

Never Alone

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*The aftermath of *Haunted*

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Chapter 1 - Unmasked

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1 - Unmasked

Starfire cupped the base of the snow globe and twisted the sphere around. Tiny bits of delicate sparkling glitter drifted around the angel inside of the glass globe. She gave half a smile and watched the confetti ``snow" spiral past the angel's tiny wings, its iridescent hue glistening in the glow of her room. Indeed, it had been a very merry Christmas when Robin had given her such a remarkable gift.

The girl stopped smiling when she remembered those recent events.

Robin, battered, bleeding, and with more horror in his voice than ever before, had screamed at all of them. He had seen their enemy, he had fought them, but once again, terror had vanished leaving only its mark of fear upon Robin. They had to pin him down, even chain Robin to the bed to keep him from breaking out. And then, with a feverish rage, he had broken out just to track down Slade. Once again, Robin was trying to be the lone hero and bring down the enemy all by himself.

You grabbed my arm, Robin. You hurt me so much, she thought sadly. Why was it that when enemies fought, you could always find the strength to get up and fight . . . but when your own friends attacked you, shouted at you, accused you of doing wrong. . . you felt the pain slicing right through your body and heart into the depths of your soul?

Starfire's exhausted head landed on her pillow with a soft thump. Her beautiful red hair spread out all over the blanket like a shimmering bolt of bright crimson silk. Starfire curled up into a little ball on her bed and closed her eyes.

Robin, why do you wear a mask? Not the mask over your eyes; that I understand. You told me that once you had to conceal your identity from your enemies. But why do you mask your heart from us?

What secrets are inside of you that make you run away from us, just to fight Slade?

A slight tapping noise made Starfire bolt up from the pillows. ``Come in," she said softly. The door slid open slowly.

Robin stood in the doorway, his posture slumped and his expression masked as always. But the lines around his face, the way his mouth was twisted, they were all there to tell Starfire that he was not all at ease.

``Um, can I come in?" he asked in a voice that was not at all like the vehement angry tones he had been using until then. It sounded like another Robin was inside of him, a Robin that wanted to curl up into pillows and close all eyes and doors, just like Starfire had just felt. This was a Robin that was vulnerable, concerned, and even tinged with fear.

``Of course," she said softly, moving to one side of the bed and making room for him. The masked boy took a seat, the mattress springs creaking slowly as he sat opposite her. Starfire studied his face, now plastered with many bandages from his fights, the struggling hallucinations he had just dealt with.

Robin's gloved hand came to Starfire's arm but this time, he laid his hand against her skin ever so gently, like touching a piece of porcelain.

``I'm so sorry, Star," he said in a low voice that was trembling with emotion. ``I'm so sorry I lashed out at you like that."

``It was not your fault," she insisted at once. ``You and I did not know that only you could see Slade. You were angry-"

``-and stupid and rash and acting like an idiot," Robin finished for her, suddenly standing up and pacing the room as he always did in a whirlwind of thought. He shook his head and clenched his teeth.

``Darn," he muttered. ``I'm never going to learn from my mistakes. I just keep running in circles and hearing his voice, I never learn to listen to my team, I'm not acting like a leader should-"

``Robin, stop it!!" Starfire suddenly shrieked, throwing a pillow aside. Robin was startled to see her spring to her feet, her green eyes aglow with rage and her own hands clenched up. But somehow, the churning fire inside of her was different than his.

``Stop hurting yourself like this," she begged. ``Stop it, Robin, I beg of you. I know that some people are always chasing dreams, but you," here she walked straight up to his face with her hands clasped together tightly.

``But you are chasing your nightmares," Starfire said. Robin was startled to see her emerald pooled eyes now begin to fill with hot tears of frustration that would soon start to spill over.

``Do not do it, Robin," Starfire begged, her lower lip quivering. ``Do not chase your nightmares." She lowered her head, trying to hold back the crying tears that wanted to break out.

Robin realized that there was something he wanted to do, something he had wanted to do for a long time even before this madness of the chase inside of his mind had ever started. Starfire felt his gloved hand come gently under her chin and tilt her face up to his. His fingers felt warm, firm, and flexible. His breath had become calm and soft again. This was the Robin that she knew and the friend that she trusted.

``What can I do to you make you feel better, Star?" he asked.

A fleeting memory caught the end of Starfire's mind. Raven had gone into Robin's mind. She had been able to probe out the depths and realize that whatever was real to Robin was real enough to do harm.

``I wish to see as Raven did," she confessed. ``I wish to see inside of your mind, into your heart and your eyes." Robin's lips remained sealed and Starfire felt her heart take a deep plunge. Robin would never allow her to do that. She was asking for the impossible, to truly probe out his mind and into the utter darkness that lurked within him, that very black river of thirst that made him chase after Slade . . .

``Starfire, if you truly want to see the world through my eyes, then I will show you," he said wearily. His

answer caused Starfire's eyes to wide and her mouth to open in surprise. But his gaze was steady and he nodded.

“I trust you,” he admitted. “But I'm warning you; once you see inside of my mind,” here his voice grew into a forbidding warning of danger.

“You may not want me as your friend.”

“Robin, nothing you did can ever make me stop caring about you!” Starfire said in alarm. “Not even if you are angry with me,” she added, recalling his fierce outrage.

“Then, are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” Starfire answered quietly.

“You have to take off my mask, Star.”

Robin felt her small nimble hands come to his temples and the cloth of his mask slowly peel off. The night air blew against his skin around his eyes, and he knew she had taken off his mask.

Even in the warm glow of the lamp that night, Starfire felt another force tugging inside as she realized that she was looking at another Robin that night.

His eyes were the most brilliant dark sapphire blue she had ever seen. It was not the perfect serene blue of a summer's day or the azure of lapping water that swam in the oceans.

This was the darkest most elusive part of midnight wrapped up in his eyes that let out its small blue shifts of light when he turned his head. In them lay the shadows of fear, adventure, and mystery. Thin slits of lighter blue darted in between the darkness like small glints of clarity for his mind.

With his jet black hair, sharp features, and dark eyebrows, his eyes were the most dazzling jewels of light and dark that she had ever seen. Starfire was startled, entranced, spellbound, and even hypnotized by his eyes.

And then, Robin leaned his head even closer to hers, and the dark blue and shimmering green eyes locked into each other. His hands were laid upon hers and Starfire felt a calm, sinking feeling close over her body. She realized her own eyelids were getting heavy and she allowed them to close and her mind to dip into the darkness.

Starfire, this is my mind, these are my memories and thoughts.

This is the darkness I kept shutting out from you. This is the night you find the person behind the mask.

The bo staff smacked Robin under his jaw with a painful cracking noise. He was sent sprawling across the ground where he finally came to a stop. The only sound was his gasping for breath and the eerie sound of gears cranking in the massive room.

“Get up,” Slade commanded as he walked over to the boy. Robin did not move at all.

“I said, get UP!!!” Slade shouted this time. He grabbed Robin by his black hair and yanked the boy to his feet. At the pain of nearly having his scalp ripped off his head, Robin gave a yelp and barely managed to stand on his shaking knees.

Slade pointed the staff in his direction. “Again. We are going to repeat this stance until you have learned it correctly.”

“I can't,” Robin wheezed, his voice weak. Black and blue marks were raised on his face, a deep cut on his lower lip just barely healing where a thin trickle of blood was finally beginning to dry. Robin tried to moisten his chapped lips and parched gums, but there was little he could do to relieve the pain.

“It's past midnight. . . I can't think straight anymore,” he pleaded.

The masked man simply raised his wrist to which a peculiar remote was attached. He pointed to a massive screen where stats and scans of blood vessels were being displayed along with codes and names of the Titans. Robin looked on with a mortified look on his face.

“Then think about your friends bodies exploding with tiny probes, while they all writhe on the floor like sick bugs.” Slade said in a cold voice. The threat was enough to send Robin's adrenaline rushing through his body.

Robin grabbed his staff and charged. “You, you MONSTER!!!” he screamed at Slade, charging with utter rage. “I'm going to kill you!!!”

Robin continued to get blocked, but he kept lashing out at his master. The bo staffs smashed and pounding noises were heard. Robin's grip was giving out but he continued to push with the last bit of his strength. Even as his weapon was snapped in half by Slade's blow, Robin's clenched fists kept trying to attack him.

A powerful blow smashed into the back of Robin's head and the hand pressed down on his head, slamming his body against the ground. Thousands of tiny stars winked inside of his head.

“Down boy,” Slade said coolly, as if he was taming a puppy. Robin's face was burning with shame and anger. The cold metal of the uniform pinched against his skin and the leather was sticky against his arms and legs. Reeling from the nausea and sheer exhaustion, Robin took a gasp of breath. Slade locked his hands behind his back and took a slow long pace around the boy.

“Come now, Robin. I know you better than you know yourself. You had no problem with asking for my alliance as Red X. I was generous, I gave you my consent. I made you my apprentice. What more could you want?” the probing questions came with hints of mockery on Robin's ears.

Robin was lost for words. His mind and body were not allowed the freedom that he once had before. Now, for the sake of his friends, he had become a slave to his enemy and an enemy to his friends.

No longer the leader of a team, he was now being slowly worn down under Slade's iron grasp. Should

he so much as do the slightest thing to displease his master, the rest of the Titans would die a slow and painful death. And it would all be his fault. Robin knew that he could never forgive himself if anything happened to them at all.

And so, he put up with the training, the long hard hours of work in the dark, machine filled room. He put up with the smuggling and stealing of valuable weapons. He did it all and was now on his knees, trying to find some source of sanity in this personalized nightmare of his. The only thing that kept him going was that very threat of the Titans' annihilation which was intertwined with his own servitude to Slade.

``I never wanted this. . ." he whispered softly. But his voice was still capable of being heard.

``You wanted this, Robin. You are getting everything that you wanted; the ability to succeed in your powers, the chance to fight me one-on-one without distractions, and of course,`` here Slade waved a hand around the room.

``Of course your friends are not here to distract you."

There it was, the dose of bitter medicine forced down Robin's throat. He had shut out his friends in such haste, for he hadn't even regretted losing their trust. And now, he had to bear this suffering in silence without them.

``Somehow, I will stop you," Robin said in his mind... His shaking hands remained on the ground, his arms refusing to support his body for much longer. But he shook his head and refused to accept it. He had taken an oath to protect others, and that was just what he was attempting to do now. Robin would rather die right there and then at Slade's feet than lose all chances of ever rescuing the Titans.

``I will find a way to get them back."

Starfire opened her eyes and looked at Robin.

Robin's once deep blue eyes were now almost bright red from the salty tears and the dam was going to burst any second. The corners of his mouth were pulling down as much as his dark eyebrows and she could tell that he was screaming inside from the pain.

``Star. . . I . . . Just want him to pay for everything . . . I just want to get back at him . . ."

Without a second to spare, her own heart just broke into two and she fell against him, sobbing to her heart's content.

``I, I had no idea," she cried, the shining tears falling onto his red tunic and leaving small spots. No, Robin had horrors within him that she and none of the other Titans had known. Yes, Raven had struggled with her father and Starfire had come as a stranger to earth.

But even Cyborg and Beast Boy were once human and had lost control over their bodies. Robin was a different story altogether. He had been a slave to the person he hated most. This was something that he

would never be able to accept completely, no matter how hard he tried. And yet he had continued to suffer in silence and work as hard as he could to keep his team intact. She had seen in his mind all those sad songs that he had masked just to remain silent and aloof. Starfire was sure she would melt again if she had to see Robin suffering at the hands of Slade, being not just an apprentice, but a helpless puppet on strings just to save his friends.

Starfire's fingers curled into Robin's cape and her head rested on his shoulder as she continued to cry. Words were pushing out of her mouth, a river of emotions overflowing from inside.

“I am so sorry, Robin,” she sobbed. “Please, forgive me for being angry with you. I did not know how hard you have fought, how much you have lost. Forgive me, my friend,” she begged in pleading tones.

Robin felt the rush of emotions wash over his body. Mingling mixtures of fear and yet relief were running through his body. Suddenly, an odd quivering sensation was in Robin's eyes and his nose. A feeling thick as syrup, but sharp like needles was slowly oozing through his veins. It was spreading into his arms, his legs, his chest, and his mind.

No, not this. I haven't ever cried before since we became a team. Darn it, I'm the leader, I've got to fight it, I can't cry! I can't!

Starfire's arms remained firm and secure around Robin's neck. Her hand came to his own face, her thumb gently smoothing over his skin. Soft lips gently pressed to his cheek and the tears continued to fall like the bits of diamond-like dust in her snow globe.

How could one single girl make him feel so scared and yet so safe?

“Koriand'r is your real name. But I call you Starfire,” he thought to himself.

Then it occurred to Robin like a bolt of lightning lighting up the sky in the midst of a rushing thunderstorm:

Starfire . . .

Your name means light, and you have been my light all of this time.

Stars sparkle in the nighttime to light the way. Ice wraps around my heart and keeps me from you, but fire brings warmth and a glow that I see in your smile. You have been there to light my way. You can help me find myself when even I am lost in the darkness.

“You are my star . . . you are my light,” she heard him say in a voice that was beginning to break. Now the last of the mask had dissolved away and somebody else was talking.

Robin's arms wrapped around Starfire and he clung to her, the mingling pains spilling over and the tears finally seeping out of his eyes. Those were the very tears he had been struggling to fight for so long. He never wanted his enemy or his friend to see him cry, but now a great burden had been lifted from his heart. Now Robin was sobbing as well, the tears able to fall free with no mask at all over his eyes or his heart.

Starfire would never let him just go into the darkness, alone and forgotten. Even when they had to fight each other, she would not accept him as an enemy. She was light, she was there to help him find clarity when his anger overruled him. She was there to reach out and take his hand and find that light, that shimmering glow of stars in the sky and the warmth of a fire that roared away at howling snowstorms.

“Robin, no matter what Slade can find to scare you, no matter how much he wants to make you afraid,” Starfire continued to say. “He will never know that you will always be loved and you shall always be my friend.”

Her hand gently touched the battered but still existing R badge on his uniform. “Do not ever forget this, Robin . . .” Starfire begged him.

“I won't forget it,” he answered, his hand gently smoothing through her red hair. “Thank you, Star,” he said a voice that was praying for the both of them. “Thank you for being my light.”

The two Titans remained in that embrace for a long time. Many times they had saved each other in battle, but now, they were saving each other in a fight that raged within. Fear, anger, and tension had ripped them apart, but there were bonds that would not be broken.

There were ties not even Slade could sever, Robin knew that. His greatest enemy, his worst nightmare might be able to probe out his terror, but not be able to take Robin from his greatest happiness for anything in the world.

Robin, you are never alone . . .

~The End~