jeering at him in that obnoxious hillbilly drawl of his. “Aww, what’s wrong birdie-man? Billy’s got you down!”

Robin answered him with an uppercut to the chin, but as that particular Billy stumbled back, five more rushed in. This was getting him nowhere, fast...it was time to go for broke.

Swinging his staff in a wide arc to buy himself some momentary breathing space, Robin grabbed a concussion disk with his free hand – and then, leaping into the air at the last moment, he threw it down right at his own feet. As he’d expected, the force of the blast catapulted him high into the air, but his instincts and reflexes took over and allowed him to turn his flight into a controlled backflip. He landed in a combat-ready crouch a few meters from his original position, and although his ears were still ringing, he was pleased to see that the blast had scattered all of the Billys like bowling pins.

As the ringing faded an electronic beep from his right drew his attention, and he turned to see a bright green light flashing on the side of the stasis pod as its transparent hatch slid open.

Finally! Robin rushed over to the pod, quickly glancing about as he did so to get a sense of the remaining opposition. Adonis and Gizmo were out of the fight, Billy and See-More were still laid out where he’d left them, and Starfire and Wonder Girl were presently double-teaming Mammoth, who was struggling to hold them at bay with what looked like a severed arm from Adonis’s mechanical suit. For the first time in hours, he felt a flash of optimism. Their goal was finally in sight!

But as for the girl, even though the pod’s cover was now open, she remained motionless. “Rose, can you hear me...?” he asked, reaching out to gently shake her.

Just before his hand reached her, her eyes snapped open – twin pools of the deepest blue he’d ever seen, standing out in startling contrast against her white hair and light complexion, and staring straight into his. Robin was vaguely aware of someone

shouting behind him but for an instant, he froze, caught off guard by the intensity of this girl's stare.

Then her foot came up, met his chest, pushed down and shoved him backwards, while simultaneously propelling her into a backflip that carried her up, over, and out of the stasis pod – just as Adonis's severed arm came flying through the air and smashed the pod beyond recognition.

“Whoa...” Upon regaining his balance, Robin stared for a moment in amazement at how close he'd just come to being squashed like a grape. But he quickly shook it off, refocusing his attention and jogging toward the white-haired girl who'd landed in a crouch a short distance away. “Are you okay? I'm Robin, we're the Teen Ti—”

She took his extended hand but then yanked it forward unexpectedly, pulling him off balance and catching him in the solar plexus with a well-placed elbow as he stumbled past her before tumbling to the floor.

“What th—?!” he wheezed, staring up at Rose in confusion as she stood over him.

“You should've let me sleep,” she snapped, her voice tinged with bitterness. “I didn't want to be awake for what's going to happen next.”

“Wha – what are you talking about?!” he demanded, completely baffled. “We're the Teen Titans, we're here to *help* you!”

She shook her head. “You shouldn't have come. None of us are leaving here. You should have—”

Suddenly she broke off and glanced over her shoulder, then, inexplicably, she spun around and launched a full-force roundhouse kick at the empty air behind her.

Which caught Kyd Wykyd square in the face as he teleported directly into the kick's path, spinning him around twice on his way to the floor.

Robin, meanwhile, took the opportunity to vault to his feet and assume a wary combat stance. “Rose, listen! I don't know what Brother Blood's been filling your head with, but we're on your side! We're here to rescue you!”

“You probably even believe that right now, too,” she said as she turned back to face him. “But eventually, you'll just want to use me, the same way they do...even if it's for different reasons.”

“That's not true!” he argued. “We've come to *help* you, we want to set you free! Blood is *evil*, he's using you to – to...”

She snorted. “You have no idea what they're even planning, do you? Of course you don't; you never would have come here if you did. And now it's too late.”

“No, it isn't!” he insisted. “We can still stop them. Come with us, we can protect you from them!”

Still, she shook her head. “No. You can't. You're going to do exactly what he tells you to, just like everyone else.”

Robin was losing patience with this. “I didn’t come here to fight you, but my friends and I have put our lives on the line to bring you home...and that’s what we’re going to do, no matter what it takes!”

He made a fast lunge, hoping to subdue her in the quickest and most painless way possible. But she was already twisting out of the way and seemed to *flow* underneath his reach, turning his own momentum against him, and the next thing Robin knew, he was lying on his back at her feet, again. His hand instinctively flew to his utility belt – only to grasp at nothing because his belt was in Rose’s hand, she was holding it up for him to see as she regarded him coolly.

Impossible! his mind screamed. How could she be so *fast*? It was as if she knew exactly what he was going to do, before he—

Robin suddenly felt very stupid. Wintergreen had told them that Rose was precognitive. She *did* know what he was going to do, before he did!

“This is just a waste of energy,” she was saying. “It’s all pointless. You’ve played right into their hands. You and your friends should have stayed away, now everything will be worse.”

Before he could respond, a huge crash from the other side of the room drew his gaze. He wasn’t sure what Starfire and Wonder Girl had just done, but it had left Mammoth sticking out of the wall. It looked like their fight was officially over.

As for Rose, she dropped Robin’s utility belt on the floor next to him, then took a few steps away and sat down on the floor, as Starfire and Wonder Girl came flying over to them.

“What are you doing?!” Robin exclaimed, hastily putting his belt back on. “Come on, this is our chance!”

“I wish for us to be escaping now, please!” Starfire added.

“Yeah? Well, too bad,” Rose retorted, her demeanor sullen. “He’s not going to allow that.”

“What are you talking about? There’s nobody left to—”

As Robin spoke, a swirling vortex of energy suddenly coalesced in the center of the room, expanding into a flat, circular portal hanging in the air. A figure stepped through it, and the portal immediately closed and dissipated behind him.

A very thin, middle-aged man now stood before them, dressed in a black and purple robe. His baleful glare was made all the more severe by the way his skin stretched tightly over his gaunt features, and the top of his skull had been shorn off about an inch above his prickly eyebrows and replaced with a glass dome, through which the man’s exposed brain could be seen clearly. The brain itself had been seared black and its surface was lined by what looked like glowing electrical circuits, coursing from front to back.

But the single most disturbing aspect of the man’s appearance was his eyes. They were solid black in color, save for the pupils, which glowed a smoldering red.

Even though the Titans had only seen him once before, there was no mistaking the man's identity: it was Psimon.

"Titans! Together!!" Robin shouted as he rushed forward. "Take him *down*, whatever it takes!"

Starfire and Wonder Girl followed on his heels with their own battle cries as Robin leapt into the air, aiming to plant his boot right between Psimon's eyes.

As they hurtled toward their target, the glowing circuits on Psimon's visible brain flared to life. He opened his mouth, and spoke a single word.

"Sleep."

Robin never felt himself hit the ground.

* * *

10. Perchance to Dream?

A gentle breeze brushed Robin's face, carrying with it the scent of grass, trees, flowers in bloom and other smells of spring. Inhaling deeply, he stirred and opened his eyes.

He found himself looking up at Starfire, and realized he was lying on the ground, a carpet of cool grass beneath him, with his head resting on her knees. She smiled down at him, and the dusk sky overhead was a breathtaking blend of oranges, reds and purples that perfectly complimented her own coloring while bringing out the brilliant green of her eyes in sharp contrast.

After a few seconds he realized he was staring, but couldn't think of anything witty or clever to say. So, he simply settled for "Hey."

"Hello," she answered, softly.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this comfortable. They were on a scenic hillside overlooking the city, which, to his eyes, had never looked so calm and tranquil in its transition from day to night. The normal sounds of traffic and activity seemed somehow muted and more distant than they should have, and rather than sounding busy, they provided a comforting backdrop which made the scene feel even more peaceful.

Their other friends were there with them as well, relaxing only a few yards away. Terra – when had she come back? – was there, sprawled on the grass much as Robin was, resting her head on the side of a green German Shepherd and scratching his belly idly as they both lay half-asleep, perfectly contented. Cyborg reclined a bit further away, his visible circuits giving off only a very dim glow. He had one arm propped behind his head as a makeshift cushion while the other was tucked protectively around Raven, who was sleeping next to him, wrapped in her blue cloak and looking tiny and fragile by comparison.

Robin sighed in contentment. This felt so perfect. He didn't ever want it to end.

"Why don't we do this more often?" he asked Starfire, rhetorically.

"I do not know," she answered, her voice sounding far away. "But I wish we would have."

"Well...at least we can enjoy the moment," he sighed, closing his eyes again. "I must have fallen asleep. I was dreaming that we'd gone to some island, out in the middle of the ocean, and..."

Something wet dripped on his face, and he opened his eyes to see that Starfire was silently crying. He reached up to touch her face, and she smiled down at him through her tears.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

“I fear we may never see such sights as this again,” she sighed, her hair billowing slightly in the breeze. “At least...not together, nor in the same way.”

“Why not?” he asked her, confused.

She smiled again in response, then quickly leaned down to kiss his forehead before whispering her answer.

“Because...you must *wake up*, now, Robin.”

* * *

11. The Contract

“...up, please! Come on, Robin, we need you! Please, wake up!”

A female voice, agitated, near desperation. Starfire? No...it wasn't her. Not Raven, either, but...it *was* familiar. Who...?

“Robin, *wake up!*!”

Wonder Girl! But then, that meant...

Robin opened his eyes and blinked in confusion. Why did everything look *yellow*...? With a grunt, he turned over on his side, then propped himself up on one elbow. His body and mind felt so sluggish, almost as if he was...*drugged*...?!

“Not exactly,” said an unfamiliar voice from somewhere nearby.

Finally taking stock of his surroundings, Robin realized he was slumped inside a translucent sphere of yellow energy, slightly larger than he was tall. To his left, Wonder Girl, Starfire and Beast Boy were similarly imprisoned. He was strongly reminded of the force globes Atlas had once used to contain the team, in their first battle years earlier.

But the figure who now stood over him was definitely *not* Atlas.

“Ah! So good of you to join us, Robin.” Brother Blood smiled broadly, hands folded behind him as he surveyed his trophies. The four Titans' glowing prisons were arranged along one wall of a fairly large, mostly empty room. There was an empty cage about the size of an ordinary jail cell, complete with iron bars, situated in the center of the room a few feet behind where Blood stood. A series of large power generators hummed noisily along the wall to the Titans' left, with a collection of thick cables running from them to the four containment globes. The H.I.V.E. Five, plus Cheshire and Adonis, were present as well, lounging near the generators. A number of standard H.I.V.E. troopers and a handful of Cyclone androids were also gathered, standing at attention, on the far side of the room. Psimon stood alone off to the right, a few yards from the iron cage. About a dozen of Brother Blood's ivory-armored ceremonial guards were congregated along the right wall behind him, near a large hexagonal doorway; there was one of these on each wall, save for the wall behind the Titans. Rose stood in front of Blood's entourage, scowling at the floor. While not obviously restrained, she was clearly under guard.

“How do you like your accommodations?” Blood asked as Robin pushed himself grimly to his feet, the sluggishness he'd felt moments earlier having been erased by adrenaline once he'd grasped the danger he and his friends now faced. “I must confess,” Blood continued, “I'd entertained the idea of strapping you all to a giant stone skull and suspending you over a pit of boiling blood, but, well...those are rather hard to find, these days.”

“I wouldn't expect us to stay very long, if I were you,” Robin retorted. “Our friends will set us free, and then we'll all deal with you.”

Blood grinned and opened his mouth to respond, but unexpectedly, Rose cut in.

“You idiot. You *still* don't get it.”

Blood's eyebrows went up and he glanced over his shoulder at her before turning back to smirk at Robin. "Our other guest doesn't seem very appreciative of your 'heroics', does she?"

"What do you want with that girl, anyway?" Wonder Girl demanded.

Blood's eyes narrowed as his smile broadened. "Why...she was the bait to lure all of *you* here, of course."

Robin nearly did a double-take. "*What?!*"

The H.I.V.E. Five chortled giddily while Psimon stifled a yawn.

Brother Blood continued to grin, clearly exulting in his apparent victory. "Oh, *yes*. All of this was arranged to secure the capture of your little team. And, I must say, you have all played your assigned roles marvelously, almost to the very letter." He glanced back at Rose again. "Of course, having access to this young lady's particular gifts *was* enormously helpful in ironing out some of the specific details. But ultimately, she was simply a means to an end. *You* delivered that which I *truly* desired to me, and for that, I am so very grateful."

Robin stared at him in disbelief. "You're lying."

Blood erupted into laughter. "Now why, pray tell, would I do that?"

To his horror, Robin found himself struggling for an answer. "Because...it's impossible, you couldn't have..."

This time, it was Psimon who answered. "Disappointing. To think that we went to such elaborate lengths to snare such tiny minds. We may as well have used bits of cheese fastened to wire springs."

His was the unfamiliar voice Robin had heard when he first awoke. It was almost startlingly mild and carried an air of unnatural calm, even a kind of academic disinterest. It was the kind of voice he would have associated with a mild-mannered butler or a substitute teacher, rather than a crazed arch-villain.

Psimon snorted. "Not even someone as ignorant as Billy Numerous would mistake me for any of those things, Mister Grayson. I should think your current circumstance argues rather conclusively that the perception and deductive skills in which you take such great pride are really quite lacking, after all."

Robin could hardly hide his shock. *How did Psimon know his--?!*

"The answer to that should also be fairly obvious," Psimon replied, once again answering Robin's unspoken thoughts, "but I wouldn't expect that to be the most pressing question to emerge from the folds of your poor, little brain. And since you are only beginning to think of it now, I'll spare us all the torture of your inarticulate verbiage and simply answer: *as deep as it amuses me to go*." He let that sink in for a moment, before concluding. "However, you needn't be overly concerned. I can assure all of you that your minds are terribly pedestrian and uninteresting. Besides which, I've already extracted from you any information I deem to be of any merit."

Robin fought down a momentary surge of panic. It was clearly imperative that he focus his mind and guard his thoughts, even if Psimon *was* partially bluffing.

“It does not matter what knowledge or power you claim!” Starfire declared bravely. “Our other friends will free us, and you will be defeated!”

“Your other friends, you say...?” Brother Blood smirked as he cast a meaningful glance toward the corner of the room, near the generators.

The Titans followed his gaze, and Starfire gasped in horror.

Cyborg lay slumped in the corner, propped against the wall. His visible circuitry, which normally emitted a soft blue glow, was completely dark. And there was a gaping hole in his chest, where something important had obviously been ripped out.

“What have you *done...?!?*” Robin murmured before he could stop himself.

“He was stubborn and uncooperative,” Blood replied with a shrug. “Cheshire’s poisons proved ineffective against him, and he refused to calm down and behave. Ever the unruly pupil...so, I’m afraid I was forced to remove his primary power cell.”

“What?? Won’t he, like, *die* without that?!” Beast Boy exclaimed, panic mounting in his voice.

“Hm.” Blood stroked his chin thoughtfully, as if the idea had not occurred to him until now. “Eventually, I suppose. I honestly don’t know how long his flesh-and-blood organs can survive without his cybernetics. But I imagine we’ll find out soon enough, won’t we?”

“But...if Cyborg dies, you’ll never learn how he was able to defy you,” Robin pointed out, his mind racing, seizing on Blood’s colossal ego in a desperate gamble. “And you’ll never have the satisfaction of breaking his will. You’ll always know he was the one person you could never beat.”

The reaction was immediate; Blood whirled on Robin, crimson energy sparking from his eyes. “His blood is as much on *your* hands as it is mine,” he snarled. Psimon coughed, and Blood appeared to check himself. He calmed visibly before continuing.

“You see, Robin...we were only expecting *five* Titans. But you had to go and bring *six*.” As he gestured to Wonder Girl, something in Robin’s brain told him that what Blood had just said was significant, but he felt Psimon’s eyes on him and didn’t allow himself to follow the thought any further as Blood continued. “Since, as you can see, our containment facilities were only set up to accommodate *five* of you...this left us with an obvious dilemma.” This time, his smile was more grim than self-congratulatory. “I guess it just wasn’t Cyborg’s lucky day, now, was it?”

“Even my math isn’t *that* bad,” Beast Boy interjected. “There’s only four, uh...big glowy hamster-ball things.”

“The daughter of Trigon deserves more *specialized* accommodations,” said a voice that turned Robin’s blood to ice and drove all other thoughts from his mind.

*No. Oh, no. It can’t be. Oh, please, God, **NO**,* was all he could think as he slowly turned toward the door.

“I knew it!!!” Beast Boy exploded.

Slade had just entered the room.

Raven, unmoving, was slung over his shoulder. Her wrists and ankles were shackled, and Slade carried her cloak in his free hand as he strode casually toward them, unchallenged. In a state of horrified disbelief, Robin watched him deposit her limp form on the floor inside the iron cage, her face obscured by her hair. He tossed her cloak in next to her before coming over to stand next to Brother Blood.

“I’m terribly sorry, Robin,” Slade told him, leaning in close to the Boy Wonder’s enclosure. “But you *really* should have trusted your instincts.”

Robin found himself at a complete loss for words. He stared back at Slade in silence, almost unwilling to believe what he was seeing and hearing.

“How could even *you* commit such a vile, shameless betrayal?!” Starfire cried.

“I *knew* we couldn’t trust him!!!” Beast Boy was yelling. “I *knew* it! I *told* you he was gonna stab us in the back!!!”

“Yes, yes,” Slade answered him. “Pity you were overruled.”

“We should kill the half-breed,” Psimon said suddenly, eyeing Raven with a distasteful expression. “It’s too dangerous to just leave lying around.”

Brother Blood fixed Psimon with a glare that could have melted steel. When he spoke, it was in a low voice, slow and deliberate. “It is only because our mutual Lord and Master has seen fit to bestow such blessings upon you, Dr. Jones, that I allow such blasphemy to cross your lips unpunished.”

Psimon met his gaze coldly, his black eyes devoid of emotion. “That name is no longer appropriate,” he answered, his own tone of voice unchanged, “and as I’ve stated previously, your continued belief in that Prophecy is foolish in light of recent events. This Gem has been tarnished by defiance and rebellion. I would argue that it is no longer worthy of fulfilling His purpose.”

“That is not *your* decision,” Blood pronounced, pointedly turning his back on Psimon. “Having gone to the lengths we have to acquire her, disposing of her simply to placate your fragile sense of security would be far more foolish.”

Psimon cast a withering stare at Blood’s back for a moment – during which Robin realized that the man literally *never* blinked, ever, at all – before responding. “Be that as it may, we are at least in agreement that it – *she* must be properly...managed.”

Blood grunted his assent while frowning at the other Titans. “But, thanks to *them*, our options have been limited. This ‘alternative’ you suggested had better not result in any lasting physical damage.”

Psimon emitted what almost sounded like a chuckle, except that it was utterly without humor. “I believe the risk will be minimal. Gizmo, go and fetch *the implements*.”

With a sinister giggle, Gizmo hustled out of the room.

“Wait,” Wonder Girl said suddenly. “Your ‘mutual lord and master’...*you* worship *Trigon?!?*”

Again, Brother Blood laughed. “Were you under the impression I was Catholic? Exactly what sort of ‘Brother’ did you *think* I was, dear child?”

Robin’s heart plummeted into his shoes as the full scope of the situation hit him. “Then, that means...your real objective, all along, was...”

“...To acquire Raven, yes, and see to it that her grand destiny is fulfilled,” Blood finished with a broad grin. “And you *have* been so very helpful in that regard, diligently following the trail precisely as it was laid out for you.”

Slade folded his arms dispassionately as Robin’s horrified stare moved from Blood, to him, and back again. Then, everything Slade had told them had all been a lie...how could he not have seen it...how could he have led his friends into such an obvious trap...?? His mind reeling, he took a step backwards, but lost his footing on the upward slope of his spherical prison and fell against the back wall. He slid down into a sitting position, still staring up at Slade and Brother Blood in shock, and didn’t bother getting back up.

Slade regarded him silently for a few seconds, before addressing Blood. “As entertaining as all this is, I believe we have business to discuss.”

“Patience,” Blood responded. “We’ll get to that in due course. First, I must report on our progress...I shall return shortly.” Without further explanation, he headed for the door.

Slade eyed him for the briefest moment as he left the room, then settled into a more relaxed stance.

“Y’see that, Billy?” Billy Numerous giggled to one of his identical duplicates. “Even *Slade’s* gotta get in line fer Brother Blood!”

“And the *beating* of his *life*, when I get loose!” Beast Boy snarled with a ferocity that startled nearly everyone present.

“Always so enthusiastic,” Slade remarked, studying the green boy as he fumed. “I think I may actually *miss* that.”

Before Beast Boy could respond, Starfire spat something incredibly vicious-sounding at Slade in Tamaranean.

Again, Psimon emitted that bizarre, emotionless chuckle of his. “Such language, Miss Koriand’r. It’s a pity none of your friends know what that means. I dare say it would alter their perception of you.”

As he spoke, Gizmo came jogging back into the room, carrying what looked like a shoebox...though Robin did not expect it to contain footwear.

Another flat, lifeless chortle issued from Psimon. “How clairvoyant of you, Mister Grayson. You see, we had originally planned to use the stasis capsule, in which you found Miss Worth, to house your ‘friend’. But unfortunately for her, it was destroyed in your little scuffle. Your actions have thus forced me to resort to more...*draconian* measures, at least until Gizmo is able to construct another such pod.”

“It wasn’t even *us* who did that!” Wonder Girl protested.

“We both know that’s not *entirely* true, Miss Troy...but it is also immaterial.” Turning to address the H.I.V.E. Five, Psimon gestured to Raven’s unconscious form. “I will require a...volunteer, to assist me in securing the prisoner.”

One of the massive arms of Adonis’s powered suit immediately shot up.

“Out of the question,” Psimon sneered. “That mechanical prosthesis is far too clumsy, and your *natural* limbs would be as useless to me as they are to you.”

He paused, apparently waiting for someone else to volunteer, but the others just looked at each other with apprehension. “Very well, then, I’ll pick,” he snapped impatiently. “**Mammoth, you’ll do.**”

The glowing circuits on Psimon’s brain brightened slightly and Mammoth stepped forward, looking very surprised to be doing so.

“Hey, what the--?! I didn’t—”

“Yes, yes. I’ll be ‘borrowing’ your motor functions for the next few minutes,” Psimon sighed, clearly annoyed to have to state the obvious as Mammoth lurched toward the cage.

Robin climbed warily to his feet, peripherally aware of his other friends also tensing up as Mammoth crouched over the still-unconscious Raven, who barely qualified as a rag doll next to him. Apparently under Psimon’s telepathic control, he grasped her upper arm and pulled her rather roughly into a partial sitting position. As her head slumped forward, Robin noticed that whoever had shackled her had also inexplicably covered her eyes and mouth with strips of electrical tape.

“The purpose of partial sensory deprivation will become clear soon enough,” Psimon stated in a bored, lecturing tone, evidently responding to either Robin’s or the other Titans’ thoughts upon seeing the tape.

Mammoth, meanwhile, was looking increasingly flustered and uncomfortable as his hands roamed involuntarily, his huge fingers boldly tracing the contours of Raven’s body under Psimon’s control, as if searching for something. “Uh, hey...wait a sec, what are you making me--?”

“Shut up and **do as you’re told**, Baran,” Psimon hissed, his eyes narrowing.

At that, Mammoth leaned Raven forward, with one hand – which happened to be large enough to enclose nearly her entire torso – supporting her chest to keep her from slumping back to the floor. Then he began pulling at something at the back of her neck, and the distinctive sound of tearing fabric could be heard.

“What are you *doing*?!” Wonder Girl shouted, leaping to her feet while Starfire’s eyes and hands lit up in the globe next to her.

“*Get your filthy hands **off** of her!!*” Beast Boy bellowed at the top of his lungs, throwing himself against the front wall of his sphere with a feral look in his eyes.

Psimon spared him a glance. “Sit down, **little puppy.**”

An enraged green Chihuahua suddenly occupied Beast Boy’s golden prison.

In the sphere next to him, Starfire let out a furious roar, her eyes and hands flaring with emerald radiation, and unleashed a massive blast of energy – but none of it could escape the force field containing her. The result was a brief, blinding flash of light which lit up her sphere like a nova, but she immediately pitched backward and collapsed in its wake, stunned by her own starbolt blast.

For his part, Robin could only punch and kick the transparent walls of his enclosure in an impotent rage.

Meanwhile, Mammoth had torn open Raven’s leotard at the back seam and pulled it down, exposing her pale neck and shoulders...but, to Robin’s great relief, he stopped there.

“Gizmo,” Psimon prompted, still staring intently at Mammoth and Raven. With an evil snicker, the tiny inventor took something out of his box and handed it to his much larger teammate.

That ‘something’ turned out to be a simple collar with a length of cable attached to it. After fastening the collar around Raven’s slender neck, Mammoth backed out of the cage and secured the gate. Then he flinched, cast a nervous glance at Psimon and quickly hurried back over to where the rest of his team was gathered, apparently back in control of his own body again. Gizmo, meanwhile, took the length of wire and headed over to the power generators.

Slade, who had been watching all of this with his back to the Titans, spoke next. “Does this actually serve a purpose, or are you just having fun?”

“I don’t need to tell *you*, Mister Wilson, that the two are not mutually exclusive,” Psimon replied.

“That’s a rather irritating habit,” Slade remarked after a brief pause.

Psimon ignored him, addressing the Titans instead. “It was deemed impractical for Miss Nguyen to chemically sedate the...prisoner...on an ongoing basis. We wouldn’t want to *accidentally* kill her, after all, now would we? Therefore, we had to devise a more primitive method of keeping her restrained, distracted and occupied, until more permanent arrangements can be made. Gizmo, you may proceed.”

“Rise and shine,” Gizmo giggled, as he plugged the cable into one of the generators and flipped a switch.

With a startled grunt, Raven immediately jerked awake. Her back arched and for several seconds she shook violently, thrashing against her restraints, her body rigid. Then her muscles relaxed slightly but her head shook frantically from side to side, unable to see through the tape over her eyes, her breathing shallow and rapid.

“Raven, it’s all right!” Wonder Girl called out to her, dropping to one knee and pressing her hands against her enclosure’s front wall. “We’re all here with you, you’re not alone--!”

Abruptly, Raven yelped again and went into another desperate spasm.

“You see,” Psimon explained, still using precisely the same clinical, detached tone and manner, “from a purely physical standpoint, it...*she* is, in nearly every respect,

merely an average, ordinary human girl. She has inherited none of her father's vast physical might – only her mother's frailties. In fact, she would be no threat at all were it not for one significant distinction: her body acts as a conduit, a link between dimensions."

Having relaxed briefly during Psimon's speech, Raven suddenly cried out again and went into another violent seizure. Psimon continued to speak over it as though everything were normal.

"Specifically, a link to her father's home dimension, where He – and, by extension, she – has absolute dominion over reality itself. Her...powers, as you are familiar with them, involve the deliberate projection of small parts of that domain, where she can control and manipulate anything, into *this* reality. And she has scarcely tapped into the tiniest fraction of the *true* power this ability could grant her – because, you see, she is afraid of it. Terrified of her true nature, and by the prospect of claiming that which is her *birthright*."

An edge of genuine contempt began to seep into his voice, and he stopped long enough for Raven to relax, seize, and calm again before continuing.

"And thus indoctrinated by the pathetic religious zealots of Azarath – before they all committed mass suicide – Raven refuses to use her father's gifts, except under the tightest restraint, the most disciplined focus, and the most intense concentration."

He paused, waiting for her to spasm again before resuming, pointing to the collar they'd placed on her as he did so. "Gizmo's device is elegant in its simplicity. It is designed to deliver a low-voltage electrical shock at random intervals, every few seconds. Not enough to cause any...*significant* permanent injury, but painful enough to continually break her concentration and deny her the opportunity to use her powers in a focused, deliberate manner. And since she can *sense* her friends nearby, but not *see* their precise locations, she will not risk an uncontrolled burst of energy." He tapped on the bars of her makeshift cell. "Especially not knowing that she is enclosed within this shabby iron cage, which could easily fly apart like so much shrapnel if she were to lose control – and with her dearest friends so very close at hand, well within the radius of such a blast."

Robin's stomach churned with anger, frustration and helplessness as he watched Raven suffer through another shock. Starfire, having recovered from her own self-inflicted jolt, simply stared at her friend with a heart-wrenching, stricken expression.

"'Elegant simplicity', huh?" Rose repeated in disgust, as Brother Blood strode back in through the doorway behind her. "Yeah, I'm sure that's got nothing to do with the fact that you *get off* on it, you sick, sadistic freak."

Psimon showed no outward reaction to her words. "If you are implying that I enjoy seeing her in pain...I certainly don't deny that. It is, however, irrelevant."

"Would that this was not necessary," Blood sighed as he approached the captive Titans, "but once again, your stubborn habits have forced our hand."

Starfire punched the wall of her enclosure in a gesture of helpless fury...but then her eyes widened in sudden realization. "Raven, do not worry!" she called out. "We are protected from harm! You may free yourself--!"

"I'm afraid you are mistaken, my dear," Blood interrupted. "Cheshire, if you please...?"

Cheshire took a step forward and flung a small throwing dagger at Robin that nearly parted his hair, passing through the outer surface of his spherical prison as if it were nonexistent, but it then bounced off the rear wall behind him and clattered to a stop at his feet. Picking it up, he tried using it to pierce the sphere's inner surface, but it was like trying to stab through concrete with a butter knife.

"Those force globes are designed strictly to keep you *in*," Blood explained, "not to keep external objects or forces *out*."

Gizmo seized on the opportunity to shoot spitballs at Beast Boy, who was still an indignant Chihuahua.

With a low growl, Wonder Girl reared back, raising both hands above her head, and brought them crashing down against the front wall of her enclosure. The impact sounded like a thunderclap.

"A waste of effort, Miss Troy," Psimon admonished her. "You'll find that—"

Ignoring him, she reared back and struck another blow. Then another. And another. The floor beneath them began to shake from the force.

A display panel on the generator controls suddenly began flashing. "No way...she's actually *damaging* it!" Gizmo cried in disbelief.

"You said that was impossible," Brother Blood responded, sounding alarmed.

"It *should* be!" Gizmo exclaimed, running over to the controls as Wonder Girl kept pounding away. Robin tensed, sensing an opportunity.

"Psimon--!" Blood barked.

Psimon leveled his unblinking stare at Wonder Girl. "**Stop that,**" he intoned, his eyes and brain case glowing.

She stopped swinging, but her hands remained at the point of impact and she clenched her teeth, muscles taut. After a moment Robin realized what she was doing.

"She's still pushing on it!" Gizmo yelled. "I don't have enough power, I can't compensate!"

"*Psimon...?!*" Blood hissed, looking back and forth from one to the other.

Psimon's eyebrow twitched slightly. "She is, fighting, me," he murmured. "Impressive, if ultimately futile..."

"The gain is still increasing!" Gizmo yelped.

"*Enough!*" Brother Blood thundered, his own eyes glowing brightly as he whirled on Wonder Girl. "*Cease* this insolence at *once!*"

She buckled visibly under the weight of the psychic pressure from both men, but continued to struggle. Finally, Blood raised a glowing hand—

--then abruptly turned and blasted Robin off his feet.

“Robin!!” Starfire cried, and he heard Wonder Girl gasp also as he fell. After that, he could only lay there for a time, too stunned by the blast to rise. He was vaguely aware of Gizmo’s voice, sounding relieved, and Wonder Girl whispering something apologetic-sounding to him.

“You see, your actions carry consequences for *all* of you,” he heard Brother Blood saying as he regained his senses.

“Well, then.” Slade crossed his arms as he turned to Blood. “Now that that’s all sorted out...there is the matter of our agreement. In delivering the Titans into your custody, I have fulfilled my half of our contract. Now, I expect you to fulfill yours, and give me what was promised in exchange.”

“Hmmm. Yes, you *have* fulfilled your part, to the letter,” Blood acknowledged, stroking his chin. “I must admit, your reputation is certainly well-deserved. Lieutenant Colonel Slade Wilson, decorated war hero turned mercenary for hire, the legendary Terminator...hmm, what was it you used to call yourself? Ah yes, ‘Deathstroke’, was it not?”

Slade eyed him with suspicion before answering. “I fail to see the relevance...”

“Indulge me.” Brother Blood smiled amicably. “I’m merely curious as to why someone in your particular...*field* would adopt such a flamboyant moniker, only to later abandon it in favor of your actual, given name. Why discard the benefits of anonymity, in such an abrupt manner? Especially considering the increased public attention your activities have garnered, since.”

Slade continued to eye him in silence for a long moment before answering. “The Deathstroke alias was intended to shield my family from the attention of the enemies one invariably acquires when working in the *field* in question. It failed, and that family was lost to me as a direct result. After that, concealing my name became pointless.”

Blood put on an exaggerated frown. “My, my. What a terribly sad story.”

“And true, for whatever it’s worth,” Psimon commented, looking bored.

“Spare me your mockery,” Slade snapped, his voice taking on a dangerous edge as he pointed at Rose. “We have an agreement. I have given you what you wanted, now I expect you to reciprocate. Give me the girl and I will be on my way.”

Robin’s teeth ground together in self-directed fury. Of *course*, it all made sense, he should have *known* that was Slade’s real goal, all along...

Blood, meanwhile, favored Slade briefly with an amused smirk before turning to Rose. “And how do *you* feel about such an arrangement, young lady?”

Slade took a menacing step forward. “That was not part of the—”

“You’re all the same,” Rose interrupted, glowering at him. “And you’re full of crap, too. You talk about wanting to protect your family, but you don’t even *care* that I’m your *daughter*. You just want me for your ‘apprentice’.”

The room fell silent, save for Raven’s intermittent, muffled cries and flailing.

“Truthfully? I didn’t know you *were* my daughter, until this moment,” Slade answered her, “though I did have my suspicions. Your mother never told me about you. But, now that I *do* know...tell me, my sweet Rose. What better choice could I make?” And he held out an inviting hand to her.

Her gaze flicked down to his hand for a moment but she remained where she was, arms crossed. She looked him in the eye again, deliberately, before answering.

“Get stuffed.”

Slowly, Slade turned toward Brother Blood. “This is *your* doing,” he hissed, in as threatening a tone as Robin had ever heard him use.

“I’m afraid not,” Blood smirked. “But since the lady objects, it seems only fair to...re-examine our arrangement, does it not?”

“No,” Slade stated flatly. “I have honored our contract. I expect you to do the same. She comes with me, as per our agreement. I will accept nothing less.”

Though Blood continued to smile, his gaze hardened noticeably. “Now, Slade. I know you’re not the sort to compromise...but look around. You are both hopelessly outnumbered, and decisively outmatched. What makes you think you have any choice in the matter?”

“This does,” Slade replied as he raised his hand, revealing a small, previously concealed thumb trigger held tightly in his grip. Robin instantly recognized it as exactly the same type of device Slade had once used to threaten the lives of his teammates, when he’d blackmailed Robin into briefly serving as his apprentice years earlier.

“Did you think I wouldn’t anticipate such base treachery?” Slade was saying. “That which I’ve given you, I can also take away. I have planted an explosive charge on Raven. At the press of this button, your precious Gem will shatter.”

“I assume you are referring to this?” Psimon asked as he held up a small object. “Did you think such an obvious thing would have escaped my notice?”

Slade immediately pressed the button – and nothing happened.

“Or that we would not also possess the means to neutralize your simplistic technology?” Psimon added, completely unfazed that Slade had just tried to kill him.

Before Slade could react, Brother Blood darted forward with impossible speed and landed a body blow that threw him halfway across the room. He landed on his shoulder but immediately flipped into a combat-ready crouch, as Blood strode toward him at a more natural pace.

“So, you wish to know *why* I was called the Terminator, then, do you?” Slade hissed, rising to his feet and snapping out his staff. “So be it.”

With that he lunged at Blood, closing the distance between them in less than half a second, and launched a dizzying series of staff strikes from nearly every conceivable angle and direction – all of which Blood was somehow able to parry or deflect, still grinning, his mechanical limbs cutting through the air every bit as fast as Slade’s staff. The Titans could only watch in amazement as the two villains clashed.

Slade’s barrage of whirling swings and strikes was interrupted when Blood caught hold of his staff, then shattered it with a swipe of his cybernetic claws. Without missing a beat Slade switched tactics and grabbed Blood’s arm, pulled him into a classic judo shoulder throw and flung him to the ground, but Blood vanished just before he hit the floor, teleporting behind Slade and throwing a painful strike into his lower back. It only staggered him for an instant and he immediately spun around with a high backhand, which Blood caught, and quickly twisted into an arm lock. But as he did so, Slade crossed over with his other hand, delivering a fast jab that caught his opponent square in the throat.

Blood released his grip and stumbled backward, choking and off balance. Slade followed up with a kick to the face that knocked his opponent through the air, but just before his head hit the ground Blood’s cybernetic arms snapped back behind him, pushed off from the floor and vaulted him into a ready crouch a few feet away.

The ceremonial guard drew their weapons and took a step forward but Blood raised a hand, silently commanding them to stay where they were, as he rose to his feet.

“Not a bad performance,” he said, rubbing his metallic chin. “But ultimately pointless. You must know that you can’t defeat me.”

“That’s funny,” Slade replied, “I thought I was winning.”

“Then allow me to *educate* you,” Blood grinned, taking up a combat stance and inviting Slade to attack with a flick of his fingers.

Lowering his head, Slade rushed forward and the two men traded blows for several seconds, neither one seeming to gain a clear advantage. The Titans and the H.I.V.E. Five watched apprehensively, while Psimon simply looked bored.

Finally, Blood caught one of Slade’s punches and suddenly blasted him with scarlet energy from his free hand, momentarily paralyzing Slade as his muscles seized. Blood took the opportunity to draw back a glowing hand, then delivered a thundering palm strike to Slade’s chest which propelled him clear across the room. But before he struck the opposite wall, Blood teleported behind him and landed an elbow smash to the back of his head, Slade’s momentum magnifying the strength of the blow to bounce him face-first off the floor with tremendous force.

For several agonizing seconds, Slade struggled to push himself back up...but, finally, collapsed.

At a snap of Blood’s fingers, two Cyclone androids leapt in to seize Slade by either arm and drag him forward, while Blood rejoined Psimon next to Raven’s cage.

“Now then...where were we?” Blood asked in a pleasant, conversational tone as his androids forced Slade to kneel before him. “Ah, yes. We’d just established the limitations of your bargaining power, had we not?”

Slade coughed, but managed to turn it into a chuckle. “Only if you’re stupid enough to believe I have no other contingencies in place.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Psimon abruptly stepped over to the Titans’ enclosures. “I meant to ask you earlier. Who is the ‘singing crab dude’?”

He was staring intently at Beast Boy, who was suddenly human again, but looking very much like a deer caught in the headlights.

“Huh? Wha...who?” he stammered, “I don’t know any—”

“There is a spy among us,” Psimon announced, his horrible, unblinking gaze still locked on Beast Boy. “One of Slade’s agents has infiltrated the ranks of your followers...your private guard, to be precise.”

“Impossible!” Brother Blood scoffed.

“There is a name,” Psimon continued, ignoring Blood and staying focused on Beast Boy, who was practically wilting under the force of his stare.

Psimon paused for several excruciating seconds before finishing.

“...Sebastian. That is all he knows. He never saw his face.”

Robin felt like he’d just been punched in the gut. Their last hope for escape was now officially gone.

And yet...Blood looked anything but happy, as he glared at the back of Psimon’s head.

“As you are well aware,” he growled, “*All* of my personal guards take the name of Sebastian, as a gesture of loyalty. This tells us nothing.”

“Well, whose problem is that?” With a derogatory snort, Psimon turned on his heel and walked back over toward Blood, the Cyclones and Slade. “Thank you, Mister Logan,” he tossed over his shoulder at Beast Boy. “You’ve been immensely helpful.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Robin saw Beast Boy sink to his knees. He couldn’t bear to look at his face, already knowing the anguish he’d surely see there.

Instead, he kept his attention on Brother Blood, whose eyes and hands were glowing angrily as he stood over Slade.

“You have already lost,” he pronounced. “We *will* find this traitor, and all your plans will fail. If you cooperate, I may yet be persuaded to show mercy on you.”

Slade snorted. “You cannot possibly expect me to talk.”

Blood’s response was a glowing punch that knocked Slade to the floor, and led even Robin to involuntarily wince at the force of the blow. The two androids immediately dragged him back up to his knees.

“Can’t you just extract the rest of the information from him?” Blood demanded of Psimon, gesturing angrily at Slade.

“I could,” Psimon acknowledged, “but the process could take days, or even weeks. His chemically-augmented brain is intricately compartmentalized, and operates in

highly unconventional patterns and frequencies. Furthermore, he has been specifically trained to resist even *my* range of mental probing. I believe my efforts would be better spent weeding out this traitor myself, and accelerating the pace of our other preparations.”

Blood appeared to silently fume for a moment before composing himself enough to respond. “...So be it. In any case, our plans are too far along to be disrupted by any one person.” He pointed imperiously down at Slade. “You *have* lost.”

Slade met his gaze for a long moment, the hatred between the two men nearly palpable, before he spoke again. “If that’s true...then you have no further need of my daughter. If you won’t relinquish her to *me*, then at least let her return to her mother.”

“Impossible,” Blood sneered.

“Why—”

“Because they *killed* her,” Rose spat.

Again, the room fell silent.

“I see...” Slade hissed, his voice low and deadly. “That is your second mistake, Blood. I promise you this...you will live to regret crossing me.”

“Hmph. Pity I can’t say the same for you, Slade,” Psimon replied. “**Die.**”

As he spoke, Slade’s eye rolled back in his head and his body went limp.

Robin’s mouth fell open, unable to believe what he was seeing. Raven yelped and convulsed again; from another shock or from what her senses told her had just happened, he had no way of knowing. Rose looked on in silence, her expression unreadable.

“Was that necessary?” Blood asked, frowning as his androids let Slade’s apparently lifeless body fall to the ground.

“Is any of this?” Psimon retorted, scarcely bothering to hide his annoyance.

“I was hoping to convert him...ah, well.” Blood sighed, then waved a dismissive hand at the H.I.V.E. Five and his other assembled minions. “The ‘show’ is over, at least for the time being. The rest of you, return to your posts. You two,” he pointed to the two nearest H.I.V.E. troopers, then to Slade’s corpse, “dispose of that.”

The two troopers grabbed Slade’s body by the ankles, and unceremoniously dragged it out of the room. Robin watched them go, feeling like he was in some kind of surreal dream, until Brother Blood stepped into his field of vision.

“I must leave you for the time being, Titans,” he announced, “to go and commune with your future God. But, don’t worry – I’ll be leaving you in the very best of hands. And I shall return soon enough, to begin your...*re-education.*” With a smug grin, he pointedly looked from Raven, to Cyborg, to the doorway Slade had been dragged out through, then back to the Titans again. “I trust you will have many things to contemplate, until our next meeting.”

With that, he turned and headed for the opposite doorway, practically radiating self-assurance as he strode past Psimon, Rose and his private entourage.

“He’s planning to kill *you*, too, you know,” Rose told him as he passed her.

Blood stopped in his tracks. Slowly, he turned to look at Psimon, one eyebrow arched.

“Well, what do you expect?” Psimon asked, unfazed.

Blood eyed him for several seconds before his arrogant grin slowly returned. “Then, it is to our mutual benefit that I know such a plan cannot possibly succeed. There is only one person on Earth who has the power to kill me, and I have already dealt with *him*. So it has been written, and so it shall be. Your powers may be great, Psimon, but they cannot harm *me*. As long as I am under His protection, I am invulnerable. You would do well to remember that.”

While the two villains faced off, Rose had quietly edged closer to the Titans’ enclosures. “*Psst. Robin,*” she hissed.

Robin looked up at her in numb, shell-shocked silence.

“*Remember,*” she whispered urgently, “*connect red to blue, and black to white. It’ll work.*”

Robin blinked in utter confusion. “What’re you *talking* about...?”

“That will be quite enough of *that!*” Brother Blood suddenly exclaimed, stepping over to seize Rose by the arm and physically haul her toward the door. “Come along, my dear... I have more questions for *you*, as well.”

“*Remember!*” Rose called to Robin again just before disappearing from view behind Blood’s armored guards, as they followed them out of the room.

Psimon glanced about the room briefly, as if taking a visual inventory of everything present – the four enclosed Titans, Raven in the cage, Cyborg in the corner, and the handful of H.I.V.E. troopers and Cyclones that remained stationed on guard duty – before he, too, departed.

The Titans were left to languish in silence, with Raven’s periodic groans and convulsions serving as a constant reminder of her ongoing torment. Robin continued to stare numbly at the spot where Slade’s life had ended, feeling the weight of their situation – of his total and complete *failure* – settle over him more and more heavily, until he began to feel it would eventually suffocate him.

It was several minutes before anyone spoke. When Beast Boy finally broke the silence, his voice was so quiet and miserable that it was hardly recognizable as his own.

“Guys, I... I’m *sorry*. I, I didn’t, I didn’t *mean* to... he just... I... ah, geez, I’m so... I’m *sorry*...!”

“It’s okay, Beast Boy,” Wonder Girl told him. “It isn’t your fault. Just *hang on*, okay? We’re gonna find a way to get out of this. It’s gonna be *okay*, really. You’ll see. Right, Robin...?”

After a few seconds, Robin realized they were staring at him. He looked up and met their eyes, and he tried to find the words to answer... but he *couldn’t*. They simply weren’t there. He saw Starfire’s stricken expression – directed at *him*, this time – and had to look away in shame.

“Aww, *man...*” Beast Boy’s voice broke. “Raven...*Cyborg...*I’m *so sorry...*”

* * *

As he and his ‘host’ fell into step with Brother Blood’s procession, Jericho unconsciously bit his borrowed lip, his mind racing.

* * *

12. Despair

Brother Blood and his entourage, including Rose and Psimon, rode the large elevator down the central shaft of the H.I.V.E. base. Jericho stood among them, hidden inside Sebastian's armor – hidden inside Sebastian himself, and scarcely daring to breathe as his thoughts and emotions raged within him like a silent, chaotic storm.

The Titans, his friends, had all been captured and imprisoned. Cyborg was dying, might already be dead. Raven was being continually tortured. He was alone now, and he was their only hope for escape...just as his father had predicted.

But his father was dead. Killed by a word, spoken by the thin man with dead, black eyes who now stood only a few feet away from him.

He had a half-sister he'd never known existed.

The huge elevator ground to a halt. Jericho blinked and shook himself internally, reminding himself to pay closer attention to his surroundings.

They'd stopped on Level B-7, where Brother Blood's personal chapel and private quarters were located. It was also where Jericho himself had been earlier, his cover identity having been obligated to attend a bizarre sermon Blood had been giving, until an alarm had sounded and he'd suddenly teleported away – leaving Jericho no opportunity to warn his friends that they were walking into a trap.

The hours since then had been agonizing, as he'd learned of the Titans' capture and spent every minute since trying to figure out how to save them...but unfortunately, he and all of the other ceremonial guards had been expected to follow Blood around the entire time, and he had yet to find an opportunity to slip away unnoticed.

But perhaps there may be a chance soon, he thought to himself as Blood stepped off the elevator, followed by six of his armored followers, then turned back to face Psimon and the rest of them.

"Take her down to Operations," he instructed, pointing an imperious finger at Rose, "and see if you can get to the bottom of what she was babbling about earlier, or if she's *seen* anything relating to this supposed traitor. I shall commune with the Master to inform Him of our progress, and seek His guidance in these matters. I will join you afterward."

"As you wish," Psimon replied, as Rose stood sullenly beside him.

"*Salute*," Sebastian hissed to Jericho, at such a low volume that it would have been inaudible had they not been sharing the same skull. Seeing the other guardsmen raise their decorative spears, Jericho hastily followed suit, mimicking their movements.

"All praise Brother Blood!" the guards – Sebastian included – all called out in unison. With a satisfied nod, Blood turned on his heel and headed off down a corridor, followed by the six bodyguards he'd chosen.

The rest of them stayed on the lift as it resumed its descent to Level B-9.

* * *

Starfire sat at the bottom of her spherical enclosure, head bowed. She stared at her right hand, braced against the curving floor to support her. Willing it to glow. Trying to summon the inner energy, the *righteous fury*, to generate a starbolt...but there was nothing. Not even a glimmer. And she could not understand why.

Inside the sphere to her left, Beast Boy was doubled over, his gloved hands clutching his head, which was pressed against the floor of his translucent prison. His shoulders shook with anguish, and she could hear him whispering “*I’m sorry*” over and over like a mantra. Sometimes he addressed his apology specifically to Cyborg, and sometimes to Raven, but in any case, he kept repeating it.

As for Cyborg, he remained slumped in the corner next to the power generators, his visible circuitry completely dark in testament to the damage done by the gaping, empty hole in his chest where his power cell had been physically ripped out. He looked...lifeless. Since awakening in her golden prison, Starfire had not seen him move even slightly. And the longer she looked at him...the more she began to fear that her friend was truly gone. That she may never again see his broad smile, feel his strength as they fought together, or hear his jovial laughter...and the thought was like an insidious poison in her veins, slowly spreading through her body.

A few feet away, inside the primitive metal cage, Raven continued to thrash against her restraints, her frequent, muffled cries a horrible reminder of the painful electrical shocks Gizmo’s vile collar was continually inflicting upon her. Though it shamed her greatly, Starfire was trying very hard not to look at her. The sight of her dear friend in such constant pain, her uniform torn, caged and bound in such a humiliating manner...it made her feel physically sick. It was almost more than she could stand.

Wonder Girl, imprisoned in the sphere to Starfire’s right, was also presently seated. But she was far from passive, her eyes and head always moving. Always searching, scanning every inch of the room, sizing up their guards...looking for any possible opening, any chance to escape, her jaw set with defiance.

Starfire thought that she should feel the same way. She knew that she *wanted* to. Why, then, could she not?

Looking past Wonder Girl, Starfire found herself thinking that perhaps she had found her answer. Robin was slumped inside the last golden sphere, his blank stare remaining fixed on the empty spot where Slade...where Slade had died.

And as he kept staring at that spot, Robin looked as though he had lost some vital part of himself. He looked more despondent...more hopeless...more *defeated*, than Starfire had ever seen him look before.

She hated the way he looked.

“Beast Boy...Beast Boy? ...*Beast Boy!*” Wonder Girl’s voice was quiet, but firm. She waited until she was sure she had the green shape-shifter’s attention before continuing. “Listen to me very carefully: *this is not your fault*. Psimon could have pulled that name from *any* of our minds.”

“But...” Beast Boy faltered. “But, he picked *me*, because—”

“Because he wanted to mess with you,” Wonder Girl interrupted him. “He was messing with *all* of us. But besides which, you heard what Blood said – the name, by itself, was useless to them. They don’t know anything else...and that means we still have a chance. So...hang in there, okay? We *will* get out of this. I promise. Right, Robin...?”

This time, Robin did not even look up. His gaze remained fixed on that spot on the floor, the one where Slade’s lifeless body had fallen after the Psimon told him to die. It was almost as if Robin was in some sort of trance; Wonder Girl repeated his name, but still he gave no indication of having heard her.

Beast Boy hesitated, his ears drooping. Frowning, Wonder Girl gave Starfire a meaningful look, to which she nodded in understanding.

“Robin...?” she attempted. “Robin...please. I know you can hear me. Our situation may be dire, but we are all here, experiencing it, together. Your friends are here with you, and they – *we* need you, here, with us. Please, Robin...tell us what you are thinking.”

She waited a long moment, staring as intently at Robin as he was staring at the floor, and feeling as though her heart may burst. Finally, she saw him blink a few times, then he slowly turned toward her. “What I’m...thinking...?”

“Yes, Robin!” she exclaimed, feeling a wild surge of hope. “Please, tell us!”

“I think...” he paused. “I think I...finally get it. I finally understand.”

“Understand what?” Beast Boy asked, when Robin didn’t immediately continue.

“Him,” Robin answered softly, inclining his head in the direction Slade’s corpse had been dragged away. “After all these years, I finally understand...Slade. I finally know what he was really after. His fixation on me, and on Terra...his obsession with finding an apprentice...all this time, he was just trying to replace the family he’d lost. It was as simple, and as pitiful, as that.” He paused, swallowing.

“And in spite of everything he ever did, and as much as I hated him...now that he’s dead...I can’t believe it, but...I actually feel sorry for him.”

* * *

The cargo elevator ground to a halt as it reached Level B-9, where the operational command center of the subterranean base was located. Psimon stepped off the lift and headed purposefully toward the nearest hexagonal entryway. “Bring her,” he commanded, without sparing a glance back at the ceremonial guardsmen to whom he’d given the order. The H.I.V.E. troopers stationed on either side of the doorway stood at attention as he approached.

Two of the ceremonial guards stepped forward, intending to seize Rose by either arm, but she quickly stepped away from them. “Don’t touch me,” she snarled at them. “I’ll come on my own.”

And so, the procession followed Psimon down the hall.

They eventually emerged into a very large and, predictably, hexagon-shaped room. It was, in fact, three such chambers joined together, Jericho noted as he looked around. Judging by the wide array of view screens, computer stations, control terminals and other important-looking machinery lining the walls, this did appear to be the base's primary command center. On the far wall at the back of the chamber, there was a raised hexagonal platform overlooking the entire room. And there was a decidedly throne-like chair perched atop it – Brother Blood's place of honor, no doubt. In addition to the H.I.V.E. troopers stationed here and there, a number of hooded figures wearing purple robes milled about the chamber and manned the various control stations. Most likely upper-tier H.I.V.E. personnel, he reasoned.

Upon entering the control room Psimon quickly veered to the right, leading the procession along the wall, around a corner and down a narrow hallway. After another turn, this time to the left, the hallway reached a dead end with a single sliding door on the left. A lone H.I.V.E. trooper was stationed next to the door, and stood at attention as the group approached.

Psimon opened the door without acknowledging the trooper, then stood to one side. "After you," he intoned, staring at Rose with a curt gesture for her to enter the room. "That won't be necessary," he added as, once again, some of the ceremonial guards started to move toward the prisoner. "She knows that resistance is pointless at this juncture."

"Whatever," Rose muttered, clearly sulking. However, she did obediently enter the room.

As she stepped past him, Psimon cast a glance over the assembled guards. "The rest of you may return to your posts," he told them, "except for...you."

As he spoke, he pointed directly at Jericho/Sebastian, and the Titan's heart skipped a beat.

"You will remain with us," Psimon ordered. Jericho gave him an obedient nod, unconsciously tightening his grip on his ceremonial spear as he followed the older man into the room.

The room was small and nearly featureless, and was divided in half by a thick, transparent plastic barrier that stretched from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling, perforated in various places by a series of ventilation holes. There were no seams, hatches or hinges anywhere on this barrier that Jericho could see, it simply appeared to be a fifth, transparent wall down the middle of the room. The only furniture present was a plain cot, and that was on the other side of the plastic wall, completely inaccessible from the door.

Psimon held up a hand and a point roughly in the middle of the transparent wall seemed to bend, distort, and finally split open, like a sheet of shrink wrap stretched too thinly. The opening expanded until it was nearly door-sized, at which point Rose reluctantly stepped through it; Psimon then sealed the opening behind her by what looked like a simple reversal of whatever method he'd used to open it.

Folding her arms, Rose sat on the cot and scowled briefly at Jericho, before shifting her glare to Psimon. Who remained standing in the center of the room, facing her, his own hands clasped casually behind him. The room fell silent.

Inside Sebastian's armor, Jericho shifted uncomfortably but remained standing at attention next to the room's only exit, trying to ignore the vague sense of claustrophobia he felt creeping up at the prospect of being stuck in such a small room, and with *these* people. One of whom, he couldn't help but recall, he'd only just learned that he was related to...and the other, he'd watched murder his father a short time ago.

His grip on Sebastian's spear tightened again. But he couldn't risk attacking...not yet, anyway. Not until he was sure he knew how to free the Titans.

For the next several minutes, Psimon hardly moved a muscle. He simply stood there, staring intently at Rose. He never moved, never blinked; Jericho wasn't even completely sure he *breathed*. The only sign of activity from him came in the form of a slight, periodic pulsing of the glowing 'circuits' on his blackened, exposed brain.

Rose, for her part, simply sat there glaring back at her captor, her distaste for him more than obvious.

"...Interesting," Psimon finally said. Then he abruptly turned away from Rose, and toward Jericho. "I must go and document this. You will remain here until another guard arrives to relieve you, which will happen shortly. After that, you may *do as you please*."

He drew the last four words out into an emphasized hiss, as if he were trying to convey some implicit message by them. Jericho was completely confused.

"All praise Brother Blood," Sebastian responded. In his puzzlement, Jericho nearly forgot to add the accompanying salute.

"Hm. If you like." With that, Psimon opened one of his dimensional rifts in the air next to him, stepped through it and was gone.

Rose was on her feet before the visible distortion Psimon's passage had left in the air had completely faded from view. "Quick," she said, "come over here."

Jericho blinked, startled, and automatically pointed to himself in question – realizing a millisecond later that he was the only other person in the room, and feeling quite stupid for it.

"Yes, you," Rose hissed impatiently. "Quickly. We've only got a minute or two before the next guard shows up, and I need to tell you something...*Joey*."

Before Jericho could react, Sebastian spoke up. "I have no idea who you're—"

"I wasn't *talking to you*," Rose snapped, interrupting him. "You're the worst part of this whole deal. It's too bad my brother can't save the others without you, but you'll get yours, sooner or later."

"I will tear out your tongue and *eat* it, you *insolent...!*" Sebastian snarled.

"*Shut up*," Rose cut him off, again. "You wouldn't want to blow your cover, would you? Now hurry up and get over here, Joey."

Jericho was sure Sebastian was still fuming, but he did so in silence. Without further hesitation, he stepped toward the plastic wall separating him from Rose and began signing, *How did you know who I am?*

But she was shaking her head, before he'd even finished his sentence. "I don't know sign language – not yet, anyway. But that doesn't matter right now, I just need to tell you something while I still have time...you have the right to know."

She looked down for the briefest moment, and took a breath before continuing.

"I can't go with them, Joey. I can't go with the Titans. It isn't safe. They can't protect me...not from him. I think we both know that."

He shook his head, but she continued.

"Deep down, you know it's true. You know him better than I do, after all. And besides, *she's* with them. It isn't safe for *you* with them, either...but I know I can't talk you into abandoning them, so I won't try. Just remember one thing...be careful who you trust. Don't lose sight of who your *real* friends are. Keep that in mind, and maybe we'll see each other again someday."

The hint of a smile flickered briefly over her lips, and was gone.

"Oh, one last thing. Dad already placed the charges while the Titans were fighting everyone, earlier. You just need to get a hold of the detonator. Now back up, because the replacement guard's about to come through the door...and good luck."

* * *

In the security room, the H.I.V.E. technician who'd been monitoring the video feed from Rose's cell jumped to her feet and turned to head for the door.

"Is there a problem?" asked Psimon, who was suddenly standing in her path.

"Sir! I think I've just found the traitor!" she exclaimed. "I must report this to Brother Blood!"

"Report what?" Psimon replied dismissively. "**You saw nothing.**"

The technician froze. "I..." she stammered.

Psimon's flat, unblinking stare bored into her eyes. "...You were saying?"

"I...I should return to my duties." Turning, the technician went back to her station.

"Indeed." What could have been a smirk tugged at the corner of Psimon's mouth.

* * *

13. Of Those Lost

The young boy clung to the upper rungs of the simple rope ladder, his breath manifesting as little clouds around him in the chill winter air. The snow-covered ground below him, now bathed in cold silver moonlight, seemed much further away than he'd remembered it being.

"Joey...?" His mother's voice drifted toward him from the house. "It's time, everything's ready! Where are...oh! What are you doing up there? You have to come inside, we're waiting for you!"

"I know, Mommy," the boy answered. "I'm coming, I just..." he trailed off helplessly.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" she asked.

"Yes...!" he called back, with stubborn bluster.

But she didn't believe him. "Hold on, I'll come and..."

"It's okay, Addie," his father's voice cut in. "You stay with Grant, I'll bring him in." He heard the front door open and close, followed by the sound of his father's distinctive footsteps crunching through the snow, toward him.

"It's Christmas Eve, Joey," the boy heard him say. "Your brother's waiting to open your presents, and you know how impatient he is. We'd better hurry back inside, don't you think?"

*"I know," the boy told him, twisting to look back over his shoulder. "But...I had to come out and get your present." It was a pine cone, but not just any pine cone...it was a **giant** pine cone, the biggest one he'd ever found, almost as big as a football! He'd hidden it in the tree house in their front yard, so his brother wouldn't find it and use it for a hand grenade or something, and he'd spent the whole week painting it with intricate patterns of blue and orange and purple and silver and gold. He wanted it to be really special, and it was finally ready, but...after he'd climbed up and stuffed it into his jacket, when he went to climb back down the rope ladder, it seemed like someone had moved the ground further away than it was yesterday.*

Maybe Grant had done it, to get back at him for hiding the pine cone.

"Did you find it?" his father asked.

"Yes..." the boy hesitated.

"What's wrong, then?"

"Nothing...I just..." he trailed off. He didn't want Daddy to know that he was scared. But when he looked down at the ground, all he could think about was what would happen if he fell. "...I'm stuck."

"You're stuck?" his father repeated.

The boy swallowed. "Uh-huh."

"Can I help?"

The boy looked down at his father's face. "I'm too high," he squeaked. "You can't reach."

“Then, climb down.”

“But...I can’t move!” the boy protested.

*His father smiled, but a look of resolute certainty settled into his clear, blue eyes. It was a look the boy had seen before, and it meant that whatever his father said next was going to happen, **would** happen, no matter what, simply because he said so.*

*“Yes, you can. You just don’t want to. But that doesn’t mean you can’t. You simply have to decide that you **will**, even though you don’t want to, because that’s what has to happen.”*

“But...” the boy deflated, he knew there was no longer any arguing. “...What if I fall?”

His father laughed. “Then I’ll catch you,” he replied. “But you’re not going to fall.”

The boy blinked. “How...how do you know?”

His father’s smile was one of irresistible confidence.

“Because you’re my son.”

The boy swallowed again. Finally, he gripped the rope ladder firmly, and took a step down to the next rung.

* * *

Jericho stepped off the last rung of the access ladder leading down from the old bunker, the salty updraft from the bottom of the huge elevator shaft whistling around him as he descended, and the heavy boots of his current host body making far too much noise on the metal grating for his taste. Although no one in the H.I.V.E.’s base had questioned his comings and goings as of yet, or even given him a second look for that matter, it still felt prudent to try to attract as little attention as possible.

“I still don’t understand how you knew where to find it,” Sebastian muttered in his borrowed ear, referring to the small remote detonator which was now tucked discretely inside the breastplate they currently shared.

The message my father left with you told me where to look, Jericho signed to himself, after quickly glancing around to confirm that there were no potential witnesses nearby.

“But the message was so maddeningly *vague*,” Sebastian argued. “All he told me was that he planned to hide the detonator ‘where one might store a very colorful Christmas gift’. How did *that* tell you to look in a *tree*, of all places? To say nothing of which one?”

Mentally, Jericho sighed. *You wouldn’t understand, even if I tried to explain it.*

“Clearly not. Well, the important thing is that now we have it. So, what are you waiting for? Trigger the charges!”

Jericho would have frowned had he been able to control his host's facial muscles. As it was, he had to wait until he'd finished descending the next ladder, which he'd begun while Sebastian was talking, before he could respond.

Not yet. I need to figure out how I'm going to rescue the Titans, first. Not to mention my sister.

Sebastian made a decidedly contemptuous sound. "If you *must*. Just don't let it get in the way of our mission."

They are my mission! Jericho signed emphatically as he made his way around the shaft to the next access ladder. *They're depending on me. On us. If we fail, who else will be left to help them?*

* * *

Several hundred miles to the northeast, the front doors of the Jump City Public Library slid open, allowing the early morning sun to cast a wide beam into the entry foyer. One of the desk clerks looked up from her paperwork, but the cheerful greeting she'd been about to utter died on her lips as a long, demonic-looking shadow – complete with horns – fell across the floor.

A young, slender girl stepped through the doorway wearing a long-sleeved, gothic-style black dress with matching black and purple-striped tights. The glossy black platform boots she wore made her appear several inches taller than she actually was, but what truly set her apart was her chalk-white skin, her pink, cat-like eyes, and her cotton candy-pink hair which rose into a pair of horn-like protrusions on either side of her head, casting the ominous shadow across the floor in front of her.

The clerk fumbled with her desk phone. "Se...*security!!*" she cried, her voice rising in a quickly escalating panic.

The girl called Jinx abruptly stopped, turning her head toward the direction of the sound, and heaved an exasperated sigh upon seeing the terrified clerk. She took a step toward the front desk, raising a hand in a calming gesture, only to have the clerk quickly duck out of view, apparently expecting a hex to the face.

Again Jinx stopped, her eyes shifting briefly from her outstretched hand to the clerk's now-empty chair and back again. Her frown deepening, she dropped her hand back to her side and stepped up to the desk, peering over it at the cowering clerk.

"Hey. Relax," she told the woman. "I'm just here to meet the guy in the yellow and red suit. That's all." She took the extra step of clasping her hands behind her back, both to assist with balance as she leaned forward, and also hopefully to minimize the clerk's hex-phobia.

Clearly still terrified, the clerk hesitantly peeked over the top of the desk at her. "You're...you're here for *him*?"

"That's what I said," Jinx confirmed, struggling to maintain what little patience she could muster.

“Are you going to fight?”

Jinx rolled her eyes so hard it *hurt*. “No, we’re not going to fight.” Or at least not the way you mean, she added silently. “I don’t do that stuff anymore. I’m just here to meet him, okay? That’s all.”

The woman seemed unconvinced. Or at least that was the conclusion Jinx drew from the fact that she continued to cower behind the desk.

The pink-haired girl frowned, trying to contain her growing annoyance. “This is the part where you tell me where to find him,” she prompted.

Slowly, the woman climbed to her feet, keeping a wary eye on Jinx the entire time. She reached for her desk phone again...but hesitated.

“You’re *sure* you’re not going to—”

“We’re *dating*, okay?!” Jinx snapped, her patience at an end. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

The woman stared at her, mouth agape. “Really?”

Jinx responded with a withering stare that would have made Raven proud, until the clerk finally got the message and picked up her blasted phone.

“Hi, Lisa? Yes, um...could you, uh, give me a location for our *special guest*, please? ...Yes, him. ...Okay...downstairs, archives.”

Jinx turned to leave, but the clerk suddenly held up a hand to stop her. “—No, wait, now he’s on the ground floor, in the southwest corner...um, I mean, upstairs, in the *northwest* corner...er, that is, third floor, east wing...”

“Forget it, I’ll find him myself,” Jinx muttered as she walked away.

She made her way to the third floor, studiously ignoring the various patrons and library employees who flinched, hid, or physically dove for cover as she passed. After catching a brief glimpse of a yellow-and-red blur toward the back of the room, she followed it to what she was somewhat relieved to discover was an isolated corner behind a tall bookshelf, where her ‘date’ was seated at a small table, along with a large stack of books.

“Hey, you finally made it!” Kid Flash cheerfully greeted her, pausing for a brief second as he thumbed through a thick hardcover volume at dizzying speed.

Jinx scowled, casting a brief glance around to make sure they were alone before she sat down. “Yeah, I kind of got held up downstairs at the front desk. Speaking of which, why did...” She blinked, having just noticed the cover of his book. “Why are you reading *medical textbooks*?”

He reached the end of the book as she spoke, closed it with a decisive *thump*, and dropped it on the stack. “I’ve been here for, like, ten minutes. I *ran out* of other stuff to read. Oh, hey! That reminds me. About halfway through the science section, I started thinking about your powers.”

“Huh?” Jinx blinked again, taken aback by the abrupt shift in the conversation’s direction. “What about them?”

“Their mechanics, the way they work. Specifically, I think...hmm.” He paused briefly, as if choosing his words. “I think they...*selectively destabilize* the molecules of objects, to a greater or lesser extent. That’s the best explanation I’ve been able to come up with so far, anyway.”

She frowned. “Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why does it matter?”

Now it was his turn to blink. “Because! It’s...interesting! It’s a puzzle. Haven’t you ever thought about it?”

She sighed. “Of course I have, but it always leads to the same conclusion. My powers make *bad things* happen. That’s what it all boils down to, no matter how you look at it. Why do you want to overcomplicate it? *How* or *why* doesn’t really matter, it doesn’t change anything.”

He regarded her with bemusement. “Why do *you* still insist on thinking about it that way, after everything that’s happened? The way you stopped Madam Rouge cold wasn’t a *bad thing*. Neither was what you did in Paris, against the Brotherhood. Or yesterday, with Mirror Master!”

“I suspect they might disagree.”

He paused briefly. “Well yeah, but...see, they’re *bad people*, who were in the process of doing bad things. Therefore, their disagreement actually reinforces my point!” He grinned.

Jinx’s eyebrows drew together. “Okay, now you’re *really* reaching.” He opened his mouth to reply and she quickly forged ahead, eager to change the subject. “Why did you want to meet *here*, of all places, anyway?”

He gestured to his stack of books. “Figured it’d be a chance to catch up on some light reading while I waited. Plus it’s quiet, peaceful, relatively private, all that good stuff...” He paused, as if finally noticing the depth of her scowl. “Wait. Is there a problem? You said you ‘got held up’ at the front desk, what was that about?”

She unconsciously sunk down into her seat a bit. “Well...the last time I was in this library, I...sorta leveled half the building.”

He stared at her in amazement for a long moment. “Seriously?” Then he cast an appraising glance around the room. “Which half?”

“It’s not funny!” she hissed, sinking down further into her chair, not wanting to attract any more attention.

“It’s a *little* funny.”

She shot him an exasperated look. “Hey, aren’t *you* supposed to be the one who’s trying to reform *me*??”

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “C’mon, I’m just saying, I can’t even tell. They’ve obviously fixed everything. And anyway, this was a *while* ago, right? I’m sure everybody’s forgotten all about it. Especially after what you and Cyborg did last Halloween, with those giant pumpkin things.”

She remained hunched in her chair, scowling. “I’m just worried they might try to *bill me* on our way out.”

He almost chuckled at that, but caught himself just in time...luckily for him, she thought, given the current trajectory of her mood. “Well, y’know...we don’t *have* to leave through the *door*.” He cocked an eyebrow suggestively.

She ignored him. “Okay, seriously, you still haven’t told me what we’re even doing in this *town*, anyway. I was finally starting to get halfway *comfortable* in Keystone, and then all of a sudden you call me up last night like, ‘*Oh, hey, by the way, could you meet me back in Jump tomorrow morning? You know, that place where most of the town still views you as a dangerous, bloodthirsty criminal? That’d be fun, ‘kay bye.*’”

Now it was his turn to frown. “I never said any of that ‘bloodthirsty criminal’ stuff.”

“You *know* what I *mean*,” she grated through clenched teeth as she glared at him.

He sighed. “Okay, sorry, I should’ve thought about all that before we came here. I guess I was distracted, but I still should’ve thought of it. Anyway, Robin called me up last night from some island in the south Pacific where they’ve been on a mission since the day before yesterday, said it was gonna take longer than expected, and asked if we could check in on things at the Tower just to make sure it hasn’t been blown up or taken over by Control Freak or anything crazy like that. So that’s the deal.”

Jinx blinked. “What are they doing in the south Pacific?”

He paused just long enough for her to notice it. “They’re on a mission.”

She scowled, feeling her annoyance flare back up again. “You said that already. What, is it a *secret* or something?”

He sighed in resignation. “Okay, fine. They’re...going up against Brother Blood.”

She stared at him for a second. “And, you didn’t want to tell me that *because*...?”

He grimaced, throwing up a hand in frustration. “Same reason you’re upset about meeting *here*. I know there’s history involved.”

“Yeah, *history*. Past tense. May as well be *ancient* history, as far as I’m concerned.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you’re worried about my loyalties—”

“Whoa, I did *not* say that,” he interrupted. “Or think it. Nor *would* I. C’mon, you *know* that.”

Something in his voice and his eyes made her pause, then swallow the rest of her retort.

Several long seconds passed between them, in silence.

“All I’m saying,” she stated quietly, keeping her eyes fixed on the table, “is that maybe I could have *helped*, or something. They could have *asked*.”

“Yeah...” he sighed, then broke into a knowing smirk. “But would you have asked *them*, if it were you?”

She felt the corner of her mouth twitch. She glanced up at him for a second, then back down at the table for a few more before finally meeting his eye. "...No."

His smile widened. "Guess we're all coming from the same place after all, then, huh." With that, he abruptly stood. "C'mon, let's head over there. And who knows, if they're still not back yet, maybe they'll end up needing a H.I.V.E. consultant before it's all said and done, anyway."

She sighed. "When you put it that way, I think I'd rather be struck by lightning."

As he turned to leave, she suddenly realized that under the table, she'd been unconsciously clutching the hem of her skirt with both hands since the moment he'd said Brother Blood's name. She immediately let go, mentally berating herself as she did for indulging in such a childish gesture of weakness.

* * *

Her fist pressed against the floor, teeth grinding and eyes squeezed shut, Starfire fervently attempted to envision herself somewhere else.

She had spent much of the past hour doing this. So far, it was not working. She could not escape this hateful confinement, not even within the boundaries of her imagination.

But she had to find a way, and soon. She had to free herself, and her friends, and not only for the sake of Raven's suffering and Cyborg's deteriorating condition. For the first time since her arrival on Earth, she was beginning to feel herself gradually slipping into the mindless, desperate rage that had fueled her escape from the Gordanians. And she could not allow that to happen again, not here, and not now. If it did, she knew she would very likely injure herself and, worse yet, probably harm her friends as well.

Opening her eyes, she scanned the room for the hundredth time, trying to find something else to focus her attention on. There were six H.I.V.E. troopers loitering in the room, evidently assigned to guard duty, and three Cyclone robots, one standing next to each of the room's exits. Just as there had been every other time she had looked.

Robin, Wonder Girl and Beast Boy were still imprisoned alongside her, each within their own hateful golden orb of energy. A short distance in front of them, Raven continued to thrash and spasm in that cruel, primitive metal cage. And Cyborg remained slumped in the corner, dark and motionless.

Starfire considered asking Beast Boy if his acute senses could discern any helpful information about Cyborg's condition. Most importantly, whether or not he was even still alive, at all. But seeing the expression on the green boy's face...she hesitated, and decided not to ask.

She was not sure she truly wanted to know the answer.

All of this was the Brother Blood's doing. His and the Psimon's. She suddenly found herself wanting to smash them into pieces, to blow them apart with starbolts, to beat them beyond recognition with their own severed limbs. To destroy them utterly.

And as for Slade, she felt neither pity nor sympathy for him, even if Robin did. He deserved what had happened to him, and in truth, she was glad that he was finally gone.

These thoughts were unsettling. They were not normal for her. But they were also not completely alien to her, and that was what truly frightened her. She had felt this way once before, and the prospect of reverting to that state filled her with shame and dread.

Though she tried to avoid them, unwanted memories of the Gordanians again returned to her. The things they had done to her during her captivity had been far more terrible than her friends had ever known, or *would* ever know. They had treated her like an animal. Their cruelty had *made* her an animal, mindless and savage, and it had been that animal who violently fought her way free of their imprisonment and escaped to Earth.

It was not until after she met Robin that she was able to remember her true self, and return to the way she *wanted* to be, instead of what had been forced on her. And she had sworn to herself, on that day, that she would never, ever be that animal again.

But the longer she sat in this prison, surrounded by the suffering of those for whom she cared the most...the more she felt the animal trying to claw its way out of her, once again. She had been trying to summon the *righteous fury* that would allow her to produce starbolts, but this was not what she had wanted. It was fury, true, but it did *not* feel righteous. And it was gradually, but steadily, growing more difficult to deny it.

As her friend suffered through yet another torturous electrical jolt a few feet away, Starfire suddenly found herself wondering if this was how Raven felt much of the time.

A quiet voice abruptly interrupted her thoughts...something for which she was thankful.

“Beast Boy. Starfire. Wonder Girl.”

It was Robin. Robin’s voice.

She looked up.

Robin, however, was *not* looking up. He was still looking down at the floor while he spoke. Probably to avoid attracting the guards’ attention, she realized with embarrassment, and quickly directed her own gaze elsewhere...even though there was nowhere else she *wanted* to be looking. But she pushed that feeling aside and focused on his words.

“Earlier, when Wonder Girl tried to break free, she was nearly able to overload the generator powering these...*things*...by herself. I’ll bet if all three of you were to make an effort, all at the same time, you could get loose.

“Even if it works, it’ll take some time,” Wonder Girl pointed out. “The guards are bound to notice.”

“It might be worth the risk.” Robin cast a meaningful glance in Cyborg’s direction. “We could be running out of time.”

“That *is* a pretty clever plan!” an unfamiliar, feminine voice suddenly interrupted.

Starfire looked around in bewilderment, as she saw her three friends doing the same. The guards were all too far away to have spoken the words they had all just heard, and besides which, none of them appeared to be—

A blurry green shape suddenly became visible next to Raven’s cage, and quickly resolved itself into a figure leaning against the bars...wearing a green dress in what Starfire understood to be an Oriental style, and a white mask which resembled a grinning feline face.

Cheshire. Starfire had forgotten about her ability to camouflage herself in plain view.

“Unfortunately,” she continued, “it won’t work, since they already know about it. Still, it was a clever idea.”

Starfire felt her teeth grinding in renewed frustration.

“Joining a religious cult isn’t your usual M.O., Cheshire,” Robin observed, ignoring her statement. “You’re more of a blade for hire. What are *you* getting out of all this?”

“The usual,” she replied with a shrug, both her posture and her tone of voice maddeningly relaxed, even casual, in such close proximity to Raven’s ongoing torment. “The H.I.V.E. is paying me very well to be Brother Blood’s errand girl, at least for the moment. It isn’t complicated.”

“Earning a living – or even just *surviving* – probably will be, in the world he’s trying to create,” Wonder Girl pointed out.

The girl in the cat mask shrugged again. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. I’m nothing if not adaptable, but I’m sure your little database would have told you that, too.”

“That’s not very forward-thinking,” Robin scowled. “You ought to reconsider your options. No amount of money will be worth how this whole mess is ultimately going to play out.”

“You know, that’s almost *precisely* what Slade said,” she remarked, pushing away from Raven’s cage to lean toward Robin’s enclosure. “Practically word for word. You really *were* two of a kind, weren’t you? And in any case, I’d say I’ve made out better than *him*, so far.”

Starfire did not need to look at Robin to know that his expression darkened in response.

“Yeah, well, the game ain’t over yet,” Beast Boy growled. “We’ve come back from worse than *this*.”

Cheshire laughed, which made her grinning mask look all the more deranged. “*This* game was over before it *began*. It ended the minute you decided to trust Slade, and follow him here. From that point on, they’ve known every move you were going to make

before you did. Which reminds me of the reason I came up here in the first place...say, boys?”

The guards looked up attentively.

“If our *guests* decide to try some daring escape plan...” Cheshire instructed them, “...say, for example, a cooperative effort to overload the power generator...*Psimon says* to execute them.” She nodded toward Robin. “Starting with bird-boy, here.”

With that, she turned to leave. But then she stopped, as if remembering some final detail, and turned back to Robin again.

“Oh, I almost forgot...I *was* going to ask you to say hi to Speedy for me, the next time you see him. But given the way things are looking now...I kind of doubt that you’re actually going to be *alive* long enough to do that. So, it looks like *I’ll* probably end up passing along *your* greeting, instead.” She emitted a mocking-sad sigh. “Oh well, I guess that’s life...or not. In either case, *ciao!*”

As Cheshire walked out of the room, passing one of the Brother Blood’s personal guards on her way out, Starfire was quite certain that the fury she now felt rising in her belly was most definitely *not* righteous.

But it may have to do.

Strangely, the white-armored guard who’d just entered the room stopped just inside the doorway and simply stood there, staring at the floor in the middle of the room, as if having suddenly noticed something important. The H.I.V.E. guards took notice of this also, and after several seconds one of them got up and began walking toward the new arrival.

“This is our chance,” Robin suddenly said in a low voice, his expression grim as he shot a meaningful glance at each of his friends in turn. “You guys ready?”

“What?!” Starfire exclaimed, nearly forgetting to keep her voice at a low volume. “But, Robin, what the Cheshire said--!”

“They will *kill* you as soon as we try to break free,” Wonder Girl whispered, indicating the proximity of the five remaining guards with a nod of her head.

“It might be the only way for the rest of you – for *any* of us – to get out of this,” Robin grimly insisted. His expression was as resolute as Starfire had ever seen him, and in light of his words, she found that highly distressing. “I mean it. *This is it.* I’m giving you a direct—”

Beast Boy’s head abruptly shot up, his eyes wide, as the H.I.V.E. trooper exchanged greetings with the white-armored guard on the other side of the room. “Wait! Guys! Hold up!” he hissed urgently. “That dude, over there! That’s—”

* * *

Aside from his mother’s perfume and Mr. Wintergreen’s cologne, the most prominent smell in the funeral home was a faint, musky scent of wood finish. Joseph Wilson supposed that made sense, all things considered, and was most likely preferable

to the alternative. The room felt cold, but he wasn't quite sure if it was because of the outside temperature, or simply because that was how he felt.

He stood between his mother and his older brother, as he had many other times on many other formal, and often solemn occasions. Only this time, his mother was gripping his sleeve and sobbing quietly, while his brother lay in a polished oak casket, silent, cold and lifeless.

Joey stared down at Grant's face, his artistic eye subconsciously tracing every line, every crease, trying to memorize every last detail. The way his long hair cascaded down to his shoulders in waves of gold, exactly the same hue as Joey's own, shorter curls. And his expression, so much more peaceful and serene than it had ever been in life.

Meanwhile, his conscious mind was engaged in a desperate but ultimately futile struggle to deny the truth before him: his brother was dead. And no amount of denial or prayer or wishing or crying was going to change that fact.

*It was true that their lives had taken divergent paths and gradually pulled them further and further apart, especially in the last few years; ever since Joey's 'accident'. But even so...Grant was his older brother. He'd never known life, never even considered life without him. And now he was never going to see him, nor be seen **by** him, never going to hear him laugh, or yell, or tell a bad joke ever again.*

He was really, truly gone. And he never even got to say goodbye. Never got to tell him how much he'd always admired and looked up to him, how grateful he was for the things he'd learned from him...and now, he never would.

*He heard the door to the sanctuary behind them open, and suddenly, his mother's hand left his shoulder and he felt her stiffen and bristle. "How **dare** you show your face here," she growled.*

"I have just as much right to be here as you do. He was my son, too, after all."

Upon hearing the voice, Joey froze. His hand unconsciously went to the scar on his throat. It was years old and well-healed, at least on the surface, but that fateful night had been the last time he'd heard his father's voice...until this moment.

Turning, he wasn't quite sure exactly what he expected to see. He only knew that it was nothing like the sight which now greeted him.

His mother had left his side at the casket and was now confronting a man in the doorway, knuckles white, her anger palpable to Joey from across the room and with her back to him. As for the man, he towered over the short, trim brunette, but that was of little concern – Joey had seen his mother incapacitate men three times her size, with minimal effort. The long coat he wore was slightly damp from the rain outside, his gloved hands clasped at his waist in a posture that looked deliberately, inappropriately relaxed in the face of his mother's barely-restrained fury. His height, broad shoulders and obviously athletic build fit his father's silhouette as Joey remembered it, but beyond that...he was nearly unrecognizable.

"I've merely come to pay my respects," he said then, and his unmistakable voice instantly confirmed his identity.

Joey couldn't believe how much his father had changed. Of course there was the patch covering his right eye, now, and the jagged, vertical scar running up the side of his face underneath it. But that was the least of it. The young man had last seen him only a few years earlier, but his father appeared to have aged **decades**. His neatly-trimmed goatee was now a full beard, and his handsome, sculpted features had become weathered, and hardened into something much more intimidating – and he had **always** been an imposing figure.

Most startling of all was the fact that his hair, which had been the same golden hue as that of his sons, was now pure white. Not graying, not even silver, but **white**. And the color of his remaining eye, which had once been a deep, brilliant shade of blue, had somehow faded to a dull, cloudy gray.

“Respect?” Mother spat. “Is that supposed to be a joke? We both know the only people you ‘respect’ are the ones who pay you to murder, and that your ‘professional reputation’, in their eyes, is the only thing that’s **truly** important to you. To pretend to care about your sons **now** is insulting; you never cared about them **before**.”

“That is not true,” Father said slowly, in a quiet, steady voice.

“Your words mean nothing,” she continued, her voice dripping with contempt. “Your actions have proven that. That one of our sons would have to **die** before you’d even **attempt** to reach out to us—”

“It was out of respect,” Father interrupted, his voice still even, “that I maintained my distance after the...incident. Respect for **you**, Adeline.”

“You **liar!!**” she snarled, her anger threatening to boil over. “Don’t you **dare** try to turn this back on me! You **lied** to me for **years**, Slade. **Years!** About your job...about what you’d become...about **everything**. That isn’t respect. It’s an insult.”

“I’m giving that up,” he said quietly, maintaining steady eye contact with her. Joey didn’t think he’d even noticed that he was there, yet.

“I...don’t...care,” Mother hissed, drawing out her words for maximum effect. “Even if I **did** believe you, which I don’t. Too little, too late. Our son is **dead**. Nothing you say or do can change that. And for **what?** Simply because he wanted to **be like his father**, without any thought as to what that really meant.”

For the first time, Joey saw cracks beginning to show in his father’s tightly controlled expression. A flash of anger in his eye, a flaring of his nostrils, a twitch at the corner of his mouth.

Mother’s voice dropped to a deadly whisper, but he could still hear her from where he stood. “Oh, and let me tell you. I will be looking into this personally, and very, very carefully. And if I find even the slightest hint of your name **anywhere** remotely near it, so help me, I will **finish** what I started with your eye.”

At that, Father’s eye narrowed. He abruptly reached into his coat, pulled out a handgun, chambered a round and then offered it to her, handle first.

“Why wait...?” he hissed, in a tone of voice Joey had never heard him use before, low, smooth, and menacing. “Here’s your chance, Addie. Do it now, if you truly mean to.”

“Don’t...tempt...me,” she growled through clenched teeth.

Suddenly, Mr. Wintergreen stepped between them. Joey had been so focused on his parents that he’d nearly forgotten he was present.

“Forgive me, Sir,” he said, his voice quiet but stern, “but I think it would be best if you were to leave, now.”

Father’s expression darkened, his gaze shifting between the two people standing before him. “You too, Wintergreen...?”

Several tense seconds passed in silence as the three of them stood there in the doorway, none of them willing to give any ground.

Finally, Father appeared to deflate. “Very well...” he sighed, put away his gun, and turned to leave.

Joey exhaled, having only just realized he’d been holding his breath ever since the gun came out.

As he opened the door, Father stopped for a moment, and looked back over his shoulder at Mother.

“You should know, Adeline,” he said, “that this was your final chance for resolution. I will never give you another opportunity.”

She shook her head in amazement. “If you honestly thought there was any way we could ever possibly be a family again, after all you’ve done—”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

And with that, he was gone.

* * *

Jericho stood and stared at the spot on the floor, near Raven’s cage, where his father had died. He found his thoughts pulled, almost unwillingly, back to the last real memory he had of him. Not as the Titans’ hated enemy, but as the father he’d lost.

And lost he was. Like Grant, now Father was really, *truly* gone, and this time, forever. He would never see him again, there was no question about it. There would never be an opportunity to ask him why he’d made the choices he’d made, why he’d done the things he’d done, or to tell him how much he’d hurt the people who loved him most, how angry he’d been at him, and for how long. He would never have the chance to say the things he’d rehearsed in his mind a thousand times over the years.

Any hopes he might have privately held out, however faint, for understanding or reconciliation were now lost. And just as with his brother, he was never able to say goodbye to *him*, either.

“Hail, Brother Sebastian,” said the H.I.V.E. trooper who was suddenly standing in front of him. “Is there something you need?” he asked.

Jericho started, having momentarily forgotten that he wasn't in his own body, even as 'his' mouth spoke of its own volition. “I've come to relieve you,” Sebastian told the guard.

Over the guard's soldier, Jericho saw Beast Boy's head suddenly snap up in recognition of Sebastian's voice.

The guard paused, frowning. “Really? I wasn't informed of...oh! Is this because the disposal team hasn't reported back yet?”

“That's right,” Sebastian answered without missing a beat. “Go and find them.”

The guard saluted and Jericho returned the gesture in kind, then he took up a position near the door, trying to look nonchalant, as the guard left the room through the doorway on the opposite wall. He was peripherally aware of Beast Boy whispering to the other Titans, and hoped the remaining guards wouldn't notice.

“What's wrong with you?!” Sebastian hissed in his ear.

Jericho paused to make sure the other guards in the room weren't looking before he answered, and even then, he took care to sign into his hand as subtly as he could.

Sorry. I...forgot where I was, for a second.

“How could you forget such a thing?! What are you, some sort of mental incompetent??”

Jericho would have scowled in annoyance, had he been able to. *Normally, when I'm in another person's body, I'm aware of their mind; their thoughts, their memories, and that's a constant reminder that I'm 'not myself'. But since yours are hidden from me, it's...different. And also...*

He hesitated, his eyes again drawn to that spot on the floor. Sebastian noticed this, since those eyes were also his.

“I thought you hated your father.”

That doesn't mean I wanted to see him dead.

“Why not?” Sebastian sounded genuinely confused. “I hate my father, and thus, I fully intend to kill him. It's only natural.”

Jericho winced inwardly. *Not for me.*

“Then you're weak.”

With a sinking feeling, Jericho began to understand why Rose – *his sister*, he had to keep reminding himself – had said what she had about this boy. But he couldn't let himself be distracted by that, he had to focus.

There were now five H.I.V.E. troopers and three Cyclone androids remaining in the room. If the Titans were freed, he had no doubt that they could overcome them with relative ease. The only remaining question was...

I don't suppose you'd happen to know where my father would have planted his charges, exactly?

“He didn't tell me, precisely. But I strongly suspect his primary targets would have been the main power generators on levels five and six, so as to cripple the base's infrastructure while also causing maximum confusion and chaos.”

Jericho found himself unconsciously nodding. *That sounds like the approach he'd take, yes.* He cast an appraising glance toward the translucent spheres of energy containing his friends. *So, with any luck...setting off the charges will also free the Titans!*

“Spectacular,” Sebastian snapped impatiently. “Does that mean you're *finally* ready to get on with it?”

One of the most important lessons Jericho had learned, from both his parents, had been to never surrender to impatience. Even so, he had to concede that there seemed to be no better time than the present. So rather than answer, once he was sure the H.I.V.E. troopers weren't watching him, he simply reached for the device.

“One final thing,” Sebastian whispered as he did so. “Remember, even after your friends are released, *do not jump bodies again* until both Brother Blood *and* Psimon have been dealt with. We must not reveal ourselves until the moment is right.”

Though a bit puzzled by his host's choice of words, Jericho gave a quick nod as his hand closed around the detonator, recalling that only Sebastian was immune to both villains' psychic influence.

Bracing himself, he pressed the button.

At first, nothing happened. For one second, there was silence. Then two. Jericho began to wonder, to his horror, if this had somehow been yet another of his father's cruel tricks.

Then he felt, as much as heard, a series of low *booms* from somewhere below them, rapidly escalating in both number and volume.

The lights went out, abruptly plunging the room into near-total darkness, and at roughly the same time the floor physically *jumped* upward several inches, and then *fell* several more, knocking Jericho off his -- and Sebastian's -- feet. Even after that, the room continued to shake and pitch violently, and the panicked shouts of both the H.I.V.E. guards and the other Titans were drowned out by a deafening shriek of metal being torn apart, which seemed to reverberate throughout the entire mountain.

After several long seconds of darkness, a series of emergency lights lining the walls along the floor and ceiling flared to life, illuminating the room once again, though much more dimly than before. The ringing in Jericho's ears gradually reduced itself to a distant alarm wailing from somewhere, and shaking his head to clear it, he saw the H.I.V.E. troopers and Cyclones climbing unsteadily back to their feet. He could already smell smoke, and given the fact that the base's main generators were several floors -- which translated into several hundred feet -- below them, the damage inflicted by the charges must have been truly terrible.

He also saw, to his dismay, that the Titans were still imprisoned within those spheres of golden energy, save for Raven, who was still thrashing about in that metal cage.

“Of course...they’re on a separate generator,” Sebastian growled. “That large machine, against the opposite wall? See the wires connecting both the spheres, and the Gem’s collar to it. We are going to have to destroy that, you and I.”

Before Jericho could ask how he was supposed to single-handedly take down the five H.I.V.E. troopers and three Cyclones standing between him and the generator, his host began barking orders.

“You lot!! Go and find out what just happened, *immediately!* I’ll keep watch over the prisoners.”

The troopers hesitated, exchanging uncertain glances amongst themselves.

“*What are you waiting for?!*” Sebastian practically exploded, the sudden ferocity in his voice startling even Jericho. It seemed to spur the guards into action as two of them obediently hustled out of the room, along with two of the three Cyclones.

“...And you?” he demanded of the three who remained, after a moment’s pause. “Why do you yet stand before me?”

“Psimon specifically ordered us not to abandon our post under *any* circumstance,” the nearest trooper answered, “no matter what happened.”

“And what if Brother Blood bade you to go...?” Sebastian growled, his voice taking on an increasingly threatening tone. “With whom does your allegiance lie?”

Jericho’s grip tightened on Sebastian’s spear. He may not have possessed Rose’s powers of foresight, but he did have enough training and personal experience to sense when a fight was coming.

The guards, in turn, gripped their rifles. One of them took a step forward and spoke, but whatever he said was drowned out by what sounded like a thunderclap, *inside* the room.

Wonder Girl had begun pounding on the walls of her enclosure again, and with renewed vigor, each blow sounding more forceful than the one before it. Beside her, Starfire unleashed a focused beam of energy from her eyes which sizzled and sparked and burned white-hot as it warred against the energy surrounding her. And Beast Boy...Jericho couldn’t quite tell exactly what he was trying to transform into, but whatever it was, it was far too big for the confined space he was limited to.

All eyes turned to the prisoners, and to the power generator against the wall, which began to make an alarming grinding noise. Raising their weapons, the H.I.V.E. troopers began shouting various threats at the Titans.

“Here is our chance,” Sebastian hissed in Jericho’s ear. “Quickly, slay them!”

Ignoring his host’s bloodthirsty outburst, the mute Titan quickly reversed his grip on the spear and delivered a carefully aimed blow with the butt end of the weapon to the head of the nearest H.I.V.E. guard, knocking him senseless. His two comrades whirled

around in alarm as the unconscious body sprawled to the ground at their feet, but of greater concern was the Cyclone, which had already marked Jericho as an enemy and was advancing toward him, bring its sonic cannon to bear.

Jericho dodged to the side, buying himself an extra half-second as the Cyclone turned to track him. As it did so, he hefted the spear above his shoulder and threw it javelin-style, hoping that he was aiming for the right place. The weapon pierced the android's head and it staggered briefly, then toppled over backwards and did not move again, indicating that its CPU was indeed located in its cranium.

Before Jericho could even feel relieved at his luck the second guard leapt toward him, aiming to bash his head in with the butt of his rifle. Still slightly off-balance from throwing the spear, the mute Titan's evasive options were limited and he only had time to throw up an arm in a desperate attempt to shield himself. Fortunately, Sebastian's armor absorbed much of the impact, sparing him the broken bones he'd have likely sustained otherwise. Meanwhile, the other remaining guard was backing toward the doorway next to the generator, and appeared to be angling for a clean shot.

"*So don't give him one.*" Jericho smiled inwardly, glad that for once the voice in his head was not Sebastian's but his mother's, remembered from countless self-defense lessons. He heeded her words, quickly launching himself back at the guard who'd attacked him, making sure to keep him between himself and the other trooper as they struggled.

As for his opponent, he attempted to take aim with his own rifle, allowing Jericho the opening he needed to swat the weapon out of his hands. As it clattered to the floor somewhere off to the side, the guard countered with a haymaker, which Jericho easily avoided despite the weight of Sebastian's cumbersome armor. He caught the trooper in a chokehold as he swung past him, and then simply held on until he felt the man go limp.

The Titan then turned to the final remaining guard, still holding on to his comrade as a potential human shield, but stopped short as he saw that the trooper was no longer aiming his weapon at him...he now had it leveled at the other Titans, who were still trapped in their golden prisons.

"Psimon was right!" the guard shouted, seeing his hesitation. "You *are* with them! Surrender, now, or they die."

"The throwing knives at my belt," Sebastian told Jericho calmly. "You can kill him before he finishes them all."

Jericho balked. The thought was repellant to him. It was not what he'd been taught, and perhaps more importantly, it *definitely* was not the Titans' way.

"Don't listen to him," Robin said urgently. For a wild second, Jericho wondered who he was referring to.

The H.I.V.E. trooper took aim. As he did so, a tall, armored figure emerged from the shadows of the doorway behind him, its hands reaching toward his head. A single practiced, efficient twist and the guard's gun fell to the floor, followed by his corpse.

Jericho stood and stared in complete and utter disbelief. Not at what had just been done, but at *who* had done it. He was dimly aware that the other Titans had ceased their attempts to free themselves, evidently just as thunderstruck as he was.

“That’s...that’s impossible,” he heard Robin say.

Their apparent savior stepped over the guard’s body, and fully into the light.

“I don’t expect any of you will be especially happy to see me,” sighed Slade.

* * *

