

“...Are we there yet?”

A collective groan was felt, if not heard, throughout the car.

“It’s been five minutes and seven seconds since the last time you asked me, B,” Cyborg sighed from the driver’s seat. “It’s gettin’ old.”

“Yeah, but—“

“He actually made it past the five minute mark?” Raven mused sarcastically from the front passenger seat. “I might have to take back what I said earlier, about him being completely devoid of self control.”

Beast Boy took a moment to glare at her from behind Cyborg’s seat. As if to demonstrate her indifference, she propped her chin in her palm and leaned against the window, staring out into the night.

“Like I said the last time,” Cyborg reiterated, preemptively interrupting Beast Boy’s repeated question, “We’ll get there *soon*. I’m *not* gonna bother calculating the minutes and the seconds, so **please**, *don’t* ask me again. Or I might change my mind about letting you test the ejector seat, after all.”

“Well, ex-CUSE me!” Beast Boy huffed as he flopped back into his seat, folding his arms and settling into a determined sulk. “*Despite* what you guys may *think*, I’m *not* trying to be *annoying*! I’m just not used to spending so many hours stuck in this *cramped car*, okay?!”

“Please, friends!” The voice of Starfire the Peacemaker drifted forth from behind Raven. “Beast Boy, Cyborg, all of us are feeling the madness of the stirring, and sympathy for the small fish of the pizza topping! But, please, let us not be angry with one another! It will only make an already arduous journey all the more unpleasant.”

Nearly one full minute of grudging silence passed.

“...Sardines,” Robin muttered.

His word was punctuated by the sound of Raven’s left palm colliding with her brow, as she exhaled with a low, exasperated hiss.

“Wasn’t me,” Beast Boy declared to the world.

“‘Sardines’?” Starfire repeated, blissfully unaware of the psychic maelstrom gathering less than three feet in front of her.

Robin pinched the bridge of his nose, pouring all of his concentration into the supreme effort required to remain calm, positioned as he was in the very center of the eye of the figurative storm which had gradually developed *inside* the car during the course of the day. A storm which, from where he was sitting, seemed far more threatening than the atmospheric conditions which presently pelted the vehicle’s exterior with sheets of snow, ice, and sleet.

“The fish that are used for pizza toppings are called *anchovies*, Starfire,” he explained with a tone of exaggerated patience. “The ones that come packed in the little cans are called *sardines*.”

“Oh... so, my comparison was in error, then? Hee!” Starfire’s single, self-conscious giggle sounded somewhat strained. “But it was a ‘truthful mistake’, yes?”

“Remind me again why we decided to *drive* all the way to the heart of the Rocky Mountains, instead of taking the T-Ship?” Raven asked whoever was listening. “Maybe I’m crazy, but it seems like California to Montana would have been a shorter trip by air.”

“Gasoline is cheaper than jet fuel,” Cyborg replied, throwing her a rueful wink. “Even the Titans have to watch our bottom line, sometimes.”

“Dude! Somebody got a stopwatch? Wanna see how fast a snail can climb the window?”

“...How expensive would it be to rebuild the entire car piece by piece, were it to unexpectedly disintegrate on one of these turns, showering debris from here to sea level?” Raven’s annoyance was becoming palpable.

“Don’t even *joke* like that,” Cyborg scowled.

“Who said I was joking? I don’t *do* ‘funny’, remember?”

“No kidding.”

“Knock it off, you two!” Robin cut in. “Remember, we’re here on business! We have a job to do, just like back at home! This *isn’t* a vacation!”

“You don’t say,” Beast Boy, Cyborg and Raven all muttered simultaneously.

“Perhaps another cheerful driving song would alleviate the gloominess and tension of the hour!” Starfire happily proposed. “However, before I begin... I fear I must confess, my confusion still lingers. Please... could someone explain again, exactly *who* is doing the circling of the mountain, and *why* does her impending arrival merit such joyful anticipation and singing?”

“I’m getting out,” Raven announced, reaching for her door handle.

“Rae, we’re on a bridge.”

“I know.”

* * * * *

Masterwork Productions presents...

Snow

A **Teen Titans** story

Written by Corey W. Smith

(Teen Titans and all related characters, with the exception of Snow, are © 2006 DC Comics.)

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

* * * * *

“Hi there,” Robin grinned broadly, carefully ignoring the hostess’s incredulous stare. “We’d like two double rooms, please.”

Clearly, this middle-aged woman was not accustomed to dealing with groups of costumed, teenage superheroes. “Who are you supposed to be?”

“We’re the Teen Titans,” Robin replied pleasantly, remaining unfazed. He smoothly produced a sheet of paper. “Here’s a copy of our reservation.”

“Uh... huh,” the hostess muttered, peering skeptically at the ticket, while continuing to eye the group standing before her desk in much the same way. “Well... this *appears* to all be in order, however... young man, I’m afraid we have a policy against allowing pets in the building.”

“Huh? Oh...” Robin cleared his throat and glared at the green Siberian Husky who had just finished shaking the snow out of his coat a few feet away, just inside the

hotel's front entrance. Beast Boy promptly assumed human form and joined the rest of the group at the desk.

"Eh, sorry, my bad," he grinned sheepishly.

"Sooooo, then..." His polite smile beginning to show some cracks, Robin attempted to regain the woman's attention as she stared unabashedly, eyes wide and mouth hanging open, at the green shapeshifter. "...About our rooms...?"

"Wha... oh... ah... yes, let's see here..." Although obviously dazed, she made an attempt at regaining her composure as she turned back to studying the reservation ticket. "And, the method of payment is..."

"Gotcha covered." Cyborg stepped forward, presenting a plastic card with a magnetic strip along one side, which he'd casually produced from a slot in his chest. "Here you go, Ma'am," he beamed.

Looking vaguely horrified, the hostess hesitantly reached out and took the card from Cyborg's metallic fingers. Slowly, almost mechanically, she ran the card through her station's credit card reader, and then proceeded to jot down some information on a note pad while it cleared.

"...Right, so, Robin..." Raven began, awkwardly attempting to adopt a pleasant tone of voice. "Any chance I could have, y'know... a room to myself?"

Robin shook his head. "Raven, we discussed this. Only two rooms. Sorry."

She heaved a sigh of resignation, and raised her blue hood.

"If you desire time for meditation, Raven, I would gladly join you," Starfire offered, raising that finger she often displayed when speaking.

"No offense, Starfire, but after that many hours in the car, I *really* need some time alone... seriously." Her features now shrouded within the shadows of her cloak, Raven already seemed to be making a deliberate effort to withdraw and distance herself from those around her.

"As you wish," Starfire smiled sympathetically. Although she didn't fully understand all of the reasons behind it, she'd learned to respect her friend's need for privacy.

Presently, the hostess held out a pair of key cards, along with Cyborg's credit card, for Robin. "Here you are, young fellow. Rooms 302 and 303. Down the hallway to your right, take the elevator to three, and you'll find it easily." She attempted a warm smile, but what she ended up with could only be described as a tortured grimace.

"...Enjoy your stay."

* * *

The team spent the next half hour locating their assigned rooms, bringing the car around close to the nearest door, carrying in luggage and unpacking. By the time those tasks were completed, although the hour was growing late, Cyborg was eager to go out in search of food. As the others were all more hungry than tired, Robin didn't bother trying to talk him out of it. Raven simply said she would see them when they came back, before literally disappearing into thin air.

Although he wasn't thrilled with the idea of splitting up the group in an unfamiliar place, Robin knew they were all carrying their communicators, and more than that, he was also well aware that Raven's need for privacy could be an even more daunting

adversary than Cyborg's stomach. So, he decided that was another conflict he'd do better to avoid.

On their way back to the car, Beast Boy couldn't resist scooping up a handful of snow from the ground and pelting Cyborg with it. Needless to say, the battle was quickly joined and an impromptu snowball fight broke out.

Giggling like a child in a candy store, Starfire gathered up a large handful of snow (which her higher-than-human, Tamaranian body temperature quickly converted into slush) and flung it at Robin. He dodged easily, and the four of them spent the next ten or so minutes chasing each other between parked cars, sliding over the icy pavement and lobbing snowballs back and forth...

...As if they were, after all, just four 'normal' teenagers on vacation, taking a road trip through the mountains.

It was nice.

Robin mentally justified it all by telling himself that, after the long drive from home, the team needed to unwind and release the tension that had built up inside the cramped vehicle. And he half-convincing himself that his own gleeful smile and giddy laughter were for the benefit of his friends, and the group's morale.

In truth, there was a part of him that hadn't had this much fun in *years*.

But like all good things, the game eventually came to an end, when a loud gurgling noise reminded them why they'd come back out here in the first place.

Beast Boy rubbed his stomach, looking uncharacteristically embarrassed. "Uh, dudes... it's not that this isn't a blast, but I think my stomach is starting to get pissed at me for not putting anything in it."

"Yeah, might as well quit while I'm ahead," Cyborg grinned, climbing into the driver's seat of the T-Car.

"Hey, no fair! I wasn't keeping *score*--!"

Robin brushed himself off, quickly reassembling his more reserved, dignified, 'leadership' persona. "Coming, Starfire?"

For a moment, she just stood there staring up at the sky, smiling, literally soaking in the snow as it fell. Out of the five of them, she was the only one who hadn't brought any cold-weather clothing since, for her, it wasn't necessary. And so she stood there, smiling, as the falling snowflakes melted on her golden skin, until finally, shaking out of her blissful reverie, she nodded at Robin and turned to join her human friends.

"I *like* The Snow!" she declared as she climbed into the front seat, that same, silly grin still plastered all over her face. "Why do we not have more of it, where we live? I wish it would come down from the sky, just like this, across the Tower, and the water, and the city..." She hugged herself, sighing in contentment.

"Sorry, Star, no can do," Cyborg chuckled as they pulled out of the parking lot. "It's too close to the equator; too warm down at the Tower. But up here, in the mountains, where it's closer to space, they get a lot of it."

She sighed again, more wistfully this time, before changing topics. "But, this Snow, even though it is soft and fluffy and cold and delightful, it is not the same as the Snow we have come here to find, is it?"

Now it was Robin's turn to chuckle indulgently. "No, Starfire, not the same. The Snow we're looking for is a person. And, judging by the information we gathered back at home, a very dangerous criminal."

Beast Boy snickered. “You mean, the info you *scared* out of his flunkies, at that factory! Heh, maybe we should start calling you...” His voice trailed off. Even with the mask he wore hiding his eyes, he could *feel* the way Robin was looking at him. “...Uh, never mind.”

For a moment, an uncomfortable silence fell over the car. When Robin finally spoke, any trace of the snowball fight’s easy laughter had completely vanished from his voice.

“The children they kidnapped are still missing. And the chemicals and machines they stole could be used to make some *very, nasty, things.*” Frowning darkly, he spoke as much to himself as he did to the others. “If there’s *anything* I can do to stop that, *whatever* it takes... I’ll do it. And I won’t apologize for it.”

And as quickly as that, the kids who had played in the snow had now returned to the world of adults.

Starfire sighed a third time, as if in recognition of the unavoidable. As they continued to drive in silence, she rolled down her window and stretched out a hand, watching the falling snowflakes as they melted in her palm.

“How can such a cruel person share the same name as something so wondrous...?” she mused aloud.

* * *

Upon returning to the hotel, Beast Boy immediately flopped onto the bed furthest from the door, where he spent a brief moment stretching as a cat before returning to human form with a deep, contented sigh.

“Ahhhh... y’know... my *brain* is telling me it really wasn’t, but right now, my *stomach* thinks that was the best salad I’ve had in months.”

“I hear that,” Cyborg agreed as he carefully shut the door. “I’m sure I’ve had better Buffalo wings, too, but man, that really hit the spot.”

“Well, you know what they say about hunger being the best spice...” Robin observed, unpacking some night clothes on the other bed, across from Beast Boy. “Anyway, let’s get some sleep. I want to get an early start tomorrow, and it’s late enough already.”

Beast Boy, meanwhile, remained sprawled atop the other bed, where he’d begun lazily fishing around for the TV remote. “Hey, Cy, what’re you gonna do about recharging...?” he asked their chrome-plated compatriot.

“Heh, you’re gonna love this, BB,” Cyborg grinned, rummaging briefly through a suitcase before dramatically producing a length of extension cord with a large, heavy, rectangular box attached to one end. “Check it out... I rigged myself up an A/C adapter!” He began searching for a wall outlet.

Beast Boy emitted a noise that was half amusement, half disbelief. “What, you’re just gonna plug yourself into the wall? Hey...” His eyes narrowed in suspicion as he peered at the cord. “How come that looks exactly like the power cable for the 360?”

“Um, prob’ly ‘cause it is,” Cyborg mumbled, his back to them.

“Cyborg, are you sure that’s safe?” Robin paused in the process of turning down his bed, watching the big man with an air of uncertainty.

“Course I am,” came the answer, with confidence, as he finally located a free outlet next to the corner table. “I tested it at home, before we left... now let’s see here...” Having plugged the ‘box’ end into a jack in his side, he grunted something semi-audible (which, to Beast Boy’s keen ears, sounded suspiciously like “*Moment o’ truth, yo*”) before plugging the other end into the wall.

The lights in the room flickered briefly, and then Cyborg’s visible optic circuits began to emit a soft glow.

“*Boo-yah! Wha’d I say, wha’d I say!!*” He pumped his arms triumphantly at each of his teammates in turn, both of whom looked visibly relieved. “Well then, g’night, all.” He lowered himself to sit in the nearest chair—

--Which immediately shattered under his weight, with a singular, ear-splitting
CRACK!

Robin, having opened his mouth too late to warn him, winced.

Beast Boy erupted into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

“Oops,” Cyborg frowned, looking sheepish. “Guess I’ll sit on the floor.”

* * *

Next door, Starfire had returned to the designated *Girls’ Room*, and was delighted to discover that she wasn’t alone.

The lights were on, although they were turned down low. The TV was off. And Raven was levitating in a meditative trance on the far side of the room, facing the window, her back to the door. She hovered, cross-legged, about three feet off the floor, her hood down, with the length of her cloak not quite touching the carpet. Snowflakes drifted silently past the window in front of her.

“Raven! You have returned!” Starfire began to gush without thinking. “I have a glorious announcement to make! I have discovered – the...”

Her voice trailed off as she remembered herself. Which happened just as she noticed a cluster of ominous black clouds begin to gather over Raven’s now-twitching head.

“...Please forgive me, I am most apologetic for having interrupted your meditation.” Starfire folded her hands guiltily, fairly oozing remorse.

Raven sighed, and the lights in the room seemed to brighten slightly as she slowly descended toward the floor. “...It’s all right, Starfire. It’s not like I wasn’t expecting it.” Her feet reached the ground, and she turned to regard her extraterrestrial companion. “So, what’s the big news?”

Starfire’s expression of delight returned as quickly as it had departed. “Ah! I have discovered the joy of... *The Snow!*” She beamed ecstatically at Raven, as if expecting some sort of reciprocal response.

Raven stared back at her, her expression neutral, for a long moment. Finally, she heaved another heavy sigh of resignation, and placed a hand on her hip. “We’re... we’re talking about the fluffy white stuff, and not the guy we’ve come here to track down, aren’t we.” It wasn’t really a question.

Starfire was now bouncing up and down, if only slightly, unable to contain her enthusiasm. “Oh, yes!! It is a joyous and wonderful thing! I had seen it before, of course, but I had not realized it could be used to create such diverse varieties of... *fun!* We

engaged in a battle of the snowballs, and the sliding on ice, and Beast Boy said he will show me how to craft the Angel of Snow, and the Man of Snow, before we depart for home!” She stopped for a breath, still grinning broadly. “The Snow is a glorious phenomenon, one which we do not experience on Tamaran. Surely you agree, Raven?” And she looked at her expectantly, still smiling, looking much like a child who’d just asked her parent for confirmation that Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy really do exist.

Through a tremendous feat of mental and emotional discipline, Raven managed *not* to be angry at her friend for interrupting her meditation with such a triviality.

“Um... to be honest, Starfire, I’ve never really thought about it like that.”

Starfire was unperturbed. “Do you get The Snow in Azarath?”

Raven turned back to the window, in silence. She placed a hand against the glass, taking a moment to feel the cold seep into her skin before finally answering.

“...No. No, they don’t.”

Starfire gasped. “You mean, you have never experienced the fighting of snowballs, or the construction of the snow fortress, or the chocolate of hotness???” She sounded genuinely appalled. “Unacceptable! We must remedy this!”

“Not... really my thing,” Raven stated awkwardly, trying not to hurt Star’s feelings. “It’s just that snow is awfully... well, cold, and... wet, and... I... just don’t really like it.” She caught sight of her friend’s crushed expression in the window’s reflection, and hastily added more. “—Uh, but, I, um, do like to, ah... watch it, I guess. As it falls. Yeah. It’s... relaxing, and helps me meditate.”

She mentally breathed a sigh of relief as the alien girl’s dejection was replaced with curiosity, and she joined her at the window.

“I see... you are right, Raven.” Starfire’s smile returned, but this time it was more serene than giddy. “It is beautiful.”

“When you think about it...” Raven continued, her hand still against the window, “...Snowflakes are like lives.”

“Lives? I do not understand.”

“Well, no two are alike. They’re formed in the upper atmosphere, millions or billions at a time, by forces beyond themselves, and then released to drift slowly to the ground. They are blown here and there by the wind, but always drawn inexorably downward by the pull of gravity... to their inevitable end. On the ground, or on a roof, or a car, or someone’s head... the only way they can survive on the ground is in great numbers, and even then, they only last until the weather changes.”

“I see...” Starfire breathed softly. “It is beautiful, but also sad.”

For an instant, Raven was afraid she’d inadvertently destroyed her friend’s new interest. Her smile, however, had not faded.

“It reminds me of an epic Tamaranian poem, which my *k’norfka* taught to me when I was young. I believe you would enjoy it, Raven.”

She cleared her throat and opened her mouth, apparently intending to recite said poem, but ended up yawning instead.

“Eh... hee hee, I had forgotten the lateness of the hour,” Starfire rubbed the back of her head, looking slightly embarrassed. “Perhaps I will recite the poem at another time?”

Raven smiled in return, despite herself. “That would be fine, Starfire. Let’s get some sleep.”

* * *

The following morning, the sun shone brightly through the room's single window as the Titans prepared to embark upon their mission. Cyborg was running through a diagnostic check of his systems to make sure everything was charged up and in proper working order, and Robin was going over maps and directions when Beast Boy returned to the room, bearing breakfast... of a sort.

"You've gotta be kiddin' me." Cyborg's expression of eager anticipation quickly turned to one of distaste, once he'd gotten a closer look at the proffered plate of baked goods. "When'd they make these, last week?"

"Dude, that's seriously all there was." Beast Boy, for his part, didn't look much happier about it. "Stale bran muffins, old toast, and cold cereal. The muffins seemed like the best bet."

"There were bagels earlier, but they were nothing special, either," Raven commented from the doorway. "So... are we ready to go?"

"Almost," Robin replied, gathering his things. "Just have to—"

"**DUDE!!**" Beast Boy hollered, turning on the TV to discover a beloved movie already in progress. "Check it out!!"

The other three, having whirled around in anticipation of some dire threat or impending crisis, were less than amused to see the source of his exclamation.

Robin scowled in annoyance. "Come on, turn it off and let's get going."

"Aw, *man!*" Beast Boy pouted. "I haven't seen this movie in, in, in... *weeks!*"

Robin's expression didn't change.

"Oh, all right," Beast Boy muttered, preparing to cram a muffin into his mouth. "Just – right after this scene, okay, this is just so cool." And he turned up the volume.

"—*Your sad devotion to that ancient religion has not helped you conjure up the stolen data tapes, or given you clairvoyance enough to find the rebels' hidden forte—*"

"... .."

"...***I find your lack of faith disturbing.***"

Beast Boy cackled gleefully, nearly choking on his muffin in the process.

"**YESSS!** That is so, sooooo *classic!*" He grinned at his teammates, ignoring their lack of enthusiasm. "Hey, Raven, y'think *you* could pull that off?!"

"Hmm, I dunno, let's find out."

"**Gahh-chh-kkkkkkk--*...*"

"Enough of this!" Robin snapped, his patience at an end. "Raven, release him!"

"As you wish..." she sighed, withdrawing her telekinetic grip on Beast Boy's throat.

* * *

As the four Titans emerged from the hotel into the dazzling light of day, Starfire *twirled* to greet them.

"Friends! What a gorgeous, glorious day it is!" She was practically beside herself with delight, spreading her arms to encompass the gleaming field of white blanketing all they could see. "Look, see how everything *sparkles!*"

“Yeah, blindingly so, even,” Raven muttered, raising her hood and attempting to shield her eyes from the glare.

Without further delay, they piled into the T-Car and set out for their destination. This time Starfire rode up front (affording her a better view of the snow-covered landscape), while Beast Boy, Robin and Raven occupied the rear seats.

“Okay...” Beast Boy croaked, still massaging his windpipe. “Even though you would’ve *totally* gotten Dark Side points for that, if this was *KotOR*... I think it’s helped me to finally figure you out, Raven.”

“Whatever.” With her elbow propped against her door, she rested her chin in her palm and stared out the window.

Beast Boy was unfazed. “No, seriously. Your powers, your meditation... it all makes sense to me, now. I *understand* it. It’s like... it’s like... like *The Force*.”

“Oh, please.” Raven rolled her eyes while Robin and Cyborg tried, rather unsuccessfully, to keep from snickering.

“Hold on! Hold on!” Beast Boy waved a quieting hand at them, his expression serious. “Here. Check it out. It’s like this.” He began drawing invisible diagrams in the air, intent on proving his point. “In *Episode I*, Qui-Gon explains how it really works, that there are these tiny little creatures called... um, Midi-Chlorines, I think, living inside everyone’s cells. *They’re* the ones that have the real power, *they’re* what makes The Force work. And the way the Jedi do their stuff, is by training themselves, *meditating*, to learn to mentally communicate with the little guys. That’s what makes it all possible. That’s what Obi-Wan means when he tells Luke that a Jedi can feel The Force ‘flowing through him’, because the power comes from the Midi-whatevers, and the Jedi are, like, *channeling* it through their body. And that’s also why Yoda says you have to stay calm, and keep your mind at peace. ‘Cause if you get angry or scared when you’re using The Force, those *bad* emotions will, like, *feed back* into the Midi guys, and they’ll, like, start to echo it to each other, and soon it’ll be spreading through your body, and eventually you start to lose control of your emotions, and your mind, and that’s what the Dark Side really is.”

Having finished his speech, Beast Boy was quite surprised to find all four of the other Titans now staring at him with varying degrees of amazement.

“Wow, Beast Boy,” Robin began, his eyes obviously wide even behind his mask. “That... almost makes sense.”

“In an alarmingly obsessive and fanboyish way, of course,” Raven added, then squinted at the green changeling, her manner suddenly one of suspicion. “Except... are you trying to compare me to a little green puppet?”

“No! Well – not *directly*, anyway,” he hedged. “I’m saying – it’s the same thing with your powers, isn’t it? Star, help me out, here. Didn’t you say it was like there’s this energy that sorta *flows* through your body, and emotion releases it, so you have to concentrate and focus your thoughts to control it?”

“Hmmm... I suppose it *was* much as you’ve described, yes,” she acknowledged, smiling apologetically as Raven glared at her.

“See! SEE!” Beast Boy pointed triumphantly at his shrouded teammate, nearly jabbing his finger into Robin’s nose in the process. “I *told* you I have a brain!!”

“Let’s not jump to any conclusions,” she retorted, turning her attention back to the window as the car slowed to a stop.

“Well, I hate to interrupt your moment o’ revelation, B,” Cyborg tossed over his shoulder, “But we’re here.”

* * *

The five teens now found themselves standing before the entrance to a sprawling and very busy lumber yard. There were at least a dozen trailers lined up to their left, a flat, snow-covered field to their right, and a series of tall, wide workshops and storage buildings stretched out for some distance straight in front of them – all of it framed on all sides by the densely wooded mountains, of course. The open yard bustled with activity, and the air was filled with the sound of industrial saws and other heavy machinery.

“Wow,” Cyborg muttered, rubbing the side of his head that wasn’t metal. “You sure this is the right place, Robin?”

“Yeah...” He, too, was somewhat taken aback. “This is the right address and location, and Snow’s hired goons said they always met him at a lumber yard. Still, I wasn’t expecting it to be this... big.”

“I dunno, this just doesn’t feel right. I mean, ain’t it kinda... *crowded*, for the supposed hideout of a terrorist or a wannabe criminal mastermind?”

“And besides,” Beast Boy added, jumping on Cyborg’s wagon, “This dude’s a thief and a kidnapper who stockpiles *chemical weapons*, right? This doesn’t really seem like a good hiding place for hostages *or* weapons.”

Robin frowned. “Well, maybe he just uses this as a meeting site. Or, maybe there’s more to this place than meets the eye. In any event, it’s the only thing we have to go on right now, so let’s spread out and start looking a... Raven, are you feeling all right?”

She had a hand pressed to her temple, and her brow was creased by either concentration or pain. “It’s... I... sense something. Over that way... something...”

She began walking across the yard toward the empty snow field. The others, after exchanging a short flurry of quizzical glances and shrugs, fell in behind her.

As they passed the nearest workshop, Beast Boy suddenly stopped.

“Hold on,” he called to his teammates, who paused to wait for him. He stood still, staring intently at the side of the building.

“What is it, Beast Boy?” Starfire asked, floating back toward his position.

He continued to stare at the building. “There’s... something there,” he muttered in a low voice.

“...I see only the building of lumbering,” she admitted, trying to follow his line of sight.

Ignoring her, Beast Boy shifted into wolf form and sniffed the air for a moment. Then, he began stalking slowly toward the building.

“Better not turn out to be a mouse,” Cyborg joked. Robin, meanwhile, was watching Beast Boy’s movements closely.

The green wolf closed to within about eight feet of the building and stopped, first sniffing the ground, then the air.

Then, with a startled yelp, he was suddenly knocked to the side, as if he’d been kicked.

And a visible distortion in the air before him revealed the shape of the person who'd done it. A figure which, until it had moved, had been totally invisible to the eye.

"Titans!" Robin shouted, not wasting another second. "*GO!!!*"

As he, Cyborg and Raven surged forward, the invisible figure disengaged his optical camouflage, revealing himself to be a tall, wiry man dressed in gray fatigues. His silver hair, pulled back into a tight ponytail, his severe, hawkish features and the set of reflective-lens goggles which concealed his eyes, all matched the physical descriptions the Titans had managed to gather of the man called Snow. Those features twisted into a snarl as he drew forth a small, compact submachine gun and sprayed a volley of bullets toward the two nearest targets.

Starfire darted in front of Beast Boy, already charging a star bolt as she did so; the extreme heat generated by her cosmic energy melted the projectiles in mid-air and rendered them harmless. She then returned fire, forcing Snow to dive for cover, losing his gun in the process. Quickly changing tactics, he ducked inside the busy workshop before the other Titans could reach him. Robin was right behind him, his adrenaline surging.

"I'm switching to EMF vision in case he pulls that 'invisible man' trick again," Cyborg barked, he and Raven following on Robin's heels as they plunged into the building.

They nearly lost him right off, between their eyes having to adjust to the much darker lighting inside, and all of the noise and activity from the dozens of workers going about their jobs. But Robin, thanks in large part to his many years of pursuit training on the streets of Gotham, quickly spotted him as he ducked between two large piles of stacked lumber a short distance away.

"This way!" he shouted to his teammates, nimbly dodging around a moving forklift as he gave chase. Reaching the lumber stacks, he caught a glimpse of a silver ponytail disappearing between two adjacent rows. His mind and body acting in concert as a well-oiled machine, Robin quickly fired his grappling line into the rafters and swung himself up and over the woodpiles, aiming to cut off his quarry's escape route and drop himself right on top of him.

To Robin's surprise, however, Snow was ready for this move and spun out of the way, avoiding the Boy Wonder's diving kick, and catching him in the side – square in the kidney, actually – with a lunging elbow on his way past.

Wincing from the unexpected blow, Robin mentally berated himself for the oversight and forced himself to recover quickly. As his quarry continued to rush toward the open air beyond the building's walls, he retracted his grappling line and immediately fired it again, catching the fleeing suspect by the arm.

But this too proved to be only a momentary delay, as with one smooth movement, Snow flicked out a knife and sliced through the line, freeing himself. However, the extra second lost had allowed Cyborg to catch up with him, and the cybernetically-enhanced Titan dove at him with a football tackle.

For a split second, Robin was sure Cyborg was going to end up inadvertently breaking every bone in this guy's body. But at the last instant, Snow again managed to narrowly dodge his intended interceptor. Cyborg lost a bit of his momentum trying to change directions after his missed tackle, and their quarry took full advantage as he bolted out into the open air and kept running – straight out across the open snow field Raven had originally begun leading them toward.

As Cyborg charged out after him, joined outside by Starfire and Beast Boy, Raven dropped down next to Robin's position, where he'd paused to catch his breath and prepare himself to rejoin the chase.

"You okay?" she asked him, her violet eyes glittering dispassionately within the depths of her hood.

He nodded wordlessly, giving his side a final pat before pushing himself back into a forward jog.

Raven levitated herself alongside, matching his pace, still watching him with that inscrutable, analytical expression. "I should probably mention that I'm sensing some really strange things from that guy."

"Is it something I need to know before we catch him?" Robin quickened his pace, eager to catch up with his teammates, not to mention Snow himself, who was now halfway across the snow field and heading for the trees beyond.

"Well, he's an empath."

He spared her a sideways glance. "An *empath*?"

"Yeah. When he hit you, *he* felt *your* pain."

"How do *you* know?"

"Uh, because, *I'm* an empath, too?" She frowned at the wide-eyed stare this provoked. "What? How did you *think* I was able to sense people?"

"Uh, okay, good to know," Robin muttered, channeling his emotional response to her revelation into a full-blown sprint.

About twenty feet ahead of them, the other three Titans were closing on Snow. Then, abruptly and with a loud ***CRUNCH!***, Cyborg *fell through the ground* and disappeared from view.

"Wha--?!" Robin gasped, momentarily stopping short to assess the situation. Starfire and Beast Boy had also stopped, and were staring at the hole Cyborg had fallen into.

A strangely *dark* hole, Robin could see as he drew nearer.

Dark, and... moving.

"Oh, no..." he breathed as the realization hit him. "We're standing on a *frozen river!!* Beast Boy--!!!"

"Got it!" the green changeling yelled, already diving for the hole, shifting into a sea lion in mid-air as he plunged into the rushing waters.

"Starfire! Help them!"

"Understood!" she called as she hovered anxiously over the ice, her eyes and hands glowing brightly.

"Raven!" Robin pointed at Snow's retreating back, as he disappeared into the trees on what was now obviously the river's opposite bank. "Give me a boost!"

She said nothing, but gathered him up in her glowing, neon black telekinesis aura and swooped after their target.

Robin hit the ground running, determined not to let his concern for his friends divert his attention from the pursuit. Although Snow was no longer directly in his line of vision, the trail he'd left in his wake wasn't difficult to follow. After a hectic dash through the trees, the trail led him to a small clearing, and a low, concrete platform with a covered manhole in the center. Snapping out his retractable bo staff, Robin attempted to pry it open, but it was too heavy.

He turned toward Raven, who'd just entered the clearing behind him, and indicated the manhole cover. "Could you..."

With a silent nod she complied, stretching out a hand from where she stood. Her eyes flashed gray and an arc of black current traveled between her and the metal lid, flipping it open with little apparent effort.

"Right, let's go," Robin said as he prepared to descend the maintenance ladder leading down from the hole's entrance.

"Uh, Robin? Wait a second." Surprised, he looked up at her. Her face was still shrouded by her hood, but something in her voice had sounded... odd, uncharacteristically... concerned? Almost... *fearful*? No, that couldn't be it. This was *Raven*, after all...

"Something... something isn't right, here," she was telling him. "There's a lot of... there's an awful lot of *pain*, down there. Something's wrong."

Robin steeled himself. "All the more reason to stop Snow," he told her gravely. "*He's* down there, too, and whatever's going on, here, I'm sure he's the cause of it. Are you with me?"

She blinked at that, and seemed to snap back to herself after that lapse of... whatever it had been. "Of – of course. Let's go." And she followed him down the ladder.

After descending about fifteen feet, they found themselves in a narrow, twisting hallway. Concrete, wood and plaster, lit by an intermittent series of light bulbs strung along the ceiling... whatever this was, it certainly wasn't a drainage tunnel. It had obviously been built for some other purpose, and camouflaged by the manhole entrance above to make it look like something related to the local water systems.

The two Titans made their way cautiously through the winding passage, watching and listening intently for any sign of their target. But the halls were strangely, oppressively silent. Even their own footsteps seemed oddly muffled.

Robin glanced back at his blue-clad teammate as they proceeded. "Can you get a fix on him?" he asked her, keeping his voice low.

Her eyes narrowed in concentration, but she shook her head. "No... I just keep picking up whatever *he's* sensing, which is... *us*. It's like trying to follow an echo in a crowded room."

They reached a fork in the passage, where the hallway branched off in different directions. Raven opened her mouth to say something just as a small metal object came bouncing out of the passage on their right, and the hallway was almost instantly engulfed in thick, white smoke.

Having been gassed before, Robin instinctively held his breath. Raven, however, wasn't as fortunate, and immediately began to choke and cough uncontrollably. Grabbing her by the arm, he quickly hoisted her over his shoulder and lunged down the hallway toward the direction the attack had come from. Once they were clear of the smoke, he gently lowered her to the floor. Hearing scrambling footsteps just ahead of their location, he paused only a few seconds to make sure his teammate would be all right, before he threw himself back into the chase.

Leaving Raven where she was (*there was no other choice*, he told himself coldly), Robin raced through the maze of corridors, convinced Snow had to be just around the next turn. Rounding a corner, he glimpsed a door swinging shut a few steps down the hall ahead of him.

Mentally preparing himself for combat, Robin burst through the door. And stopped dead in his tracks, his mind scarcely able to process the sight which now greeted him.

For the deepest, darkest, filthiest pits of Gotham's underworld paled in comparison to the room he'd just entered.

It was, literally, a torture chamber. Lit by a single light bulb in the center of the ceiling. Chains and hooks also hung from the ceiling, and the walls, as did... other things. There were a few chairs, tables, cots... mattresses... all of them horribly, horrifically stained, as was the floor.

And, stacked in rows along the wall across from where he stood...

Children.

In cages.

More than a dozen, a few dead, but most of them alive.

Bound.

Chained.

Abused.

Tortured.

Molested.

Mutilated.

*And not one of them was even **half** Robin's own age.*

Despite all the things he'd seen and experienced, the sheer *horror* of this threatened to overwhelm him, and he had to look away. He clenched his eyes shut, fighting to regain control of his emotions.

He could remember a small handful of times they'd come across things like this – well, *not like this* – things involving crimes against children, in Gotham. Those times, Bruce would never let him look in the rooms. He always made him stay outside, he always went in alone.

Now, Robin understood why.

As the room came back into focus, he realized he was standing next to a camera tripod. And there was an impressive collection of audiovisual recording equipment arrayed against the opposite wall, behind him.

His stomach twisted in a mixture of revulsion and fury.

And then the light bulb exploded, showering him with sparks and shards of glass as the room was plunged into merciful darkness.

Raven stood in the doorway, framed by the light from the hallway behind her, her expression and features hidden within the darkness of her cloak.

Robin ran a hand through his hair and drew a shaky breath, determined to at least restore his own outward composure, for the sake of his team. He deliberately focused his thoughts toward his friends, and away from the horror of the room. This wasn't the sort of thing they were used to dealing with, to put it very mildly. They were going to have to call in some outside help. Assuming, of course, Beast Boy and Starfire were able to rescue Cyborg from drowning...

Once he felt confident that he'd gotten himself sufficiently under control, he stepped back out into the hallway.

“...Come on,” he said in a low voice as he passed Raven. “This place is like a maze. We’re not going to be able to find Snow without Beast Boy and Cyborg. And, we have to call the police, to help these... kids...”

He took a few steps down the hall, stopped, and turned back.

Raven was still standing in the doorway. Motionless.

“Raven...?” He approached her, reaching out to gently touch her shoulder. “Are you—“

At the slightest hint of his touch, she spun away with a strangled shriek and telekinetically slammed him against the wall. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and he slumped to the floor, dazed.

It took several seconds for his vision to clear. When it finally did, he saw her with her back pressed against the doorframe, staring at him, her eyes wide. And there was a look in them that he’d never seen before, and would never forget having seen now, no matter how much he might want to.

Her eyes were devoid of recognition, of reason, of control. And the raw, primal horror he saw in them was a hundred – no, a *thousand* times worse than what he’d felt himself, a minute earlier.

“*Ra... Raven...*” he managed to whisper, holding out an empty hand, trying to bring her back from wherever she was. “*It’s... me... it’s Robin...*”

Gradually, a sense of recognition began to return to her wild, staring eyes. But as it did, she began to shake uncontrollably. “...*Ro...*” she croaked, swallowed, and pressed a violently trembling hand against the wall, attempting to steady herself, with very little success.

“...*Robin...*” she breathed, then choked. Doubling over, she collapsed against the wall and retched painfully, then fell to her knees, coughing, still shaking, her frail frame shrouded within the depths of her cloak. Finally, she sank completely into the shadows and vanished, having teleported herself away, leaving Robin there alone.

* * *

There were still some traces of smoke hanging in the air as Robin made his way back toward the entrance. Nearing the surface, he spotted Beast Boy descending the ladder up ahead.

“Robin!” the green changeling called out, waving as he reached the floor.

“Is everyone okay?” Robin immediately asked, once they were close enough for normal conversation. His own voice sounded strangely hoarse to him.

Beast Boy, for his part, was slightly out of breath, but nodded reassuringly.

“Yeah, lucky thing Cyborg’s so heavy, otherwise he mighta been swept downstream and it woulda taken me longer to find him. He’s drying out up top, Star’s using her powers to help warm him up. So, wha’d we miss? Didjou guys catch Snow? Hey, where’s—“

At the mention of Snow’s name, Robin’s expression darkened, and he brushed past Beast Boy without a word.

“Come on,” he threw over his shoulder as he headed toward the ladder.

“Hey, wait a second!” Beast Boy protested, following a few steps behind him.

“Where’s Snow?? Where’s *Raven*???”

“Snow got away, *for now*. It’s possible that he’s still down here, somewhere, but I think he probably had another escape route. At any rate, we’ll need you and Cyborg to comb through this place and see if you can track him. But first... we need to call the police. Probably fire and rescue, too.”

“Wha – Robin, *hold it!* What are you *talking* about?! Police? Fire?? Rescue???
Where the heck is Raven??? Is she *okay??!*”

Robin stopped just short of the ladder, grasping it with one hand, almost as if to support himself. “I... I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “I don’t *think* she was hurt... but she teleported away. I don’t know where she went... or if she’ll come back.”

Beast Boy stared at him in disbelief. “What... *What happened???*”

Robin sighed. “...I was wrong.”

“Wrong? About *what--?*!”

“About Snow.” Robin turned to regard his green teammate grimly. “About his plan. He didn’t kidnap those children to hold them for ransom. It was for... something else. Something... something so much worse.”

* * *

After calling in the local authorities, the four remaining Titans spent the rest of the day helping them comb through Snow’s underground lair, and rescue the children who were left there. The place stretched out for nearly a square mile in several directions, and included a number of other hidden entrances and exits. Snow, himself, was nowhere to be found. But there were also several other ‘torture chambers’ much like the one Robin and Raven had discovered, and over three dozen children – all of them with varying types and degrees of injuries, the worst of which were undoubtedly psychological – imprisoned there. Less than half of them had been kidnapped from the Titans’ home turf of Jump City; the rest had been reported missing from a number of other cities, all across the country. It seemed that the range and scope of Snow’s crimes had also been far beyond what Robin had originally suspected. Worse yet was the fact that the stolen chemicals he’d reportedly been collecting were not present at this site, and still unaccounted for.

Raven had not returned, either. Robin had tried to contact her repeatedly via communicator, but there was no response.

It was evening by the time the team’s work was finished. The sun had dipped behind the mountains, leaving the riverbanks illuminated only by the flashing lights of the last departing ambulances as the four teen heroes gathered at the frozen river’s edge.

For Robin’s part, he hadn’t seen his friends’ mood this low since Terra’s betrayal. Not that he could blame them, after the things they’d all seen that day. Even Beast Boy was quiet and subdued.

Cyborg was the first to break the silence. “Well... now what? Should we go look for Raven?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” Robin admitted. “Unless you’re picking up her communicator’s locator signal...?”

Cyborg checked a display panel on his forearm, frowned, and shook his head. “Nope. Too much interference. Signal’s bouncing off the mountains, giving me ‘phantom’ reads all over the place. It’s like trying to find a needle in a haystack.”

Frowning heavily, Robin paced for a moment before finally reaching a difficult decision. "...We'll have to go back to the hotel, for now. We're too tired to go searching through the mountains after spending the day down in Snow's 'Shop of Horrors', and the temperature's dropping. Besides... maybe she's already there, waiting for us."

He didn't seriously believe that one, either, but it was the most optimistic thing he could think of to say at the moment.

Beast Boy and Starfire seemed too despondent to argue. Cyborg, noticing this, took it upon himself to answer for them. "Well, you're the boss. Hey, Star, would y'mind givin' me a lift back to the T-Car? I'm prob'ly gonna catch pneumonia as it is, and I'd rather not risk another *swim* on the way back."

Starfire just stared gloomily at the ground. "I am sorry, Cyborg, but I do not think I will be able to summon the Joy of Flight right now. I apologize..."

An awkward silence descended over the group, until Beast Boy stepped up to the plate. "Don't worry, Cyborg, I'll give you a lift." And he shifted into a pteranodon.

As the two of them took flight over the river, Robin turned back to his extraterrestrial friend. "Starfire... are you okay?"

She shook her head, continuing to gaze mournfully at her feet. "Robin... you are my good friend, and together, we have fought and defeated many villains. And even though their methods were often cruel, mean and very deserving of defeat... to some degree, even if it was only in a small way, I have always been able to understand their reasons."

She shifted her weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other, refusing to meet his eye as he stepped closer. "...For example, my sister, Blackfire, felt constricted by our relatively sheltered upbringing, and so she decided to expand her realm of experience by doing things which were forbidden. Terra turned against us because she believed we had betrayed her trust, even though we had not. The Johnny Rancid is angry because people say he is 'A *Liar*', and the Mad Mod is blinded by his love for the Britannia, and wishes for others to share his feelings. The H.I.V.E. students steal things and hurt people because they seek the approval of the Brother Blood and their other teachers, who, in turn, desire wealth and power. And that was even true, to some extent, of Slade."

Despite her obvious misery, and his own sorrow, Robin smiled. "Y'know, Star... you have a lot more insight than people give you credit for."

But she continued to shake her head, and bit her lip as tears began to slide down her golden cheeks. "But... but, *this*... I... I do not understand why *anyone* would do something as *cruel* as this, to innocent *children*, for no reason at all." She choked back a sob, trying to maintain her composure, but steadily failing.

Robin instinctively reached out to her, then hesitated, torn between wanting to comfort her and maintaining his image as the 'untouchable team leader'. Finally, he decided that her feelings were more important than his vanity, and *willed himself to just give in and hug her*.

She gratefully returned his embrace, but was careful not to hold him *too* tightly as he patted her back consolingly.

"I... it... it is... *X'hal*, it is just too terrible," she sobbed, burying her face in his cape. "I do not understand... there is no word in my language for this. I cannot understand it..."

He was silent for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was very quiet, but he had never sounded more serious.

“...It’s *evil*, Star. There *is* no other word for it. It’s just evil.”

* * *

“*Azarath... Metrion... Zinthos...*”

Raven repeated her meditative mantra for the forty-seventh time, trying to bring her breathing and heart rate under control.

She was seated in a cross-legged Lotus posture at the end of a diving board overlooking an indoor swimming pool, at a local gymnasium. The place was closed for the day and completely deserted, which was why she’d chosen it. But the silence, the emptiness of the room and the presence of the water, all of which she would normally have found soothing, were not helping her.

She had been sitting there, alone, *trying* to meditate, for hours. And it wasn’t working. She knew that Robin had been trying to contact her, but she couldn’t answer him. Not like this. Her mind was filled with a whirling cascade of panicked thoughts and disjointed imagery she could barely sort out, and her emotional state... was much, much worse. Horror, dread, revulsion, more horror, nausea, wild panic and, above it all, a raw, searing *pain* that went far past what she’d previously understood as agony. And perhaps worst of all, *her body would not stop shaking*.

She wondered if this was how it felt to go mad. Her mind, her reason, and her will... always her most reliable tools, her lifeline, her saving grace hundreds of times over, now all but useless to her in the face of *this*, whatever *this* was. And without that, her emotions... they were totally out of control.

And for Raven, this was a profoundly dangerous situation. Not only for herself, but for everyone and everything around her. Strangely, however, her powers were not running as wild as everything she knew about herself told her they *should* be... she supposed she should be thankful for that, as it was surely the only reason the building had not been torn to the ground around her by now. Yet, she could find little comfort in it.

All she knew was that *she needed to regain control*. But her normal meditation techniques were not working. Without them, she could not calm her mind or master her emotions. And her growing desperation only made it more difficult, and made the meditative trance she was so fervently seeking all the more elusive.

She drew a shaky breath, and tried again. “*Azarath... M-Metrion... Zin... thos...*”

Without warning, she lapsed into a coughing fit. And each cough seemed to incite her airway to spasm even more violently than it had the time before, so that by the time it finally subsided she was left gasping for air and clutching her stomach, feeling as though she’d been repeatedly kicked in the diaphragm.

When her vision cleared, she was quite startled to find a familiar figure regarding her from the water, a few feet away.

“Aqualad...?!” she gasped, and wheezed. “Whuh... What are *you* doing here...?”

“Oh, I’m not,” he replied, his expression blank, his voice devoid of warmth or humor. “You’re hallucinating.”

“I’m...” she trailed off as she stared at him, bringing a trembling hand to her temple.

“Hallucinating,” he repeated, looking uninterested. “The real question, of course, is *why?*”

“Why...?” Truthfully, she hadn’t given it much thought, having been too focused on trying to manage the symptoms to worry about what was causing them. Rather foolish of her, now that she considered it. With no small effort, she attempted to redirect her thinking. The trouble was, her brain didn’t want to cooperate, and she wished her lip would stop quivering. Nevertheless, a possible answer eventually presented itself.

“...Snow. It... it must have been that – that gas grenade, or whatever it was, that he hit me with... something in it... a chemical, probably.” She nodded to herself, her brow furrowing in thought.

Aqualad yawned, clearly bored with this notion. “Oh, really, is that all. Are you sure it wouldn’t have anything to do with *His Pretty Gem*...?”

Raven’s eyes widened, and she was about to demand an explanation for what he’d just said, but her body reacted to his words more quickly than her mind did. She opened her mouth to speak but instead choked, gagged and pitched backwards, banging her head on the diving board, then rolled onto her side and writhed in agony as her stomach *twisted*, violently trying to empty itself of nothing.

This went on for probably a minute or so, but each second felt like hours. When it finally passed, it was all she could do to keep herself from falling off the board and into the pool. She lay there, gasping, shuddering, barely able to move, for at least another two or three minutes before she could muster enough strength to even lift her head, to see if the Aqualad hallucination was still there.

He was, his black eyes still watching her without interest. “Looks like I might be on to something, there, huh?” But before she could summon the breath to ask him what he meant, he suddenly looked at a watch which had apparently appeared on his wrist sometime during her ‘attack’.

“Oops... looks like my time’s up. *URRRGH*...” He clutched at his own stomach, from which there now protruded a long, bloody spike; this because he’d suddenly been impaled from behind by a bayonet-wielding warhog in a Civil War uniform. (Union colors, incidentally.)

Fortunately, being hallucinations, they didn’t leave a mess behind when they both vanished a moment later. Raven stared at the empty space they’d occupied.

“I... think I need help,” she told herself.

* * *

Only a few minutes after the Titans had returned to their hotel rooms, there came a soft, rapid knock at the door. Since Cyborg was in the bathroom giving himself some sort of ‘*sauna treatment*’, as he’d put it, and Beast Boy was already half asleep (and didn’t currently possess opposable thumbs, for that matter), Robin answered it.

“Starfire...?”

“Robin... may I please speak to you for a moment, in the hall?” Her voice was quiet, but urgent.

“Uh... sure.” He cast a brief glance over his shoulder at the green Basset hound which lay sprawled across the far bed, then stepped into the hall, quietly shutting the door behind him. He turned to ask Starfire what was up, but she didn’t wait for his question.

“Your suspicion was correct,” she whispered excitedly, somehow looking both happy and worried at the same time. “Raven has indeed returned!”

“Really?” he asked, genuinely surprised and not bothering to hide it. “Is she okay? I need to talk to her.” And he took a step toward their door, but Starfire held up a hand to stop him.

“Wait a minute, please,” she cautioned him. “When I left her, she was using the shower. We should allow her time to finish.”

“Oh... uh, yeah, okay. You’re right, let’s wait over here.” Mildly embarrassed, Robin motioned for her to join him a short distance down the hall. He was anxious to check on Raven, but Starfire had a point, she would definitely *not* react well to being barged in on.

They stood in an uncomfortable silence for nearly a minute. That, in itself, did not strike Robin as a particularly encouraging sign; *he* certainly had his own reasons for being worried about their absent teammate’s condition, but something in Starfire’s demeanor was also putting him on edge. Her smile seemed... less than jubilant.

“Um... Star,” he began awkwardly, “The last time I saw Raven, this morning, she was... well... upset.” *And not the only one with a talent for understatement*, he added mentally. “How did she, uh... *look*, to you? Did she seem okay?”

She met his eyes, and now her concern was clearly evident to him. “Truthfully, I do not know. I did not see her. When I returned to our room, she was in the bathroom. I spoke to her briefly, through the door, and she said she was all right... but...” She bit her lip. “Robin... I fear that she is very ill.”

“Ill?” His eyes narrowed quizzically.

“Yes. I could hear her... coughing, in the shower.” She sighed and rubbed her arms as if chilled, which, for Starfire, was almost certainly not the case. “It... it did not sound... healthy. In fact... I do not think I have ever heard Raven sound so miserable.” She looked at him helplessly, no longer trying to hide or downplay her worry.

Before he could respond, there was an audible **crash!** from the room. The two Titans looked back and forth from the door to each other, and wordlessly decided they’d waited long enough.

The door opened to the sight of a bathrobe-clad Raven standing at the foot of the nearest bed, staring at a broken teacup which lay at her feet, its contents already soaking into the carpet. Her fists were clenched tightly at her sides, she was visibly trembling, and looked as if she was desperately fighting just to keep herself in check.

“Raven...?” Robin hesitated, somewhat taken aback by the sight, in spite of his own imaginings.

She glanced up, her violet eyes widening in surprise, then quickly spun away from them and seemed to shrink into her robe. For a wild second, Robin thought he’d seen her *blush*, but quickly decided it must have been his imagination.

“Raven, please... may we be of help?” Starfire asked, taking a step toward her.

The mirror cracked.

“S-stay away,” she stammered.

“But, Raven—“

“*Please!*” She took several staggering steps away until she’d reached the far side of the room, putting both the beds between them. “I... I *know* you... only want... to help,” she rasped, her breathing labored. “But... *please*... don’t touch me.”

“What *can* we do?” Robin asked, he and Starfire standing next to the cracked mirror. “You can’t expect us to just stand here and do nothing. We’re your *friends*, Raven. Please... let us help you.”

There was a long pause, during which the silence in the room was broken only by Raven’s raspy breaths. She stood with one hand braced against the wall next to the window, attempting to steady herself, the other hand tightly clasping the collar of her robe. Finally, after nearly a minute, she half-turned to look back at her friends.

Her normally pallid skin was even paler than usual, nearly to a point of opacity. Her eyes were sunken and bloodshot, and her ashen lips quivered involuntarily, mirroring the tremors which shook the rest of her body.

Starfire gasped softly.

“Can you...” Raven croaked, swallowed, and tried again in a small voice. “Can you get Cyborg’s... m-medical scanner...? I need to... f-figure out... what’s wrong with me.”

* * *

Ten minutes later, all five Titans had gathered in the girls’ room. And Raven’s list of ailments had now expanded to include annoyance at being fussed over.

She sat at the foot of Starfire’s bed, now shrouded in her blue cloak, biting her lip and clenching her teeth together to keep them from chattering audibly. Cyborg ran a series of tests and scanning instruments over her, while Starfire hovered (both figuratively and literally) over them, wringing her hands and fairly radiating concern. Beast Boy straddled a chair a few feet away, watching the whole display in uncharacteristic silence, and Robin paced in front of the window.

Finally, after double- and triple-checking his readings, Cyborg sighed. “You’re not gonna like this, Rae, but... according to my scanners, you’re suffering from symptoms of acute stress.”

“That’s impossible,” she grated, her knuckles whitening as she dug her fingers into her knees. “You’re wr-wrong. It... *has* to be s-something to... do with that... s-smoke bomb...” she was interrupted by a brief coughing spasm.

But he was already shaking his head. “I can’t pick up a single trace of anything other than plain, ordinary smoke in your lungs, and not even enough of *that* to account for the respiratory problems you’re having, now. Whatever triggered this, it wasn’t in that grenade Snow hit you with.”

Her eyes flashed with obvious dissent, but she said nothing further, still trying to catch her breath.

“Now, in this situation,” Cyborg continued, “The best thing you can do is try to rest. It’s possible that this will clear up, if you give it some time. If you want, I can give you something, a sedative, to help you relax.”

“*No*,” she hissed. “No drugs. My mind... needs... to stay c-clear...” Wheezing slightly, she hunched over and withdrew even further into her cloak, until her outward appearance constituted little more than a shivering mound of blue fabric, piled at the foot of the bed.

“Raven, please, do try to calm yourself,” Starfire implored her in a soft voice, descending to hover protectively over her friend, just behind her shoulders.

Cyborg frowned sympathetically at the sight, shaking his head slightly as he pushed himself to his feet. “Well... I hate to dump even *more* bad news on y’all, on top o’ that, but I got no choice.”

At this, everyone stopped and looked up at him, varying degrees of startled apprehension reflected in their eyes.

He continued. “Ever since this morning, I’ve been deliberately running ‘*hot*’ with my internal cooling systems disabled, to try to keep my organic parts from developing frostbite, hypothermia or some other fun thing, after that dip I took in the river. Seems like it’s been working, but now there’s *another* problem. I ran a systems check as soon as we got back here, and my power cells are dangerously close to the red line. I’m gonna have to shut myself down completely for at least six hours, or risk permanent heat damage to my circuits.”

“Do it, then,” Robin replied without hesitation. “We’re gonna need you tomorrow. We can’t go home until Snow is behind bars, where he belongs.”

Cyborg nodded in agreement. “Awright, then.”

He turned toward the door, but stopped as his gaze fell across the girls. Pausing, he took a small syringe out of a compartment in his forearm, and laid it on the dresser. “Raven, I’m just gonna leave this here, in case you change your mind.”

The blue mound bobbed slightly, in what might have been acknowledgment.

With that, the meeting was adjourned. The Titans dispersed to their respective rooms, and retired for the night.

* * *

Raven wasn’t sure how much later it was when she sat bolt upright in bed.

Her heart was pounding like she’d been running a marathon, and she was nearly hyperventilating as her eyes darted about, frantically searching the dark room for—
--What?

What was she expecting to see? What had the dream been about?

She couldn’t remember, but whatever it had been, it obviously wasn’t real, and it obviously wasn’t *here*. Flustered and a bit irritated with herself, she climbed out of bed and staggered through the dark room until she’d found the bathroom door, found the light switch, then flipped one and closed the other.

She stood in the small, cold room, her back against the door, forcing herself to take slow, deep breaths while her heart rate gradually slowed to a slightly more acceptable gallop. She was still shaking, her joints ached and her breaths were somewhat raspy, but aside from those things, there was a comfortable familiarity to this particular ritual, and knowing that helped to calm her.

“*First ‘normal’ thing that’s happened on this blasted trip,*” she griped to herself as she made her way over to the sink. What had the dream been about? What were they *ever* about? Buried pain, suppressed fears, inevitable doom... variations of a familiar theme. Same as always, no point in dwelling on it.

Having reached the sink, she stared balefully at her pitiful reflection in the bathroom mirror. A small, bone-white girl with bloodshot violet eyes, frazzled purple hair, and a dark chakra jewel in the middle of her forehead stared back at her.

What the hell is your problem, anyway? she asked her reflection, silently. *Was Cyborg right, is it something... internal? But if so, what??*

The girl in the mirror showed no sign of giving up her secrets.

“Fine, *be* that way,” Raven told herself, and leaned down to wash her face.

The sight of the water brought a sudden, uninvited image to her of the spike through Aqualad’s gut, and—

“His Pretty Gem...”

...And a second later, Raven found herself on her knees, staring into the toilet.

What a waste of valuable fluids, she found herself thinking, as she wished for a way to somehow disable her gag reflex. Why was this happening to her?

A terrible thought suddenly occurred to her, and she hastily pulled up her sleeve, then breathed a sigh of relief. No visible runes or markings; just her thin, pale arm. The seals were still dormant, still in place. Besides, her next birthday was still months away...

She allowed herself a few minutes to make sure her body didn’t have any more unpleasant surprises in store, then washed up and forced herself to drink several glasses of water, having concluded that adding dehydration to her current list of problems couldn’t possibly help matters. Finally finished, she turned out the light and stumbled through the dark room again, past Starfire’s bed and back to her own, where she eagerly crawled beneath the covers.

And realized, to her dismay, that she had no idea how she was going to get back to sleep.

For just a split second, she wished she’d accepted Cyborg’s offer of artificial sleep. *Yeah, and be aspirating right now? No thanks,* she told herself.

She blew her breath out in a shuddering sigh, then remembered she wasn’t alone and cast a worried glance over at Starfire, afraid her activities might have disturbed her roommate’s sleep. But no, the Tamaranian princess was dozing blissfully, in her habitual position with her feet propped on her pillows and her head hanging off the foot of the bed. Her luxurious mane of scarlet hair trailed to the floor, and seeing this, Raven realized it was a small miracle she hadn’t stepped on it during her trek to the bathroom.

She felt a pang of envy, wondering briefly if she’d *ever* slept so peacefully, but quickly reminded herself that self-pity was pointless. Turning over, she glanced around the room for something to stare at until her eyelids grew heavy, and quickly settled on the window.

It was snowing again, and she watched the snowflakes drifting lazily past the window, as cold and as silent and as indifferent as **WAIT WHAT WAS THAT SHAPE SITTING IN THE CHAIR AT THE FOOT OF HER BED WHEN HER EYES FLICKED PAST IT.**

The realization hit her mind like a bucket of ice water, and for an instant, Raven was too terrified to even *look*. Even as she felt her gaze moving unwillingly, inevitably back to that spot, her imagination was already two steps ahead, reconstructing the horrific sight she’d glimpsed, that it was dark and thin and eyes and teeth and limbs and—

And it was gone. The chair was empty.

She stared at the empty space, holding her breath, afraid to let herself believe it.

But it was a moot point anyway, as a hand locked around her ankle and yanked her down below the bed sheets.

And then it *clawed* and *gripped* and *clutched* and *bit* and *groped* and *climbed* its way up her body, tearing at her clothes, ripping at her skin, until sharp, spindly fingers had wrapped themselves around her neck, and all she could see were eyes and teeth and a foul, writhing, snake-like tongue trying to force its way down her throat.

She tried to fight it off but it held her down, its narrow limbs impossibly strong and heavy, gripping every part of her body so tightly it felt like the thing's innumerable digits were *borin* *right into her flesh*, and choking the very life out of her while its revolting tongue was—

And suddenly the room was engulfed in heat and green light, and even *stronger* hands had taken hold of this nightmarish thing, and were breaking its vile, invasive grip and pulling it away.

“**LEAVE – HER – ALONE!!!**” Starfire roared, finally *tearing* the thing off of Raven, and then hurling it against the wall with what should have been sufficient force to punch straight through into the next room.

But instead of obediently crumpling into or even smashing through the solid wall, the thing *splashed* against it, splattering out in every direction like some kind of dark, sticky gelatin, but never quite separating, forming hundreds of black, liquid tendrils which flowed out and around and *back* through the air toward Starfire, solidifying back into its original shape just in time to tackle her to the floor between the two beds, its gaping, toothy maw aiming right for her head.

Meanwhile, Raven, now free of the thing's ghoulish embrace, had fallen behind the bed. Her airway (among other things) now unrestricted, she choked and gagged and retched and coughed and finally managed to *breathe* again, but hadn't yet sufficiently recovered from her own assault to be able to render aid to her rescuer.

Fortunately, Robin chose that moment to kick the door down, and he and Beast Boy burst into the room.

“What's going on?!” the Boy Wonder demanded, whipping out his *tonfa* batons.

Starfire was too preoccupied with keeping the dark thing's jaws pried apart to answer him at first, seeing as its teeth were yawning mere inches apart on either side of her face. Its loathsome tongue snaked forth and began to coil itself around her neck. In response, her eyes flared brightly with emerald energy and then cut loose, each one firing a solid beam of searing heat and light straight into – and then clean through – the creature's gaping maw, going on to blast a three-foot-wide hole in the ceiling and roof above its head.

The thing was hardly fazed at all, as the hole she'd blown through its head almost instantly began to *fill itself back in* as if nothing had happened. But Robin and Beast Boy didn't need any further explanation or incentive to throw themselves into the fight, and soon all three Titans were locked in a vicious melee with the black horror.

As the battle raged, Raven managed to climb to her feet, bracing herself against the window.

“*Enough of this...*” she hissed, her anger now overcoming her fear. Reaching inward, she focused her mind, channeled her emotion, and...

“Azarath... Metrion... *Zinthos!*”

Nothing.

Nothing happened. There was absolutely no discharge of energy, at all.

And as she watched her friends locked in combat with *her nightmare* beyond the reach of her outstretched hand before her, Raven knew exactly what that meant. And the implications were more horrifying than she cared to analyze, right now.

Deal first, dwell later.

“Robin!” she called out to the nearest Titan, her voice raw and hoarse. “*Hit me!!*”

“Wha...?!” He broke off his attack, stopping to stare at her in utter confusion.

Raven supposed that, in some context, she should be appreciative of the fact that he *didn't* just readily do as she asked, without reservation. But it wasn't helping to expedite the situation.

“My powers aren't w-working,” she grated, trying to make him understand. “You *know* what that means.”

As he put two and two together, Robin had the grace to look nearly as shocked as she felt, herself. “You mean, that thing is... *a manifestation of your buried emotions?*?” He relaxed his guard slightly, while Starfire and Beast Boy continued to grapple with the monstrosity. “But, that means it can't really hurt us, doesn't it?”

As if in answer to his question, the thing lashed out and raked his chest with a clawed appendage, staggering him, ripping his uniform and drawing blood. Then it bounced Beast Boy off the ceiling, and renewed its efforts to bite off Starfire's head.

“It's... *not* just... *FEAR!*” Raven spat through clenched teeth. “It's something... *ELSE!* You have to *knock me out*, otherwise... it could *kill* you all!!”

He hesitated, and then it pressed toward him, dragging Starfire with it and forcing him to bring up his tonfa to parry its blows.

Cursing internally, Raven frantically scanned the room for an alternative option, and quickly seized on the overturned chair at her feet.

While her friends fought for their lives against her 'demon', she mustered her strength, hefted the chair and swung it toward the window.

The glass shattered quite accommodatingly.

Without hesitation, Raven flung herself out into the cold, snowy night.

* * *

As the spots obscuring his vision and the dull ringing in his ears finally began to fade away, Robin climbed painfully to his feet.

On either side of him, Starfire and Beast Boy were groggily doing the same. The black horror from Raven's subconscious had vanished, leaving only the cuts and bruises they shared as proof of its passing, while Raven herself had...

Robin shook his head, struggling to clear it. How long had they been out? It couldn't have been more than a few minutes. He remembered hearing the window break, and glancing over his shoulder, seeing Raven dive out through it. Then *it* had grabbed him by the neck, he'd heard the window break a *second* time, and then... consciousness fled.

Making his way over to the window and gritting his teeth against the chill wind that now flowed freely through it, he peered out into the night, searching.

They were on the third floor, a good twenty-plus feet off the ground. And from the look of things, a snow drift below them had broken Raven's fall. But she wasn't there

now, and a set of clearly discernable footprints led away from the point of her impact, to the street.

Did that mean she was okay, that she'd walked away on her own? He fervently hoped so, but that presented the new problem of having to *find* her again. However, in her present condition, she couldn't have made it very far...

"Awww, *man...*" Beast Boy was groaning, clutching his head. "Did anybody get the number on that *train...*?"

Robin turned back from the window. "Beast Boy, can you go down and find..."

His voice trailed off as his eyes settled on a small, metal cylinder, lying on the floor next to where the green changeling sat.

The window had broken a *second* time, *after* Raven had already passed through it.

Robin snatched the object up in a shaking fist, already knowing exactly what it was: a concussion grenade.

"*Snow...*" he hissed through clenched teeth.

"Huh? Snow?" That got Beast Boy's attention, and he and Starfire quickly shook out of their dazed state. "What *about* him...?"

But Robin was already out the door and down the stairs, on his way outside.

They caught up with him below their shattered window, studying the snow drift. It was as he'd feared: the footprints leading away from the building were too big to have been Raven's.

"Robin... where is our friend?" Starfire asked him. "Please... I wish to know that she is all right."

"...It was Snow," he answered quietly, holding up the spent grenade for them to see. "He knocked us out, and... took Raven." He angrily pitched the object into the drift.

"*No...*" Starfire whispered, looking stricken. "No... we – we must *find* her--!!"

Beast Boy was a step ahead, having already shifted into wolf form and followed the tracks out to the street. But once he got there, his ears and tail drooped, and he came back in human form, shaking his head.

"I can't track 'em," he reported despondently. "They drove away in a truck, or something, and the scent trail got buried in all the exhaust fumes on the street... sorry."

"There *has* to be a way," Robin growled, even as he was wracking his own brain for an idea. "Maybe Cyborg can—"

"But he has not reactivated yet," Starfire pointed out, her voice beginning to quiver.

"*Wait!*" Beast Boy exclaimed, suddenly. "I got an idea!" Without another word, he took wing and flew back up to the room, leaving the other two Titans to follow behind him.

Reaching the window, they found him hastily rummaging through a suitcase.

"Beast Boy!" Starfire exclaimed. "Those are Raven's things! I do not think she would want you to—"

Wordlessly, Beast Boy spun around and held up a mysterious-looking, ominously decorated hand mirror.

* * *

The plan was simple and straightforward: get in, make contact, and get out.

Reluctantly, Starfire had agreed to stay behind and keep watch, lest some hapless cleaning person stumble across the mirror while they were inside. Besides, someone would need to bring Cyborg up to speed once he 'woke up'.

And so, with that settled, Beast Boy and Robin had gone through the mirror, and into the depths of Raven's mind.

Robin had known beforehand that no amount of mental preparation, and none of Beast Boy's garbled descriptions and confused explanations, could have truly prepared him for the experience. But even so... what he now saw, heard, and felt was *nothing* like what he might have expected.

"Uh, oh-*kay*..." Beast Boy was saying, "I definitely do *not* remember eight feet of snow on the ground."

He was exaggerating, but it *was* knee-deep, and that was in the shallow places.

They stood in the middle of what Robin could only describe as the bleakest, most desolate, and thoroughly inhospitable environment he had ever seen. The 'ground' was covered in a thick blanket of snow, as far as the eye could see. There was the occasional hill, outcropping of rock, or dead, twisted tree jutting up out of it in places, but aside from those things, the landscape was almost featureless. A howling, bone-chilling wind swept steadily across it, whipping the snow into flurries, and...

The sky... the otherwise gray sky was literally spattered with blood.

Beast Boy had taken notice of this, also. "Um, yeah... don't remember *that*, either. I'm guessing it's probably not a good sign."

"Okay, well, which way do we go?" Robin asked, trying to redirect their attention to the mission at hand.

Beast Boy spent several seconds looking around, trying to get his bearings, and finally gave up. "I... I dunno, dude. When me an' Cyborg were here before, there was, like, a path to follow. But now, with all this *snow* everywhere... who can tell?" He scratched his head, looking apologetic.

Robin frowned. "Well... the wind seems to be coming from a specific direction, so I guess that's as good a starting point as any." He began walking forward.

They trudged through the snow for several minutes, in silence. Finally, Beast Boy spoke up again.

"So, um... whaddya think all *this* means?" he asked, gesturing at the blizzard.

Robin opened his mouth to answer, but then stopped, having been interrupted by the smallest of sounds. A soft moan, barely audible except to the most trained ears, coming from just beyond the small hill ahead of them.

The two Titans exchanged a brief glance to confirm that they'd both heard the noise, then hurriedly climbed the hill. Reaching the top, they stopped short.

Below them, the snow sloped downward to form a bowl-shaped depression between this hill and the next one, almost like a crater. And in the center, her body draped by a gloomy, gray cloak, lay Raven. She was lying on her side, her back to them, huddling into her cloak and shivering miserably.

And... both the cloak, and the snow around and beneath her, were stained with her blood.

"*Raven!*" Robin exclaimed, leaping down the hill toward her.

"*Aw, Man!*" Beast Boy cried as he followed suit.

But before they could reach her, *another* Raven, this one clad in a green cloak, dropped down in front of them, seemingly out of thin air. “*Stay back!!*” she shouted, her expression fiercely protective, as she spread a glowing black barrier to hold them at bay.

“What the... Beast Boy?” Robin asked, confused.

“Um, yeah. These are, like, different sides of Raven’s personality,” the green changeling explained. “Buried emotions, I guess. To tell you the truth, I was kinda hoping we’d run into her *happy* side, first, but I guess I shoulda known better, the way she’s been lately... Heh, you’d never believe it, Robin, but Raven’s happy side is actually pretty cool! She even laughed at my—“

Robin cut him off with a glare and a nod of his head toward the two Ravens in front of them.

“—Oh. Uh, right. Sorry.” Beast Boy did have the grace to look embarrassed.

With that settled, Robin took a moment to decide which Raven he should address, and ultimately settled on the green one. “Raven... please. We’re your friends, we want to *help* you.”

She didn’t drop the barrier. “I don’t *need* help. This is *my* problem. *I’ll* deal with it. Anyway, no one else *can*.”

“I don’t accept that,” Robin shot back. If she wanted to find out which of them could be more stubborn, he’d be happy to oblige her.

“There’s gotta be *something* we can do,” Beast Boy added.

“*Buh... Beast Boy?*” Gray Raven whimpered, lifting her head slightly. “*Is that you?*”

“Yeah, Raven, I’m here!” He dropped to one knee and placed a hand against Green Raven’s barrier (while she glowered at him reproachfully). “Me an’ Robin are both here. Don’t worry, it’s gonna be okay. You’re gonna be *all right*.”

“*I...*” She coughed, and it sounded wet. “*I’m... suh-sorry for hugging you.*”

His mouth hung open, and he looked as if she’d physically struck him.

“*Please, Raven.*” Robin was imploring her. “Please, let us help you. At least tell us where you are. We know that Snow has you, that he’s taken you somewhere. Please, help us find you.”

“Snow...?” Green Raven repeated, then burst out laughing, startling both young men. “*Snow* isn’t the problem. He’s *nothing*, just a pathetic little parasite. He can’t hurt me. *He’s* not the one who did *that*,” and she jerked her head toward the bloodied, shivering gray mound behind her.

“Then, who did?” Robin asked her quietly, as Beast Boy got to his feet.

“*Him*, of course,” Raven snorted, as if the answer were patently obvious. “It’s *always* Him, after all. It’s never anyone else.”

Robin’s eyes narrowed. “And *He* is...”

“Uh, I’m guessing, prob’ly this big, scary looking red dude with four eyes,” Beast Boy piped up. “Me an’ Cy helped her fight him, the last time we were in here. I think she said he was, like, her dad, or... something.” He shrugged, rather helplessly. “I dunno... I don’t really get it.”

“A reasonably accurate assessment, nonetheless,” said a voice behind them: it was a third Raven, this one draped in yellow and wearing glasses. She sighed, slouching heavily and looking truly exhausted as she continued. “Perhaps you’re not really as dense as I sometimes think you are, Beast Boy.”

“Um, thanks?”

“It’s all *her* fault,” Green Raven was saying, her voice rising in righteous anger as she pointed past a nearby hill. “*She* lets Him in, because He makes her stronger. And sometimes, when that happens... I can’t stop Him.”

Robin looked to where she was pointing, and saw yet *another* Raven, this one shrouded in a red cloak. She was pacing, restlessly, in front of an enormous black hourglass, one which held what must have been many years’ worth of sand. The sand was trickling down, very slowly, but very steadily... and it had nearly run out. If the sand in the bottom of the hourglass did indeed represent years, then what was left in the top half was no more than a few months’ worth, at the most.

Seeing the hourglass, Robin felt a vague sense of dread begin to slowly creep over him, for reasons he couldn’t fully explain. But what lay behind it was far more ominous.

For behind the hourglass was an enormous barred gate, so tall and wide that he couldn’t believe it had escaped their notice until now. The gate was held shut by an intricate series of glowing black chains, which also seemed to be attached to the hourglass.

What Robin glimpsed beyond the gate could only be described as Hell.

It was the only truly fitting description. Flames erupted from burning pits, across which charred, bloodied bodies were *suspended by poles and hooks and barbed wire, shrieking and wailing in agony while they were being **skewered and tormented and ripped into pieces by—***

A hand took hold of his jaw and firmly wrenched his gaze away from the gate. It was Raven, the green-hooded one.

“*Don’t look at it,*” she told him, her piercing violet eyes staring intently into his. “It will drive you insane.”

He did not doubt her for a second. Beast Boy had already covered his own eyes, and looked even more green than usual.

“Keep in mind that everything you see here is metaphorical,” Yellow Raven pointed out, even as she was clearly struggling just to stay on her feet. “Although, certain visual metaphors are somewhat more... *literal* than others... oh, drat.”

His mind still reeling from the unparalleled horror he’d just glimpsed, Robin turned, rather numbly, and tried to organize his thoughts into a question, or something else to say to her. However, her gaze appeared to be fixed on something beyond, and above, them.

With some apprehension, he looked over his shoulder.

There was a *towering wall of water* looming over them, ready to crash down and swallow them all.

“...Oh,” was the only word to spring readily to his lips.

The tidal wave roared toward them, so tall and wide that it left no time or avenue for escape.

“I suppose he wants me to wake up now,” Yellow Raven sighed.

And then the wave hit, and they were all washed away.

And just when Robin had decided they were going to drown, he and Beast Boy found themselves ‘washed’ back out into the hotel room, with Starfire staring at them.

* * *

This time, it was a very literal, very physical bucket of ice water that jarred Raven's mind back to the here and now.

She gasped involuntarily as the painfully cold sensation shocked her body awake, then choked and sputtered on the mouthful of water she'd inhaled in the process.

"Wakey, wakey!" jeered a grating, gravelly voice that was about as pleasing to the ear as nails being dragged across a chalk board.

The next thing she was aware of was a loud rattling noise from something like a chain winch, and she had just enough time to realize she was lying on a flat, concrete surface before both her arms were roughly *yanked* straight up above her head. She then found herself being *hauled* upwards by her wrists, higher and higher, until her toes barely touched the floor.

Now, more than ever, Raven fought for *control*. She absolutely could not afford to reveal how weak she currently felt. She ground her teeth together, determined not to let them chatter, and made a furious attempt to keep herself from shaking, although this was made doubly difficult by the extreme cold of both the water and the air around her, and also the sheer amount of physical *pain* she was presently experiencing.

Think. Focus. Assess the situation. Trying to ignore as much of the discomfort as she could, she forced her eyes to open and look around. She was in a very cold, dimly lit room. It was fairly large, and there were tables and platforms here and there, built into the floor... dozens of hooks hung uniformly from the ceiling, attached to chains that ran along it in neatly measured rows. It must have been part of a meat processing plant, she realized, though it didn't appear to have been used in some time. Her wrists were locked into what appeared to be an ordinary set of steel handcuffs, she noted, which had then been hung on one of the meat hooks and winched up toward the ceiling, taking her with it. Already, her hands were turning a bluish-purple color from the strain, lack of circulation, and the room temperature, which was frigid... of course, being drenched in ice water certainly didn't help on that front, either.

Although beams of moonlight filtered in through a few high windows, most of the room's illumination came from a very bright hand lamp which had been set on the floor a short distance away, and was aimed directly at her, obscuring her view of anything behind it. She could hear someone moving around nearby, however, and suspected she wouldn't have to wait very long for them to reveal themselves... not that she didn't already know who to expect.

Her expectations were met moments later when Snow stepped forward into the light's beam, chuckling quietly as if enormously pleased with himself. "Well, now!" he drawled, in that horribly grating voice of his. "Good *morning*, sunshine! You look just about ready, to me." The way he spoke was strange, almost theatrical; he fairly *spat* his words at her, drawing each one out and emphasizing it as if he were putting on some kind of rehearsed performance. Of course, she couldn't sense or sort out his emotional state, because *he* was completely focused on... sensing *hers*...

...Which meant that the only things she *could* sense from him, were... her *own* emotions... her own pain... her own humiliation... her own...

Not good. This was not good at all.

If possible, his already toothy grin widened, and he leaned in close. She nearly gagged on his breath, which smelled like a dumpster.

“That’s it. That’s right,” he hissed. “You’re starting to get it. Good.”

He was still wearing those reflective-lens goggles, so she couldn’t see his eyes; only her own soggy, pitiful reflection. Another deliberate move on his part, no doubt, the reasons for which were only now becoming clear to her. *This was really not good.*

Reaching up, he squeezed her cheek and patted her face roughly, then gave her a light shove, just enough to leave her swinging as he took a few leisurely steps away and lit a cigarette. He stood with his back to her, taking several indulgent puffs while staring up at the ceiling, as if taking his time in deciding what to do next.

After a few drags, he spoke again, without bothering to turn around. “Whatsa matter, little girl? Cat got your tongue?”

Raven blew a lock of wet, purple hair out of her eyes. “If you’re planning to use me as a bargaining chip against the Titans, it won’t work.” *Good, she was able to keep her voice level. At least she had that much.*

Snow burst out laughing, nearly losing his cigarette in the process. “Oh, I couldn’t care *less* about the Titans, at this point.”

“Well *that’s* not very smart,” she commented, but he shook his head as he made his way behind a nearby table.

“No, you’re not following me. See... they already *served* their purpose, by bringing *you* here, to me.” Still grinning broadly, he lifted a large briefcase into view, and laid it out on the table’s surface. “We’re gonna have *fun*, you an’ me... fun like you wouldn’t believe.” With that, he popped the case open, turning it slightly to give her a good view of its contents.

Inside the case were the tools of Snow’s chosen trade, tools which were clearly designed for a singular purpose: the administration of nearly any and every variety of physical torture that could possibly be imagined.

Raven eyed the items dispassionately. “Aren’t I a little *old* for you?”

To her mild surprise, Snow laughed heartily. “Oh, that’s *nice*. That’s *very* good. You’re gonna make me *work* for it, ain’tcha? Well, that’s half the fun, right there.”

Leaving the case and all of its contents where they were, he stepped away from the table, flicked his cigarette away and began walking in a slow circle around her.

“Actually, babe, I hate to burst your bubble, but I’m not a pedophile,” he explained. “In fact... *you* oughtta know that, better than anyone else, with those senses of yours. That...” And he inhaled deeply through his nose, as if savoring the smell of the air. “...That exquisite *gift*, that you and I both share. But *you* don’t see it that way, do you?” He stopped in front of her, shaking his head and clicking his tongue in disapproval. “That’s a shame, a real shame. Ah, well, don’t feel *too* bad about it... I can enjoy it enough for the both of us.”

He took a step closer, once again leering into her face as she stared defiantly back at her pale, drenched reflection in his goggles.

“See... what I *enjoy* more than anything else in life, what *sustains* me from day to day, and enables me to keep going... is the *pain* of other people. *Pain... Hurt... Fear... Grief... Despair...*” With each word, he pressed his finger against her chakra, roughly grinding the jewel against her skull. “...Those are the things that *nourish* me, in a way that no food or drug *ever* could. And, as you and I both know... nobody else *feels* those things in quite the same way, with the same kind of... *purity*, the same kind of *intensity*, as a child.”

He stepped back a bit and began circling her again, while she struggled to ignore the fact that the pain in her arms and shoulders was steadily increasing the longer she hung there. Meanwhile, he continued his speech.

“...Of course, it took me quite a while – a lotta years, frankly – to realize it, before I figured out that... *perfect formula*, if you will. Now, I used to hang around S&M clubs when I was younger, and that was really what got me started, but... it was never *enough*, y’know? I mean, *those* people... they’re so mixed up inside. ‘Pain is pleasure, pleasure is pain’... *that* kinda thing. Their *understanding* of pain is so flawed that they’re really not even capable of truly *experiencing* it, the way it’s *supposed* to be. Then again... how many people really *appreciate* pain, for what it is? I mean, honestly? Not too many, I can tell ya that. I mean... *you* sure as hell don’t, that’s plain as day.”

She didn’t respond, for two reasons. One, because she was waiting to see where he was going with all this, and if he might somehow let something slip, make a mistake, or accidentally grant her some unforeseen opportunity. And two, because it was becoming progressively more difficult, and required greater concentration, to block out her own emotions that he was ‘reflecting’ back to her.

He’d stopped again, and was now staring up at one of the windows, his goggles shining brightly in the moonlight. “I think the first time I really *tasted* it, was... what, ten years ago, about? When that guy did his thing, down in Oklahoma City. *That* was when I started to really *appreciate* the viewpoint of a child.” He began rummaging idly through the contents of his case, as he continued. “See... so often, with adults, and even a lot of adolescents, they’re already carryin’ so many things around with ‘em, so much... emotional *baggage*, so many psychological *issues*... whatever you wanna call it. But when you take a person like that, and really *hurt* them, I mean, *really*, *hurt* them... well... there are so many *other* things that get involved, you know? Those other *things* they’re already carryin’ with ‘em, they affect the way their mind *interprets* the pain, and half the time, they end up believin’ they *deserve* it, on some level.”

Leaving the case again, he stepped back over to toy with a few strands of her hair, letting it slide gently between his fingers. Despite her resolve, she found herself flinching away from his touch – only slightly, but enough that he smiled at it, as if it was some private, disgusting joke between the two of them.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong... there’s definitely somethin’ to be said for *emotional* torment, too, of course. But, when it’s self-inflicted, like that... it just ain’t the *same*. It gets too *complicated*, so many conflicting feelings, and that can just spoil the whole experience. But *children*, on the other hand... a child’s pain is *undiluted*, is *pure*, in a way that nothing else is. Nothing else has quite the same *flavor*.” And he inhaled sharply again, as if savoring the aroma of a favorite food. “I learned, through trial and error, that what I could take from one, single, tiny child, could *give* me things I couldn’t get from *ten* or *twenty* adults.”

And now, he turned to look at Raven, as if awaiting her reaction or response.

“...So... the whole kiddie-porn angle is just something you do, to... what? Make ends meet?” she asked, raising an eyebrow slightly.

He grinned. “Precisely! I tell ya, you wouldn’t *believe* how much money there is in that stuff. ‘Course, it also allows me to *sustain* myself, in more important ways, but... like I told you before, I’m *not* a pedophile.”

She nodded slowly. “And... which one of us were you trying to convince, again? I lost track.”

For a split second, she caught a flash of *rage* from him, and it gave her just enough time to brace herself before his fist smashed into her abdomen. Even as the air was violently pushed out of her lungs, and the force of the blow lifted her several inches into the air, she felt his adrenaline spike euphorically as *he* experienced and absorbed *her* pain from the blow, thereby ‘echoing’ it back to her and nearly *doubling* the sensation of the impact.

Her head spun from the experience, and she was left swinging back and forth on the chain that linked her wrists above her head, while she coughed and wheezed and gasped for air.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!!” He exhaled fiercely, clearly invigorated. “*That’s* the ticket! *That’s* what I’m *talkin’* about!” He grabbed her by the hair, forcing her to look up at him as she struggled to breathe. “And that’s just the *beginning*, darlin’. That ain’t *nothin’*. I’m just getting *warmed up*.”

He dropped her just as quickly, taking a few steps away to light another cigarette. While he was doing this, she managed to find enough breath to speak again.

“So... *that’s* why you brought me here? To take advantage of my powers, so you could... catch a better *buzz*, while you torture me?” Her voice dripped with disgust.

Snow blew a plume of smoke out across the moonbeams that shone down outside the flashlight’s glare. “Well... that’s *part* of it, yeah, but not the whole deal. Fact is...” And he half-turned to regard her. “...The *real* reason I sought you out, is because you’ve got enough pain, fear an’ misery locked inside o’ you, to keep me fed for *years*.”

Raven suddenly felt cold in an entirely different way.

“...No,” she said after a moment. “You’re wrong. My emotions are under control.”

He laughed at this, long and loud. “Oh, that’s rich. *Now* who’s kidding herself?” He came back over to leer into her face, again forcing her to confront the reflection of her own weakness in his goggles.

“Sweetheart, you don’t *control* your emotions. You just *suppress* them. There’s a *big, big difference*.”

“You know *nothing* about me,” she shot back, trying to squelch the anger rising in her throat, trying to manage the fear that was pushing just behind it. She did *not* like where this was going.

“On the contrary,” he chuckled. “I know quite a bit. Enough to know that those weird powers of yours are *useless*, as long as your emotions are running wild, and you’re fighting to keep the lid on. And I intend to keep it that way... in fact, I plan to make it worse.”

“Physical pain is meaningless. Nothing you could ever do will break me.” But even as she said this, she realized that the longer she hung there, the longer she was *near him*, the more difficult it was becoming to maintain her concentration.

He grinned. “Well... you’re *half* right. I doubt my ‘usual methods’ would be enough, in your case. But, luckily... I don’t *need* to use them, to get what I want from you. See... the *fact* that you’ve suppressed your emotions, means that you’ve never truly learned to *deal* with them. And that means all the things that have ever *hurt* you, and everything you’re *afraid* of... it’s all just *lying there*, under the surface... waiting.”

With that, he stepped outside the flashlight's beam for a brief moment, and returned with a folding chair, which he set up about three feet in front of her. He then tossed his cigarette and sat down, facing her, and fixed her with a calm, steady, penetrating stare.

And as he did so, he became acutely attuned to her emotions, her senses. By focusing on what *she* was feeling and experiencing, he was effectively 'broadcasting' those same things *back* to her, as *he* experienced *her* pain, humiliation, anger, and fe—*no, it wasn't—yes, fear!* And as he increased his focus and attention on what *she* was feeling, it was creating a kind of 'emotional echo chamber' where the sensations were being steadily *amplified* each time they were 'reflected' back.

"Wha... What." Her brow creased. "What are you doing."

"Digging," he grinned, his expression twisting toward a sneer. "Believe it or not, sweetheart... you're the most frightened little girl I've ever met. And *I want what you're hiding from.*"

"...*I'm not afraid of you,*" she hissed, grinding her teeth together, struggling to maintain control as he *bombarded her with her own suppressed emotions.*

Snow leered, starting to lean forward a bit in his chair. "Now, that much *is* true; you're *not* afraid, of *me*. But there *is* **someone** who *terrifies* you, who scares you so much that you can't even bear to *think* about **him**, except in the most detached, abstract terms... and I've come across *that* particular variety of pain enough times to know *exactly* what it means."

"No," Her eyes were squeezed shut now, trying desperately to focus, to maintain, but it was getting so hard, she was losing, he was going to make her... "...Don't. You, you don't..."

"*Yesss...*" he hissed, leaning closer. "*That's it... that's right. Give it to me.*"

"...*Stop,*" she whispered in a tiny, childlike squeak, so unlike her normal speaking voice. Her physical control had weakened to the point where she was now visibly trembling. "*Stop, you don't... you don't know what...*"

"*That's it, that's right... Let it go,*" he cooed, as if soothing an infant. "Let it *all* go. Tell me, now, Raven..." And he leaned in even closer...

"...*Are you Daddy's Special Little Girl?*"

She choked.

He waited, absorbing her reaction, taking it in, *feeding* on it, and sending it back to her twice over.

"...*No...*" she sobbed, tears threatening to spill out from beneath her eyelids.

"*Don't, please, you don't... He'll hear, Azar, please, He'll come, He'll... no...*"

"**Yesssss!**" Snarling like some ravenous beast, Snow leapt out of his chair and came to hover mere inches away from her, practically drooling in anticipation.

"*Yes! I want him to hear, do you understand, little girl?! I am calling him; I am bringing you to him!! And now... now, you are going to relive everything, do you hear me, child?!*"

Her eyes were shut tight and she was frantically shaking her head back and forth, desperately trying to block him out, failing completely, but still trying, like the final frenzied kicks of a drowning swimmer. Grabbing her head in his hands, he roared directly into her face.

"***He is here, NOW!!!***"

He was about to physically pry open her eyes, and a strangled, tortured *scream* was building in her throat, behind her clenched teeth, and then—

--And then it abruptly stopped, as her emotions suddenly went completely dead.

Snow jerked in surprise and disbelief, unable to comprehend what his senses were telling him. He stood there, holding her face in his hands, but now *he* was the one shaking, from pure adrenaline, and she'd gone utterly limp.

Then, slowly, her eyes opened. And she stared past the reflection in his goggles.

"Snow..." she breathed, "*You want my soul, the things I hide... is that it?*"

"Yes..." he hissed again, his face settling back into a predatory snarl.

Her lips twisted slightly, almost imperceptibly. "*Then... look into my eyes.*"

"Yes... *Yes,*" he whispered, his tone becoming reverent. "*I... I can see it...*"

"No..." she sighed, her voice nearly inaudible. "*Not those...*"

"*The other ones...*"

* * *

Having awakened Cyborg, the Titans had been desperately trying to cobble together a makeshift search-and-rescue plan, when the loudest and most horrifying scream any of them had ever heard blew out all the windows on every building in town.

It had gone on for nearly a minute, emanating from a gigantic, glowing black shape which had erupted upwards from a location on the city's outskirts, its ebony wings blotting out most of the night sky before finally dissipating and collapsing in on itself, back down to its point of origin.

Without a word, the four Titans had immediately set out for that location.

No one had spoken since they heard the scream. The entire drive had been silent. In retrospect, it occurred to Robin that he should have said something to reassure his friends, should have formulated some sort of tactical plan for when they reached their destination. But words had seemed unnecessary, and more than that, potentially dangerous. For if someone had spoken, they might have given voice to the fears that gripped them all, and that in turn could have invited those fears to come true.

It was irrational, sure, but it was the only explanation that made sense to him.

And so, nothing was said when they arrived at the abandoned meat packing plant. Neither had he felt the need to speak or issue orders, when Cyborg and Starfire had torn open the building's doors in unison.

No orders were needed as the four of them rushed into the dark, empty building and began their search, moving as a coordinated unit. Each of them knew their role.

No one spoke because words were redundant.

Because they were a *team*. Because they were the Titans.

And within minutes, Beast Boy's (canine) nose and Cyborg's sensors had led them to their lost friend, who was soaking wet and hanging from the ceiling like a piece of meat.

Starfire was the first to break the silence then, crying out Raven's name with an equal measure of shock and relief. She stood by, looking oddly helpless, as Cyborg darted forward with remarkable speed to free their teammate from her shackles, and then gently lowered her to the floor.

"Easy, Rae... we gotcha," Robin heard him murmur.

Starfire later admitted to having been afraid that her ‘righteous fury’ may have been too great, and that she might have accidentally hurt Raven while acting to free her. But her reservations disappeared once that was done, and she practically flung Cyborg aside in her haste to hug her friend as tightly as she could without killing her, while uttering a number of colorful-sounding phrases in her native language and repeating over and over, “*Raven, we have found you.*”

Eventually, Robin heard Raven croak, “...*Lucky me.*”

He couldn’t tell whether or not she was being sarcastic. And he was sure no one cared at that point, anyway.

As for himself, he realized he still hadn’t spoken, and probably should. But he couldn’t think of anything to say to express how he felt, having found their friend and comrade alive and (relatively) unharmed. So he settled for standing there and smiling.

“Uh... dudes.” Beast Boy was calling their attention to something, off to the side.

Robin looked, and for an instant, wished he hadn’t. Even though he knew he would have had to, would have *needed* to, sooner or later.

It was Snow. He was lying on the floor, a short distance from where they’d found Raven. There was a gun on the floor near his hand, and the large pool of blood and gray matter beneath his head promised that he would never rise again.

Starfire gasped, and Cyborg was silent, but the beam from his shoulder lamp indicated that he was looking. There was a pause, as the four of them were genuinely at a loss for words.

“...Oh,” said Raven, after a moment. Her eyebrows rose slightly, but otherwise she showed little reaction to the sight. She looked exhausted; perhaps that was why.

Robin bit his lip, and forced himself to ask the one question he really did *not* want to ask right now, but the one he knew he had to. “Raven... what happened?”

She continued to stare at Snow’s corpse for a long moment, blinking slowly as if gradually digesting the image and its ramifications. Finally, she spoke.

“...Snow wanted to feed on my soul,” she murmured, bluntly. “I guess he couldn’t handle what he found there.”

There was no anger in her voice. Nor was there any pity. Robin thought he heard a hint of regret, but it was somewhat ambiguous.

Looking around the room, he didn’t find that at all surprising.

As her words hung in the air, Raven took a brief moment to study each of her friends’ faces, as if gauging their reaction. Finally she sighed, and seemed to deflate.

“So... can we go home now, or what?”

* * *

Two days later, the Teen Titans were on the road back to Jump City.

The police had ruled Snow’s death a suicide. The bullet that killed him had been fired from his own gun, and there were no fingerprints on the weapon other than his own. After having cleared out his underground lair the day before, the local cops didn’t seem terribly curious about the precise chain of events that had led to his demise, and had not asked many questions. Apparently, they were fairly eager to close the books on him.

They also didn’t ask about the horrible apparition that had filled the sky and blown out all their windows that night, either.

Robin appreciated that, and he had no reason to second-guess their judgment on either count. He also had no reason to doubt his teammates, his *friends*, not one of them. Least of all Raven, who had saved his own life, had saved him from Slade, and had seen a part of his soul that he'd never revealed to anyone else. She knew him better than *anyone*, even Bruce, and as such he knew that he could trust her.

And that was why he refused to allow himself to imagine her telekinetically holding Snow's gun to his head, and pulling the trigger with a thought. She *wouldn't* have done that. She just wouldn't have, no matter what. That was all there was to it.

Once the minor injuries she'd received had been dealt with, her overall health had also improved with surprising speed, so much so that Cyborg was led to admit that perhaps Snow *did* have something to do with her illness, after all. In fact... when all was said and done, Raven seemed more or less the same as she'd always been, since they'd known her.

And Robin wasn't quite sure whether he should find that reassuring, or even more alarming. He made a conscious effort to choose the former, but not without reservation.

Even so... he felt that he should ask her about it. It just didn't seem right, to pretend he wasn't worried.

He'd spent the past two days waiting for the proper time, but was gradually realizing it would never come. So... he was going to have to make a choice.

Why couldn't *anything* ever be easy?

It was snowing, again, as they drove home along the twisting, sloping mountain roads. Apparently, it always snowed in the mountains whenever you tried to go anywhere. Probably something worth taking note of, for the future.

They'd been on the road for several hours, and so far, the drive back had been almost deathly quiet compared to the trip there. Even Beast Boy was gloomily subdued, and the jokes he did crack seemed more out of habit than a real desire to see his friends laugh (which they didn't, anyway). Cyborg had played a few CDs, but it was much quieter and more mellow fare than his usual upbeat selections. And Starfire had yet to sing even one, single 'cheerful driving song'.

It felt like everyone in the car was asleep. Except that none of them were.

Robin sighed, deciding that now was as good a time as any.

"Um, Raven...?"

"Hm?" She didn't look up from the book she was reading, in the front seat.

"I... I apologize for intruding into your mind, the way we did. At the time, it had seemed like the best way to find you, and we only wanted to help... but I wanted to apologize anyway, because we didn't have your permission."

"Huh...? Oh, uh, yeah, right. Sorry," Beast Boy added, after Robin nudged him.

She sighed, but still didn't turn around to look at them. "I know... it's okay. Don't worry about it."

Robin swallowed and pursed his lips. *Now for the hard part.* He cleared his throat, feeling uncomfortable.

"I'm... not exactly sure how to ask you about this," he admitted, "But... the things we saw in your mind, they seemed so... so... I couldn't understand them," he finished awkwardly, hoping she'd either throw him a line or give him an excuse to drop it.

She flipped a page, and didn't speak for so long that he began to wonder if she'd heard him, even though he was sure that she must have. When she finally answered, her voice was so quiet it was nearly inaudible.

"...I hope you never will."

The only sound in the car for the next several minutes was the occasional turning of a page in Raven's book. Robin thought he should ask her something more, but he couldn't summon the words.

Starfire sniffed, and as he glanced up at her reflection in the window next to him, he was startled to see that she was silently crying.

"Star...? Are you okay?" Although he was concerned, a part of him was secretly grateful for the diversion.

"Robin... I must ask for your forgiveness," she murmured, her voice nearly as quiet as Raven's.

"What? Why?" He was completely blindsided by this.

"I fear... I fear that something terrible is happening to me, that... I may have become unworthy of your friendship, and your trust." She covered her eyes with her hand.

"Why?" He asked again, completely dumbfounded. "Starfire... What's wrong?"

She drew a shuddering breath, and tried to explain.

"Although I have many times felt the Righteous Anger, and the Fury of Justice, during our battles against criminals, monsters, villains, and people who are not nice... always before, when the battles were finished, I have been able to leave those feelings behind and return to the joy of living." She sniffed again, and hugged herself with her free arm. "But, now... I find that I cannot. And I am... afraid of what that means. I... I do not like this feeling."

Smiling sadly, Robin patted her arm.

"I know. But it's okay, Star. Being angry is only natural. It doesn't make you a bad person."

"But... but, it is *more* than that," she insisted miserably, pulling away from his touch. "Even though he is no longer alive, I find that... for the terrible things he did to those poor, innocent children... and for the way he hurt Raven, and caused her to suffer... I..."

"...I hate the Snow."

* * * * *

-Fin.-