Listen To Me
by fillahsofytea

Summary

Tim Drake didn't socialize very much with The Team outside of mission work or training. It had been months but no one had gotten much background information on the latest Robin. He seems distant and uninterested in making friends on a personal level, but when his behavior starts changing everyone wants to know the reason why. The answer isn't a happy one.
Chapter 1

Tim Drake rarely hung out with The Team to engage in social activity outside of crime fighting. When he did, he'd stay to the corners of the room, working on cases from his laptop. His teammates had at first written him off as shy, and they would invite him to socialize only to give up as he'd sit in silence, never asserting himself despite their efforts to convince him to open up. After a month or so there was an unacknowledged agreement that the new Robin simply didn't want to socialize with them. After all, Tim—outside of being Robin—would only answer questions with as few words as possible and would only reveal information about himself that was absolutely necessary. He kept his distance, he showed little range of emotion, and worst of all (even as Robin) he looked like the poster boy of perfection. It was as if Tim could see all of their flaws and judged accordingly. So, those on the team stopped trying so hard to understand Tim and the little guy was never noticed as he sat halfway hidden in the shadows.

The missions were different entirely. Robin was confident, sociable, and never made any major mistakes. But no one is perfect.

... 

"Superboy, we need to get to the control room now!" Robin whispered urgently. He and Kon were pressed up against a wall, looking at the dozens and dozens and dozens of mechanical guards just around the corner. Kon was taken aback at the demand, a demand which contradicted Nightwing's direct orders to wait for the signal. As M'gann was on a mission in a different country, Robin used the classic communicator and said quietly,

"Our window of opportunity is closing—not waiting for backup." Tim was using his perfected "serious business" tone of voice. Kon grabbed Robin's shoulder before the idiotic-genius could run into a suicidal situation.

"Are you crazy?" Kon growled at him around the same time Nightwing's voice sounded on the communicator, quickly and half shouting,

"That's a negative, Robin. There are too many. Stand down."

Then Robin, who follows orders religiously, practically snarled back,

"I'm not asking for permission." Then, he turned and looked Kon in the eye and said, "Throw me across the room where the computers are. Now!"

In half a second Kon knew two things: One, Tim was doing the first act of rebellion since Kon had known him. Two, Tim had a plan and had the situation under control. Probably. Superboy scowled and immediately threw Robin as accurately as he could. He overshot a bit, though Robin would be swiss cheese either way now that the guards have seen him.
However, during his launch, Robin threw a bird-a-rang or whatever that stabbed the computers and shorted out the lights while about the same time he used his grappling hook to pull him up to the rafters. The backup generator kicked in a matter of seconds but it was too late, Robin had already disappeared the moment he had been spotted.

Chaos erupted as all the guards spread out to detain and most likely kill the intruder. A dark chuckle echoed throughout the room, more threatening than Dick's laughter back when Nightwing had been Robin.

"I'm sorry, am I being too much of a distraction for you?"

The word 'distraction' was originally going to be the signal to start fighting, and even though the battle was not in Kon's favor, he was about 3 seconds away from being discovered anyway so... He jumped and landed in the center of the room with a roar and was glad the guards were made of metal so he could use them as shields. He punched and kicked and avoided as many shots as he could. After a moment while he heard a chorus of "beep beep beep," someone suddenly pulled Kon by the waist as he felt the rafters collapse around him. He had closed his eyes and when he opened them he saw he was standing in one of the few spots in the room that the rafters had a big enough gap to spare him. It was barely big enough, but it worked as Kon had barely a scratch from the battle and the guards were effectively demolished. Tim was in the distance, snatching the flashdrive moments before it was supposed to teleport to a bigger operations base. He had a bad gash on his forearm where it seemed that one of the rafters had sliced him.

Tim smiled in victory but frowned as he looked at Kon and asked,

"Are you okay?" Tim was suddenly in front of Kon, trying to decipher whether or not Kon was injured on his left side.

"Robin, I'm fine." Though Kon indulged Tim to inspect his arm.

"No you're not. There's blood on the spike over here."

"Robin, that's your blood." Kon gestured to Tim's arm which now had soaked his entire left sleeve. Tim stared at the wound for about 8 seconds before speaking,

"Oh, sorry. Fuck."

Kon blinked a couple times then glared because Tim just apologized for an injury the dork got by assuring Kon's safety, and then Tim had actually said a curse word? Tim wouldn't even swear when The Team were mind-linked with one another, let alone cussing out loud.

Robin was always confident and poised, but suddenly Tim was hunched over, staring into space,
and his face... He looked so helpless and utterly broken like he lost all hope of being happy. Kon's
gut twisted painfully. Whatever was going on it felt very wrong. He had to ask,

"Robin, um, are you-"

"Superboy! Robin!" Bart yelled, speeding into the room, around the room, and around the two heroes before stopping, "Crash! You're alright! What did you guys even do? Everyone was totally freaking-"

"Robin!" Nightwing called, running full sprint, "Are either of you hurt?"

"Nothing that requires immediate treatment." Robin reported smoothly, hiding his arm with his cape.

"Yeah, 'm fine." Kon grumbled, looking away and felt a bit guilty that Tim's arm got shredded while Kon suffered what might as well be paper cuts.

"Okay. C'mon, you two can give your report on the way back to base." Nightwing said as he gained composure, "Hopefully you two have a good reason for all of this."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Batman and Robin go back to the Batcave. Bruce is a good person.

The ride in the Batmobile back to the cave was tense and uncomfortable. Tim occasionally glanced at Batman who determinedly glared ahead at the road. Bruce had refused to let Robin return to the Batcave via Zeta Beam and Tim expected a lecture on being more careful and "you could've ripped your arm off," things like that. Thinking back, Tim felt guilt gnawing its way to the front of his mind. The entire point of taking the persona of Robin was to keep Batman sane, and Tim was sure that embarrassing Batman by disobeying orders would only stress Bruce out. After all, Jason died partially by being reckless. But Tim thought his plan out, honestly! Okay, maybe his plan hinged slightly too much on the hope that the guards would be slow to start shooting and that Kon could handle himself for a few minutes as Tim strategically set up the bombs. Tim got the encrypted flash drive and Kon was in perfect health, so the risk paid off, right? He looked up at Bruce and anxiously wondered about the consequences of the situation. Finally, they arrived at the Batcave and upon getting out of the car Bruce took off his cowl, sighing.

"Robin, go ask Alfred to restitch your arm."

Alfred was there waiting and didn't look at all surprised when Tim showed off his latest injury.

"Your adventures today went successfully then, Master Timothy?" He said dryly but kindly, "I assume you've already concocted a story to explain to your parents the current state of your arm?"

"I have, but it's September. I'll wear long sleeves and they won't notice a thing." Tim gave him his best reassuring smile. Alfred frowned at the arm he was stitching up. Then, the older man didn't say anything but Tim saw the hesitation in his stitching process as he peered closely at the torn skin. Tim felt the creep of paranoia that Alfred was about to mention how his wound was actually from the night before and had reopened during the mission. Sure, the rafters had made the cut much worse, but originally, well, his father had a bit too much to drink last night. Apparently he and mother got into yet another fight.

"You!" Jack had stumbled toward him and grabbed the collar of Tim's shirt, "Why can't you be useful for once in your life and tell your bitch of a mother to get the fuck over herself!" When Tim didn't answer right away Jack dragged him to the kitchen. Sure, the grip could be easily broken but Tim's father wasn't quite drunk enough to forget if Tim had suddenly learned self-defense tactics. There was no point risking Robin's identity through such an impulsive act. Jack pulled out a knife and Tim knew better by now than to show any fear when the knife was pressed against his forearm. His father slightly slurred.

"Now, tell me you're going to go upstairs to your whore mother and give her what she deserves."

Tim knew his mother could hear him and while his father was a violent drunk, Janet was far worse. If Tim had to choose to be on the bad-side of one of them, he'd take the drunk over the sociopath every time.

"Well?" Jack slammed Tim head onto the dinner table, holding him in a way where he could be eye
level with the knife. Tim had tried to find the right answers to such questions for years before finally figuring out he should just keep quiet. After a few seconds of strained silence, Janet's quiet and cold laugh carried down from upstairs. She knew Tim would never jeopardize the relationship he and mother worked out. She travels around the world and doesn't actively abuse him as long as he properly takes care of affairs at home. By now Jack's face was flushed a violent red and as Tim felt the knife burning he was almost surprised that Jack would actually hurt him in such an obvious place. Faintly, Tim wondered if the people at school would see his arm and say it was self-harm.

Tim was sucked back into the present as someone touched his shoulder and he flinched away from the unexpected contact.

"Tim?" Bruce's eyebrows creased together in concern though he didn't remove his hand from Tim's shoulder, "What's wrong?" Great, now Bruce must think Tim isn't physically fit to train as Robin due to his injury.

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about dinner tonight with my parents. They'll be leaving on Friday so I want to spend as much time with them as possible, y'know?" Actually, this was the first time Tim's parents had really been home since he became Robin so Tim actually wasn't lying this time when he said his parents were back from their trips overseas. He wasn't even lying about dinner scheduled. Bruce was still staring at him so Tim continued,

"Look, I'm sorry for not following Nightwing's orders today and getting hurt. Don't worry, I'll write a full report on what happened and I'll double down on training and casework. Really though, there was no serious damage done. We obtained our objective and I never would have risked Superboy-"

"Robin." Bruce cut in, "Tim. Yes, you made a riskier move than usual but you did good work today. Occasionally Nightwing plays it too safe and underestimates you. Trust me, if he were in your shoes he would have done the same thing." Tim blushed at the praise, unable to keep from smiling. The hand on his shoulder suddenly felt warm and safe instead of threatening. He wished he had a camera to capture this moment so he'd never forget it. What the hell, was Tim getting teary-eyed? God, his parents would be so mad if Tim cried around them. Would Batman get mad, too? Tim relaxed his face and said,

"I should... probably get going." He didn't want to go, not when Bruce was looking at him as if Tim could perhaps be good for something. Maybe Bruce was simply picturing Jason, but Tim could imagine that for a moment someone legitimately thought the invisible-nobody-Drake-kid was someone who was worth noticing. Bruce all too soon removed his hand and replied,

"Yes, go get some rest tonight."

"Well, sure. Only Bruce Wayne is allowed to work until he drops." Tim grinned. Alfred handed him his backpack and gave a little sigh,

"He most certainly is not, Master Timothy. However, he unfortunately lacks the ability to abide by such a rule. I do hope you'll have more common sense on the matter."

Tim laughed and waved goodbye as he made his way to a Zeta Beam to teleport close to home. He tried not to think about the disappointment in his parents' faces when they remembered how useless he was. It was going to be a long night.
Nightwing was staring at a picture of the original team when Superboy walked in.

"I miss him, too." Kon spoke up, looking at Wally's goofy smile. Dick wasn't at all startled at Kon's sudden appearance.

"We all know the risks." He replied with a voice tinged with grief.

"That doesn't make it any easier."

"I know."

A comfortable silence fell between them as they thought about the early days when they all played on the beach, Wally and Artemis were both beginning to fall in love, and the pride everyone felt everytime they proved they were more than sidekicks. So many of their friends had fallen since then. They all had lost someone and they all did their best to make sure they wouldn't lose more loved ones whenever possible. Dick was the first one to break the silence (of course),

"Tim seemed off today." Nightwing attempted to be casual, but he must be worrying about his little brother. It had only been about two years since Jason was killed by the Joker. The pain and guilt of that death still weighed on Dick, and he refused to let another one of his little brothers die. But Tim wasn't Jason. Tim was generally more rational and thought things through. He was careful, maybe at times too careful. Tim's behavior could always be predicted and dependable. Now that the baby bird had turned 14, maybe Tim was struggling with hormones and teenage angst. God knows Dick went through his share of phases. His friends were usually nice enough not to remind him of the ridiculous collar on his original Nightwing suit. Nevertheless, Tim seemed... particularly stressed.

Kon grunted in reply to Dick's comment. Dick took that as permission to continue talking,

"Has he mentioned to you anything that was bothering him?"

"No. Why would he talk to me? As far as I know he doesn't stick around to chat with anyone."

"Yeah, but you're his best friend." And at that Kon had to pause to obsorb that information.

"What." He said flatly.

"Well, he talks about you more than he talks about any of the others." Dick started quoting Tim, "'Then Kon came over and just outright told everyone to shut up because both teams were inadequate to play in a professional setting;'' You should've seen the look on Garfield's face! Did you know Kon can solve difficult equations nearly as fast as a computer? I think people underestimate his intelligence way too often.'"

Kon's cheeks turned a tad red and he shuffled his feet awkwardly,

"Well, he doesn't really talk to me much so..."

"Hm. Still, I don't suppose you could whelm my nerves by doing me a super favor?"

"A super favor? You think that pun will make want to help you?"

"I think my sparkling personality will make you want to help me. But if that fails then do it for Tim's sake."
"... What do you want me to do?"

... 

Kon stood in front of the Drake residence with a container filled with oatmeal cookies. Dick admitted that he wasn't sure what kind of cookies Tim preferred but if they were made by Alfred then Kon figured they'd be well-received. He was almost tempted to swipe one for himself. Cookies aside, Kon knew he had the address for the house correct, but even going as far as putting on a button up shirt, he still felt very much under dressed. It wasn't that the neighborhood was wealthy, after all he'd been to the Wayne manor before and the manor never felt like... a dollhouse or a housing advertisement. He just didn't quite fit the role that going to this house suggested of him. But being a hero meant overcoming cowardice. He rang the door bell.

A man with a bit of a gut and dressed like he was fresh from a business meeting gave Kon a fake smile while opening the door.

"Hello. Can I help you with something?" The man asked in a tone that spoke 'I don't want whatever you're selling.'

"Hello, sir." Kon spoke using the manners he learned from Ma Kent over the last 5 or so years, "I'm Conner, I'm a friend of Tim's from class. Uh, my mother made these cookies for him as a thank you for tutoring me."

Before the man, probably Tim's father, could respond a woman appeared in the doorway.

"How nice," And she gave the most creepiest and uninviting smile Kon had ever seen. The Joker should take lessons from her, "Tim always has such trouble making... appropriate friends." Did she just give Kon a look of disdain? "I'd invite you in but I'm afraid you've come at a bad time. He's become quite sick with some disease, probably caught at school. You know how it is."

Weird, Tim had been fine after the mission aside from his arm. Kon used his super hearing and heard someone puking upstairs. Huh. Maybe Tim had been off today because he felt sick?

"Oh," Kon offered them the container, "Well, could you give these to him and tell him I stopped by?"

"Of course." Then as soon as they took the cookies they shut the stupidly expensive door in Kon's face. They hadn't even introduced themselves! After a moment Kon used his super hearing again and heard the woman say,

"Throw those away. God knows what filthy hands touched them." Then there was the sound of Alfred's homemade-with-love cookies being dumped in the trash. Well, Tim's parents were officially assholes. Kon would rather live with Lex Luthor than be stuck living in this artificial hell hole. Luthor would know better than to throw away Alfred's cookies. He doubted that Tim's mom was going to mention Kon stopping by as well. Kon fell back to the familiar feeling of brooding, which was most likely his default emotion or something. He hoped Tim would get better soon.

No one on The Team saw Robin for the next two days. When Kon told Dick about the cookies, the acrobat didn't seem too surprised by the story. Apparently Janet wasn't known for her compassion. Nightwing's lack of concern over that fact angered Kon even more. Superboy tried to not to think about it too much, and Tim showed up again that Saturday.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter is so short. It's late and I'm tired.

Saturday was a training day followed by the general socialization. Honestly, nothing that interesting happened. Yet, Kon payed extra attention to Tim. As usual Tim didn't really talk, nodding or shaking his head in response to the couple questions asked of him. Now, Dick had said Kon was Tim's best friend so Kon naturally looked closely for any proof to that claim.

"What? Blue, how could you say that? I thought we were amigos!" Bart exclaimed dramatically, "SB, tell Jaime and Cassie that I could too beat Sonic the Hedgehog in a race around the world."

Step 1. Give an exasperated sigh that Bart dragged him into this pointless discussion. Step 2. Look to someone else for help. Kon looked around and made eye contact with Barbara, but she smirked and kept on walking towards the main lounge. Great, all the older heroes had left him with the freshmen. Typical.

"Well, Kid, I don't know what to tell you. At first I thought the right thing to say is 'Sonic would crush you,' but my Lex Luthor half wants to lie and say you would win in the end," Superboy spoke gruffly. At that point Kon would have gotten off the couch and left Bart to feel the mode, not to mention suffer the laughter from Cassie, Jaime, and Garfield, but Kon heard a little huff of amusement come from Tim who was hiding behind a laptop as usual. Kon made the briefest moment of eye contact and the corners of Tim's mouth flicked up ever so slightly. Then, after listening carefully, Kon could hear Tim's heart beating a little faster. For whatever reason Superboy felt extremely proud, not unlike the time Superman gave Kon an official Kryptonian name. It was Kon who made Robin smile when no one else could. (batfamily excluded) Kon couldn't help but smile when he said,

"Hey, Robin. People were starting to worry when you didn't show up again yesterday." In other words: Are you okay since you've probably never have taken a day off in your life until last week? Tim frowned and answered,

"Just a little sick. I'm fine now." But Tim didn't sound fine. He sounded like he swallowed a cheese grater or tried to shove swords down his throat or decided this morning to try to get a swab sample of his vocal chords using tree bark. It was bad.

"Oh, dude. Your voice." Garfield didn't bother hiding how disturbed he felt. Tim's eyebrows furrowed slightly in response and he gave a shrug no doubt meaning, 'I've had worse. Don't worry about it.'

"Ti- um, Robin, I have some cough drops in my bag if you'd like-" Cassie said but stopped when Tim vigorously shook his head no. Wondergirl and Robin didn't date long for reasons neither of them discuss, but whatever the reason, Cassie still seemed to get hurt when Robin rejected her offers to help him.

"I'm fine. Really." Then Tim slid off the chair he was on and moved to the next room.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Basically, Kon attempts to be better friends with Tim.

After a minute or so Kon followed Tim into the modest sitting room. The lighting was dimmer than in the other area. It was almost romantic the way the chairs were set up by a bookshelf, a warm glow illuminating the room in such a cozy way. Tim looked like the finishing touches to complete the look, small and comfortable in a chair much too large for him, having had abandoned his laptop in favor of a Sherlock Holmes novel.

Kon wasn't exactly the biggest fan on reading but he plucked a book at random from the bookshelf and sat in the chair diagonal from Tim who hadn't looked up at him yet. Flipping to a page in the middle of the book, Kon tried to figure out exactly what he wanted to say. What's a good way to start a conversation? Should he start talking about the lower rates of crime in Gotham or something? Would it be weird to invite him to see a movie? Kon already knew his real identity, so they'd have no trouble hanging out, right? Thankfully, Tim spoke first,

"I didn't know you enjoyed reading Swedish books on cats." Tim's amusement was evident even with his raspy voice. Then Kon felt like an idiot for not only choosing such ridiculous reading material but that he was holding the book upside-down. Before Kon could come up with a semi-witty retort, Tim added, "Did you... want to tell me something?" Was it just Kon or did Tim sound hopeful?

"Uh." Damn. Why was Kon so awkward so suddenly? Tim looked a little deflated so Kon just blurted out the first thing he could think of-

"Your mom's a bitch."

"..."

"Also, would you like to hang out sometime?"

"..."

"I know you're still pretty sick so we can talk later when you're feeling better." Kon figured he should quit before he could say anything worse. He ungracefully put the book back and was just out the door when he felt his phone vibrate in his back pocket. Not feeling much like talking to anyone, Kon checked his phone anyway.

Tim: She is, I would, and I can type just as quickly as I can talk for future reference. If you'd like I could message you in Swedish.

He grinned and texted back.

Kon: I guess I can put up with English for now. You sound like you gargled razors this morning btw. Maybe drink some tea or something? There's no way Alfred doesn't know some miracle healing tea.
Tim: Oh, of course he does. But my throat will be better in a few days, there's no point in bothering him.

Something felt off about that statement, but as Kon sat down at a table and munched on chips he had plucked from the overhead cabinets, he decided to let it go.

Kon: So D told me your parents left Friday? I could swing by tomorrow after helping w/ the Kent farm and we could watch Netflix.

Tim: As eager as I am to Netflix and Chill with the legendary hero Superboy, I'm behind in homework and casework and you've pointed out that I sound about as pleasant as an unfortunate accident with a lawnmower, a flock of geese, and an oboe.

Kon nearly choked on the tortillas chips he forgot he was eating. He never realized how much of a sense of humor Tim had. Robin was nearly always serious business outside of banter with their enemies. No one probably knew this side of Tim (again excluding batfamily) Karen passed by Kon and paused with a knowing look,

"I've seen that dopey smile before. Look, I've known you both for a long time, and I swear, you and M'gann either need to stop fighting or break up and move on. This on and of thing you two have goin' on isn't healthy." Kon opened his mouth to ask her what she was talking about but she wasn't finished,

"Yeah, I know it feels like sugar and sunshine now but remember what I said if you two break up again. Your friends love you and no one around here wants ya'll heartbroken."

"M'gann and I aren't back together."

"Mhm. Yeah, okay. I'll just keep on walkin' and you can keep on giggling at your phone like you do."

She left Kon feeling confused but oddly unconcerned as he reread Tim's last message.

Kon: We don't have to talk. I can sit and watch TV while you work.

It was a few minutes until Tim answered.

Tim: Okay.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Kon goes over to Tim's house to chill and watch Netflix.

Tim POV

Oh god, oh god. What was he thinking? Tim paced around in his living room on Sunday morning. There was a light sprinkle of rain outside and that was the equivalent of blue skies considering it was Gotham. He didn't even mean to send "okay" to Kon's offer to visit! He immediately typed it before deliberating whether or not Kon was actually interested in coming over, because he probably was just trying to be polite. At the same time, Tim wanted Kon as a friend... Although Mother always insisted that people around Tim's age always found him annoying when they spent an extended amount of time talking with him. But Kon said they didn't have to talk. But Tim really didn't want Kon to learn to hate him. Being Robin was one thing but Tim Drake simply didn't deserve friends, especially someone as super -heh- as Kon. After deciding it was better to decline as was appropriate, Tim accidentally pressed 'send' instead of the backspace key! He spent most of last night tidying his room before wondering if it was too clean and then strategically messing it back up. He made sure the fridge was stocked with several different beverages despite the fact Tim didn't particularly enjoy at least half of them. He scrubbed and rescrubbed the bathroom since with Tim's luck Superboy probably developed a new super smell power. He checked his phone about every 2.5 minutes expecting Kon to cancel.

"What do people even do when they 'hang out'?!" Tim asked the empty room.

The doorbell rang and he actually jumped at the sudden noise. He needed to get his head in the game. He could do this. He didn't even have to carry a conversation. He would not fuck this up.

Kon POV

Tim opened the door and gave a small wave, stepping aside to let Kon in. The inside was even worse than the outside in terms of feeling like a home. Everything was placed perfectly aligned and it was all brand new, nothing was worn in the slightest. There was no dust or scuffs on the floor or plethora of family photos. No wonder Tim did everything with perfection. His house was eerily perfect. It was just... unnatural. Kon was an actual clone made in a lab and he thought the place was unnatural. His phone buzzed. Tim looked at him expectantly and Kon remembered Tim's sore throat.

Tim: My room is upstairs if you'd like to hang out there.

"Yeah, that's fine." Kon said out loud and followed Tim through the house. The more he saw the more he felt uneasy.

Tim: The bathroom is two doors down from my room and the kitchen is downstairs to the right if you'd like a drink or food.

They stopped in what Kon knew to be Tim's room. It was the only corner of the house that felt like someone lived here. There was a TV on the dresser and a camera set in a bag on the nightstand.
Clothes were hanging on a chair by a desk, but very neatly so. What looked to be homework was scattered all over the place on his desktop, and his backpack was on its side at the foot of his bed.

Luckily, Kon was paying enough attention to what Tim was doing to catch the TV remote tossed to him. Netflix was already pulled up so Kon decided to start watching "NCIS" since Tim might get a kick at laughing at the poor imitations of detective work. His quiet host was sitting on one end of the bed that was against the wall, already clicking away on a laptop. Kon took his place on the other end of the bed, and Kon spent a while appreciating what Tim's face was like without a mask or sunglasses. Tim must have sensed him staring because suddenly a set of blue eyes were staring back in confusion. Wow, those eyes are very blue. And his eyelashes are the perfect frame for them. Was there nothing about Tim that wasn't perfect? He was a teen and yet his skin was so unblemished and smooth... Maybe his eyes were only this blue because of the lighting. Kon leaned in closer. No, now his eyes were just a deeper shade like sapphire.

"Kon." Tim croaked. His cheeks were rosier than before, apparently uncomfortable with so much attention. Understandable, really, since Kon could be intense at times.

"S'rry" Kon mumbled an apology and focused himself on the crime show. He heard Tim resume typing.

After about four episodes Kon's mouth felt unusually dry. He grumbled something about getting a drink and headed to the kitchen.

The kitchen fridge had plenty to choose from, including several fruit juices he had never tried. Being indecisive, Kon thought water was a safe choice. He had almost started filling up a cup with that classic H2O before changing his mind and wanting icy water. There were plenty of ice cube trays in the freezer but Kon chose the one that had already been partially used.

After the first clink of ice into his cup he noticed an odd chemical smell. Was it coming from the ice cubes? Sniffing the tray he determined that the ice cubes were a mix of a chemical, most likely bleach, and water. He curiously licked one of the ice cubes. Yep, definitely bleach in them. Was this a part of a science experiment Tim was working on for school and he completely forgot they were still in there. I'm sorry.

He put the ice cubes in the cup and filled it up with water anyway, and he headed back upstairs. Kon wanted to see Tim's reaction to the ice. What if Tim didn't even know about the bleach and his housekeeper was trying to poison the little guy?

Kon walked in and plopped on Tim's bed without a word. He tried acting casual but made sure the ice cubes in his glass clinked as he sat down.

Tim's head shot up and he snatched the cup from Kon's hands. Well, Tim definitely knew about the bleach.

"Everything okay?" Kon asked knowing that it very obviously was not okay. Tim's heart was racing and his face flickered with fear before going into the blank bat-expressionless face. Kon had seen that sort of fear before and his gut told him something weird was going on. Tim set the water down, away from Kon and began texting quickly.

Tim: Yeah, no. The ice cubes in the freezer have pretty concentrated bleach in them. It was a project I was working on for school and I completely forgot they were still in there. I'm sorry.
Ah, yes. The old "school assignment" excuse. 9 out of 10 times a person could get away with that, but this was the other 1 time.

"No harm done, I didn't drink any. I'll just grab some Coke or Pepsi." Kon did a much better job hiding what he was really feeling unlike Tim whose smile in response looked strained but relieved.

People didn't often rely on Kon for the more mentally challenging tasks as Kon was more known for being the muscle of the group, but being friends with the ward of the World's Greatest Detective taught Kon a few things over the past 6 years. He had a very basic knowledge of how to remove fingerprints from objects. It was simple: Get a fine powder, a brush, and some tape. Tim's parents were archeologists and the house had all objects put in their proper place. It took Kon less than a minute to sneak and find Jack's office which had tape, chalk, and a brush used for gently dusting ancient artifacts stolen from the native people. Spending his whole life on secret missions which required stealth, yes, Kon could manage to sneak around a little while Tim was upstairs probably trying to concentrate on his casework again. Kon could hear the click clack of typing and the TV streaming "NCIS" so he was doing well so far.

He crushed the chalk into a fine powder and dusted the ice cube trays, using the tape to lift the prints. White colored prints meant Kon needed to have a black background to stick the tape on. Luckily, Kon always wore black Tshirts so soon the inside of Kon's shirt was nearly completely covered in tape with white fingerprints. As soon as Kon was done he cleaned up the mess, put everything back, grabbed a Coke, and hurried upstairs.

Tim was still sitting cross-legged on the bed, so caught up in his head that he didn't notice Kon taking a couple minutes longer than necessary to get a drink. Kon mentally congratulated himself on getting away with something under the eyes of a bat-trained hero. He also made a mental note to apologize to Dick for scoffing when the original Robin insisted learning to lift fingerprints would be important in the future.

For the next couple hours Kon and Tim sat in companionable silence. They'd occasionally glance at each other and appreciated each other's company. Of course, Kon didn't want to overstay his welcome. When the credits started rolling at the end of the next episode Kon carefully placed his hand on Tim's shoulder to get his attention. Tim sort of tensed up at the contact as if he wasn't used to it, which maybe was true. Kon didn't like thinking of that and instead said,

"It's been fun, but I should probably get back to Kansas. Next time I come over and you feel better, I'll bring you a slice of Ma Kent's famous apple pie. If you don't like pie, trust me, you'll like hers. I'd bet she'd love it if you visited me at the farm sometime."

Tim's eyes lit up and he gave Kon the most beautiful smile the half-kryptonian had ever seen. Kon made up his mind in that moment to get Tim to smile like that more often.

Tim: I believe you. That sounds great :)

Kon grinned and mussed up Tim's hair.

"I'll see you soon." Kon promised then got a strange feeling in his gut again. He absently brushed his thumb over Tim's jawline and softly said, "Stay safe, okay?" And he stared into those crystalline blue eyes of Tim's, trying to get across how serious Kon felt about this. It was an admittedly intimate sort of moment, which Tim was clearly not used to. Kon just needed in that instance to convey how much he wanted Tim's health and safety to be intact, because this dork deserved more than the pretense of a perfect family. He shouldn't be cooped up alone in an empty dollhouse when there are so many who'd enjoy his company. Most of his socializing was probably with Batman and that couldn't be too pleasant.
Tim's breathed hitched as he fumbled for his phone. His face was pretty red at this point.

Tim: No problem. Thanks for stopping by.

...

Kon was glad when he got to base that he could take his shirt off as tape had been lightly tickling his back for hours now. The computer had an excellent fingerprint scanning system, and on the days Nightwing and Batman were in a petty argument, Dick often boasted that it was more efficient than the Batcomputer.

Of course Kon hadn't expected results quite so quickly with so many fingerprints to process, but it turns out all of the fingerprints were from the same person. Janet Drake was apparently the only person to touch that ice cube tray. If Kon's theory of Tim's throat damaged by bleach was correct, then Tim's mother was the one who filled the tray with bleach and gave the ice to Tim.

Okay first, that's fucked up. Sure, Janet was extremely unpleasant but giving her own child poisonous and potentially fatal chemicals? Maybe she didn't realize it was bleach somehow...? Tim certainly knew about the bleach when Kon was there... and... and... Kon needed an actual detective in this area. Whatever happened with Tim that week officially needed to be investigated. After all, best friends don't let other best friends suffer at the hands of horrible parents.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Kon more or less worries about Tim's home life.

Kon debated with Dick on the ice trays found in Tim's uninviting house. Nightwing seemed tired from his job at the police force today, which was impressive as the energetic acrobat didn't tire out so easily. If Kon wasn't so frustrated with him, he would be concerned.

"Alfred himself did a DNA swab of Tim's throat a couple days ago and determined it had been a sort of virus his immune system was struggling against. It's not so surprising considering we both know how Robin works a little too hard at times, forgetting things like eating and sleep."

Actually, Kon didn't know that about Tim and it didn't do anything to "whelm" him as Nightwing had kindly instructed him to do.

"But," Kon argued, "Only Janet's fingerprints were on the trays, and I dusted all of the trays. Very thoroughly."

"Which is oddly obsessive of you though I'm happy you care so much and even happier you actually listened to me when I tried to teach you about detective work."

"Why aren't you more concerned? He's like your little brother! A Robin whose mom leads him to his death- Where on Earth have I heard that one before?" And Kon immediately regretted saying that as Dick's face looked hurt and angry.

"Yes, his mom is a really shitty parent, but I would know if there was anything more to that! If I didn't know then surely Bruce or Babs would. Robin knows what abuse is and how to recognize it, he would tell us if he was in such a situation. Did it ever occur to you that maybe he used gloves when messing around with substances such as bleach?" Nightwing couldn't accept a reality where Tim had been abused for so long without his knowledge.

"But Janet's-"

"So, she touched the trays! Maybe she made the same mistake you did and almost used the ice cubes in her drink. I don't know, ask Tim for a more detailed explanation if you're really that worried about it."

Kon was still frustrated, but maybe... Maybe Kon was too paranoid about everything. Tim had perhaps looked so scared that Kon got a little overprotective. After all, humans were fragile and he might have been biased thinking of Lex Luthor, or Artemis's father... or Kaldur's father... Why were superheroes' parents either dead or evil?

...

Two weeks later it was officially October. Kon and Tim had been around each other more, a lot of the time not even talking. The other members of The Team were starting to give Kon strange faces when they saw him and Tim together. Whenever he thinks he has a handle on social interactions, people once again behave in confusing ways. Tim mostly ignored them, or so it appeared. The little
Robin surprised him occasionally by being far more observant than Kon. He learned quickly that Tim could compartmentalize incidents far better than anyone else on the Team. One day Kon asked him about it.

"How do you do that?" Kon asked suddenly, breaking the silence as they both sat quietly in the library.

"Do what?" Tim's face showed honest confusion.

"That! Bart zooms by and you're all I'm Robin and I don't have time for this childish exercise of having fun. Any moment not working is a moment you're disappointing your ancestors. I had mastered the art of brooding before I left my mother's womb. But then everyone leaves and you're more like, 'I'm shy but I will destroy you through wit so sharp you'd think I'm Edward Scissorhands. Oh, you say you're funny? Prepare for burns so severe you won't be allowed near Martians for a week.' You flip some sort of switch that keeps everyone out."

"Hm. Everyone but you? How flattering. And they say I'm the narcissist." Tim half joked.

"Oh yeah? Who says you're a narcissist?"

"Jaime did yesterday, he said that I'm narcissistic and I'm hanging around you because you're willing to constantly compliment me. Then he said my attitude will rub off on you and you too will start thinking you're better than the rest of the Team." Tim fiddled with his hands nervously, "I think he feels like I'm stealing you from him or something? Maybe you should spend more time with them."

Immediately, Kon was angry.

"You heard him say that?" And Tim nodded,

"Sometimes when I sit in one place for a long time people forget I'm there or they think I can't hear with my earbuds in. Sometimes people think I don't care or don't have the emotional capacity to feel insulted or hurt, not necessarily from the Team but in general." Tim looked like a puppy who couldn't understand why he'd been kicked. He snapped out of that funk and hurriedly said, "Not that I'm complaining, I'm okay with it, really. I get why they'd think things like that and it's my own fault for making others feel excluded-" he saw Kon's clenched fists, "And I've said too much. I'm sorry. I'll shut up now."

At first Kon couldn't believe Blue Beetle would say something like that, but then Kon remembered openly talking about how kind and intelligent Robin could be. Kon had been a bit excited to become such good friends with the enigma that was Tim Drake, so yeah, he might have... made his other friends feel excluded to some degree by talking about Tim. Not to mention, Kon himself had thought Tim was snobby before getting to know him. A lot of it was jealousy over how "perfect" Tim came across.

It came to his attention that Tim was afraid Kon was irritated not toward Jaime but toward Tim himself. Kon was upset for ever believing Tim's supposed egotism when Tim so readily believed in the good in others while judging himself so harshly.

Superboy was not the kind of person who went around hugging people as Nightwing often did. However, he saw Tim begin to retreat into a persona unaffected by verbal abuse and he rushed in without thinking.

Tim froze and blushed when Kon forced him into a full-on hug, but Kon didn't retreat because his
best friend needed physical forms of affection like everyone else. Tim shouldn't feel guilty for feeling upset over the insensitive things said about him. Kon knew what it was like to feel awkward and be interpreted as unapproachable when in actuality he was shy more than anything. Slowly, Tim relaxed and hugged back, which Kon labeled as a success. They both didn't want to let go because it was nice to just breathe together and feel safe. Kon wanted to remember how soft Tim's hair felt and how he smelled like books and soap. Kon finally whispered,

"I'm not going to end our friendship because other people get jealous. You know that, right?" Then Tim muffled back,

"It's fine if you do. I know I annoy people around my age when I talk too much."

"What? No you don't. Where the hell did you get that idea from?"

"My mother and father. It's why I was never allowed to play with the other children at school or at dinner parties."

Kon felt a cold pit in his stomach, in a way a pain worse than Kryptonite. Tim's parents had basically brainwashed their child into thinking he's automatically inferior to the rest of humanity. So, is that why Tim stays away from everyone? He feels he's not... worthy enough to around them? No, no, no, no, Tim. Timothy Jackson Drake. How did you end up being such a talented, strong, and wonderful person growing up with such awful people? Kon felt a deep hatred for Janet and Jack Drake. He wanted to say something, anything to make Tim understand that what he's been told all his life by his parents is false.


"Did you need something?" He asked, trying not to sound hostile. He liked M'gann, but right now he was trying to fix Tim's self-esteem and childhood.

"Batgirl found alien coding on tablets that match the language found on the flash drive. She thinks it might be a way to translate the language, a sort of Rosetta Stone."

"Let me guess, we don't have the tablets but the enemy does?" Tim said and was absorbed back into bat-serious mode.

"Yep. Time to suit up."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Tim leads a mission that goes badly. Enter Ra's al Ghul.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the comments and support you guys!

Luckily, Robin wasn't paired with Superboy for the mission. Tim wasn't sure if he could stay as focused if Kon was around right now since ohmygodSuperboyhuggedhim. So, Aqualad designated the groups and gave Robin leadership of the Gamma Squad with Beast Boy, Blue Beetle, and Bumblebee. Part of Tim thought Batgirl should lead the squad if only to follow the trend of names starting with "B" but it wasn't his place to say. Their mission: Search and gather intel. There were at least three tablets spread across the globe. One was in Australia, one was in the lower region of South America, and it wasn't certain where the last tablet was. Alpha Squad and Beta Squad were targeting the two known areas whereas Gamma Squad was searching on more of a hunch. Since there were rumors of Light activity in the caves on the western coast of Africa, and recent reports of odd energy shortages in one area in particular, Gamma was sent to investigate. It was a simple, easy, and uneventful task. At least at first.

"Blue, what's wrong?" Bumblebee asked Jaime. The whole group had been walking through a tunnel for quite a while seeing nothing suspicious whatsoever. Blue Beetle had stopped walking suddenly and looked around, alarmed.

"I- I'm not sure. Something is off here." And then Jaime was supposedly talking to someone else for a moment, "What danger? There's nothing here- What does that even mean?" It was always weird when he talked to seemingly no one.

"Danger?" Robin wanted him to elaborate, but there was no need as the ground violently rumbled beneath them and in that instant the floor collapsed. It was a long fall to the ground so Robin was fortunate everyone else on the squad could fly. Blue Beetle caught him about halfway down since Bumblebee and Beast Boy--Beast Boy transformed into a bat--were not strong enough. Landing on the ground, Robin gave Blue a curt nod of thanks as they observed the new scene around them.

"Well, someone is building somethin' down here." Bumblebee noted the caverns supported by metal beams. The tunnels ahead were poorly lit as wherever the squad fell, they had landed in an area only in the beginning stages of construction. The structure keeping the roof stable had been placed rather carelessly hence the collapse when the squad walked over it. No one seemed to have even noticed the cave in if anyone was here at all.

"Where do you think those tunnels lead to?" Beast Boy asked conversationally. Robin started walking, saying,

"One way to find out. Stay quiet and stay alert. Let's go,"
It felt like ages until they came across a heavy-duty door. Blue made a move to blast down the door before Bumblebee stopped him with a reminder.

"Sonic cannons might not be the best idea right now."

Blue huffed but backed off since his method was obviously needlessly violent and impulsive, but in his defense they'd been walking around doing basically nothing for at least an hour already. Perhaps he'd been spending a little too much time with Bart. Robin went up to the keypad by the door and unlocked it in seconds. The security was pathetic, honestly. That's why Tim and the others were not expecting a large room full of men with guns and... were those ninjas? Those were ninjas in the distance. Hundreds of people were gathered below. Some were moving pieces of heavy tech, some were loading and unloading packages from cargo vans, and some were keeping watch whether standing or walking around the room.

More importantly, there was a tablet in the middle of it all, held up in display on a podium.

"I spy with my little eye our mission objective." Bumblebee commented. Yep. Information officially achieved but should they turn back now? The situation might be more than they could chew. Right now they were in a blind spot of the room, hidden behind rugged rocks and shadow, probably a place overlooked since no one from the outside should be able to get in through the way they did. Their cover wouldn't last forever though. They needed a plan.

"Call it in." Robin ordered as he took in the scene before them, cataloging the patterns of the people keeping watch, and looking for other exit options. He only saw two other doors, and one of those doors might not even lead outside.

"Yeah, so, my communicator isn't working." Beast Boy informed. Blue Beetle checked his own,

"I have a feeling none of our communicators are working." He was right.

"I was afraid of that." Tim sighed, "Whatever here that's causing the energy shortages must be blocking our communication frequencies. And actually..." Tim used binoculars from his belt to get a better look at the inscribed symbols on the slab of rock, "I'd bet the cause is that tablet we want to get."

"Si. I'm scanning it now and there's all sorts of weird signals coming from it." Blue Beetle confirmed. Robin faced the team with determination and said,

"Alright, here's the plan- Bumblebee, the next time that guard in the far left goes behind that rock, take him out quietly. Beast Boy, as soon as she does that you have a 30 second window to sneak to the panels at the bottom and get below the grates. Go to the crates on the right and place this bomb," Tim handed Garfield a small timed bomb, "On the crate closest to the wall. Set it for 60 seconds and get out of the blast radius. Bumblebee, that guard has a phone to call for backup to certain sections of this base. I need you to set off alarms of another area outside of this room to divert attention on my signal. Blue Beetle, as soon as that bomb detonates, fly, avoid getting hit, grab that tablet, and go full speed back out the way we got in until you're clear of the area. I'll cover you. This is a hit and run situation. We leave the way we came. Got it?"

Everyone nodded and the plan was set in place. The guard was knocked out, the bomb was in position, the alarms went off and many many people ran out to fight intruders who weren't there, then the bomb exploded and everyone turned to fight whoever detonated a bomb. Blue was then racing from behind to snatch the tablet while Robin followed him with smoke pellets and other bat-gadgets. The plan was easier said than done though. Blue was hit in the wing by a lucky gunshot and he dropped the slab in the smoky haze clouding the room. Thankfully, Robin caught it
and realizing he wouldn't be able to carry the burdensome rock and also help Jaime, he quickly slid the tablet under a nearby cargo van. They were already near the door. Blue Beetle held his own through his sonic cannon, but Robin had to join in to get Blue enough space needed to escape.

"You need to go." Tim hissed to Jaime, throwing yet another smoke pellet.

"No way-"

"Tell the others what we found and trust me. Please! You can come back soon but for now- go!"

Blue Beetle really did not want to leave, but he escaped through the tunnels with the intent of contacting the Team and immediately going back for his friends.

Robin, however, was seized by two ninjas who held him in a way he couldn't escape. This wasn't part of his plan.

"My, my, this is a surprise." Came a low and cold voice, "The Boy Wonder. To what do I owe this unexpected visit?" Ra's al Ghul was standing in the midst of dissipating smoke, holding a shrunken Bumblebee in his hand. She was knocked out. (She had gone down fighting though. There were a lot of unconscious bodies decorating the floor.) Ra's smiled without much humor. He looked... irritated, which Tim hoped would turn into rage when he and the others somehow made an inevitable, daring escape.

"Ra's" Tim said as if bored but trying to be polite, "How nice of you to join us. What took you so long? Spa day at the Lazarus Pit?"

"Oh, don't be like that. After all, you've taken something of mine and so you must convince me not to take something." Ra's flexed the hand he had holding Bumblebee in, "Of yours." Good, Ra's thought Blue Beetle had flown off with the tablet. Robin couldn't see Beast Boy and hoped his green team member was okay. Tim scoffed,

"A small price to pay for an ancient spell in an alien language not even known to most, that combined with the other tablets create a magic more powerful than anything on Earth."

R'as was highly impressed and he said with intrigue,

"How did you come to that conclusion, exactly? The League couldn't possibly have such a reliable source of information."

"They don't. But those symbols clearly aren't in a language from Earth. Not to mention that now with a closer look, across the top, it carries a certain symbol I once found in ancient textbooks of dark magic when I was doing some light reading. Green Lantern's ring doesn't know the language which strengthens the theory of its age. And why would the Light care so much about a rock? To appreciate history? No, it has to be something very powerful. Your itty bitty chaos committee has gone through a lot of trouble to keep it all a secret."

Ra's actually laughed at that, "Quite observant, making those connections. Although I suppose Batman would have had to choose a child with such intelligence, presuming he learns from the idiotic behavior of his last one." Robin didn't appreciate Ra's talking about Jason, but he shoved that frustration down. Instead, he focused his efforts on keeping up the conversation.

"He didn't choose me. I went to him and demanded to be a part of his crusade. After all, I had deduced his identity years ago."

Ra's al Ghul froze at that and Tim figured he had somehow said the wrong thing. Bumblebee was
still unconscious and Robin silently prayed for her to wake up. C'mon, Karen, wake-up and fly away.

"Then why do you persist on staying with someone who doesn't want your help?" Ra's stepped closer to Robin with a look Tim had seen too many times in his life, "You have a lot of potential, Detective. A mind like yours deserves better than the infantile instructions of those who do not appreciate you. So why would you swear loyalty to them?" Ra's was even closer to Robin to the point Tim could see the details of Karen's face. The older man took his hand not holding Bumblebee and firmly grasped Robin's jaw, forcing him to look directly at Ra's.

"Detective, think for a moment about all of the resources I could offer you, all of the things you could achieve with my help. You'd be treated with respect, welcomed like family. I see you for all you are and all you can be." Ra's was still talking with a predatory glint in his eye. He was now much too close for comfort and they were nose to nose.

Robin, being raised in the wealthy art of politeness, politely spat into Ra's al Gul's eyes and snarled,

"I choose Batman over a coward afraid of living and terrified of death. Your pathetic attempts to flatter me are just one of the many reasons I'd never join you- a man the equivalent of a cockroach I by chance stepped on while traveling on the subway- no, not a man but an old idea the world has long written off as a failure- a failure that lingers in the air with a faint but foul smell of desperation, slime, and-"

Robin was punched in the face and a sword streaked across his chest multiple times, leaving gashes of red. Of course Robin barely gasped at the pain, but it hurt quite a lot. He could feel the heat of his blood beginning to spread across his torso. Ew.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Detective. Remember that it was you who chose to kill your friend." Ra's held up Bumblebee so Robin could watch as his teammate was ripped apart. Robin tried to move but he simply couldn't fight being held back as he was.

Thankfully, thankfully, thankfully, a voice stopped Ra's from carrying out his plan. Tim felt relief, but that quickly went away when he realized who was speaking,

"Our position has been compromised so we're moving out." Queen Bee said with authority, "I see you had better luck catching our unexpected visitors though."

"Indeed." Ra's replied, still very much annoyed with Tim though no longer as interested to kill Bumblebee.

Now Robin was in serious trouble. He was going to be mind controlled into doing who knows what. Oh, no. If Beast Boy is still here somewhere then he's going to go insane trying to attack her. Queen Bee had killed his mother by enthralling her to drive over a cliff. Garfield was still grieving for his mother and probably wouldn't act very rationally.

"Hm, well. As long as they're here they can help us clear the area." Then Queen Bee put her hands on the sides of Tim's face. He shuddered involuntarily and he could feel how warm her skin felt. Their lips were practically touching. Tim could feel the pheromones she was giving off.

"Now, Robin, you will-"

Whatever she was about to say was cut off because a giant green elephant charged through the room. Suddenly, ninjas were on the move, attacking poor Beast Boy as he kicked and swung at
whoever he could. In particular, Beast Boy tried getting to Queen Bee, but the League of Assassins were trained too well and Garfield's emotions messed with his powers. He was then in the same position as Robin although occasionally Beast Boy tried to shape shift into different animals. He stopped when he got a knife stuck in his thigh. At that point he was in too much pain to shift although he continued to struggle. He called out,

"You! You-fucking! Let me- Stay the hell away from him! Don't fucking touch him! You rotten piece of-"

It took Robin a second to understand Beast Boy was talking about him. He felt a little dizzy like when a strong perfume is overwhelming to the point his brain buzzes in protest. Fuzzily, he heard Ra's order another search of the area in case more heroes were going to pop up. It didn't feel as if Tim couldn't act and think for himself though. Queen Bee was at his side again and she whispered to him,

"Now Robin, be so kind as to take this dagger," She gave Tim a knife as the ninja assassins let go of him, "And slit your throat."

Um, no. No, thanks. He would pass on that suggestion. Garfield was positively screaming in protest and Robin understood this was Queen Bee further torturing the kid through Robin's death. Where were the others on the Team? They should be here by now, surely. Furthermore, why wasn't Tim enthralled by Queen Bee right now? She could enthrall men and some women through pheromones and... She could enthrall women because those women were sexually attracted to females to some extent. So, she couldn't enthrall him because he wasn't... sexually... attracted... to...

"I'm gay?" Robin said out loud.

Of course, Tim took advantage of everyone's surprise and utter confusion at that statement to throw the dagger at Ra's, hitting his arm so he'd drop Bumblebee, which of course Robin then rolled and caught her carefully. She was still out cold and he was beginning to worry she was injured much worse than he originally thought.

Ra's struck out, but Robin had moved on, leaving a small bomb to keep the creepy man busy for a few seconds. Queen Bee called out urgently for evacuation as the Team had showed up, full force.

Beast Boy struggled against those holding him effectively enough that Robin got to him before the ninjas could get to one of the vehicles that lead to... Tim guessed a Boom Tube. Robin grabbed Beast Boy by the waist and used his grappling hook to try and get out of the stampede of men. They made it all the way to the door they had entered through.

"Queen Bee-" Beast Boy had started to protest.

"She's already gone. With your leg do you think you could take Bumblebee and get clear of the cave?"

"Yes, but Rob-"

"I left the tablet back there, I need to go-"

"I already got it. I found it and I got it out."

The room of people had become startlingly empty in a hurry. No one was attempting to go after the young heroes and so Robin was 95% sure that there was a bomb set to go off to destroy whatever they were doing in these caves. Tim saw Ra's going to leave and the creep *smiled* at him and mouthed the words, "Until we meet again, Detective." Robin looked back at Beast Boy.
"Right, then let's go. Move quickly, very quickly."

They ran as fast as they were able and Robin had a sinking feeling that they were no way going to get out of the caves in time. But that's when Blue Beetle showed back up. With him able to carry Beast Boy, they moved a lot quicker. The next bit was blurry but as they were leaving there was a loud noise and the world turned black.

Tim woke up in a hospital bed, disoriented. He looked at the clipboard hanging off his bedside table to see what his charts read.

"Head trauma, lacerations to torso, various contusions to skin, exposed to mind-altering substances,"

That's not so bad. But how was everyone else? Jaime? Garfield? Karen? Wow, that mission had gone downhill fast. What even happened, exactly? Tim's head was pounding as he stood up. There was a lump in the distance of someone on a hospital bed a ways down from Tim, and his heart thumped hard as he went to see who it was.

Kon El.

What. No.

Kon... didn't look so great. He was deathly pale and his breathing stuttered every once in a while. Tim took a look at Kon's charts.

"Severe poisoning of mixed strain of Joker Gas, suspected Fear Toxin combination"
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The Team has a change in perspective of Tim's character, and Tim worries about Kon.

Apparently, both Alpha Squad and Beta Squad had some complications with their missions like Gamma Squad, which was why it took so long for anyone to respond to the distress signals Blue Beetle tried to send out. (Even when he cleared the area, Jaime's communicator took a while to work properly.) In the end, Gamma Squad were the only ones to actually obtain a tablet, all thanks to Beast Boy who had seen Robin slide the rock under a van. The shape-shifter managed to slither the tablet out of the room by leaving through the ventilation system in the floor, grates too small for the average person to fit in. He returned as quickly as he could and saw Robin with Queen Bee, and Tim remembered how that went down.

Beast Boy was the only person who could give a report on what had happened with Queen Bee and Ra's during the brief time Robin was unconscious in the hospital wing. After all, with Jaime gone and Karen knocked-out, only Garfield and Tim knew how they escaped. Garfield had enthusiastically and dramatically described what happened as "Robin really legitimately has a gay superpower." Tim suspected Garfield focused on that aspect of the story to avoid getting upset over Queen Bee. Whatever the reason, Robin at first was frustrated no one would tell him about Kon's condition, because instead, they wanted to talk about Tim's sexuality and how that related to the mission. Finally, after Tim patiently explained multiple times the situation, and he explained for too many times the science behind his immunity to Queen Bee's mind-control, Robin learned what happened to Kon.

Superboy had been on the Alpha Squad, and they clashed with the Joker and Klarion. Kon had gotten a serious hit of Joker Gas, which for a while seemed like his Kryptonian DNA made him resistant to the exposure, but at some point he had collapsed in a seizure of hysterical laughter. His team members such as Nightwing, Batgirl, and Lagoon Boy, tried to remove him from the combat zone, but he fought them off in a panic. Tim didn't like picturing a cackling yet terrified Superboy.

Kon was the only one still unconscious in the hospital. Why did his best friend have to be here looking so miserable and sick? Tim began to entertain irrational thoughts: Did hugging Tim somehow curse Kon? Was this his fault somehow? Tim had been practically infatuated with Jason, and then the 2nd Robin ended up dead because of the Joker. Now Superboy was in the hospital at the hands of the same person. It was the beginning of a pattern as if those most important to Tim were destined to suffer. Maybe... maybe Tim should stay away from the hero. He should keep his distance so Kon wouldn't be in such danger. Kon deserved so much better than him anyway.

Ignoring those sort of thoughts, Tim for nearly a week spent his free time sitting beside Kon's bed, waiting for the first sign of movement. Really, this doesn't make much of a difference in his usual schedule as he sits with his laptop and works on different cases for Batman. Kon had other visitors, too. Some took time to talk to Tim.

"How's it going, Timmy Tim-Tim?" Nightwing said, sitting backwards on a rolling chair, giving Robin a winning smile.

"His condition is the same as yesterday." Robin informed seriously. Nightwing's smiled became a
little less bright.

"I mean you, Timmy. How are you?"

"My injuries are healing at the rates predicted."

"Well, that's good," Dick gave a small sigh, "But I was wondering if there was, maybe, something you wanted to tell me."

"...Um. Not really."

"Oh." And they sat in a silence that made Tim want to squirm in discomfort. After about ten awkward minutes, Dick spoke again,

"You and Conner have gotten pretty close..."

After pondering that statement Tim gave a nod of confirmation. He and Kon hugged so they must be close, right? Dick then continued in an odd tone of voice,

"You two have spent a lot of time together..." Hang on, what exactly was Dick hinting at? He kept talking. "You two are close and spend a lot of time together... alone..."

Tim snapped his laptop shut with more force than necessary. He wasn't sure why he felt so angry all of a sudden, but Nightwing looked sheepish so Tim's anger was probably justified,

"Yeah, we do. He's nice, he's considerate, he's patient, he's funny, he's smart, and he's a joy to be around." Dick wasn't used to Tim sounding so aggressive, "Also, even though it's not really your business, he and I are not dating. We're also not fucking." When Dick actually flinched when Tim swore, it weighed on the smaller boy what he had done,

"Oh, I didn't mean to say- I'm sorry. I'll just, uh, I can be quiet now. Sorry." Tim felt ashamed for raising his voice and being rude. He's Robin, he's not supposed to be so stupid.

"No, you're right. It's not really my business and I'm talking about Kon when he's here and injured, and I'm sorry, really." Dick cleared his throat, "You're sort of the latest gossip? Everyone's pretty excited. I had to talk Bart and Jaime out of showing their support by making a rainbow colored Robin suit, and it took me a full hour to convince Garfield that being gay didn't mean you're now an expert on fashion. Though, I think Cassie still might nonchalantly or very chalantly try to get your opinion on a few outfits or ask you about musicals. Good luck with that."

"Wow." He didn't know what to make of all that. Honestly, he was still as uninteresting as before he came out. So he said, "If having a good fashion sense is a sign of being gay then you're the straightest man I've ever known."

Dick laughed a lot and told him Zatanna had also said something along those lines. Then Nightwing left, and Robin wondered if Kon would react well to the news. Tim knew Janet and Jack wouldn't approve at all. They would insist he needed to be "cured" and Tim did not want to go back to the way things were before he was ten. There was no way he could continue being Robin like that. No, Kon would be okay with it like everyone else. Tim could trust him.

...

When Kon woke up he was alone and felt absolutely horrible. Everything ached, he had no clue what had happened, and his mouth tasted like rotten meat. Ugh. He saw a bottle of water on the bedside table and tried not to chug it all at once. Taking in his surroundings, he stood up carefully
and slowly started walking. The first person he came across was M'gann who hugged him and spoke using telepathy,

'Conner! You're awake! We were all so worried about you.'

'How long was I out?'

'About six days.'

'Six days? What happened?'

Well, what happened was Kon had gone berserk and attacked his teammates because he was hallucinating and freaking out. In moments like that Superboy is glad he's not 100% Kryptonian for fear he could do far worse damage. His squad had not retrieved the tablet. Surprisingly, Robin's squad was the only one who had managed to achieve that. Who was Kon kidding, it was not at all surprising that it would be Robin's group who succeeded. Speaking of which-

"Where is Robin?" Most of the Team had come to welcome him back to the land of the living but Tim was nowhere in sight.

"In Gotham, on a mission with Nightwing and Batman." Barbara said lightly, "He'll be happy you're awake."

"Happy? More than happy! He's been practically glued to your bedside." Cassie piped up, "So, happy, you might say he's g-"

"Anyway," Karen for whatever reason cut in, giving Cassie a pointed look, "We should celebrate that you're back. Maybe we could all get together and watch a movie tonight."

"I second that. Let's party." Mal agreed with her, grinning.

"Oh, totally crash! SB, you should get Robin here, too." Bart had way too much energy as always. Then, weirdly everyone seemed really set on Tim coming tonight, which is great they all have a renewed interest being his friend, but it's unexpected. Kon didn't think Tim would be comfortable if everyone was going to be so... enthusiastic. He tried to object,

"I don't know, guys. Robin will probably be tired from the mission and he's not really a party sort of person. We can ask, but he usually passes on these things."

"Yeah, but he'll definitely go if *you* want him to, right? You two talk all the time- you've gotta know how to persuade him." Cassie smiled a bit mischievously. Kon blushed, taking her comment as a compliment.

"We're around one another a lot, yes. But I don't think I can make him do anything he doesn't want to do. When we hang out we don't actually do a lot of talking, y'know? Let's not pressure him too much."

The others were staring at him now as if he'd told them the scandal story of the year. What happened in the last 6 days? What did Tim do exactly? Kon tried to change the subject,

"So, Beast Boy. Tell me how the mission went for you. You're the one who got the tablet, right?"

Most of the time Kon could depend on Garfield to chatter away and fill lapses in conversation, but today had been especially strange. Garfield looked up to Jaime who shook his head no. But why?

"Ummmmm, It's kind of Robin's story to tell." The green kid laughed nervously, "He was there
more than anyone else."

The Team once again brought up the idea of a celebration and while they insisted on Tim's presence, no one mentioned what Kon now thinks of as the "mysterious tablet incident." He hoped Tim would tell him what happened.
Robin, Nightwing, and Batman finally returned to the Batcave after successfully stopping Two-face from executing political officials throughout the city. It was basically an average day in Gotham. Nightwing was lending a hand, which wasn't all that necessary but Tim appreciated the help nonetheless. Although, Dick was a bit too mellow and it was unnerving. When they got to the Batcave Tim understood the odd behavior.

"Timmy," Nightwing said slowly and it immediately felt like an intervention, "Lately I've been talking to Bruce about your parents." He did not like where this was going, "And we both figured that they're not around often enough to teach you about, y'know, um, stuff." What? Bruce looked seriously uncomfortable like he'd very much rather be anywhere else and he was literally in pain standing here. Nightwing continued with what seemed to be a rehearsed speech,

"You're already 14 and now that recent events may lead you to think more about your sexuality and therefore thinking about experimenting in sexual activities, we think it's best to prepare you with the knowledge to go about those things safely."

Tim thought he might throw up. Bruce looked like he might, too. If they were honestly about to discuss with him the birds and bees then there really is no God. Bruce managed to speak,

"You see, Tim, even without the risk of your partner getting pregnant, there is still a very real risk of contracting STDs. For instance, there was an epidemic, particularly among gay men, of-"

"Woah! Geez, guys, no." Tim knew better than to interrupt others when they were speaking--as his mother reminded him on her last visit--but everyone here desperately needed saved, "I know all of the risks, alright? I've known how that kind of stuff works for as long as I can remember. There's no need to-"

"As long as you can remember, huh? Right. Nice try Timbers, but you need to actually know this stuff, not just the misinformation the schools teach you." Nightwing tutted, possibly sounding bitter about said "misinformation." Did he have a story behind that disapproval? Right now, though, Tim couldn't believe they were being so ridiculous,

"Seriously? You guys know I know!"

"Oh we do? Because I've never noticed you reading up on it, although I do recall you refusing to watch any and all of the sex scenes on TV. Call me crazy, but I feel like you haven't done a lot of research." Dick wasn't having it and Bruce only raised an eyebrow at Tim. Well, that's hardly fair. Batman is supposed to be on Robin's side with this.

"You're crazy. Dick, I've been following you and Bruce on the streets since I was at least six years
Tim's phone rang and he answered the call in an instant, avoiding eye contact of the two men. Barbara told him Kon was awake! Kon El, that beautiful angelic clone, saving Tim from this cringe-worthy conversation. He didn't hesitate in rushing to the Zeta Beam.

Maybe if he had he would've noticed how horrified Dick and Bruce looked when Tim's last statement sunk in.

...  

Kon had waited for ages before Tim showed up. He wanted to ask right away about the secret-tablet-incident but Tim's first words were,

"Oh, Kon! Thank God you're awake- Batman and Nightwing were trying to give me the birds-and-bees talk and I think you just saved all our lives." That's not what Kon expected.

"That sounds... terrifying. Are you sure you haven't been dosed with Fear Toxin?" He attempted to keep a straight face but Tim being so melodramatic was too amusing. Though, so much emotion was unusual to the point Kon was about to ask Tim if he was okay, but Tim beat him to it.

"Are you okay? How do you feel?"

"I'm fine."

"Good, everyone's been really worried about you."

"Yeah, I heard you kept me company a lot of the time." Kon saw Tim blush and tense a little,

"Oh. Did they, um, say anything else about me?"

"No." That's the problem.

"Cool. So, you didn't miss much. Batgirl probably filled you in. Wanna chill in the usual spot?"

After they settled into their favorite chairs in the library, Tim got out his book like always. Kon like a nerd worked on his Sudoku puzzles even if he couldn't really concentrate. He could wait a while more before interrogating Robin. When Kon couldn't take it anymore, he looked up to question Tim, and the teen had already been staring at him almost expectantly. As it turns out, Robin was prepared to tell the whole story front to back. Some parts were more disturbing like Ra's al Ghul giving off pedophile vibes. Then, Kon heard the part everyone must be acting weird over.

"You came out of the closet to two of the seven leaders of the Light?" Kon had honestly tried not to laugh, but it was too much. What even was Tim Drake?

"No! I asked them if I was gay. It was a question." That made Kon laugh more and he hoped he didn't sound as creepy as he did when dosed by Joker Gas,

"Yes, whenever I have doubts about who I'm attracted to my first instinct is to call the Light and ask for their advice," Kon's chuckling subsided and he added, "Everybody's been supportive, right? I would think so but..."

"On the Team? No one's homophobic. Oddly enough, not even the thugs in Gotham have been
trying to mock me, more than usual anyway, and they must have heard rumors by now."

"Hm," Kon hadn't miss how relieved Tim looked when Kon smiled at his story. "The Team wanted me to persuade you to come and party tonight."

"..."

"I told them we didn't talk to the point I'd know how to convince you, but this is me officially inviting you, and I'd like it if you were there."

"... You said with all the time we spend together alone, we don't spend that time talking?"

"Um, well, yeah. It's fine if we don't talk, not that I want to not talk to you, um, 'cause I like talking with you and hanging out." Kon had a feeling he was missing something.

"No, it's fine."

Then they both sat for half an hour, happy to be together again. Kon liked to watch the faces Tim made when reading, subtle changes, but the entertainment was in how lost in the book he'd get. Hopefully, Robin would make an appearance tonight if only to steal some cake. The room started to feel chilly as the day got darker. Heat and cold didn't bother Kon all that much since he absorbed sunlight that kept him at a pleasant, warm temperature. However, Tim was shivering even after curling up under a blanket. Robin might as well have been a kitten abandoned in a box by the street. Kon liked to think despite his DNA deriving partly from Lex Luthor he would never simply ignore a box of kittens.

"Move over a little?" Kon asked Tim who glanced around and replied,

"Sorry, do you want this chair?"

"We can both fit."

Tim timidly nodded and let Kon sit down. The babybird didn't relax for several minutes--he seemed terrified--but eventually the two were snuggled and comfortable. With the busy and unpredictable lives heroes lead, moments like this were remembered. For a few seconds they could cherish a peaceful atmosphere. Kon listened to Tim's steady breathing and wished they could spend the rest of the night content like this.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first fanfic I've written so I'm thrilled so many people like it so far! Thanks guys, it means a lot.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Tim is happy until he's not.

Chapter Notes

Short but sweet.

Tim was having the best day ever.

To list the events of the evening: It was a successful day fighting crime in Gotham, Kon woke up and is once again in good health, and he and Kon spent a few hours cuddling? And the Team had been insanely nice to Tim all night. They were always nice, but Tim had felt so... accepted this time around. He argued over Star Wars and Star Trek with Mal (Tim still thinks Star Wars is better), everyone wanted him to be on their trivia team even though Tim insisted he lacked knowledge in half of the categories (including magic, Atlantis culture, alien culture, and football), and when they gathered to watch the movie he tried get out of the way but Superboy dragged him to the couch where everyone was gathered. The movie was okay, but Tim more so liked the excuse to snuggle next to Kon again.

After the movie the wiser members of the group went home for the night. These were the older heroes who better understood the value of sleep. Those who were foolish at the moment--Cassie, Garfield, Bart, Jaime, and Lagaan--all were still chatting about the movie or whatever was on their mind. Tim had to planned to leave as Batgirl had smartly advised him, but he saw Kon and Lagaan caught up in a conversation. Their body language suggested conflict even if their voices were calm. Thus, he foolishly stayed behind.

Everyone knew M'gann had dated both Kon and Lagaan. While the two were always civil toward one another, there was a level of tension that never quite went away. Tim didn't want to lurk since his fanboy stalking days were over, but he wanted to give Kon an easy reason to stop talking if so needed. Cassie saw him not-lurking and she commented,

"Ugh, men. What are they good for?" Cassie gave him a sarcastic smirk, "No offense. To think all this time I thought I was the one who ruined our relationship."

"Does this mean you're thinking of joining me outside of the closet?" To that Cassie sighed,

"Well, I'm more confident about confessing, definitely. In a way it's a shame my big reveal won't be as dramatic as yours. And I really should say something before I have an unplanned run in with Queen Bee like you did. Oh," She noticed Kon was getting particular frustrated, "I think now is the time to cut in."

She walked up to Lagaan and threw an arm around him saying loudly, "Hey, guys! Whatchya talkin' about? Robin and I were just saying we should totally take bets on who will be the next hero
to join the Justice League."

"Oh, you were?" Kon said dryly, giving Tim a glance that read 'that lie was pathetic.' Tim gave a shrug back responding 'I don't know- I didn't ask for this.'

"Well, if we're going by favorites then Robin will be the next chosen one." Lagaan spoke as if trying to provoke a fight, "I'm sure after that Superboy will finally accept their invitation to join as well, which means M'gann is sure to follow. Great Neptune, half the Team will be gone." Kon was getting angrier. Tim tried to say something to help,

"Actually, given my level of experience, it's more likely Batgirl would join the League. And considering the length of time you've been studying Atlantean magic, you'd be invited-"

"No, no. You're the perfect one who does everything by the book, never disobeying orders. They'd love you in all your perfect, gay glory." Luckily, Bart sped over to talk before Kon could punch anyone,

"Psh. What? Nah, not Robin. He's too crash and it's always the quiet ones who are crazy enough to do the hardcore rebelling like, hm.. Blue, name a rebellious act only someone crazy would do."

"Oh. Um... Go for a joyride in the Batmobile?"

"Yeah! Robin could totally get away with that!"

"Dude. There is no way I'd ever mess around with Batman's car." Garfield said, "I'd be too scared to even think about doing it."

Tim was about to mention how extremely idiotic it would be to steal the Batmobile for many reasons other than fear, but his cell phone started buzzing. Maybe Bruce needed something. The caller ID, however, was not Bruce but-

"Sorry, I should take this." Tim apologized hastily. He answered the call once he was a few rooms over.

"Timothy," His mother's voice echoed through his skull, icy as ever, "Your father and I will be arriving home in two days due to an unfortunate drop of Drake Industries' profits. I would like to have a talk with you upon our arrival home." She hung up without another word.

Tim felt numb. 'A talk.' Drake Industries weren't doing well so his mother was going to officially break their agreement for money. He thought about the look Ra's al Ghul had given him. He thought about the slimy perverts in Gotham who'd only let a kid walk down their streets for a 'price.' He thought about how much research he did on Bruce Wayne because Tim liked Dick Grayson and assumed all rich adults were child molesters. He thought about discovering Bruce as Batman and how he had to reopen that investigation because even though he cleared Bruce, if the playboy was Batman then what other secrets could truly be hidden?

The other heroes were still talking a few rooms over. If they really liked him now then maybe they would... no. Tim needed to grow up and solve his own problems by himself. He's expected to be brave and smart enough to handle these things. Maybe he actually wasn't brave or smart enough, but he finally wasn't alone anymore, and he didn't want the others to realize how weak he is. Tim couldn't bear it if the people he considered friends learned to hate him. They were all such wonderful people and Tim was just... Tim. He would handle his parents on his own.

He wasn't sure at what point he went back to the others but he heard himself say,
"Sorry. I have to go. Bye." He walked in the general direction of the Zeta Beams, but Lagaan scoffed,

"Yes. Batman beckons and Robin heeds his call. You're right, Bart, he's the very definition of 'rebel.'"

Tim stopped and he honestly wasn't sure as to why at first. Lagaan only felt insecure and possibly envious over Superboy. He was lashing out after holding in the bitter feeling of being rejected by people he loved. Not just M'gann, but Aquaman had easily forgiven Aqualad, and Lagoon Boy often got put on squads with the least extreme mission assignments. Tim suspected Kon also antagonized the Atlantean to some degree, uprooting the usually restrained bitterness. So, why had Tim let Lagaan's bitterness stop him?

A warm and wired feeling in Tim's chest had started to bubble. The sensation traveled up his throat, his lips were stretched wide, and he began laughing. He laughed far louder than he spoke, and his whole body shook with the sound. Kon had asked him something, but Tim didn't hear. When Kon asked again the voice was clearer,

"Robin, listen to me. Are you okay? Robin?" His best friend seemed upset so he stopped laughing. The half-Kryptonian was at a closer distance than before, looking like he was about to reach out to touch Tim.

"I'm good, Kon. I just-" he gave another chuckle, "I'm just excited because I've never tried to hijack the Batmobile before. It should be fun, eh guys?" Tim checked his watch, "Give me an hour and whoever isn't scared of a little rebelling can join me."

The rest of the group stared at Tim, realizing he wasn't joking. Kon in particular looked super-heh-concerned, but Tim was already walking away. However, he did manage to hear Garfield say,

"...Did we just break Robin?"
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Tim steals the Batmobile.

Tim would never ever betray the Team or the League. But *if* he did then he had a mountain of information to use against them. He had read everyone's psych profile and background. He knew everyone's secret identity, where they live, and who they care about. Oh yeah, he also knew practically all of the codes that give him access to things like the storage of Kryptonite, resources on the Watch Tower, security cameras, and access to the Batmobile. After all, knowledge is power.

With this information, he examined the live feed at Wayne Manor to ensure Batman and Nightwing were in the Batcave, which they were. They were arguing, but that wasn't uncommon. Tim smiled a little when Bruce gave a specific grimace meaning 'please for once, Dick, could you not butcher the English language and use actual words, also there is no reason for our debates to have this many puns, why are you like this, please stop.'

Alfred had walked upstairs so Tim knew it was now or never. He knocked on the grand doors to the manor. Despite Alfred being halfway across the house, the miraculous butler seemed to answer the door in mere seconds.

"Master Timothy, I do wish you did not feel the need to enter the manor so formerly." To which Tim responded his usual,

"I'm sorry, Alfred. May I come in?"

"Of course."

Tim nervously went inside, being obvious in how uncomfortable he felt. Alfred raised an eyebrow and when Tim continued his silence, not making a move to travel too deep into the house, Alfred kindly asked him,

"Master Timothy, is there something a matter?"

"I, uh, Bruce and Dick wanted to talk to me and I sorta ran out on them and now I'm thinking I should've stayed and listened because I didn't know as much as I thought I did and now I need their advice but I don't really want to talk to them down in the Batcave because I want to talk to them as Tim to Dick and Bruce and not Robin to Nightwing and Batman, y'know?"

"Quite understandable. I daresay it's about time for them to stop sulking about in that dreary cave and come upstairs for a cup of tea." Alfred nodded gravely but gave a small smile, "I shall fetch them for you. Wait just a moment." Tim let out a relieved sigh,

"Thanks, Alfred."

As soon as Alfred turned around the corner and out of sight, the teen checked the live feed to see which direction the two heroes were heading upstairs. As he predicted, Bruce and Dick went to the hidden passage behind the piano, so Tim took his place by the grandfather clock to go down just as they came up. As he hurried down, he put the security cameras on a loop to try and buy him as
much time as possible.

Alright, Batmobile in sight. Now he just had to get past Dick's security codes put in place for the car to get it out of remote control completely. The Batcomputer was the most efficient for such a task. If Tim didn't know Nightwing so well, there was no way he could get past all of the coding, at least not fast enough to avoid getting caught. C'mon, Dick, really? Traught_NoDis320 was honestly one of the passwords the hero used for the Batmobile. Dick was a technological genius, excellent with numbers, but apparently the acrobat didn't feel the Batmobile needed top protection. It's as if he wanted someone to carjack the vehicle... That could be a very real possibility now that Tim thought about it since Dick could be petty as hell when it came to Batman.

As Tim hopped in the Batmobile he knew he could drive the car in theory, but sitting in the driver's seat with so very many buttons was intimidating. He managed to turn on the main screen on the dashboard and saw the screen show the security cameras were no longer on a loop. Dick and Bruce were headed to the Batcave swiftly, so Tim was officially busted. However, he did manage to start the car and lock the grandfather clock entrance to the Batcave so the two would have to get in another way. When he did that, Dick glared at the security camera in the corner as if personally offended, which he might be. With a stroke of luck, Tim set coordinates in the Batmobile and finally drove out of the cave with adrenaline in his veins as if he'd come out of a fight with Killer Croc.

He made certain it would be quite a few hours before anyone could track him or the Batmobile again, hacked the Zeta Beams in Gotham to be unavailable to teleport on the west coast of America, and even hacked their phones so they couldn't call anyone other than Barbara who also resided in Gotham. Though of course they could receive calls because there could be an emergency. It was complicated stuff, but Tim had little problems hacking into the systems to ensure just a few hours fun. Granted, he nearly ran into a skyscraper trying to multitask but no one was hurt.

Tim made it back to Superboy and the others in about 3.5 minutes before the hour mark, which was impressive since flying the Batmobile--Well, technically a Batplane at the moment--he anticipated to be difficult to fly. He could tell by the look on the others' faces that most of them did not expect his mission would be successful. He landed a tad rough but decent for a first try. Opening the top of the Batmobile he stood and smirked,

"So, anyone need a lift?"

... 

Kon stared, not moving because he'd been out of commission for less than a week, and on his first day back Tim was falling apart. The babybird stole the Batmobile. Dick hadn't attempted to do that until he was at least 17 and he'd gotten into a huge fight with Batman afterward. Bart and Garfield were already inside the car, and Superboy didn't blame them because he'd done the same thing during Dick's rebellious streak. The Batmobile was undeniably really cool.

Jaime, Cassie, and Lagaan were standing with him still, no doubt thinking about Batman's rage if they messed with his famous monster of a car. Kon wanted to punch Lagaan for this fiasco, but Kon often wanted to punch people he couldn't so he overcame the urge.

"C'mon, Blue! Once in a lifetime opportunity here!" Bart called out, "What about you, Cassie? You know you want to."

At this point Kon realized despite being alive for under 7 years, he was the adult in this situation.
Most of the time Robin was more responsible than the others and Tim was less than a year older than Garfield, the youngest on the Team. Cassie and Jaime looked to Kon and he gave an "absolutely not" glare. He could predict from Lagaan's face the Atlantean had no intention of tagging along. Good.

Kon calmly walked up to the Batmobile, looked Bart in the eye and said almost threateningly,

"I get shotgun."

"What? But-"

"Bartholomew. Get in the back or get out of the car." The kid mumbled something about 'the mode' but Kon was sitting down, attention on Tim. He said gruffly,

"You have any idea where we're going?" Tim then thought about this question while closing the roof of the car and beginning to drive quickly. It took him between 5 and 10 minutes to respond.

"After death? I'm embarrassed to admit I'm not sure. Of course, I'm Jewish so-"

"Hang on, you're Jewish?" Bart exclaimed then whispered to an interested Garfield, "Did you know that?"

"-I'll have to do some more research on Judaism and get back to you. If you meant as of now where are we driving then I figured we could pedal to the metal until we get to New York or run out of gas. Whichever comes first. There might be a credit card here somewhere if you want to stop by a drive thru. Although I'd bet they'd be so shocked at the Batmobile they wouldn't notice if we just took the food without paying. As long as I'm stealing things we might as well." The more Tim talked the faster the car got.

"I like food!" Bart said. Kon ignored the speedster and asked,

"And why are you stealing? Did Batman do something to upset you?"

"Nope. Just felt like going for a drive. For fun. Why don't we talk about you instead- What were you and Lagaan fighting about? M'gann? Are you two dating again? That's nice. She's nice. You're nice. Everyone on the Team is nice. Batman is nice. This car is nice. Nice things are nice." Tim sped up, "Waffles are way nice. I know a girl practically obsessed with them. Oh! And coffee is amazingly nice." The car was going way too fast for comfort. Kon checked to make sure everyone had seat belts on.

"Um. Robin?"

"You know what else is nice? Kazoos. Ever think about quitting the hero biz and running away with a kazoo marching band? I don't think kazoo bands exist but they should. The melody, harmony, bass, everything, played on kazoo. It would be the epitome of art. The only thing better would be a Batdog. I love Wolf and really think Batman should get a dog, too. We could train her to sniff out clues and attack on command. I even have her secret identity picked out. Her name would be Bagel. Know why? Because Bagel bites! It's a wonderful idea." Now in the far off distance Kon could see a drawbridge rising. Tim wouldn't think of trying to jump that, right? If not because of the danger then because it's overwhelmingly cliché. This isn't a car chase in an action movie.

"Woah, hey, Robin," Bart noticed the bridge as well, "We're going to have to turn around or we're all going to be feeling the mode. You see that bridge? I'm a professional on calculations between speed and distance. We can't go this way."
"Yeah," Garfield said anxiously, "We should go around or something." Tim laughed,

"Guys, don't be ridiculous! We're superheroes. We can do anything! C'mon, the Batmobile can make that wee little jump." So, Tim has completely lost his mind then. Kon wanted to grab the wheel but they'd crash into someone for sure at the speed they were going. They couldn't even get out of the car without injury now. And Tim was still talking but in an empty voice,

"Kon, have you ever regretted choosing to go with the Team instead of staying with Cadmus? Not because the life you have now is bad, but because you experience first-hand fresh air and sunlight and love... If you were forced back to your previous life then you lose so much more and the pain would be so much worse."

"Oh god." Garfield yelped from the backseat, "We're going to die, aren't we?" Bart tried to reassure the shape-shifter they'd be fine. It didn't help Garfield's mother died in a car crash.

"Robin," Kon said, trying not to show too much panic. The car was not in its armored setting for dealing with heavy impact, "Tim. If we try to make that jump then we could be seriously injured. Please, slow down and turn back. Tim, are you listening? Tim! Trying to make that big of a jump is insane. Slow down and go back! Tim!" And Tim replied with a determined sound,

"I don't want to go back."

It was too late. Kon would try and shield everyone as much as he could, but someone was going to get hurt. They all felt just how fast they were going as Tim sped uphill on the bridge. Bart and Garfield screamed when the car became airborne. For a second it was if they were weightless, flying rather than falling. Wait. No, they were flying. Robin had switched the car into plane mode at some point. Why that son of a...

Kon, Garfield, and Bart had barely begun to process they were no longer in danger, still shocked because they did not expect Tim to behave so irrationally. The next thing they knew, the Batmobile was back on the ground where they began, though Cassie, Jaime, and Lagaan had gone home. Garfield had begun giggling in surprise and relief. At least the little guy wasn't traumatized.

As soon as Tim opened the roof, Bart found his voice again,

"What? What! What was that, why are we back here, we shouldn't be back, what about going to New York, or driving until we can't, what about the food!" Did Bart honestly want to stay in the car after that? Tim replied in his normal, serious voice,

"Going all the way to New York while driving would take days and as for running out of gas, the Batmobile doesn't use fossil fuels for energy. After all, you and Garfield have school tomorrow, so yes, we're here once again. No way am I about to risk spilling food in the Batmobile, I'm not nearly that crazy." Tim was using a batglare on the two younger teens, "What did you two learn from this experience?"

"Never tamper with the Batmobile." Garfield said, "And be careful with our choices of rebellion."

"Never climb into a deathtrap with someone we suspect might be having a mental breakdown." Bart pouted.

"Both answers are acceptable." Tim nodded in approval, "The Batmobile is off limits for a reason; It's dangerous to ride with someone who hasn't been properly trained to drive it." Kon felt annoyed,

"You pulled that stunt to teach them a lesson? Seriously?"
"Well..." Tim blushed, "I also wanted to end the night on a high note. Get it? High. High note."
Bart groaned in exasperation,

"Because the bridge went up so high and we were flying?"

"No. Because of how high pitched you and Garfield screamed."

Kon barked out a laugh before he could stop himself because Bart looked hopelessly lost trying to think of a good comeback. Garfield laughed, because the kid didn't mind admitting how scared he had been. Truthfully, none of them would have been nearly as frightened if it hadn't been for Tim's acting skills. They were all convinced that Robin was about to crash the car. Thankfully, he had reverted back to normal.

"Okay, you two go home. We won't let Batman know you were in his car. Go on," Kon ordered the two teens who promptly obeyed and went inside to the Zeta Beam. Garfield was giggling how exciting riding in the Batmobile was and Bart agreed by saying Jaime would be majorly jealous once he heard. Tim spoke,

"You should go before Batman finds me, too." Kon responded by smiling,

"Yeah. But first would you like to get some ice cream?" Tim gave Kon one of those brilliant smiles that made Kon's heart light up,

"Yep. I think eating ice cream in the Batmobile sounds like the perfect last rebellious event."

... 

Kon and Tim were eating ice cream in the Batmobile and gazing up at the stars. Kon had chosen strawberry vanilla swirl and Tim chose chocolate chip cookie dough. They had parked on the side of a grassy hill. It was beautiful how the trees swayed in the slight breeze and how the colors danced under the cover of starlight. The scene was one that could never be truly caught in a camera or painting. Kon looked at Tim's face and marveled at how content his Robin appeared in that moment. Tim looked over at him,

"Something wrong?"

"No. I guess I just think your face is prettier than the stars," Tim turned bright red, which made Kon smile. He figured he should finally ask Robin, "You've seemed extra stressed lately. What's up?"

"I have? Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to come off that way. Sorry, um, I've just been really worried about you? And everyone was making a fuss of the whole 'gay' thing and people think we've been sleeping together and you weren't waking up..." People thought they were sleeping together? Huh.

"Yeah, I can understand that. But what about that call earlier?"

"Call?" Tim looked away and Kon knew the phone call was a big issue.

"Yes. The one you rushed out for and came back acting weird with the desire to steal the Batmobile.."

"Oh. That call." Then Tim became silent for a long while and Kon let Babybird take his time. Eventually, Tim answered,

"My mother called. She and father will be home in a few days and- and I guess that's why I wanted
one night of being irresponsible and reckless. Once she's here..." Tim closed his eyes and whispered, "Kon, my parents hate me. They despise me. I don't want you to see me like they do."

Kon set his ice cream aside and pulled Tim in for a hug, happy Robin seemed to relax quicker than the last time they hugged.

"It'll be okay, Tim." Kon murmured, his mouth pressed against Tim's temple, "Any decent person in this world knows you're a brave, intelligent, and kind person. You deserve better than your parents if they can't see that."

Tim pulled back to look at him, their foreheads were touching and they were nose to nose,

"I- My parents. They used to- They're going to- Kon," Tim tried to find the words. He seemed scared, "Business isn't going well so I think they're going to use me to-"

"Conner! What. The. Hell." Dick's voice boomed. Tim and Kon broke apart with a jump. Suddenly, the acrobat was by the car, furious. He dragged Kon out of the vehicle, and the half-Kryptonian let him out of surprise, "What exactly are your intentions with my little brother? Did you put him up to this?" Kon was quick to anger,

"'Oh golly Conner, so glad you're awake and alive!' Oh, well thank you! It's nice to see you, too. I'm sorry if I worried you since we've been good friends for so long."

"Glad you're alive. Now, I've been told you two aren't dating and yet I could've swore you guys were about one second away from making out in a stolen Batmobile." Tim called out,

"I told you it's not like that!" But Kon said,

"So what if we're about to make-out? You just assume I'm taking advantage of him?"

"Well, from where I'm standing you don't seem to be a good influence!" Nightwing shouted.

"If he's having sex with whoever comes his way then obviously he's learned from your influence, you dick."

"He's just a kid you-" By this time Tim had gotten in between Dick and Kon, saying,

"Hey, guys! I'm blushing that the two hottest men on the Team are fighting over me, really, but we can talk about this later using our inside voices. Please?"

Then, a dark shadow loomed over all three of them. He wasn't sure how much Batman heard but the Bat looked... not happy as far as anyone could tell underneath the cowl. Well, Kon wasn't happy either. Tim was about to confess something important and he could sense Robin already shutting down and censoring himself.

"Robin. Get in the car." Batman scowled at Tim who responded,

"Yes, sir." And as he walked away called back, "Superboy didn't put me up to this by the way."

"We'll talk later." Batman then turned his scowling on Kon, "As will we. Leave him, Nightwing. He's had a long first day back."

"..."

"Nightwing."
"..."

"Nightwing."

"...

"It would be traught of you to join Robin and I in the Batcave."

"Yeah, sure thing."

Superboy angrily watched them drive away with Tim's frightened expression still etched in his mind. Janet and Jack were going to be seeing a lot of Kon once they arrived in Gotham. He'd find out what was going on behind closed doors once and for all.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Tim spends a night at the Kent Farm.

Tim POV

Tim Drake stumbled sleepily into his bedroom without bothering to turn on the light. He was emotionally exhausted. Bruce benched him the rest of the week, and Dick set Tim an appointment to talk to Black Canary with the assurance she would be easier to talk to about personal issues than Batman. Honestly, the punishment wasn't nearly as bad as he expected. He sat down on his bed, too tired to even think of a decent plan of action for the next day. His phone buzzed.

Kon changed his name to Clone Boy.

Clone Boy: You okay?

Tim: Yeah. I like the new name, Clone Boy.

Clone Boy: Thanks I try.

Tim changed his name to Gay Theft Auto.

Clone Boy: Nice. Don't let dick see though or he'll make a 'driving stick-shift' joke.

Gay Theft Auto: Joke's on him. His entire life is a sexual innuendo.

Clone Boy: You're not wrong. Nice ass though

Gay Theft Auto: Omg. You mean objectively speaking?

Clone Boy: Probably. It's been a long day.

Gay Theft Auto: Ha! Tell me about it. You should get some sleep.

Tim spread out on his bed, extremely happy for the moment to have spent all day with his best friend. Oddly, something sharp pricked against his hand and Tim looked down in confusion. Shining his phone light on the object, he saw he had pricked his hand on a thorn of a singular red rose. Now realizing the flower was there, he felt stupid for not noticing the heavy flowery smell in his room earlier. Already knowing the answer, he messaged Kon.

Gay Theft Auto: Did you stop by the house earlier? I found something weird

Clone Boy: No. What is it?

Tim got up, more alert, and turned on his bedroom light. Roses were everywhere around his room. There were some scattered on the floor, some on his bedside table, one on his backpack, at least five on his pillows, and even roses in his closet. Detective mode activate. He clicked some photos, gathered the roses, and counted forty-nine flowers, figuring he was likely missing one. After giving up looking in his room, he searched the rest of the house. Nothing was missing or out of
place and he still couldn't find a rose. Alright, what did he know about roses? They often symbolized love and passion, given to significant others as a romantic gesture. Who would break into Tim Drake's house to give him roses? Maybe it was somehow a mistake. His head ran through different theories as he returned to his bedroom.

He stopped at the sight of another rose hanging down from a string in the middle of the room. A card was propped up on his bed. The window was still shut and it didn't look like anyone had been here though obviously the evidence in front of him proved the contrary. He put on gloves before picking up the card to read it.

"See you soon." The card also depicted an ornate red-breasted robin. Tim felt the vibration of his phone in his pocket.

Clone Boy: Hello?

Clone Boy: Tim? You still okay?

Clone Boy: It's been over an hour.

Clone Boy: I'm coming over.

Tim was about to tell him not to and that it was a false alarm, but on second thought...

Gay Theft Auto: Actually can I come to you?

Clone Boy: Of course.

...

Kon POV

Kon woke up in his bedroom at the Kent's house, rolling over to admire the sunrise of a new day, or he was about to before feeling the weight of someone warm and breathing in his arms. Tim was curled up against his chest, sleeping. Okay, so Tim is officially too cute for words. Kon would have continued laying in bed but he heard a familiar voice come from doawnstairs,

"Ma, don't listen to Pa. You look as beautiful as always."

"Nice try, Clark, but you're still in charge of dishes this morning."

"I've had over 18 years to do dishes, what about Kon?"

"The poor boy only just came out of a week-long coma."

"You never let me get away with that excuse."

"Hm. Well, Conner actually brings his partners home to meet his family."

"Lois will be here for Thanksgiving, I swear. Besides, he and M'gann were together before you met him."

"And whose fault is that? But I'm talking about the sweetheart he brought home last night."

Kon made it out of bed and downstairs without disturbing Tim. Sure enough, Clark was there having breakfast with Ma and Pa Kent. Over a plate of golden waffles Clark grinned at him, saying,
“Good morning. Sorry I didn't get a chance to welcome you back yesterday. How are you feeling?”

“Uh. Fine.” He was delighted to see Clark, really. The Kryptonian often gave him valuable advice and he's always wanted Superman's approval. However, he didn't want Clark to think he was taking advantage of Tim the way Dick had assumed last night. Ma asked,

“Conner, will Tim be coming down for breakfast?”

“I figured he should get more sleep.” A sort of strangled noise came from Clark,

“Tim as in Robin Tim?”

“Yeah. He, um, has a lot going on right now.”

“And you two are...?”

“Not dating. Something freaked him out last night so he crashed here.” Kon sat down at the dining table, absently filling up his plate with eggs and sausage, ignoring Clark's stare.

“Didn't I just hear that the Batmobile-” But the man stopped talking because Tim had walked in wearing one of Kon's Tshirts. Last night the babybird's clothes were soaked from Gotham's rainstorms. He was also wearing shorts but Kon's shirt was so big on him that it didn't look like he was wearing any pants at all. So much for not looking like they were having sex. It didn't help that Tim blushed as if they were guilty of sleeping together when in actuality the blush was likely out of hearing the word "Batmobile" and knowing rumor of pulling one over on Batman traveled fast.

“Tim, good, you're just in time for breakfast.” Pa greeted, not phased in the slightest by the lack of clothing. The Kents are very open-minded, which is only one of the reasons Kon adored them. Tim shuffled his feet anxiously before responding,

“Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Kent, but I wouldn't want to intrude.” Ma's voice then said,

“Young man, you are far too skinny to not have breakfast, and call us Ma and Pa.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don't apologize, just take a seat and start eating.”

Tim hesitantly sat down beside Kon and gave himself a small portion of eggs. Kon rolled his eyes and filled the dork's plate up with a decent portion of everything. Everyone chuckled after Tim took his first bite, his eyes lit up, and he looked down at his plate as if he never tasted real food until this moment. Then, Clark chattered away about his job in Metropolis, and Tim did his best to have manners, resisting the impulse to shove all the food in his mouth at once. As Kon started his second helping of waffles, he said to Tim,

“So, you said you'd tell me what happened last night.” After Tim gulped down a mouthful of orange juice he replied,

“Someone broke into my house leaving fifty roses scattered around my room and an ominous card that read 'See you soon' along with a picture of a robin. Here, I took some pictures.”

Kon flipped through the pictures on Tim's phone, getting steadily concerned. He showed them to Clark and the rest of the Kents. Ma and Pa looked concerned and Clark looked... guilty? Kon asked Tim,
"Do you have any idea who would do this? Poison Ivy, maybe?"

"Throwing dead plants everywhere? No, she prefers her flora alive and territorial. Catwoman is the only person I can think of in Gotham who even has the skill needed to sneak past me when my guard is up, but she has no motive to do something like this." Ma spoke,

"They were in the house the same time as you? Oh dear, did your parents see anything?"

"No, they're in another country on a business trip."

"They left you alone in Gotham?" Pa looked surprised, which is understandable given how dangerous Gotham is even if your job doesn't require jumping in front of armed thugs every night.

"Oh, um, it's fine. I'm used to it." But that was the wrong thing to say in front of Ma who stood up and smothered Tim with a hug.

"Well, I'm glad you're here instead of being alone in that house." Tim flushed as cherry red as he said with a muffled voice,

"Thank you?" Ma let Tim go before Babybird could suffocate to death. Although, from the looks of Tim, he might die over not being able to process all the attention he was getting. Kon sympathetically patted Tim on the back before asking Clark,

"You've been pretty quiet. What do you think about Tim's mysterious intruder?"

"I think you should tell Batman your identity has been compromised." Then Tim nodded very seriously,

"Yes. I sent him an email this morning before coming downstairs. Until he sends a reply, I want to go back to my house and search for more clues. Thank you all for the amazing breakfast. I can help with dishes-" Kon interrupted,

"No need, Tim." he gestured to all of the dirty dishes, "This looks like a job for Superman."

...

Tim POV

Tim was walking next to Kon, about to leave the Kent farm after a truly fantastic breakfast. Kon insisted on seeing him off and Tim accepted the offer, allowing himself to be selfish with taking up so much of the half-Kryptonian's time. Not long after they were out the door, Clark stopped the two of them.

"Hey! Timmy, listen," and as Clark said that Tim began to glare. When someone other than Dick called him 'Timmy' he was probably about to hear something insulting, "I think you should stay at the farm a little longer. Ma and Pa love having you here and they've only just begun to know you-"

"What aren't you telling us?" Kon cut in, impatient "You look so sheepish you're about to grow wool." Oh, wow. Kon must be mad if he said that to his role-model in life. Clark sighed because it's not a secret he's a terrible actor.

"Ever since the... incident with Gamma Squad last week, Batman has been worried that the Light might want to target Robin." Why? Tim was nothing special. Did they think they could use him for bait against Batman?
"Because of the tablets?" Kon asked, giving Tim a worried glance.

"Possibly. Maybe. I don't know. We still haven't figured out exactly what the spells on the tablets are used for." And Tim wanted to face-palm because of how stupid Superman was being right now. Clearly, Kon got his intelligence from Luthor's genetics. Wait, no. That was mean of him to think. Clark is only super- heh, never gets old- worried. Tim spoke using his Robin voice,

"If I'm being targeted by a large organization rather than an individual person then we have to assume they have resources outside of Gotham. If so, it won't be beyond them to travel to Smallville to get to me. I'm putting your family in danger by being here, Clark. Is that what you want? Because I don't. The best course of action is to play along with their game until we can draw them out into the open."

Clark looked flustered, unable to come up with an adequate response against him on the spot. Tim and Kon kept walking in silence, which was fine because he didn't want to talk about the roses. The Light stalking Tim so romantically seemed like a big leap to make. After all, he couldn't offer them anything more than anyone else. He would find out who his stalker is, but until he gets a blatant threat from this unknown person, his parents were a more immediate threat.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Tim's parents come home.

The Zeta Beam in Kansas beamed Tim to the Batcave, which he did not intend. Lo and behold, Bruce was there waiting for him along with Batgirl who gave him an apologetic smile. Unsurprisingly, Bruce was not smiling.

"You should've come straight here after receiving that note last night." He growled.

"Just because they know my identity doesn't mean they know yours," Tim pointed out, "If someone is following me then I'm not going to suddenly hide in Wayne Manor. It looks a little suspicious."

"You could stay in the Batcave."

"As homey as this place is, who knows how long it will be before we even catch the guy doing this? I can handle myself, Bruce. I'm not going to hide. Do you even have any hard evidence the Light is targeting me?"

"How about just for the next couple days?" Barbara suggested reasonably, "While you're here you can work on case files despite yesterday's hilarious- I mean, completely irresponsible joyride." Bruce glared at her and she shrugged, "You have to convince him somehow." Tim sighed,

"Even if I wanted to, my parents are coming home tomorrow." Barbara raised her eyebrows,

"Wow, already? It's been less than a month."

"Tim," Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose, "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"I only found out the other day."

"Right. Well, I can delay their flight-"

"No!" Tim didn't mean to shout. He composed himself before saying, "I mean, they're finally starting to notice me more and since my stalker hasn't exactly threatened me, I'd prefer if you didn't do that. Please." If his mother was inconvenienced on top of bad business he'd be getting far worse than whatever she was planning now. Bruce raised an eyebrow,

"Alright, but keep in touch. If anything happens, contact me. And don't be surprised if someone stops by to check on you." Check on him? His parents definitely wouldn't like that.

"Instead, how about I send a message to you every 4 hours to prove I'm okay?"

"..."

"Every 3 hours?"

"..."
"Two hours."

"Fine."

Tim felt a smidgen offended that Batman thinks he's too incompetent to handle the issue, but considered himself lucky he still had breathing room to deal with his parents on his own.

... 

The next day Tim awoke bright and early. For his attire, he chose a nice button up shirt and trousers with pockets that disguised the fact he carried his phone in his pockets. He cleaned the house even though he'd already done so the night before, mentally repeating the responses he could have to whatever news his mother had for him. If he couldn't use any of his martial arts training against them then he would have to be persuasive and appeal to his mother's logical side. He already had several ideas on how to raise profits in Drake Industries that he'd mapped out with charts. The sky outside glowed grey rather than blue, but actually this Sunday morning wasn't too gloomy. He remembered the fun times over the weekend he had with Kon, and he felt a spark of hope. After he'd sent a message to Bruce to say he's safe and nothing's amiss, he heard the front door begin to open. Show time.

"Hello, sport!" His father greeted him, thankfully not drunk though odd because his father always drank when flying. Tim smiled politely and nodded, remembering not to talk out of turn.

"Timothy, darling." His mother walked in, bags in hand, smiling. Tim smiled politely and nodded yet again although feeling very uncomfortable. His parents were never happy when they were in Gotham. Janet handed her luggage to him and he promptly carried the suitcases up the stairs to their room. Yes, they were strangely in a good mood, but it's no cause for alarm. Yet.

When Tim went back downstairs the two were waiting for him, standing side by side, still smiling.

"Timothy," Janet's voice was warm, which was somehow more disturbing than her icy tone of voice, "We have good news. Here, why don't you sit down." He didn't want to sit down. Of course he did anyway, but he a serious feeling of foreboding. As he sat on the pale brown couch, his parents sat in the two chairs across from him.

"As I told you, Timothy, Drake Industries' sales are down. However, a few days ago we received an exciting offer to solve this problem." Janet looked at Jack with excitement and then turned her eyes back on Tim, "You have a client who has bought your services for the next four weeks. Tomorrow you'll be going across the Atlantic with him." Just as Tim had feared, she was breaking their deal.

"Actually, mother. I have some ideas on how to increase-" He stopped talking because Jack had come over and grabbed him by the neck.

"Timothy," Janet said sharply, dangerously, "This is a wonderful opportunity for us and you will not ruin it."

"I'm not leaving Gotham." He retorted before losing his nerve, "And I don't have 'clients' anymore. I can offer you alternative-" His dad squeezed his neck, cutting off air.

"No," she hissed, "Listen to me, you pathetic brat. You're beginning to forget your place. Clearly, I've been too lax with you. Children that can't be useful don't deserve a place in society. For some reason, this man has offered over 15 million dollars for a worthless piece of shit like you and you will do whatever he asks. Do you understand?"
This person offered over 15 million dollars? Shit. He couldn't offer a business strategy to beat such a high amount of money, but he also couldn't abandon his duties as Robin for so long. Briefly, he considered stealing money, but he wouldn't stoop so low. Maybe if he found out who his client is, he could uncover some blackmail on the man and get the money that way. Jack tightened his grip on Tim's throat and the teen could see black crowding his vision.

"Do you understand?" His mother repeated and Tim nodded as much as he was able. Jack gave a final squeeze before letting go and he laughed as Tim gasped for oxygen before saying,

"There's a good man. Don't worry about performing. I'm sure remembering will be like riding a bike. Unless, of course you need a small reminder to practice..." Tim didn't have to answer because his mother snorted,

"Yes. 'Small' would be an accurate description." To this his father's face turned red and he lifted his foot to kick Tim before Janet stopped him,

"We promised he'd be in good condition, Jack. Go have a tantrum somewhere else." His father stormed off in the direction of the alcohol cabinet. Tim held a hand to his neck, wondering if there would be bruises. Then Janet grabbed his arm, leading him to the under-stairs storage closet. Pushing him inside, she picked up the old chain Tim hadn't touched since he was ten, and she chained his hands to one of the latches on the wall.

"Our guest should be arriving soon. Stay here and be quiet until then." She commanded as if he had forgotten the drill on how this process works. Tim nodded mutely, assuring he was going to be a good child from now on and she shut the door, locking it. He could get out of the chains fairly easy after training with Batman, but he still felt the same terror as he did four years ago. How many times has Robin gotten out of tougher situations than finding blackmail on some rich schmuck? He would be back in Gotham in a matter of days. A long time passed before Tim remembered he needed to check in with Bruce. He carefully reached for his phone in his pants pocket to check the time. He still had twenty minutes before needing to send another message. Before writing anything, however, he heard the doorbell ring. Straining to listen, he heard his mother welcome the stranger into the house. He heard footsteps draw nearer before the stranger's familiar voice.

"No, Ms. Drake. That won't be necessary. I'll take Timothy and be on my way, no need to trouble yourselves with such a lowly task." Ra's al Ghul was talking, obviously bored with small talk. Tim tried not to panic and messaged Kon.

"Gay Theft Auto: light trouble pls help"

The closet door opened and Tim's phone was immediately snatched away and crushed in Ra's' hand. Tim snarled and attempted to kick him but the ancient man smashed his head into a latch on the wall. Ow. As soon as Tim sank to the ground he felt a needle prick his neck and he felt drowsiness overwhelm him. Someone picked him up and his mother was apologizing for his behavior. He felt so heavy but he weakly tried to cling onto the door frame. With almost no effort, hands pried his fingers loose. The last thing he remembers before succumbing to the sedative is a red rose pinned to Ra's al Ghul's shirt.

... 

Kon's phone made a ding. He lazily reached out to read whatever text he received while he decided what jacket to wear to the Drake residence. When he read the text he dropped everything and ran to find Tim. His friend wasn't answering his calls so he called Batman to see what was happening. Batman didn't know anything either and started a search of Gotham. Kon went straight to Tim's house. Using his thermal vision, he saw no one was home, so he broke in. He went through every
room without finding anything unusual.

Then, he saw the smallest scratch carved in the under-stair doorway, which he was sure wasn't there the last time he visited Tim. Opening the door, there was a long length of chain in the dingy closet, and worse, a small splatter of blood that had not yet completely dried.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Tim has been kidnapped and Ra's al Ghul is a creep.

Chapter Notes

Short, I know. Sorry.

Tim woke up slowly and with great effort. His first thought was someone drugged him, then he saw Ra's al Ghul and recalled what had happened. Ra's smiled at him and said, "Hello again, Detective. How are you feeling?"

"..." Tim tried to see more of his surroundings but the room was too dark. He was strapped tightly to some sort of metal board. Although, he did feel the weight of a mask on his face. Ra's planned to keep his identity a secret then, but why? As leverage?

"Oh, come now. I paid good money to enjoy your company. The least you can do is make conversation."

"Why am I here, Ra's?" Tim said tiredly.

"Why don't you tell me, Detective?" The creepy old man brushed his fingers against Tim's cheek tracing down to his chin.

"To use me as bait?"

"Oh, but you sell yourself short. We need you for your talents."

"No, we don't." Klarion's whiny voice came from the dark, "He's not going to be useful at all. I know what I'm doing."

"So we've heard." Lex Luthor's voice rang out dryly.

"He can't even cast any spells!" It was then Tim realized what the witch boy was talking about.

"Wait, hold on." Robin meanly laughed at them, "Is this about the tablets? What, do you not know how they work?" He was rewarded with silence as confirmation. "Sorry, but I don't know what the Justice League has discovered about them. Kidnapping anyone else on the League would've had a greater chance of success getting you the information you want." Ra's al Ghul sighed,

"Not quite. We know the League has no new information. No, I believe you can help us understand the inscriptions on the tablets through your own intellect."

"With all of the experience and brain power you already have--including someone who is literally
just a brain--you think I will make a difference? Even if I could, why would I help you?" Then Lex Luthor's voice cut in again,

"We have several different options of brainwashing to force you to cooperate."

"Please," Tim snorted, calling his bluff, "I would already be controlled if that were the case. To mind-control someone requires certain neural pathways to shut off, and you apparently want all of those in working order. Both of my points are still valid."

"Hm," Ra's said thoughtfully, "I think you already know the answer to your first question."

"You call me Detective. For whatever reason you think I can make connections the others can't. In the group you have genius in politics, strategy, science, and manipulation, but you need a balance that no one has individually of logic, creativity, and faith to solve such a complex magic puzzle."

"Well done. The mere fact you so quickly deduced the situation you're in while a sedative still clouds your mind is a testament of your abilities. It's not surprising though, considering the profile of you I've attained. Are you aware you have a higher IQ than your mentor? Working with you would be an honor." Tim flushed because he did know he technically had the highest IQ on the Team, even higher than Nightwing, but he out of respect for Bruce did not look too deeply into Batman's profile. After all, Tim spent most of his life studying Batman so he already knew practically everything about the man. It might be possible Robin has an IQ above Batman, but trusting Ra's isn't wise. Still, the idea someone thinks Tim is useful and of more value than a hero like Batman is... flattering.

"Why would I help you again?"

"Because," Black Manta's voice suddenly sounded. "There are other means to force someone to cooperate aside from mind-control." Tim wasn't impressed.

"Oh, sorry Black Manta, if I knew you were listening I would've talked slower. I mean, it's not like severe trauma damages the brain or anything. So go ahead, torture me. I'm sure it won't be counterproductive at all."

"Detective," Ra's intervened soothingly. "You're not going to be tortured until you agree to work with us. I will convince you through debate because you're intelligent enough to be enlightened. I promise within the next four weeks you won't want to go back to your previous life. You will finally understand our perspective and see the light."

Tim refused to validate such an idiotic claim with a response. He still couldn't tell who was hiding in the dark, if anyone. The other leaders could be listening through technology or magic rather than being here physically. He also didn't know where he was in the world although if Ra's al Ghul is babysitting him then he might be in the Middle East. Tim began mentally listing the different ways he could escape successfully, which was not a train of thought long lived as Ra's was leaning over him now.

"We will talk more about business tomorrow," Ra's said in a deeper and hushed voice. Tim felt the warm air of his captor's breathing. Ra's was still leaning closer to the point his face blocked Tim's view of the rest of the room. "For now you shall rest and for the moment forget about the troubles of the world. Pleasant dreams, my Detective."

With that statement, Ra's gently pressed his lips against Tim's, who was already getting sleepy from another dose of sedative. Robin wanted to twist his head and resist the kiss, but he was too tired to put up a fight. It wasn't too bad; he had definitely received worse. Ra's al Ghul's lips were
surprisingly soft, velvety, and what might be described as affectionate. In his last moments of consciousness, Tim felt relaxed with human contact so serene.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

So, two weeks after Tim has been abducted...

Kon furiously punched the metal wall of the room. He left a dent, but better the wall than someone else.

"How can it be over two weeks with no sign of him?" He shouted rhetorically. M'gann winced and he felt guilty for that but he still felt anger over anything else. He was angry at the Light, Batman, Dick, Tim's parents, and the world in general. Most of all, though, he was angry at himself. Tim needed him and he hadn't been there. Who knows what was happening to Babybird as they speak? Picturing him so helpless just... the little guy was the smallest on the Team ever since Bart and Garfield had their growth spurts. Yes, Tim was smart and mature, but they forget how he's still young with only so much training. He's physically the weakest and- Dammit! Kon should have been there.

"We'll find him, Superboy." Nightwing said with determination, eloquently hiding how much the acrobat was worried. Nightwing probably felt angry at himself, too because the video-cameras he installed in Tim's house ended up destroyed before anyone could see what had happened. "Robin will be okay-"

"Oh, really? Okay? A-o-kay? It's been sixteen days. Even if he's not being tortured, he probably assumed we're not planning on rescuing him after day three because you left him with asshole parents who convinced him that he's a burden to everyone."

"He doesn't think-"

"Yes, he does. His mom tells him he's annoying to people his age and he'd understand if I ever planned on abandoning him. He thinks he's a burden the same way someone would think the sky is blue or 2+2=4. It's basic fact to him. That's why he doesn't talk. The kid is afraid that if he says too much everyone will inevitability hate him. So, no. He's not going to be okay because he wasn't okay in the fucking first place. You left him to suffer abuse at home so why the hell wouldn't he expect you to let him suffer in the hands of the enemy?"

After Kon's rant the Team was silent and Nightwing wouldn't look him in the eye. Finally Dick spoke,

"I'm distraught, too, Conner. I know it's overwhelming and I know the whole situation is a major disaster, but we're not giving up. We're going to keep working and hope for the best. Maybe he won't be okay, but we need to hope he will be, alright?"

Kon looked down at the symbol on his shirt, the symbol of hope. The fight seeped out of him all at once and he nodded, gaining his cool back.

"We'll find him." He agreed.

...
Tim smashed the teacup, handed to him with uncertainty, on the floor. He reveled in the sound of glass shattering. The action of such a beautiful structure breaking into millions of glittering pieces seemed poetic at the moment. After admiring his handy work, he glared at the no-name ninja in front of him and growled,

"This. Is. Not. Coffee. I don't care what Ra's says- I'm on the precipice of a breakthrough and I need very black, extremely bitter, and highly caffeinated coffee immediately. I," Tim kicked a chair over, "Am being held against my will, trying to decipher an ancient language through magical context, and the only thing I ask for is not sleep or food or any sort of living arrangements, but coffee. Either get me a large quantity of it or drag Ra's al Ghul in here so I can scream at him. What are you waiting for? Go. Now!"

Honestly, Tim enjoyed being a little bit of a diva. All of his life he was around people who make a fuss over every slight inconvenience. 'Let me speak to your manager, there are only four freshly pressed bath towels when the brochure specifically assured there would be at least five.'

The tablets, he discovered, were called the Apocalypse Trinity. Klarion had pouted for hours when Tim translated that for himself. It was some sort of summoning spell. What or who exactly the Apocalypse Trinity was supposed to summon was not revealed yet to him, but his focus was on how to summon whatever this great power is. If he could figure out that then he could find out how to prevent the spell from working. He was going over the last few lines on the second stone for the thousandth time when he heard the door in his room open.

"Detective," Ra's al Ghul sounded tired though reluctantly amused, "We've talked about this. Tea is better for your health." He felt Ra's' fingers comb through his hair, but he refused to turn around, "I am beginning to think you cause trouble just to spend time with me."

"Oh, is that what you think?" He challenged. Ra's spun him around by his shoulders, lips hovering over one another. Tim's breathing became uneven and shallow. When he felt Ra's' tongue flicker out to trace his bottom lip he shivered. Ra's obviously enjoyed such a reaction.

"Indeed." Then the man kissed him as he did every day. Like every day, Tim let him do as he wished without kissing back, and Ra's made no move to proceed further than a few chaste kisses. After Ra's was done he cupped his hand on the side of Tim's face and spoke, "Is there no way I can convince you to stay longer than four weeks?"

"Maybe if I could have a steady supply of coffee..."

"No."

"Then no."

"I see. Well then-"

Suddenly the door explodes and Tim hears Kon before seeing him as Superboy slams into Ra's al Ghul. Ra's lands heavily to the ground, stunned. Kon punches him in the face, knocking him unconsciousness. The half-Kryptonian furiously punches Ra's again for good measure before tackling Tim in a hug.

"Robin, thank god." Kon clung to him as if Tim would disappear the moment they let go. And Tim felt so relieved and happy as he inhaled Kon's familiar scent of... milk... and wool? Huh. Odd.

"C'mon, Timmy, we need to get out of here." He started tugging Tim to go out the newly blown hole in the wall. Timmy? Robin resisted and pulled back toward Ra's.
"Wait. Conner, I don't want to leave yet." Tim broke Kon's hold on him. His friend didn't react to his use of the name 'Conner.'

"What? Robin, we don't have time for this. We need to leave."

"You don't understand. I've learned so much about what we're dealing with and I'm only beginning-"

"Look, you might not be in your right mind-"

"Actually, I am! With the sort of power they're unlocking we could make some real change in the world. We could save lives-"

"We already save lives! Are you even listening to yourself? I'll consider what you're saying but come with me and we can talk about this later. Don't make me fight you." Tim heard the sound of chaos in the distance and footsteps were rapidly drawing nearer.

"I have to stay and help."

"Help who? The Light? No, Robin, we're leaving." Kon tried to grab Tim who evaded the attempt easily.

"You'll understand soon. They're called the Light because their vision really is an enlightened one. You need to trust me."

"No. They've done something to you." Kon surged forward and pinned Tim's arms down. Kicking and struggling, they didn't make it out of the room before backup came in with guns. Specifically, they were guns of Lex Luthor's, which were designed to produce enough electricity to render Superman immobilized and probably carried the capability to kill someone only half Kryptonian. Tim realized what he had to do. Kon was forced to put him down in order to fight his way past the numerous amount of men now blocking the exit. As the clone fought, Tim picked up one of the guns that had clattered to the ground by one of the men.

"I'm sorry, Superboy. But I can't let anyone get in my way." Tim whispered. He waited until Kon faced in his direction before pressing the trigger. Even after his friend fell to the ground unconscious, he didn't relent in his electrocution until Ra's stopped him.

"That's quite enough, Detective." Tim felt dizzy and would have fallen to the ground if Ra's hadn't caught him. When his head cleared, he saw no men, no Kon, no hole in the wall, and he helplessly looked to Ra's for an explanation. The man obliged, "I apologize for putting you through such a trial, but we wanted to test your dedication to the Apocalypse Trinity."

"So... none of that was real?"

"No."

"You're okay?" Tim reached up to touch the spot on Ra's' face that Kon punched.

"Yes. I'm surprised you're so concerned." Ra's teased him. Tim scoffed and responded,

"Of course. You're the best shot I have at getting a good cup of coffee anytime soon."

"It would seem so. I am also surprised how calm you are considering you just killed a former team member."
"I didn't kill him." Tim's voice shook a little though.

"You thought you did."

"But I didn't."

"But you thought you did, did you not?"

"I- I didn't know what- and you've been so nice- I wouldn't- couldn't-" The look of Kon's face as he thrashed around in pain would be an image that would forever haunt Tim's dreams, "I did what I had to."

Ra's brought their lips together and maybe it was because Tim felt so distraught or because it was the next logical step in earning Ra's' trust, but whatever the reason, Tim kissed him back. It was aggressive, and hot, and wet, and he would never forgive Ra's for testing his dedication by making him kill Kon. Tim disliked the man before but now he felt boiling hatred. So, he moaned when Ra's pressed him up against the wall and tugged the old bastard closer because the more you know about someone the more you can make their life a hell. The next couple weeks would consist of Tim being the poster boy of an evil prodigy until the time came to get his revenge. As Ra's broke their kiss and smiled at him, Tim smiled back, wondering how much torture would be appropriate for the situation according to Batman standards.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Tim has been held in captivity now for over three weeks.

Tim sat smugly in between Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy. Across from them sat a disgruntled Riddler who complained,

"Well, he's male and he gets to sit next to you!"

"That's because he doesn't gawk as he continuously looks down the shirts of women." Killer Frost snapped, "Maybe if you had the ability to concentrate on anything other than fuck-" Harley cut her off with a cough, "oh, I mean, other than objectifying women then perhaps we might reconsider our rule."

"Harley," Ivy sighed, "Dear, you know Robin already hears cursing, no doubt on a daily basis from Klarion."

"Well, someone has to be a good influence in his life if he's officially flown the coop." Harley said while hugging Tim protectively, "He's too cute and innocent to have to hear everyone swearin'."

"Innocent? He has sex-"

"No!" Harley covered Tim's ears, "Red, don't talk about that stuff in front of the kid. Ra's shouldn't be touchin' him."

"It's not so bad-" Tim began to say.

"We know, Spring Flower." Ivy soothed, "But we don't want him to end up hurting you."

"Yeah," Killer Frost snorted, "For his sake he better not. I need someone to count cards in poker."

"And I need someone who can match my wit in riddles." Riddler added fondly, then pointing at a plate piled with sweets, "Also, are these cookies available for everyone?" Tim smiled,

"Yeah, these are leftover from the baking Deadshot and I did this morning."

"Deadshot?" Ivy asked curiously.

"Mhm. Apparently his daughter's birthday is coming up soon." Harley looked like she was about to squeal over how adorable that was but Tim's new phone rang out. It was a classical piano piece Ra's chose as his ringtone, some sort of romantic ballad. Of course, Tim hated classical music because it reminded him of his mother. Nevertheless he answered,

"Yes?"

"Beloved, I have a gift for you. Please join me in the common room."

"Of course, I'll be right there."
After hanging up he sighed, said goodbye to the others, and shuffled his way to the common area. Ra's had yet to provide gifts that Tim would actually enjoy. Most of the time the presents were things relating to various sexual acts. BDSM as it turns out it very much something Tim feels uncomfortable with, not that his satisfaction in the bedroom matters either way. Still, Ra's had been the most considerate rapist Tim has ever had the misfortune to entertain so the teen would keep his complaints to a minimum. Ra's already refuses the excuses of "no I don't want to," "no, I don't feel up to it," and "please stop that hurts," but at least he takes time to whisper compliments as if Tim was actually more than a sex slave. Overall, it wasn't nearly as painful as it could be.

In fact, nearly all of the criminals around him treated him with kindness or at least were civil. Tim was under the constant watch of ninja and although they refused to bring him coffee, they did know how to have a good time. They held massive secret rap battle sessions every Thursday night, which he found out when he accidentally stumbled into their room. Naturally, since his world recently revolved around patterns with language, Tim quickly adapted to rapping in Arabic. He didn't win, but he came close. It was enough to earn the respect of Ra's' followers, and their surveillance decreased if but a little.

Ra's stood alone in the unnecessarily fancy room with a metal chest ingrained with an intricate design similar to the designs shown on the man's uniform. Now curious, Tim tilted his head to the side and asked,

"Is this what you want to show me?" Ra's decided to smirk in response,

"Go on and open it. I think it will please you."

Tim warily reached to open the chest like a pirate who expected the treasure to be a ruse. He hoped it wasn't some sort of animal costume he'd have to dress up in. He'd been down that road and he just couldn't make the sexy-horse look work for him. The first thing Tim sees actually is a suit, but luckily he discovers it's more of a ninja outfit. Yeah, okay. He's not bad at role-playing so he could pull this off. There was also a grey tool belt with various weapons inside like explosives and shurikens. So... Ra's wanted to play rough? It wasn't until Tim saw the white mask that he truly understood what the suit was for.

"This is my new identity I take it? What will my name be?"

"Hmm, well, I believe a name will be yours to assign. I merely provided your garments, which of course can be tailored differently if you so wish."

"No, this is perfect." Tim smiled, holding up the suit against his chest, "In fact, I already have a name. It's a bit on the nose, but people today are always so desperate to have their world simplified."

"And what would your name be, Beloved?"

"Red X." Tim traced the red x on the mask that resembled a skull, "I don't suppose I have the chance to take this new look for a test run?"

"Yes, you've earned a place among the Light. Tonight you, Livewire, Weather Wizard, Cheetah, and Deathstroke are going on a... Let's call it a rescue mission. There's someone I wish to retrieve and a file which needs to be given to the right people."

"No problem." Tim put on the mask and then said with a distorted voice, "I can handle any X-treme jobs and I'll put in X-tra effort to prove myself."
"Please tell me you did not choose the name Red X for the sake of the... puns."

"I did not choose the name Red X for the sake of the puns. Also, yes, I absolutely chose the name because of the endless puns. We'll laugh about this someday."
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Tim Drake is Red X and gets to fight Nightwing.

"What do you mean I'm not allowed to go?" Kon roared at Aqualad.

"You're too emotionally compromised." Kaldur explained calmly. Somehow, the fact he was calm made Kon even angrier. Superman said there was word Tim could somehow be involved with the transport of a prisoner to Arkham Asylum. Someone who was going to try and free Victor Zsasz knew something of his friend's location and Kon sure as hell wanted to be there for the interrogation.

"Well, I'm going anyway!"

"Superboy," Nightwing interrupted, "If Tim is in immediate danger it would help to have you standing by as part of a rescue team. Don't worry, Zatanna is tagging along and she'll make sure the scumbag talks."

"You get to go," Kon protested although he could see he was losing the argument.

"If a fight breaks out in Gotham I know the city like the back of my hand. It'll give us an advantage."

"Right. Fine. Whatever. Just make sure you find out where Tim is, okay?" Then he heard M'gann's voice in his head.

'We will, Conner. I promise.'

....

Dick POV

Gotham was unsurprisingly rainy. A thick fog was clouding the streets below to the point driving had to be slowed, which gave the Light more time to ambush the van transporting Victor Zsasz. They had to attack soon because the vehicle was already within a few miles of Arkham Asylum. Miss Martian and Beast Boy were in position at the Arkham Asylum itself, Nightwing and Zatanna were to the West, and Tigress along with Wonder Girl were ready to strike from the East. They were now close enough to one another that M'gann could set up a mind link with all of them.

"Nothing is happening." Artemis griped. Everyone could feel her impatience and anxiousness. The attack to get Zsasz was their only lead to where Tim could be.

"Are we too close to the van? They're not going to strike if they see us, right?" Cassie questioned, her anxiousness felt similar to Artemis's.

Nightwing glanced around, and although he couldn't see too much through the fog, he couldn't imagine anyone would be near enough to catch them. Yes, now that the van was so close to its destination the heroes were stationed closer to the target, but he knew which rooftops could hide
someone and which alleyways weren't noticed by people who passed by. Perhaps the Light didn't plan on striking tonight after all. Once Zsasz was in Arkham Asylum, it's not like anyone would be able to break him out, at least not since Batman upped the security to the point that if someone wanted to survive a zombie takeover they could just take shelter in Arkham.

Every muscle Nightwing had was tensed, ready for any sort of action. He hated waiting and staying still but he could manage. The others could feel his itch to move and he felt guilty because it probably made them feel more on edge than they already did.

'Stay whelmed, Boy Wonder. I'm sure the convict is almost-' Zatanna had begun to comfort him, but Beast Boy cut her off.

'The target is in sight. Still no sign of opposition.'

'They must be here somewhere.' Nightwing began making his way across the rooftops, searching for something, anything.

'No. Zsasz is already inside the asylum, Nightwing.' He pictured M'gann shaking her head as she continued, 'It's not going to happen tonight.'

'Dammit!' Cassie yelled mentally and probably punched something, 'Why! Why did they take Robin? What are they doing to him? I swear to Zeus I'm going to rip them apart!'

'We'll find him.' Garfield's voice chimed in quietly and skeptically, 'Right? '

'We should head back and give our report.' Artemis gave a mental sigh. M'gann echoed everyone's sadness and said,

'Yeah. But, Conner... Conner isn't going to like this at all.'

No one was happy as they headed back to the Bio-ship. Nothing could be helped about the situation though. As much as Dick hated to admit it to himself, they might not find Tim. It had been almost a month since his kidnapping and they couldn't track down any leads from the criminals connected with the Light. The one time they caught someone, that person had a cyanide capsule in his mouth and died before revealing any information. Going past the Team's concern for a friend, Tim knew all sorts of information. The kid probably had secrets connected to everyone on the Team, maybe the League. With the Light's obsession with mind control... No one was sure how much information their enemy now stored in their enemies, waiting for the right time to exploit the information. The security risk was at an all-time high so it'd be nice to question Tim on how much he the Light knew.

Nightwing hated thinking of Tim's kidnapping in such a way because it made him sound like Batman. Although, said emotionally-stunted-man seemed more obsessed with Robin's well being more than the secrets the teen might confess. Bruce had been storming across the world in what could be described as an unnecessarily violent crusade for answers. Frankly, his behavior has started to mimic his past actions when Jason...

No, Nightwing couldn't think about that right now. Acknowledging Jason's death made it easier to acknowledge the fact Tim could- He could- Doesn't matter, Tim wasn't Jason anyway. Jason was all emotion while Tim was the sort of kid who would memorize entire schematics of buildings before making his move. The little guy had even helped Bruce set up the new security in Arkham, which was adorable to watch because the two sat side by side like a couple of trouble-making children designing their dream tree house. They both had matching crooked smiles whenever they solved a particularly tricky problem.
Suddenly, an idea occurred to Nightwing and he felt like a complete idiot. He skidded to a stop and Zatanna nearly ran into him with an annoyed huff. Luckily the mind-link was still up.

'WAIT.'

'Jeez- what, Nightwing?' Cassie did not appreciate the shouting. No one appreciated it, actually.

'Robin helped Batman design the new security for Arkham. If the Light has managed to get that information from him-

'Breaking into the asylum might not be so impossible.' Artemis finished for him, 'We need to go back.'

They rushed back to Arkham in time to see an explosion out of one of the upper windows. Nightwing started giving out commands.

'Wonder Girl, Tigress, you take the window. Miss Martian, Beast Boy, take the main floors; The most accessible exits are on the bottom two floors and the basement.'

"And us?" Zatanna asked him out loud.

"I saw someone on the fifth floor. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. Etativel su!" Zatanna floated them to the fifth floor while Nightwing hacked the system to open a window.

As soon as the two were inside they were attacked. The room they were in, supposedly the lunchroom, was dark and Nightwing's mask couldn't even make the switch to night vision before he was struck in the side by... He didn't know what had hit him, actually. Even as he got back up from the floor and his mask switched to night vision, he couldn't see anyone responsible. Then Zatanna fell to the ground as if punched by an invisible person, and why wouldn't there be an invisible person? Gotham has seen far weirder things happen.

"Show yourself. Unless you're too much of a coward." He braced himself for another attack, listening for the slightest sound of footsteps or breathing.

'Miss Martian, what's your status? Miss Martian? M'gann?' The mind link was turned off, no doubt she and Beast Boy had been ambushed as soon as they entered the building, too. Whoever planned the break-in knew exactly what to expect. Nightwing felt air move toward his face and he ducked, sensing he just dodged a kick to the head. He flipped backwards, hoping to hit whoever the invisible person, and he heard a satisfying grunt of pain in return.

"Elbisivni regnarts wohs flesruoy!" Zatanna commanded with a spell. Nothing happened except they barely dodged a handful of red shurikens. Nightwing tried to goad this mystery person again by mocking,

"Ha! Is that the best you can-" But his sentence was cut off by one of the shurikens behind him exploding. He fell forward and then suffered a swift kick to his jaw. Cursing internally for falling for such a simple trick, Nightwing lashed out blindly and in turn felt a sharp jab to his back, maybe from someone's elbow. In the second he was dazed, he saw Zatanna also fighting aimlessly and taking hit after hit. As Nightwing charged the stranger once again, he used a smoke pellet to try and find the outline of where the guy was hiding. He saw for a small moment where the person stood, but then he was blasted back by a ray of energy in the form of an x.

Luckily, Zatanna also saw the stranger and got in a great right hook before getting blasted by an x.
as well. She hit a wall and tumbled to the floor. Angrily she got up saying, "Emoceb elbis-" A red x suddenly shot out of midair to cover her mouth. Stumbling back, Zatanna tugged at the x that gagged her in vain. It appeared to be made out of some sort of sticky substance. Distracted by her inability to cast spells, she didn't dodge the next laser blast and was hit once again. This time the invisible enemy hit her roughly enough to render her unconscious.

Nightwing threw one of his electrical escrima sticks at the place the enemy should be, and though the stranger blocked the attack, the jolt of electricity must have forced the perpetrator to become visible. Now being able to see his opponent, he could tell the trick of invisibility was through the man's suit. The person probably wasn't meta-human or an alien. He wore a white mask made to look like a skull, a large red x on the front of his chest, and the rest of his suit was either black or grey. The man's height and weight were obviously distorted by the bulk of his shoes and armor, so no one would have a clue as to the correct measurements of his enemy. Smart.

"Who are you?" Nightwing demanded to know. He used his scary voice because the asshole hurt Zatanna.

"Red X, at your service." Red X gave mocking bow to him and said with a voice purposely distorted by his mask, "Does a pretty thing like you come around here often, because I could go crazy for you, y'know."

"Crazy. Because this is an asylum for the criminally insane. Har har."

"Criminally insane? I think the only crime here is that your X-cellent ass and I haven't met sooner."

"...Seriously?" Nightwing was notorious for having terrible puns but that was just painful. Though, the bantering gave him time to download the Arkham's emergency protocol, which would hopefully go into effect any... second... now...

"You can't tell with this mask on but I'm winking suggestively."

"Oh, you really want to go on a date? Then let's dance." He put everything he had into knocking Red X out, but for a new villain the guy sure knew how to fight. Clearly, he had practiced with some of the best, and one of his flips seemed familiar.

"Aha, so, you work for the League of Assassins?" Nightwing grunted as he dodged a punch and nicked Red X on the shoulder with his foot.

"I work for me. The League of Assassins is more of a friends with benefits sort of thing." Red X sounded slightly offended as he managed to knock away Nightwing's other escrima stick.

An alarm sounded and jarred Red X long enough to give him a perfect kick to the gut. The man went down with a loud "oomph." Sensing he was about to lose, Red X turned around to run out the door, but the doors and windows were now replaced by thick steel wall. He gave a frustrated growl, making Nightwing feel accomplished. The acrobat dodged a few x lasers and knew the other was letting emotions get the best of him.

"What's wrong? Are things not going X-actly to plan?"

Nightwing gave a chuckle and Red X gave a furious shout, throwing more red shurikens at the hero. At least, Nightwing had assumed they were shurikens, but one of them instead turned into some sort of goo when Nightwing tried to block it with a kick. The goo expanded rapidly until only his neck and head were left uncovered. No matter how hard he struggled, the glob he was stuck in wouldn't let him go anywhere. Well. This wasn't aster at all.
"Finally, I thought you'd never download the emergency protocol." Red X said, taking his time walking over to Zatanna's unconscious body and tying her to one of the legs of a nearby lunch table. This guy was making his way up Nightwing's hate-list remarkably fast. But maybe if the jerk thought he was in control then he'd be easier to interrogate.

"There's only one way you could know about all these security measures in Arkham. Do you know where Robin is?"

"Robin? Robin... Robin Robin Robin. Rob, Robbie, Robin. Hmm, isn't that the pipsqueak who shadows Batman?"

"..." Nightwing resisted saying something he'd regret, "Yes. That's the one."

Red X took a chair and dragged it along the grimy floor, making it screech unpleasantly as he did so. He faced Nightwing, sitting backwards so he could lean over the back of the chair with his arms crossed.

"You don't like me very much, do you?" Red X sounded sort of sad, which made no sense. A crash from somewhere else shook the floor. There was also a faint banging noise coming from above their heads and Nightwing chose not to bring it up in favor of asking about Tim.

"Do you know where Robin is?" Nightwing repeated the question.

"You could say that. Why don't you like me? Do I remind you too much of yourself?"

"No. You hurt my friend."

"Fair enough." Red X gave an X-aggerated--No. Nightwing would not fall to his level of humor--exaggerated sigh, "Why do you want to know about the pipsqueak?"

"He's my friend and I miss him." He tried not to sound like he was pleading. Red X sort of froze but relaxed so quickly Nightwing wondered whether or not he imagined it.

"Really? I couldn't picture someone like him as a friend." It was said with a cold, uncaring tone of voice.

"What does that mean?" Nightwing tried not to sound so harsh but he felt defensive, "He's an amazing friend."

"He's more trouble than he's worth. Useless. You shouldn't bother with him and focus on something more important."

"Oh, fuck you."

"Only if you ask nicely."

"...

"Okay, okay. I can see you're X-tremely upset, but I'm only following orders. It's hardly my fault you're just another pretty face without the capability of finding your so-called friend. Tell you what," Red X stood up and went to stand in front of Nightwing at eye-level, "I can promise you he's not hurting. Feel better?"

"I- Yes, actually... Thanks. I think."

"No problem." Then Red X ruffled Nightwing's hair as a friendly gesture. The metal on the doors
and windows began to retract. Dick had been struggling to get out of the gunk he was trapped in but could tell by the time he got free that Red X would be long gone.

The new villain had nearly passed under the doorway when he walked back. He put some sort of computer chip in Zatanna's limp hand and said to Nightwing,

"I almost forgot- This contains files Ra's al Ghul wants you to look at. Don't ask me what they are because it could be virus that turns your hair purple for all I know." Red X suddenly put his hand up to his ear, "Yes. Yes, I'm done here. No, leave them be. Stand down, that's an order. If you really want to see someone die then I can just kill you. That's what I thought. Clear the area unless you'd rather explode in the next two minutes alongside the other inmates." Red X apparently ended the call as he bowed sarcastically to Nightwing, "Farewell, my tight-pants prince. We shall meet again."

Two minutes until a bomb goes off. How original. Nightwing guessed it took him about a minute and a half to get out of the goo and five seconds to realize someone changed the security so he couldn't go back out the window. In fact, he couldn't even contact the Team. Typical. He pocketed the computer chip and carried Zatanna down the stairs as fast as he could. There was no one else in sight, including the residents of Arkham so Nightwing was hopeful that the others had gotten everyone out of the building already.

Twenty-four seconds and counting.

He came across what must be the bomb. It was comically large and in a split second Nightwing decided he had a better chance defusing the bomb than he had of running to safety.

Twenty seconds and counting.

The screen to turn off the bomb through coding had been smashed to bits so the only option left was to cut the right power line. Looking inside the explosive he noticed there were many unnecessary wires that probably didn't lead to anything. He'd never seen anything quite like it, probably homemade.

Eighteen seconds and counting.

Zatanna, who he had gently placed on the ground for the time being, began to wake up. She looked dazed at first but her eyes went wide seeing Nightwing and what appeared to be a giant bomb.

"Stay traught, I've got it under control." He heard her trying to say something even though she was still gagged with a red x. The material the x was made of simply was too sticky to remove. She'd need some sort of solvent to get it off.

Fifteen seconds and counting.

Nightwing cut a wire. Then two wires. Then three. Nothing he was doing changed the ticking noise. Zatanna's muffled voice became louder.

"It's fine. We'll be okay." God, he hoped they'd be okay. An explosion isn't the worst way to die but it's not the best either.

Nine seconds and counting.

Why couldn't he figure this out? Who designs a bomb with so many pointless wires? He more or less started slashing at all them.
Four seconds and counting.

Zatanna tugged his arm.

Two seconds and counting.

He pulled her into a hug and she hugged him back, her shoulders moving up and down as if she was crying. His heart ached because Zee deserved better than an ending like this.

One second.

Zero.

Then nothing happened other than confusion and Zatanna was pulling away from him, her shoulders shaking in poorly restrained laughter. He felt his cheeks glow warm although he wasn't sure why. She pointed to the bomb again, specifically underneath the bomb. Getting on his knees, he looked at the particular spot Zatanna tried to show him. "Made in China. For kids 12 and up." It was a toy that someone put a ton of effort into making look real. The bad guys used the bomb purely as a diversion for them to make an escape.

"Well, for all we know it could've been a real bomb from Toyman!" Nightwing blushed even more as Zatanna rolled her eyes in a way that meant 'you spent half your life training with the World's Greatest Detective and have defused how many bombs by now?' She walked away. He ran after her calling out,

"You're not going to tell the others about this are you? Zee? C'mon, for old time's sake!"

....

The Team rendezvoused on one of their bases in California. Zatanna and Artemis were in the medical bay trying to get the x off of Zee's mouth. Not to mention Deathstroke and Cheetah had done a number on Artemis. She needed about a dozen stitches. Poor M'gann was still knocked out altogether from being ambushed by Livewire. Dick gave the rest of the Team his best guesses as to Tim's whereabouts. Conner scowled when hearing about Ra's al Ghul, which was understandable considering Tim described how the man was leering at him.

"So what was on the files?" Jaime asked and Bart nodded to show his curiosity as well. Batgirl answered,

"We're scanning the computer chip for anything that could be even slightly harmful to our technological systems." Nightwing, now dressed as a civilian, was doing the scanning as they speak, occasionally looking down at his laptop while listening to the group. Simultaneously, he searched to discover anything he could about the new guy: Red X. Whoever he was, he seemed to be the one calling the shots. People like that don't simply pop up out of nowhere. Surely, someone with such unbearable jokes had been noticed before now.

"What do you think will be on the files?" Karen tilted her head.

"Who knows. Ra's al Ghul has a brain full of cats high off of catnip," scoffed Mal, "He's insane."

"Be that as it may," Kaldur said as patiently as ever, "His 'brain full of cats' controls an empire of trained assassins who serve him with unshakable loyalty. We'll need quite the plan if we want to challenge him so blatantly."

"If he took our friend then he has already challenged us." Cassie snapped, "We should find him and
strangle him with the Lasso of Truth until he tells us where Robin is."

"I agree with Cassie." Garfield piped up while gently adjusting a bag of ice on his knee. He thankfully was not as injured as M'gann was, "Ti- I mean Robin, has had to wait long enough. We should take action as soon as possible." Bart agreed, Jaime seemed more skeptical, and La'gaan was flat out disagreeing.

A small beeping sound came from Nightwing's computer, though he didn't interrupt everyone's debate. The chip was perfectly virus-free, so not being able to wait any longer, Dick placed the chip in his laptop. It was probably better to see what was on the files before showing everyone on the Team anyway. Immediately he regretted his decision. Ra's had written a message that read:

"He wanted you to know he doesn't blame you, and should Batman decide to take on another Robin the odds of survival to adulthood are now a 33.33% chance rather than 50%. He loved you all and only wished you had loved him in return. You have my condolences."

And there were pictures of an unconscious Tim strapped to a chair with blood dripping down his face as his head lolled to the side. Ra's was pressing a delicate kiss on Tim's hairline, staring into the camera triumphantly. From there the images became increasingly disturbing. It wasn't possible to completely see Tim's face but you could tell it was him by his clothing and the scars on his torso. There was so much blood, too much blood for a normal person to survive through. From his body language, he was clearly in insurmountable pain. Long pieces of metal were stabbed underneath his fingernails, and the masked figures in the picture were taking burning steel rods and dragging them down Tim's legs.

Dick kept clicking through the photos until he came across the last one. Red X was holding what was supposed to be Tim's face. Whether or not it was his face was impossible to tell, but considering Tim was now dead in the chair with his face ripped off, the connection seemed obvious enough.

No. Nonononono. He's- Tim can't be dead. Not Tim.

"Hey, Nightwing, are you okay?" Babs sounded concerned, which made sense because Dick was very much not okay. This was not okay.

"Babs." He choked out the word as if he were dying, and perhaps he was considering he had now lost Tim on top of Wally and Jason and his parents and... Too much death was surrounding him. He was suffocating, drowning in it.

"What? What is it?" Now Babs really sounded worried as she hurried over by his side. Then she saw the picture of Tim.

"Oh God." She clapped her hands over her mouth like she wanted to puke. Dick couldn't blame her because he felt like he was going to throw up, too.

Red X had told him Tim wasn't hurting. Not for a second did Nightwing think Tim wasn't hurting because dead people are unable to feel pain. Now he was staring at a picture of Red X holding up Robin's face as if it was some sort of prize, a trophy. The shock he felt seeing the picture burned into rage in an instant. Dick stood up so quickly he felt dizzy, or maybe he felt dizzy because of the swirl of emotions clawing away at his insides. Disbelief, fury, grief, betrayal, guilt, and a desperate need to scream all churned within him, blocking out any feelings he ever had of happiness.

"What happened? What is it?" The others wanted to know. Looking at some of their faces, they had already correctly guessed the problem by his reaction. (The prominent clue would be the tears now
freely cascading down Dick's cheeks.) He'd always be careful not to fall apart in front of the Team, but this loss was just one person too much.

"The files have pictures of Robin. He's d-d-" He shook his head, unable to say the news out loud. God, he was such a mess. He needed to pull himself together for the Team, "He's gone. They killed him."

No one responded to that. There was no screaming or panic, they all just stood in silence, the quiet before the storm. Dick could tell he was about to lose control of himself so he raced out of the room. By true coincidence he ran straight into Batman, literally, and he almost fell over. Superman and Green Arrow were there as well, but that didn't matter.

"Nightwing?" Bruce's voice called out anxiously as he grasped the acrobat by the arms, "What's wrong? What happened?"

He wanted to hate Bruce and wanted to be angry with him. How could this be happening again? They both knew it could. They knew the risks. Why? Just... Why. The only thing Dick could do was hug his adopted dad as if their lives depended on it.

"I'm so so sorry, Bruce." he whispered, "He's d-dead. I'm so so so so sorry." Dick buried his face into Batman's shoulder and couldn't prevent the sobs that tore through his body. Bruce hugged back, just as tightly, and ran his hand through his son's hair.

"Shh. It's okay. We'll get through this. We'll get through this together." Mostly it wasn't possible to understand what Bruce was saying, but the constant low rumble of his voice felt like the only thing holding Dick together.

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Tim sat on the edge of the bed next to Ra's al Ghul, feeling exhausted from the events of the day. Dick seemed really upset at Tim's disappearance, which of course made the teen feel tremendously guilty. He thought while the Team would be concerned for him they'd still focus on bigger issues. Maybe telling Dick that Robin wasn't suffering would help get Nightwing back on the right track. The acrobat was one of Tim's favorite people, but Dick had such a big heart that it could potentially overwhelm logical actions. At least Batman wouldn't get distracted by Tim's absence. Bruce at least understands how expendable Tim is in the grand scheme of things. The mission comes first, sentiment after.

Robin understood that, too. He had already translated the first tablet of the Apocalypse Trinity, which he then had to give a false translation to Klarion, basically creating a completely different alien language to explain the logic behind the translation. The tablets were like a haiku and Sudoku and Mad Lib all in one. To understand it one would need to figure out the rules of a dead language, then figure out how that language was coded and scrambled, and then solve the metaphors and/or riddles (which all the metaphors were about things not from Earth. Yikes.) Only then does someone know what ingredients and rituals needed for summoning this mystery power. Tim was fairly certain the time, place, and the 'what' of what is being summoned is laid out in the second tablet.

He wished he had gotten a better look at the third tablet before he was abducted by the Light. Tim would have to wait until he was back home and get permission from Dr. Fate to examine the stone.

Ra's planted kisses on his neck, pulling him closer. Acting contemplative Tim decided to ask him,

"So, what was on those files you had me give to Nightwing?"
"Mm," the older man kissed his collarbone, "Why? Are you concerned?"

"A little." At this Ra's yanked Tim sharply away, eyes full of suspicion.

"I see."

"Ra's," Tim said quietly, leaning up to stroke the assassin's chest, "What I'm trying to say is, did you give them pictures of... us?" He placed a hand on Ra's' thigh and gave it a small squeeze to show what he meant, "I know how you like to gloat, but sharing this with them means it's a little less of ours and a little more theirs. I don't want to share you." He nuzzled up against Ra's, and the man embraced him once again.

"Fear not, Beloved. I did no such thing."

Thank God. He didn't think Garfield was ready for those kinds of graphic images. At least not images of Robin with a 500 year old creepy man like Ra's al Ghul.

Tim still wanted to know what had been on the computer chip, but he knew better than to push the issue at the moment. He figured he'd find out what was in the files eventually. Until then, he was one step closer to discovering the secrets of the Apocalypse Trinity.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Kon refuses to accept Tim's death.

The hallways and rooms around the Watchtower echoed endlessly with silence. Kon as a half-Kryptonian didn't hear everything as intensely as Superman did, but he imagined it would feel a lot like now. Every shift in movement, every sigh, every heartbeat was ringing almost painfully in his ears. Without anything louder to focus on he couldn't ignore what small waves of sound were left. Plus, the walls, ceilings, and floors were made of cold metal. The atmosphere reminded him of Tim's house, uninviting and empty.

"Hey." Nightwing came into the room with a pitiful attempt at a smile, "So have you decided whether or not you want to go to the funeral service tomorrow?"

Apparently Kon took too long to answer because in the next moment Dick was sitting down in a chair next to him with a sigh,

"I heard you and Superman got into an argument over Robin." He talked slowly, carefully, as if Kon was going to crumple into despondent shambles, "You said he didn't understand what you were going through because he grew up on Earth before knowing he was an alien?"

"No. I said he didn't understand because he grew up loved. He doesn't know what it's like to grow up in a family who doesn't want him around. I didn't grow up with love because I grew up in a test tube. Even after I got out, the one person who I looked forward to meeting the most wanted nothing to do with me. At least M'gann understood that kind of rejection because she grew up as a White Martian. Clark can grieve for Krypton all he wants, but he's always had family in Kansas."

"Okay. What does that have to do with Tim?"

"Tim is like that. He didn't grow up loved or wanted. That's why we need to keep searching for him. We're the closest he's had to feeling like someone cares and we're letting him down by accepting he's gone."

"...Conner, listen,"

"No! You're the one who told me to never give up hope! He's my best friend-"

"And Wally was mine!" Dick now had his voice raised, "Tim was like a little brother to me, but no matter how much I wish they weren't dead, they are. There's a difference between having hope and living in denial. I'm sorry we didn't find him before the worst happened but it has been four days since confirming those pictures weren't faked and you're still preaching he's alive!"

"Because I'm right! You can't even see his face in the pictures of him being supposedly tortured. I know it's impossible to clone someone but- Oh! That's right! It is possible because you're talking to a fucking clone right now!"

"Fine- you can believe that. But you're making some of the others on the Team, the younger ones, believe in a fantasy that will only cause them more pain than necessary." He took a deep breath,
"Please, Conner, just... Come to the funeral tomorrow to help support each other. I know it will be tough, but I doubt Batman will be there and... and Tim deserves to have the people he cared about the most to be at the service."

Kon turned away from Dick to collect his thoughts, needing to calm down in order to respond in an intelligent manner. After a few seconds he spoke once again.

"One time, Tim and I were at his house just being alone together. He worked on his laptop for hours, solving Batman's cases like he always does. The babybird just wouldn't take a break, y'know? It was obvious he worked so intensely because his parents have such high expectations of him. I mean, he gets straight A's and it's still not enough for their approval. And I start to wonder why he became specifically Robin, because Batman doesn't seem to be the kind of person anyone would ever expect to win the approval of, so I asked him why he chose to be Robin." Dick said quietly,

"What did he say?"

"He said he didn't choose to be Robin, not really. Batman became violent as he grieved for Jason. Tim claimed Gotham needed Batman and Batman needed Robin. Apparently he wanted you to become Robin again but you refused, and he decided he had an obligation to take up the mantle himself. I told him just because Batman needed a Robin didn't mean he needed to take up the responsibility of a superhero for himself. Then this tiny fourteen year old looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Of course I had to, because I was right in saying Batman needs Robin. What's the point of being right if we're not willing to fight for it?'

Tim's alive, I would feel it if he were dead as if a piece of my heart died with him. I know I'm right, Dick, and I'm going to prove it." Kon tried to walk away but Dick blocked him.

"Conner, I can't handle anymore of the people I love dying. Please," the acrobat's voice broke, "After the funeral I'll help you search for Tim if that's something you're going to do no matter what. Don't try and look for trouble by yourself. Can I count on you to be here tomorrow?"

"I don't... Yes, okay. For the Team, Dick. I'll be here for them." Kon gave Nightwing a ghost of a smile, "Thank you for offering to help find him. It means a lot to me, really."

"What are friends for?" Dick asked rhetorically, his posture relaxed in relief. Nevertheless, Nightwing couldn't look him in the eye for too long and something about that bothered Kon on some level. Even so, the half-Kryptonian left Dick alone, passing by M'gann on his way out. She looked particularly cheerless, which was understandable. However, she also didn't want to look at Kon directly, like she felt guilty about something. He would've offered comforting words through telepathy, but M'gann preferred not to use her powers so often when she's really depressed.

Kon reached the end of the next two hallways when a gut feeling made him wonder if M'gann and Dick were talking to each other and what were they saying. Abusing super hearing isn't something he wants to make a habit of, but he still felt a sense of uneasiness thinking of the two. Hesitantly, Kon focused his attention on their voices, something that took minimal effort with how dreadfully quiet the Watchtower was that day. He heard Dick first.

"-and he's becoming more and more obsessed. I don't think he's going to stop searching. He's going to wind up getting killed if he continues like this, M'gann. You know how he is, he'd probably try to beat the Light single-handedly if he thought he had to."

"I know, I know. I thought about what you said. As much as I'd hate to betray Conner's trust again, I'd rather have him alive and angry with me then do nothing and watch him self-destruct. But it's
going to be difficult keeping something so big hidden from him."

"You don't have to erase all of his memories, just rewrite the ones from the past few months when the two started to become closer. We can tell the others not to mention Tim because those memories are too painful for Conner to handle."

"Alright, then. When do you want me to do this exactly?"

"He promised to be at the funeral tomorrow. Do it after the ceremony before he has the chance to run off."

That's all Kon could stand to hear. He thought he'd feel shocked at the prospect of his two friends betraying him but it truly wasn't so surprising. If Dick was willing to fake Artemis's death and M'gann was willing to manipulate his mind for the sake of saving their relationship, this didn't seem beyond their capabilities at all. Still, Kon could feel anger burning through him like his blood turned to lava. His hands clenched into fists and he used the Zeta Beam to get far away from these people he stupidly trusted with his life and love.

He ended up in the Team's California base. Packing up a few things for the road, Superboy decided to go and find Tim on his own. He decided flying was best and was about to get on the Super-Cycle when he heard Wonder Girl call out,

"Superboy, wait! We want to come with you!" We? He turned to see Cassie, Jaime, and Bart rush over. There was no point in trying to escape at this point when all three of the freshmen could travel inhumanly fast.

"No. You guys need to stay here with the Team." Kon ordered firmly with his best this-is-not-up-for-debate tone.

"Robin was our friend-" Bart began to say, "No. Robin is our friend, too. We agree that something isn't adding up."

"Why did they send only pictures? Why not an audio recording or something more?" Jaime said, "Robin must still be out there somewhere."

"Seriously, you-" Kon stopped because if the kids wanted to do what they thought was right then they should get that chance, "Fine. Hop on."

Bart instantly was sitting in the back like they were about to go on a family road trip. Jaime was just settled when yet another voice called out to them.

"And where do you tadpoles think you're going?" La'gaan showed up with a scowl, "What's your plan for finding Robin? Just pick a random spot on the map and hope for Neptune's blessing?"

"Get out of the way." Kon growled.

"Calm down, Chum." La'gaan held up his hands to signal he meant no harm, "I'm here to help you."

"The more the merrier!" Bart grinned while Cassie skeptically responded,

"Why are you helping when you don't even like Robin?"

"I like Robin!" La'gaan said defensively and then morosely, "But I didn't treat him the best when we last talked, you're not wrong about that. I don't know if you remember but I sarcastically told
him everyone loved him in his 'perfect gay glory.' Then he gets taken by the Light and then those horrible pictures... I'm going to take responsibility for my actions and help find him. At the very least I owe him that."

While Cassie still looked at the Atlantean with doubt, Kon held out his hand for La'gaan to shake as a truce. They would put aside their differences for Tim's benefit. Lagoon Boy shook his hand and said,

"Looks like the Super-Cycle is getting crowded. Why don't we swim over to a bigger pond?" He nodded toward the Bio-Ship, "Miss Martian isn't planning on going anywhere anytime soon."

"But I'm not sure how long this mission will take..."

"Neptune's Beard!" La'gaan exclaimed suddenly, "I almost forgot to tell you I know where to start looking for Robin."

"Really? Where?"

"The source came from Gotham. Rumor has it, Deadshot said Victor Zsasz and Red X were in the Arabian Desert. He said Red X had been at that base for weeks prior to breaking into Arkham."

"Hang on," Bart cut in, "Blue, didn't you tell me about a base of operations in the Arabian Desert?"

"Si. Lei sobre eso..." Jaime brought up a hologram file on the base, "Here. Now we have an exact location."

"Good job, you did the reading." Cassie congratulated him with what was meant to be a gentle punch to Jaime's arm. He winced slightly from the pain.

"In that case, we're taking the Bio-Ship." Kon decided, "Are you sure you want to tag along, Lagoon Boy?" After all, they were traveling to a desert and La'gaan was a fish out of water. Lagoon Boy only glared and marched to the Bio-Ship.

...  

Tim had honestly tried to ignore Zsasz's eyes drilling into the back of his head, but when a serial killer pays too much attention to him, well, it kept Tim nervous. Not to mention the guy kept a count of how many lives he's taken by carving tally marks into his skin. He gave off such a disturbing vibe. After training with the ninjas to practice fighting, and honing his skills with the Red X suit, Tim was exhausted. Now he was stuck in a room translating the Apocalypse Trinity, but failing because his body wanted to keep Zsasz in a line of sight. To make the situation more unbearable, Klarion was sitting beside him, nagging and being frustrating in general. Teekl had taken a liking to Tim, so she attempted to help by laying on top of the books and notes he was trying to read.

"Cat," Tim grumbled, "Move."

"Sleep, weakling mortal." Teekl in her ginger coat purred happily, "Sleep before death takes interest in you."

He wasn't sure if he was proud or appalled that he learned how to understand Teekl's meowing. The feline took her paws and began rhythmically kneading Tim's arm.

"Sleep isn't the priority. I need to work, so please move." The cat replied by purring louder. Tim decided to complain to Klarion, "Tell your familiar to move before I have to make her." Klarion
"You can't make her do anything."

"I bet I could convince her to claw your face off."

A deeper voice came from behind Tim as Zsasz spoke up, "I agree. You possess a unique trait to connect with others. You can get them to worship you or kill for you."

"You mean I can manipulate others?" Tim drawled, refusing to face the man, "Yes, I'm as unique as everyone else who can manipulate people." Concentrate on anything else but the psychopath and maybe he'll give up conversating. No good, Zsasz was walking closer to him now. Klarion tensed as if ready for a fight, and Tim was too tired to deal with this shit.

"So much potential..." Zsasz spoke almost reverently, "Yet you tie yourself down to someone who holds you back. First Batman and now Ra's al Ghul. Imagine what you could accomplish with the freedom to make your own rules. You could control entire empires. People would want the pain they inflict upon themselves in order to please you. They would slice themselves open and then thank you for their suffering." What the fuck. "You would be loved, craved for, the thread that ties the universe together..." Tim felt fingers slide over his neck.

But the teen didn't have to do anything because Klarion got up and immediately sent a burst of magic that pushed Zsasz back a few meters. The witchboy said something about no touching and then sent the killer away. Yay. When Klarion sat back down, Tim mumbled a thank you.

"I didn't do it for you." Klarion huffed and blushed, "He was annoying me. As if *you'll* ever be something great in the future. Whatever. You do whatever Ra's says, simple as that. Your potential for chaos is lacking." There was a beat of silence and for whatever reason the boy kept talking. "I mean, I guess Arkham Asylum that one time was decent chaos wise. No one died, but all of the inmates were running wild and people were getting beat up left and right. All of those explosions and the wonderful panic... It was kind of impressive." The witchboy turned a deeper shade of red, "For a mere mortal, I mean. You're still just a puppet."

"Maybe." Tim attempted to pick up the cat who stubbornly would not budge, "Or maybe the puppet master doesn't realize he has strings attached to him as well." That's it. Teekl wins this round. Tim knows when he's been beaten.

"So, you're planning on stabbing the Demon's Head in the back?" Klarion grinned, morbidly happy at the thought Ra's al Ghul would be in pain, "Tell you what, if you do that then I'll admit you're..." He coughed, "I'll admit you have some potential for causing true chaos."

Tim gave a small snort before leaning toward the suddenly awkward Klarion.

"What if I do better than stabbing him in the back?" He whispered in a conspiratorial manner.

"Well, um," The witchboy's eyes were dilated and he became more flustered, "I guess I could pay you back somehow as a token of appreciation."

"Pay me back?" Tim tilted his head and placed his hand over one of Klarion's. The evildoer desperately required some fingernail clippers. What is it with evil people and refusal to trim their nails? It's hardly a difficult task to accomplish.

"Pay him with sex." Teekl meowed, which made Klarion snap his hand away and back up from Tim in alarm.
Cats are precious creatures.

"What! Ew! I'm not going to fuck some puny insect, and definitely not when it's Ra's al Ghul's sloppy seconds. Ugh! No!" The boy's voice was an octave higher than normal, his face glaring red, "I think we've done enough work today. I'll- I'll see you tomorrow, goodbye, Red X."

He and the cat left through a magical portal as was normal for the spoiled brat. Admittedly, Tim made decent progress at getting the witchboy to be more respectful in general. Of course, Klarion seemed to have a crush on him, and that wasn't planned, but he'd use it to his advantage.

At least Tim finally got a chance to take a nap. Practically dead on his feet, he didn't even bother taking off his Red X costume before falling asleep. His dreams were he and Kon cuddling in the library as they read their favorite books. Kon smelled like sunshine, denim, warm spring showers, and... well, he smelled like home.

When the teen awoke to discover Ra's holding him, the pang of homesickness hit him full force. He shoved the sense of emptiness gnawing at him, he put it in a separate corner of his mind to be taken care of later. Right now he needed to prepare the finishing touches of his dramatic escape.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Kon goes to rescue Tim from the Light and discovers Tim is Red X.

Chapter Notes

RIP to Adam West who passed away yesterday.


Tim's morning played out in slow motion. Breakfast, working, training, socializing, working, complaining about the lack of coffee, and then Tim was oddly ordered back to his room. Being sent to his room that abruptly hadn't happened since his first two weeks of being captured, so he was a tad offended. Curiously, everyone else in the base also congregated in anomalous places. If Tim had to take a bet, he'd put his money on the base being under attacked. He paced in his bedroom with his Red X suit on, without the mask.

After what seemed like a century later, Ra's rushes into the room looking disheveled but very pleased with himself. He was on a level of satisfied that made Tim extra uncomfortable. One of the many brainwashed followers opened the door and Ra's raised a hand to shoo the person away while saying in an annoyed voice,

"Yes, yes, leave me be for the moment." But before the door closed Tim could see someone in the background putting a lasso away in a small wooden box. He'd recognize that specific lasso anywhere. Shit. Cassie must be in trouble. Hell, for all he knew, his other friends might be in trouble as well. That changes things. Tim had not planned on escaping that day but he's nothing if not resourceful. He analyzed Ra's al Ghul. The man was hanging up that terribly tacky green cloak, which Tim was certain symbolized some sort of psychological insecurity Ra's had with his masculinity. Or maybe the hideous clothing was a side effect of being submerged in the Lazarus Pit one too many times. Anyway, it was time to work some magic.

"You're a bit out of breath." Tim informed, "What was the issue out there? What did I miss?"

"It has been handled, Beloved." Ra's gave one of his more sinister smiles, "Think nothing of it."

"Yes, I'll drop the topic. It's not as if I've been cooped up in this room, unable to know what was happening or if I could do anything to help. It's not like I waited around like a sitting duck or fish in a barrel or-"

"Now, now, Timothy." The teen hated when Ra's said his name the way Janet did, "You do know how many enemies the Light has poised to strike against us at any moment. Don't forget, it is my duty to ensure your safety, so I indeed dealt with the inconvenience. Lure away the distress from your mind and quiet your worries. I am here with you."
"Yeah, sorry... I want to be useful and I thought, maybe, since everyone... they always leave me. I thought I wasn't doing well enough and- and... I guess I just got myself worked up for no good reason, huh?" Tim looked down and took a step back in a sudden bout of shyness.

"Hmm," Ra's al Ghul hummed as he stepped forward to skim his fingers over Tim's cheekbones, "You did get worked up, didn't you?" And upon saying those words, their faces were much too close together. Ever so slowly, the man pressed a kiss on his lips, soft and open-mouthed. Tim stood for a second as if processing what Ra's was doing before hungrily kissing back like adrenaline still lingered from all the pent-up stress.

The next part would be difficult, not because Tim was incapable of seducing pedophiles, but because he couldn't let himself surrender to the temptation of dissociating himself from the events occurring. In his mind, Timothy Jackson Drake was the leading expert on compartmentalizing. He decided he had two main versions of himself like different settings on a light switch. When the light is on the brightest--call it setting number two--Tim's emotions are thoroughly experienced to their full potential. If he has ever shouted out in excitement when feeling the joy of swinging building to building by his grappling hook, that was setting number two. If he couldn't help but smile while snuggled up next to ever-delightful Kon El, it's setting two. When the Flying Graysons fell from the trapeze to their deaths and Tim spent the following hours crying for Dick's loss, he felt that level of pain because of setting number two. The third Robin rarely kept this setting on for extended periods of time.

More often, Tim would keep himself on setting number one. This setting could better focus on facts, the mission, logic, and the willpower to get the job done despite whatever difficulties they faced. Of course his emotions still existed, but he can dim them, not unlike when someone blinks or breathes without noticing. Of course a person is aware they breathe or blink, but for the sake of concentrating on other things they ignore such functions in favor of (for instance) completing a math exam. The teen has found that most other humans are more like flames in the way their emotions and logic can fluctuate freely rather than be put in separate categories.

However, given all of the truly gruesome and repulsive things Tim has seen in his life, he additionally knows how to turn off the light switch altogether. When personally suffering an impossibly traumatic situation, he can simply turn off and exist as an empty, automated version of himself. There is no grounded conscious thought or intention; It's as if he watches himself in the distance, going the the motions. He responds by the rules his parents taught: React to clients as they desired (which meant moaning in pleasure or possibly screaming in terror, depending on whatever fit the fantasy of the person). In general he was not to talk, complain, resist, or act as if he were an equal human being. Finally, when the danger passes, the light switch turns back on--though it might flicker at first--and Tim refuses to allow his light become too bright in case he needs to turn it back off quickly as possible. This ability to dissociate from unspeakable things has its uses when Tim is more or less enduring torture, but if he wants to do anything defiant he requires to be at least on the lowest setting.

As consequence, he was pressed up against the man who came into his home and paid him out as a child prostitute, the man who used him for sexual experimentation for two weeks, the man who takes a confirmation of consent as an all-free pass for all future desires, the man who put him in a hallucinated situation of killing Kon, and Tim had to come to terms with feeling disgusted and tainted. He felt the anxiety of feeling powerless to keep this man from doing anything and everything to his body. When Ra's stuck his hand down Tim's suit, the last thing the teen wanted to do was gasp as if enjoying having those filthy hands anywhere near him. Tim felt too much emotion, even on setting one. He shook with the frustration of his body reacting to heat and friction by sending shots of dopamine to his senses. Logically he was aware even a corpse could have an orgasm with the right electrical signals, but it didn't help the cognitive dissonance of having
physical pleasure at a touch he really really didn't want.

Soon enough, he was forced to his knees in front of Ra's. Tim skillfully pulled down the grey-haired creep's pants, licking and sucking in all the right places. He waited until Ra's had desperately ragged breathing before opening his lips in an 'O' shape as an invitation. When fleshy nastiness was shoved down Tim's throat, pulling and pushing in a way that choked and stung, he waited until every inch of the shaft was in his mouth and Ra's' grip tightened in his hair.

Then he bit down. Hard.

...  

Kon didn't know for certain how long he, Cassie, Bart, Jaime, and La'gaan had been in their pods, although he would hazard a guess of a few hours. They tried to struggle as soon as they were awake, but it was similar to being trapped by CADMUS, and since they all wore inhibitor collars they weren't getting out anytime soon. Their individual pods were arranged in a semi circle, engineered to be maneuvered, which meant they were going to be transported to another location sooner or later. The base in the Arabian Desert turned out to be a lot bigger than they originally thought. Really, the files they had didn't give a whole lot of information, and a lot of the building hid behind magical illusions. Klarion had so much fun attacking them that the thousands--thousands upon thousands--of Ra's al Ghul's followers didn't get much of a chance to do anything.

Well, Dick was right in thinking Kon would end up hurt if he kept looking for Tim. The half-Kryptonian dragged four other people into his useless rescue mission and Rao knows what will happen to them now. Those people--his friends--were watching him in expectation of a strategy or sign of hope, and they were only kids. Okay, technically, Kon was six years old, but nevertheless he shouldn't have let the others get to this point.

The glass that encased them blocked out the majority of sound from outside so he couldn't hear what the thugs below were saying. Worse, since most of them wore masks he couldn't even attempt to read lips. He did see a few familiar faces like Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy, which didn't make him feel any better. Maybe if he saw someone he could trick into opening the pod... Deciphering the psychology behind the actions of the criminally insane wasn't his strong suit though. That skill set resided in Bat territory. Even if they did manage to escape their pods, how would they get pass the small army to an exit? Kon wondered how long it would be before Klarion or whoever located the hidden Bio-Ship. Hopefully, Miss Martian would notice it had been taken and have a sort of mind trick to find her vessel from across the world. Having a powerful mental GPS on Bio-Ships seemed like a very Martian thing to do. Then again, why would M'gann ruin her streak of disappointing Kon when she's been doing such a marvelous job so far?

Thinking of how M'gann broke his trust yet again, Superboy felt angry, an emotion that would help him more than self-pity ever could. Kon effortlessly transformed his anger into a productive energy source, and he gave the Team a look of fierce determination to which they responded with faces reflecting vehement resolve. They only needed a hint of opportunity to retaliate.

Like a sign of fate, the towering doors in the back of the room swung open dramatically with a figure who resembled... someone important? Kon couldn't discern through the shadows the identity of the person, but the figure immediately drew the attention of everyone else in the area. Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy rushed to the stranger's side with body language that screamed 'protective anxiety.' Coming out of the shadows, a seemingly distressed Red X animatedly told the two girls a story probably to do with why the entire front of his suit was covered in blood. Then again, maybe being covered in blood was a common occurrence in Red X's line of work.

Superboy spared a glance at Cassie whose facial expression was undeniably murderous. Suddenly
Kon realized that despite accompanying him on his rescue mission, agreeing Robin was alive, some of his friends might think on some level that Red X killed their teammate. Hopefully they'd show enough restraint to keep the bastard alive long enough to get information. Kon tried to catch the eye of the others to somehow communicate they needed Red X relatively unharmed, but he became distracted by the sudden evacuation of the room.

A crash sounded in the distance and Kon could feel the vibrations of the room shaking. A big fight? An earthquake? Maybe the Team or Justice League had found them. Only a couple of thugs were now guarding the controls that kept him and the others captive. Red X had also lingered behind, going up to the others and saying who knows what. Then those thugs turned around as if ordered to do something with the control panels.

For whatever reason, as soon as their backs were turned, Red X swiftly incapacitated them. The masked man reached for the control panels himself until a portal opened in front of him, bringing along Klarion and that demonic cat. Almost appearing betrayed, Klarion yelled to the point Kon could almost hear him, although on the other hand the cat rubbed up against Red X's legs as if the fleabag adored the guy. Maybe Superboy should've brought Wolf with him after all. Wolf hated Teekl.

To make the situation even weirder, Red X took a few steps--intruding on the unspoken bubble of personal space everyone possessed--and leaned into Klarion with a stance that clearly read 'inappropriate flirting.' Dick had reported Red X used some awkward teasing and cringe-worthy wordplay, but the witchboy actually blushed at whatever Red X was saying. Then the flirtatious individual took out a bag made out of cloth that was soaked and dripped with... yeah, definitely blood, and offered it to Klarion. Apparently whatever was in the bag made Klarion the happiest insufferable brat on Earth, and he stepped aside to let Red X get to the controls. Saying goodbye with what could only be described as infatuated babbling, the impudent child left with his cat.

Red X took less than ten seconds to open the pods Kon and the Team were held in. During the next second, the criminal had unlocked their inhibitor collars. In retrospect, the dude should've waited to explain his position before letting a group of very upset super-powered teens on the loose. Bart wasted no time slamming into the man first, knocking him down on the floor. Red X made a show of not resisting the attack and Kon pulled the speedster off of the felon before anymore damage could be done.

"What did you do with Robin?" Cassie demanded, ducking passed Superboy and punching Red X in the face before anyone could stop her.

"He's okay, I swear." Red X assured calmly, still on the floor and not fighting, "But first we need to get out of here. We don't have a lot of time."

"Yeah? Why should we trust you?" Jaime crossed his arms. La'gaan had made a show of puffing up to three times his size as if Red X would be any more intimidated.

"Do you have a choice? Hmm?" The masked man replied knowingly, "We're going to miss our window of opportunity if we debate much longer."

"Fine." Kon growled and roughly lifted Red X to his feet, "How do we get out?"

"We go left first."

The group ran with Red X into a hallway and sharply to the left. Alarms throughout the corridors were all flashing red, signaling a disturbance Kon didn't think had to do with them. (Well, not yet, anyway.) In the next significantly large room, an impressive battle reigned complete with
deafening destruction and massive confusion. Superboy's squad stood on a less crowded railing from above, taken aback.

"What the-?" Blue Beetle looked out at the chaos, seeing giant plants taking up about half of the space below and lashing out at ninjas, and Harley Quinn with Killer Frost facing off against Deathstroke. It was absolute insanity how many people were amidst the melee, and Kon wasn't sure who was on whose side. In one corner he spotted Cheetah frozen in ice from the waist down and she was still managing to take near-fatal swipes at anyone who got too close to her. A storm cloud expanded across the ceiling, lightning striking out at random. The metal panels of the floor in the middle of the room began to retract, pushing up a platform from beneath. On the platform stood a gigantic--like the size of a house gigantic--android. Holy crap. The metal man joined in on the war commencing. Superboy turned to face Red X and saw it was him who had activated the android.

"Alright, Wonder Girl, tear off that strip of steel on the wall." Red X ordered. Cassie shot the man a resentful glare before doing as instructed. There was nothing behind the wall other than a hole in the floor that lead into darkness. It reminded Kon of a space for a dumbwaiter.

"Now what?" Bart asked.

"Now we go down. It's a bit of a drop so watch your step." With that, Red X clicked a grappling hook to the floor and jumped into the darkness. Cassie shrugged and went next, followed by Bart, Jaime, La'gaan and lastly Kon. 'A bit' of a jump felt more like jumping off of a small skyscraper, so after about forty stories Kon finally hit the ground with a resounding thump. Everything around him was still dark.

"Okay, what did you guys come here in, the Bio-Ship?" Red X looked at a holographic map from the x on the palm of his hand, "What direction is that?"

"The east." Kon answered.

"Good, alright, this way!"

Red X and Blue Beetle shined flashlights in front of them to guide their way as they ran into another maze of hallways, "We're going to use the pipelines as our exit." The man explained, "Good thing Lagoon Boy is here." La'gaan gave Kon a small smirk. Honestly, that stupid puffer fish gives all the Atlanteans in the world a bad name.

"Just two more rights and one more left." Red X updated. But of course then all the hallway lights turned on and alarms sounded. An extremely thick wall of cemented carbide began to drop further ahead, potentially blocking their chance of taking their next right turn. Several seconds later a similar barricade began to drop on the left side.

"Hurry!" Bart called out, pushing Jaime from behind using super speed. Once Blue Beetle was across, Kid Flash doubled back for Cassie. The wall was more than halfway to the floor, falling fast. Once she was across, he came back for La'gaan. By the time those two slid to safety, Kon had reached the wall of metal himself, lifting it barely a foot off of the ground. He strained his muscles, putting everything he had into holding it up. Wonder Girl attempted to help him on the other side and he could hear her struggling as well.

"Go!" He grunted to Red X who would still be able to fit through the small gap, "Now!"

Instead of listening to Kon, the man reached into his belt and threw an x under the left blockade of which had only lowered halfway. The x mechanism worked as a sort of carjack, holding the
barricade up though not for long. He grabbed Superboy by the collar and practically threw the hero under the metal wall. Red X dove after him and made it before they could be crushed.

"What was that?" Kon yelled in frustration.

"You're welcome!" Red X retorted, "Use your communicator and tell the others to hurry to the Bio-Ship as fast as possible- fast enough to meet us on the west side in three minutes."

"What?"

"We're taking an alternative route, okay? Let's go!"

Kon did what he was told while running alongside Red X. They turned corner after corner. Just when the half-Kryptonian suspected the man had no clue where they were going, they rushed into a dark, cold, and damp room. When Red X turned on the lights, Superboy immediately said,

"No."

"You have a better idea?"

"I don't think Man-Bat is in the mood to offer free rides to the public." In fact, Man-Bat was highly upset at the suddenly well-lit environment, responding by screeching and tugging against the many chains that held him down, "Was he always this huge?"

"I think he got a dose of what made Wolf so big. Now, c'mon, we're running out of time."

"...This is a really horrible plan." Man-Bat was literally foaming at the mouth, absolutely feral. They were probably the right size for food from its perspective.

"Clone Boy, I need you to trust me."

Clone Boy? That got Kon's attention. He thoughtfully examined Red X, gauging fully the general height and size of the man. The suit was lined with lead and designed to trick the naked eye of what Red X's true measurements were but... maybe it was possible.

"Have it your way, Gay Theft Auto." He couldn't actually say, but he thought Red X smiled under the mask.

They, despite all common sense, climbed up and clung to the back of the mutant experiment gone wrong. Red X hacked into the release mechanism of the restraints.

"Brace yourself. Three... two.. one."

Kon decided he hated flying via Man-Bat a whole lot more than being levitated by M'gann. He felt like he could be thrown off at every flap of the creature's wings. Also, he felt nauseous. And dizzy. They spiraled upward out of the cave Man-Bat had been imprisoned in for who knows how long. Kon would feel more sympathetic toward the creature if he wasn't currently being lurched around as if he was riding a mechanical bull. No, more like a drunk mechanical bull on steroids.

"Did you have any idea how to fly this thing?" Kon shouted over the ungodly screaming.

"Uh, maybe tug his hair like reigns on a horse?" Red X (Tim?) said with uncertainty. When they reached fresh air outside of the Light's base of operations, Kon pulled Man-Bat's hair as suggested. Surprisingly, the creature responded fairly well. Superboy spotted the Bio-Ship hovering in the far off distance.
"Hey, we're on a giant mutant bat and headed your way." Kon yelled into his intercom.

"Yeah, estás loco, but we see you, too." Jaime confirmed. Then Kon could faintly hear Wonder Girl saying,

"He knows we're under no circumstance keeping Man-Bat as a pet, right?" Wow, Kon adopts a mutated carnivorous animal one time and no one will ever let him forget it.

"Woah, hey what's with the orange glowy stuff?" Bart asked in alarm. Confused, Kon scanned the area and spotted the beginnings of a dome, a force field, creeping up around the edge of Light's headquarters. Red X quickly stated,

"Their magical defense has gone into effect. Once the dome is sealed nothing is getting in or out of this place. It closes from the bottom up so we need to fly higher." Great. Kon urged Man-Bat to go higher up, and the orange energy followed, gaining on them.

"We're not going to make it." Superboy called out to Red X, and he was right. The force field was almost complete with a rapidly closing gap at the top of the half-sphere.

"Man-Bat isn't going to make it." Red X corrected, struggling to stand up against the wind and jerking wings, "I hear you can leap tall buildings in a single bound."

"Might as well," Kon stood up with more success than the masked man. If they were going to jump off of Man-Bat through the opening then hopefully Red X had some sort of X-parachute in his belt. "Hold onto me."

"Why Kon-El, I thought you'd never ask."

"Tim, don't make me drop you."

Red X clung to his back while Kon tensed to jump. When he decided they couldn't wait any longer, Superboy leaped and did his best be precise in his aim. For one horrific second he thought they were going to be sliced in half. However, the magical barrier closed behind them and their trajectory then curved downward.

"You have a parachute?" Kon warned, "This is gonna go bad for you if you don't have a parachute."

"No, we have something better."

So Superboy like a schmuck waited for Red X's punchline, expecting him to coincidentally have a hang glider or something. Feeling a sudden lurch upward, Kon turned his head to see Cassie carrying them. Tim continued,

"We have Wonder Girl."

"You don't have a damn thing." Wonder Girl hissed and roughly tossed the two into the Bio-Ship. Gee, thanks Cassie, "You're going to tell us exactly where Robin is and then I'm dragging your sorry ass back to Hades myself." The other heroes had already cornered Red X, all of them were soaking wet and cranky. A piece of Cassie's shirt had torn off like a shark tried to bite her. Kon could absolutely believe the Light kept an army of sharks in their water supply.

"Alright, okay." Red X said slowly, "If you increase the Bio-Ship's altitude, you'll understand."

"We're not playing your games, Chum." sneered La'gaan, "Just tell us-" But Lagoon Boy stopped
talking because he saw Kon sitting at the helm of the ship, following Red X's orders. The rest of the group complained to Superboy in protest until Red X cut in.

"Now that the magical barrier is in place, nothing can go through it, not even air." The man gave a nod to the window, which now had a bird's-eye view of the dome, "Basically, it would really suck if someone triggered a sort of chemical explosion in the building. Actually, now that I think about it, I hope I didn't leave the oven on."

With perfect timing, because of course it was perfect timing, a flash of light encompassed the inside of the force field before what appeared to be smoke started pouring out. Strangely, red smoke circled around the perimeter, black filled the middle, and then... No, he didn't... Yellow smoke rose above the black, forming what was an unmistakable "R." For a couple of seconds the red, black, and yellow smoke consumed the dome with the world's biggest Robin insignia before losing its formation and blending the colors together.

During the brief moment the Team had been staring more or less in awe of the impressive chemistry/artistry, Red X had taken off his skull mask and clicked several photos of the symbolic "R."

"Wow." Tim wore a domino mask said conversationally, like they were relaxing by the beach and making small-talk, "I didn't think it'd turn out quite that nicely. What do you guys think?"

Because Kon had pretty much guessed Tim was Red X, he got to better appreciate the faces on everyone else when they looked at the teen and recognized Robin. When the pieces began to fully click in their minds, they were understandably angry. Apparently Tim did not expect such a negative reaction.

"You- you little-" Cassie spluttered and stepped toward him to do something presumably violent. Bart held her back, but La'gaan and Jaime were one minute away from punching Robin, too.

"Sorry, everyone, really." Tim hastily apologized, "I would have told you earlier before we escaped but I didn't want anyone to lose focus of our objective."

Jaime cursed loudly in Spanish and now everyone was angry because that explanation was so damn logical. They obviously would've gotten distracted if they knew Robin had been Red X all along. It was very Tim of him.

"How could you do that to everyone?" Bart still held onto Cassie although he expressed definite impatience, "Nightwing actually cried in front of the Team and we've been looking for you for so long and those pictures on the flash drive were so not crash and you're lucky it was us because the others would have killed Red X for killing you but you are Red X and so they would've killed you and realized that you are you and everything would have been so awful because you were alive all this time and then in the endweweretheoneswhokilledyouinsteadand-

"Whoa, whoa. Bart, slow down. Red X killed me as in Red X killed Robin?" Tim sounded genuinely confused, "Wait. That's what was on the files I gave to Nightwing during the Arkham break-in?"

"Yeah!" Cassie finally stopped trying to attack him. "We're the only ones who thought you were still alive!"

"Everyone has been grieving for days now." La'gaan added more calmly. Kon still sat at the helm to fly the Bio-Ship although he had a fierce need to hug Tim until satisfied that his friend is safe and here once again.
"Your funeral service is happening as we speak." The half-Kryptonian reported somberly. His best friend blinked owlishly a few times like at a loss for the appropriate response to this information. Finally, Kon remembered how graceful and poised Tim could be in such situations when the teen spoke,

"Well. Shit."
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Everyone discovers Robin is still alive when Tim crashes his own funeral.

Tim thought he would feel elated to be back with the Team, but he instead felt guilty, which didn't make any sense because he got a ton of potentially useful information from the enemy! The first thing Jaime, Bart, La'gaan, and Cassie wanted to do was make an official announcement he was alive. Of course they were speaking from a place of emotion--namely a place of aggravation--so Robin reminded them he needed to go through the proper security procedures. For all they knew he was a clone or mind controlled to kill the Justice League. No one wanted to listen to reason but Kon pointed out Tim was right, so they ended up situated in the med bay of the Watchtower. It was freaky thinking elsewhere in the space station Tim's funeral was underway.

Though reluctant, everyone waited for the bio-scans (to prove he wasn't a clone or had any unusual brain activity), virus-scanning (of both him and his suit, not that Tim would allow himself to wear anything he found even remotely sketchy), and Zatanna's nifty magic-tech charm (a copper bracelet that turned blue if it detected any curses) to confirm Tim's safety. He had no doubt he was fine, but rules were rules. Meanwhile, Bart and Jaime were arguing over how they should tell the others about Robin's miraculous return from the dead, La'gaan stood stiffly while pointedly looking away from Tim, and Cassie lingered at the computers to wait for test results. She at least forgave Tim for the whole Red X miscommunication when he gave her lasso back. Wonder Woman would have been furious if she had lost it since, unlike utility belts, it wasn't a weapon easily replaced.

Kon and Tim sat side by side on a medical bed and it was impossible to figure out what was going through the clone's mind. Well, impossible unless someone happened to be a Martian, which made Robin feel a pang of jealousy toward M'gann. He selfishly wondered whether or not the two were dating again and if he would need to keep his distance from his friend as consequence.

"You sure you're okay?" Kon broke the silence with a dubious tone, eyeing the blood on his Red X suit.

"Uh, yeah. No- I'm good, or um, I'm okay. Very fine. Much content." Tim in a bout of nervousness tripped over his words, "None of this is my blood, so..."

"Not even the stuff around your mouth?"

"Nope. I sorta acquired a few bargaining chips to get passed Klarion."

"...Bargaining chips?"

"Yeah, a tongue, pinkie toe, stuff like that."

"Oh. Wow."

"Don't get me wrong, no one died or anything."

"Did you," Kon's eyebrows furrowed together, "Eat any body parts?"
"No! No. Definitely not. Cannibalism isn't even on my bucket list."

"That's... good."

"Thank you. It's about time someone praised my affinity to resisting the consumption of human flesh."

"Anyone ever tell you what a dork you are?"

"I'm not the one whose superhero costume is a shirt and jeans from your local Walmart."

"Not fair, I also wear gloves."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to forget about your oh-so-cool accessories."

Kon paused a moment with a small smile before blurting out,

"I missed you. I mean, I really really missed you, you know that?"

"Well, feel free to hug." And just like that Tim was crushed in a fierce hug from Kon. Luckily, the half-Kryptonian remembered how fragile the average human is, so no bones were broken. They ignored the gazes of others who were fascinated at such an outburst of affection from the two normally reserved heroes. Under no circumstance did Tim ever want to let go because he was home, his best friend was really here, and it felt like they'd be okay from now on. On some level, Tim realized this comforting feeling meant they were finally safe.

"It was a nightmare." Kon said hoarsely, "Those pictures of you being tortured, the whole Team saw them that day after Arkham Asylum. They kept saying nothing had been photo-shopped or anything but I knew you were alive. I knew it."

"You were right, Kon. I'm here." Tim assured him, "And after the test results we'll grab some coffee and tell everyone you were right all along."

"After coffee, huh?" He chuckled.

"I wasn't allowed to have any, so it's basically liquid freedom."

"Congratulations, you have gallons of freedom to enjoy here."

"Even better, I have you."

"D'aw, you are so fruity."

"It's my specialty. Without worrying of being perceived as emasculate I can be sappy as hell. For instance, you might've missed me but I didn't miss you." Tim grinned, "I couldn't miss you because you were with me the whole time. Every time I felt sad or lost, you were there in my heart keeping me determined and giving me hope."

"Huh. Well, without you I felt like I might as well have been locked up underground, getting my powers from a Solar Suit. Now it's like I get to see the sun rise for the first time all over again."

"You're saying I'm your sunshine?"

"I'm saying you shine as brilliantly as the sun, moon, and stars combined."

"Okay, fine, you win the sappy contest."
"I accept your surrender."

Then Tim heard Bart pouting to Jaime,

"Why can't you ever say nice things like that to me?"

Kon sighed and let go of Tim, but scooted over close enough that their shoulders could touch. Not for the first time, Tim noticed how tired his friend appeared and felt horribly guilty for causing so much distress. Robin of all people shouldn't have been dense enough to wind up kidnapped. If he had known his teammates were going to turn into such a wreck in his absence, Tim could have at least sent a message to signal he was okay. Stupid Ra's al Ghul deserved to have his dick bitten off repeatedly. Not to mention, Janet and Jack now had a greater chance piecing together the fact their son lead a double life as Robin. Had his parents agreed with the decision to fake Tim's death? Knowing his mother, it wasn't likely.

"Kon," Tim said quietly, hesitantly, "Do my parents think I'm...?"

"Dead?" Kon shook his head and with a lowered voice responded, "I told Nightwing they should be the last ones to know and he eventually agreed."

"Where are they now?" Was he going to go back to Gotham to discover Batman tried to imprison his parents? A million scenarios ran through Tim's head as he strained to think of any possibility that confronting his parents on the topic of child abuse would be the slightest bit successful. Janet revealed in outsmarting the justice system. If Bruce did interrogate Jack or Janet, the result would no doubt be more misery for Tim.

"Africa, I think. They're in the same place they've been since they cancelled on you."

"Cancelled?"

"Yeah, cancelled their flight on the day you were kidnapped. They said they called you and told you they'd be staying overseas longer than planned. A business offer came up and since their company hadn't been making much profit... Don't you remember?"

Of course Tim remembered, it's difficult to forget his parents sold him off to one of the main adversaries of the Justice League. Of course Janet had managed to cover her tracks, probably by using a friend's private jet to avoid evidence of boarding a plane, keeping out of sight of any cameras, bribing or threatening any would-be witnesses. She could anonymously hire someone to give Tim's school an excuse for his absences, and it's not as if 15 million dollars would suspiciously materialize in the banks of Drake Industries. Janet Drake could be labelled many things, but a moron was not one of them. Still, if Bruce started digging for clues because of Tim's disappearance... Anything was possible when Batman got involved.

"Um, I think so. My head was hit pretty hard. Bits and pieces of that day are fuzzy."

He wanted to inquire more, but Bart suddenly zoomed in front of the two, excited and holding up his phone. The speedster's screensaver was a Labrador puppy wearing a miniature Kid Flash costume, which Tim personally found to be adorable. Jaime walked up behind Bart in exasperation.

"Here's the plan," Bart beamed at them, "We interrupt the funeral, then we take a selfie while everyone's jaw is dropped in shock, and then we send that picture to everyone who didn't go to the service with the caption: 'I wish you had gone to the funeral. It was very lively.' Lively! Because it'll be Robin alive at his own funeral! It's totally crash, right?"

"Please tell him it's a bad idea." Jaime pleaded.
"It's a bad idea." La'gaan mumbled out his opinion. Kon shrugged and looked at Tim who responded,

"Hmm. Both photos and puns are a part of my shtick. It's a tempting option... Yes, I officially approve. Maybe don't send the picture to everyone, but definitely send it to any of the Bats who aren't there. They know me well enough to understand the significance of the picture and wordplay."

"The only one who isn't there is Batman." Cassie called out from her chair in a matter-of-fact tone, "Can Bart handle the responsibility of knowing Batman's cellphone number?"

"Yes!" Bart immediately defended himself. Tim rolled his eyes and typed in Batman's number on the phone.

"Neptune's beard," grumbled La'gaan, and then impatiently louder, "Wonder Girl, isn't the scanning complete yet?"

"I will tell you when it's done, Lagoon Boy! Calm your gills."

"Hopefully it finishes soon." Kon's shoulders slumped, "After the funeral M'gann is supposed to find me and wipe out my memories of Robin from the last couple months, replacing them with something less 'emotionally attached.' I'd rather not confront her before she knows he's alive."

"What?" Jaime gasped while La'gaan clenched his fists in outrage. Superboy nodded slowly, like even an action that minute took too much energy.

"I overheard her and Nightwing say I'm too obsessed with searching for Robin. They think I'd wind up hurting myself and others in my denial of his death." Kon sounded bitter, "So they think they have the right to force their way into my brain and scoop out my happy memories to replace them with false, dull, and insignificant recollections of my best friend."

"Holy Zeus." Cassie's eyes widened, "That is so fucked up. Seriously."

Tim didn't say anything because he lost the capacity for expressing himself through intelligible language. No. How could Dick do such a thing to Kon? What the hell! What was that imbecile doing? Seriously! To think Nightwing, once upon a time Tim's hero/role model, could so easily suggest raping Kon's mind like he thought Superboy was less than any other individual? What, because Kon-El is a clone he thinks he can just program the half-Kryptonian like any other toy? Dick fucking Grayson could have destroyed the best friendship Tim ever had because the acrobat felt entitled to fuck willy-nilly with someone else's memories. It was unethical and not at all heroic. Tim's heart was beating faster and a familiar spike of adrenaline shot through his system. He was just so angry he didn't know what to do. Kon reached out in order to hold his hand, no doubt able to hear his heart beat and shaky breathing.

Cassie's computers gave a ping. She spun around and tapped a few keys, the corners of her lips twitched up in a relieved smile. Tim already knew she was about to announce the scans showed he was perfectly fine. Knowing this, he slipped away while everyone was reading the computer results. Maybe it was rude that Robin used his disappearing Bat-trick on his first day back, but in that moment he was too pissed off to give a damn. It was the kind of rage that made someone not care what the consequences of their actions would be, which wasn't a typical emotion for him to get stuck on.

Perhaps had Tim been more rational, when disrupting the service he might've paused to appreciate how much effort went into organizing such a beautiful ceremony in honor of his death. In all his
life, he never thought so many people would attend or so much attention to detail would go into his funeral. Then again, it wasn't for Tim—it was for Robin. More likely, people like Nightwing were grieving Jason's death twice over. For whatever reason that made Tim feel angrier.

Dick was wearing dark but casual clothing, standing in front of a combined crowd of the Team and Justice League who were sitting in various rows of chairs. Not everyone on the Team and League were there of course but more members than expected. The acrobat was giving a speech, a story, maybe a 'fond memory,' but then again the man clearly had no respect for anyone's fond memories of Tim.

The look on Dick's face as Tim charged toward him was comical, eyes bugging out, taking in the appearance of the supposedly-dead Robin wearing the Red X suit. Not to mention the blood stains on the suit and his face must have made Tim look like something from a horror movie. Good. Dick took a step back, about to say something doubtlessly unimportant before the very-still-alive Robin punched the idiot painfully in the jaw.

"WHAT THE HELL, NIGHTWING?" Tim roared, probably speaking louder than ever before in his life.

"Ti- Wha- Robin?" The formidable punch had sent Dick to the ground, trying to process this turn of events, "Are you- you're here?" As they were in a room filled with superheroes, several of those heroes were now on their feet about to intervene. Fortunately Kon sprinted into the room, calming them by saying,

"It's okay! It's really him, no brainwashing or anything, we checked." And Bart was in the background taking pictures on his phone, but Tim would think about that later.

"You're alive?" Nightwing smiled in disbelief.

"And you're about to be dead!" snarled Tim. Kon grabbed his arm, keeping him from continuing his attack.

"What's- What happened?" the acrobat was still smiling as if he couldn't help himself.

"What happened? WHAT HAPPENED? YOU AND M'GANN PLANNED ON FUCKING WITH KON'S MEMORY SO HE'D FORGET ABOUT ME, THAT'S 'WHAT HAPPENED.'" The third Robin gave a short laugh of insanity, which startled Kon sufficiently enough to escape. Tim grabbed fistfuls of Dick's shirt, pulling the man up so they could be face-to-face, "I've been playing besties with psychos like Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn for weeks. If you think I'm not crazy enough to try and kill you in front of the entire Justice League at my own damn funeral, you're about to find out how wrong you are!" Of course Tim was bluffing, but Dick didn't need to know that. Of course Robin couldn't accomplish anything too harmful in a space station packed with superheroes. Green Arrow's voice sounded distantly in the crowd,

"This is officially the third most interesting funeral I've been to."

"Not now, honey." Black Canary shushed.

Dick stumbled out of Tim's grasp, finally understanding the situation. Frowning, he placed his palms outward to show he didn't want to fight. At the same time Jaime and La'gaan were trying to thin out the crowd of witnesses, convincing them to leave and go home because this didn't concern them.

"Robin," said Dick, "I thought you were dead. You weren't here, you didn't see how extreme
"Conner was acting."

"Oh, you mean how he wasn't willing to base my death off of a few measly photos?" Tim hissed, "Because the way I see it, you wanted me dead so badly you were willing to rape the mind of someone who trusted you, your teammate, your friend-"

"No, I would never want you dead-"

"You just wanted to destroy Kon's memory of me-"

"I didn't want Conner to die, too!"

"He almost died today because instead of helping him look for me, you planned to memory rape him."

"Would you stop saying- I didn't-" Dick took a deep breath and started over, "You're right. I've been making excuses, but you're right. It was very wrong of me, I wasn't seeing passed my own grief and pain. I'm sorry." He talked soothingly as if Robin needed coddled. That felt like a smack in the face because it suggested Robin was hostile due to his experience with the Light--which Dick knew nothing about--instead of reacting to the appalling fact that Kon had been betrayed in the worst way.

"Don't apologize to me." Tim snapped, gesturing to Kon.

"Conner, I am really, really sorry. I'm sorry for not believing you and I'm sorry for thinking that tampering with your mind in such a manner would ever be acceptable."

"Apology accepted, Nightwing." Kon responded dispassionately, and Tim got the distinct impression the Team--the only people now left in the room--were communicating by mind-link with Miss Martian. They were all glaring at her or Nightwing, their faces occasionally flashing ticks of different emotions, responding to the conversation going on in their minds.

"I'm extremely sorry as well, Conner." M'gann said softly, looking like she wanted to cry. Well, she should rightfully feel ashamed of herself! Kon only nodded to her like she deserved recognition but not forgiveness, which made Tim feel oddly satisfied. Most of the Team clearly were not content with any apologies given so far. With any luck, Nightwing could eventually get it through his thick skull the extent of how much he screwed up. Dick at the moment kept staring at Tim like the returned Robin took priority over everything else.

A long block of silence went by before the Team joined in with Dick in staring at Tim, or maybe in reality it had only been a couple of seconds. Robin wished they would say something out loud because no way was he currently going to allow M'gann in his head. They were looking at him almost warily. He wondered if Kon told them about the whole giving-severed-body-parts-to-Klarion thing. After all, someone by now must have asked 'why is he covered in dried blood.' It's fine, if they weren't going to say anything verbally then Tim had better places to be.

Turning to go, he noticed Artemis and Mal tense as if about to stop him. That's all it took for his friends to be put in the category of "potential threat." Okay, what did he know? One, he called out Nightwing and Miss Martian on their abuse of power. Two, M'gann and Dick really did not like getting called out. Three, all of the Team were now in a mind-link with a Martian who very recently lost all of Tim's trust. Conclusion, he no longer believed M'gann would be above mind controlling anyone, especially her friends. If the Team allowed her to connect via mind-link then they gave her opportunity to take over.
"It's been a long day." Barbara spoke abnormally slow, "I think we could all use some time to relax and process things. Robin, go get cleaned up and get some rest. I'm sure we can talk about everything later."

Kaldur and Garfield stayed a good distance away from him. Artemis carefully got out of Tim's path to the doors. Karen, La'gaan, Mal, Bart, and Jaime actually left the room altogether. All of their movements were done too strategically and slow-moving. Batgirl talked sluggishly as well, which only cemented the theory M'gann had taken over their minds. Trying to control that many people at once would prove to be difficult, resulting in delayed movement and speech.

Tim broke down what Barbara had said. She said he should get cleaned up, and admittedly he was covered in blood, but he didn't appreciate being more or less ordered to take his clothes off. Then she said he should 'get some rest' and when Ra's said that he meant 'go to the bedroom and have sex,' so Tim's paranoia increased by roughly 15 million percent.

"See? You're just upsetting him more." Kon scolded, "He's not going to respond the same way as a typical citizen after trauma. Just go and let me deal with it." Whoa, hang on, they thought he was in mental shock? Um, no, he's only super upset at Dick and M'gann. After analyzing himself, yeah, he was trembling from adrenaline, he felt extremely paranoid, and he definitely felt a smidgen terrified. Of course he did though! He discovered people who are very dangerous although trustworthy, turned out not to be trustworthy! Now they're just dangerous!

"Conner," Dick said irritably while walking toward Kon, "You don't-" But the acrobat got too close to Superboy for Tim's liking so naturally Robin decided to incapacitate the threat before it was too late.

Tim still had his Red X suit on while Dick was in civilian clothing. Under the assumption everyone was being controlled by Miss Martian, first order of business was to render her unconscious. While in the air to tackle Nightwing, Robin threw an electroshock-x at Miss Martian who naively did not expect to get electrocuted when she woke up to go to a funeral that morning. Then when Tim got to Nightwing it wasn't long before the man skillfully pinned the younger to the ground. However, the Red suit had gloves that could shoot lasers and thus the man was blasted off of Tim, landing quite a few feet away. Seeing Barbara moving to protect Dick, Robin threw X shurikens for her to dodge and she could avoid them easily. One of those shurikens, however, was also a bomb. So while Batgirl flipped out of the way for the first couple projectiles, she also put herself in the path of a small explosion.

Garfield was at M'gann's side, determining how injured the Martian was while Tigress and Aqualad ran at Tim as if he were the real bad guy in the situation. Whatever Miss Martian did to them must be able to last even though M'gann was knocked out. Robin used the same trick on them as he did to Nightwing at Arkham Asylum. After a few deflected shurikens neither two predicted the next red x would instead trap them in a mound of goo. It wouldn't hold them for long given their combined strength, but hopefully Robin could grab Superboy and run.

"I don't want to hurt you." Cassie flew up to him, "Don't make me-" In response Tim hit her with a laser. Then Nightwing came up from behind to wrestle his arms to the side.

"Quit fighting." Dick said during their struggle, "We're your friends." Friends don't destroy the memories of other friends. With a twist he learned from practicing with Ra's al Ghul's ninjas, Tim managed to throw Nightwing off before hearing a new voice.

"Robin, stop." Batman had appeared from nowhere, grim as ever. Everyone stopped moving, a sort of obedience only the real Batman inspired.
"They're being controlled." Tim protested though suddenly unsure of himself.

"If they were I wouldn't be so embarrassed they were losing eight to one."

"Am I in trouble?"

"Should you be?"

"No? I don't..." Hadn't Tim threatened to kill Nightwing earlier? How much did Bruce hear? As Tim stood thinking, the other heroes began to shuffle out of the room. (M'gann had to be carried out.) Batman must've given them the 'just leave since you all are failing so stupendously' face. Soon only the Dynamic Duo remained.

"Tim," Batman had at some point stepped closer to him, "You're in shock."

"No, I'm not. Nothing that bad happened to me, honestly." Truthfully, Tim hadn't gone through anything new in the past month. Then again his parents had never sent him away to a child molester for more than two days at a time. Maybe the stress had affected him more than he realized as he was no longer in enemy territory yet acting out. Logically, even if Miss Martian wanted to hurt him, she couldn't go rogue in a place as secure as the Watchtower. Still, calling it 'shock' seemed a tad exaggerated.

"You think you're okay?"

"Ye-" Tim froze.

"Tim, what is it?"

"It must be because they wouldn't let me have any coffee." he said in a mortified whisper, wondering why he hadn't thought of it before. When had he last survived without his beloved beverage for four weeks straight? Sherlock Holmes had cocaine, Batman had scandalous affairs with coquettish women, and Tim Drake's vice manifested in the form of caffeine at its purest.

"Why those despicable heathens," Batman sorrowfully shook his head, "I'll inform Alfred you need a pot of black coffee as soon as possible."

"Really?"

"Would I lie about something this indisputably sacred?"

"Batman would never do such a thing- he's like my third favorite hero!"

"Third?"

"Yeah, you moved up in rank after Nightwing made me mad."

"So I wasn't even in your top three? I'm going to pretend that's the trauma talking."

"Bruce?"

"Yes, Tim?"

"I'm tired. Can I... Would I be allowed to spend the night at the Manor?" As he said it, Tim could feel the weight of exhaustion ache in his body. He'd been in a near-constant state of fight or flight for too long. If he tried to push himself anymore he'd probably pass out.
"Of course. Alfred will be delighted to see you."

"I'll write up a report on what happened these past weeks before going to bed, I promise."

"Actually, I was thinking after you slept you could tell me in person the basics of what happened. Tomorrow, I'd also like you to be checked by Leslie Thompkins for injuries, if you'd agree to it."

"No problem. I'm a model of perfect health."

"Yes, as I've come to understand, none of this blood is yours." It was as much of a question as it was a statement.

"Yeah, um, long story short I bit off Ra's al Ghul's penis... then cut off a few other little things. He's alive though, I swear. I didn't kill anyone."

"..." Oh god Batman must hate him now.

"...I'm sorry." Please say something, Bruce.

"I'm not upset with you, Tim. We can talk about it later. For now, let's go to the Batcave and put this day behind us."

Tim nodded and walked with his mentor to the Zeta Beams. Tomorrow promised to be another busy day.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Bruce is officially on the case to find out about Tim's disturbing childhood. Meanwhile, Tim's caffeinated and back in business.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He woke up in a warm, comfortable bedroom by himself. Where was Ra's al Ghul? Did creeper Ra's let him sleep in or something? Blearily, Tim sat upright to recognize his guest bedroom in Wayne Manor. Sniffing the air he noticed the lovely scent of Alfred's cooking. Instantly at attention, he did a quick mental review of the events of the previous day. A glass of water and a new phone were on the nightstand, and his alarm clock read 9:00 a.m. If the sun was high in the sky, Superboy of all people should be awake by now, surely.

Picking up the phone, by memory he tapped in Kon's phone number. His friend answered on the first ring, which brought a nice fuzzy feeling to Tim's chest.

"Hello? Tim, is this you? Bruce gave me your new number." Kon sounded energetic. The half-Kryptonian must've gotten a well-deserved night's rest. Hearing his voice so high-spirited made Tim want to laugh with relief. He took a breath to try and relax.

"Tim?" Now the voice resonated with tinges of worry. Tim remembered why he had called in the first place.

"Yeah, Kon. It's me. Um, so yesterday did I actually go to my funeral and scream at Dick in front of dozens of other people in the Watchtower? And like, then attacked half of the Team in the Red X suit all the while covered in Ra's al Ghul's blood?"

"Wait, the blood on your suit was Ra's al Ghul's?"

"So, I'll take that as 'yes, you did flip out and attack your teammates.' Okay, just checking. I should go give my report to Bruce."

"Uh, yeah, of course. You wanna catch up later? I'm going to be stuck at the Team base in California all day, so..."

"Perfect. I'd like to use the computers there around one o' clock anyway, does that sound okay?"

"Alright, I'll see you then. Try to stay out of too much trouble?"

"I'll do my best. See you soon."

After hanging up, Tim stood up to get dressed and then paused in front of the closet mirror. He was wearing the simple T-shirt and pajama pants Alfred had offered him. It'd been ages since the teen viewed his face without a mask on. His eyes were a familiar blue, highlighted by a ring of dark eyelashes that made him appear more feminine. He liked his eyes, but they had the tendency to make any blue bruises on his skin stand out more such as the bruise currently decorated across his
collar bone. No way had Bruce missed that hell of a hickey last night. Well, it's not like Tim planned on hiding anything anyway, although considering Talia al Ghul and Bruce have gotten together before... Yeah, this conversation would probably be awkward.

...

Dick sat cross-legged on the dashboard of the Batcomputer. He wasn't supposed to sit there, but he wanted to stay in a position he felt secure in if he was about to get reprimanded by Bruce. Babs was sitting in a chair like a normal person, patiently waiting for Batman to arrive. Her mask was off and a waterfall of red hair cascaded over her shoulders. Even when she was furious with him, she looked like a surreal dream, too flawless to describe properly. At what point in their relationship had Dick realized Babs was an ethereal, unapologetic warrior rather than a simple friend?

"What?" Babs said irritably, "You keep staring at me."

"Sorry. I'm just caught up in thought, I guess."

"Thinking? That's a first. Try not to hurt yourself."

"..." Dick knew why everyone was so upset with him, but suffering through the silent treatment of his friends took a toll on his usual optimism. He didn't have the energy to come up with a witty response or defend himself.

"Dick," Barbara's face softened a degree, "I understand why you thought changing Superboy's memory was the right thing to do, but how can anyone trust a team member who's willing to intrude on someone's private memories and impose their own beliefs? It takes away their freedom. You have to trust that people can make the right choices for themselves."

"I know, I know. The whole point of putting together the Team was to prove we could handle the freedom of making our own choices. It's hypocritical, and it was freakishly controlling of me."

"Yeah, and you're the one always complaining Batman has control issues."

"...Like I said, I'm a hypocrite."

Then Bruce finally entered the cave, walking down the stairs that lead from the grandfather clock. Dick had hoped talking to Tim would brighten the man's usual brooding disposition (Because, thank God, Robin is alive! Actually alive!!), but his face looked grim as ever. Straightening his posture, Dick prepared for an argument that would inevitably lead to shouting and temper tantrums. However, the yelling he was waiting for never came. Bruce only sat in the big chair by the computers, giving Dick and Babs a look of pain as if about to deliver bad news. Oh no, what had Tim told him? What was Robin forced to do? What had the Light done to his little brother?

"Tim is... he's being examined by Dr. Thompkins right now." Bruce scowled, "I don't know the details, obviously. He doesn't have any serious injuries from what I can tell, he swore to me he never revealed any Team or League secrets, and he made a point to assure me the most illegal activity he took part in was the break-in of Arkham Asylum. He counts himself lucky he never had to endure any torture."

"That's better than we hoped for, all things considered." Babs said carefully, "What else?"

"He also claimed he had relations with Ra's al Ghul. As much as wish it weren't true, the blood on Red X suit was that of Ra's al Ghul's, and Tim's torso is covered in hickeys... along with other suggestive markings."
"Jesus," Dick muttered, "I knew Ra's was insane but...

"Yes, apparently Tim faked Stockholm Syndrome as a way of gaining trust, which included encouraging Ra's al Ghul's sexual advances. Some of Ra's' sexual fantasies were rougher than others, and he felt entitled to use Tim's body as needed, disregarding any protests to such actions. Most of the other villains at the base assumed Robin was under some sort of influence as a result, not believing he would willingly go to bed with someone like Ra's. This went on for about two weeks."

"So," Babs's eyebrows crinkled together in concern, "What about the blood on the Red X suit? Was that Tim getting revenge?"

"Tim discovered Superboy and the others had been captured, so during oral sex he bit off Ra's' penis, then proceeded to cut out the man's tongue, pinkie toes, and gouged out his left eye. The Red X suit ended up covered in blood as a result. Then Tim offered those body parts to Klarion, in return asking for aid in their escape by delaying the magical defense system. For fun, the Witch Boy also helped turn the criminals in the base against each other. I was skeptical Klarion Bleak of all people would agree to those demands, but as it turns out, he and Teekl grew fond of Robin after spending so much time together."

"That's a lot to unpack." Dick exhaled, "Wow. How is Tim dealing with it all so far? Is he doing okay?"

"That's what I'm concerned about at the moment. It's too early to tell, but given what I know of Tim, I'd expect him to be far more reluctant to talk about trauma in the form of sexual abuse. He already doesn't like talking about things that evokes too much emotion yet he spoke in a very casual manner--too casual--which makes me wonder if he's in a state of dissociation due to shock or."

"Dealing with sexual abuse has been a common theme in his life. If he feels to some extent it's normal, he can talk as if it's not significant." Babs finished darkly.

"Well," Dick said, "He implied he'd been molested when he was out on the streets following Batman and Robin around." The acrobat's gut twisted up in guilt. He should've noticed the kid years ago either as Robin or as Dick Grayson. They all should've noticed, and Tim's parents should've been around so the kid never felt like he had to run off into danger in the first place.

"No," Bruce shook his head, "There are many predators in the dark alleys of Gotham, but going through an experience so painful would make any normal child too scared to repeatedly place themselves in the same situation. Not even chasing after superheroes would be viewed as a reward greater than the consequence of being raped."

"What are you trying to say, Bruce?" Dick wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Children don't choose to be hurt like that. If Tim can normalize such an action, the abuse came to him, he didn't go out and habitually find it. Someone taught him how to tolerate being sexually abused, someone he didn't have the option of avoiding such as a teacher or a family member."

"Not possible. Tim just... he's just in shock right now, not able to fully process what happened."

"Maybe. But he said he could've escaped in his third week of captivity. For the sake of gathering information for the Justice League, he stayed knowing he'd be repeatedly violated. That's more than just dedication to the mission."
"His parents are impossible to please," Dick desperately objected, "So he'd do anything to impress someone he admires. He did it in a misguided attempt to make you proud. Yes, maybe Tim's gone through some serious emotional neglect but... Abuse to this extreme?" Even as he talked, Conner's words from before sounded in Dick's head like an echo, 'He's not going to be okay because he wasn't okay in the fucking first place. You left him to suffer abuse at home...'

"Tell me, at your most desperate to earn the approval of someone, would you put yourself in a position to be raped, for two weeks no less? I've been looking into his medical files and records from school since his disappearance. Conveniently, his previous doctor has disappeared off the face of the Earth. One of his elementary teachers said she remembers he missed several weeks of school and yet the school records showed no absences. In fourth grade, his teacher wondered if Tim was autistic and left a voicemail to Janet and Jack to talk about it. The next day Tim came to school with a limp and insisted he'd hurt himself falling down the stairs. It's not a lot to go on, but all the times this last year when he claimed his parents were home, I couldn't find any record of plane tickets. Upon further investigation, I discovered his parents never traveled to the United States. They were still halfway across the world."

"Tim lied when he said his parents were home?" Babs frowned, "What, his parents left their only child alone in Gotham for over a year?"

"I never saw them, did you? The only eye-witness account of his parents this last year that didn't come from Tim would be the one that came from Kon. Funnily enough, that's the one time I've been able to find the slightest proof they had visited Gotham. It also happens to be the week Robin for the first time suddenly fell ill."

"Oh god." Dick wanted to hit himself, "That was when Superboy thought Janet had put bleach in the ice cube trays, even though Tim insisted the bleach had been for a school project. I said Tim would've told us if he was being abused until Conner dropped the subject."

"If Tim's helping hide signs of abuse, it's going to be hard to prove otherwise." Babs sighed, "We're going to need a lot of substantial evidence. Meanwhile, we need to figure out why the Light took Tim and if they're planning on doing so again."

"They wanted him to help translate what they call the Apocalypse Trinity." Bruce said thoughtfully, "The tablet we attained from the Light a month ago is a part of it although not even Dr. Fate has deciphered the coding. As for why choose Robin specifically, they said it was because of his intelligence, although considering Ra's knows his civilian identity perhaps they assumed Tim--given his parentage--was the most susceptible to be manipulated with flattery. I'm not sure whether or not Tim will be targeted again in the near-future. It might depend on Ra's al Ghul's desire to get revenge."

"That's it," Dick abruptly headed toward the stairs, "I gotta talk to Tim."

"And say what?" Babs hurried after him, "You think he's already over yesterday's incident? Um, no. He'll punch you in the face again before you have the chance to say anything." Babs and Bruce followed him into the sitting room before blocking the door.

"C'mon!" Dick threw his hands in the air dramatically, sitting down on the arm of a chair, "I'll apologize, I'll beg for forgiveness, he adores my trademark Grayson hugs. I need to do something to help him feel better! I can't do nothing."

"It's been less than 24 hours since his return." Bruce grumbled, "The best thing for him right now is to take a day off to rest."
"Bruce." He whined childishly. Dick had cried for hours planning a funeral, thinking Timmy was dead. Now Tim was so nearby, just on the other side of the Manor, yet Dick still couldn't hug him even when clearly his little bro needed comforting more than ever.

"Dick, he's paranoid enough as it is and you lost what credibility you had of being perceived as safe. The best advice I can give you is wait it out a little longer and use coffee as a peace offering." Bruce gave the smallest hint of a smile, "Tim will forgive you eventually. After all, I assume you were ranked as his third favorite hero until yesterday when I replaced you. If anything, right now you should be worrying about finding a better way to apologize to the rest of your Team for your highly immoral behavior."

"Wait," Dick scrunched up his face, "If you're listed as third then who are the two above you?"

"That's what you're focusing on?" Babs gave a huff, "His second favorite is Alfred. I know that much."

"Oh, okay." Dick and Bruce nodded in acceptance. If anything Alfred should've been listed first.

"Just so we're clear, you're not going to try and punish me for the whole memory replacement thing?" The acrobat dared to ask, preparing to be scolded.

"You're an adult and it's not League business. It's *your* problem to fix. However, if you barge into Tim's personal space before he's ready, well, that's another story."

"Alright, I promise to keep away from him until he's ready to talk... Still, I'd like to see him without a conversation. I'll leave at the first sign of agitation. Pretty please?"

Babs and Bruce exchanged a look and simultaneously turned around, implying 'fine, but you have to stay behind us the entire time. Don't ruin this.'

When Dick was ten, if he felt happy he skipped everywhere he went. Sadly, most kids at school didn't do that at his age, so they made fun of him. Still, sometimes when he had a lot of pent up joy he felt the urge to expend more energy than walking provided. As a result, Dick, at the prospect of once again seeing Tim felt the urge to skip while trying to trudge along so slowly behind Babs and Bruce. Yes, what Tim suffered was terrible, but now his little brother was safe in the Manor! Alive! That's news worth skipping for.

"Dr. Thompkins," Babs greeted the doctor politely as they walked into the room.

"Hello, Barbara." Leslie smiled a little sadly, "If you're looking for Tim you just missed him, he went off to find you." She nodded at Bruce.

"I see." Bruce took a cell phone from his pocket and dialed Tim's new number. Buzzing on a nearby table, Tim's phone laid there, forgotten. Or at least, Dick hoped Tim simply forgot the phone and didn't leave it on purpose. Did Tim feel like he needed to lie and sneak out of Wayne Manor? Was Tim running away to do something dangerous already?

Babs, ever the genius, quickly checked in with the security camera history in the Batcave. Lo and behold, Tim Drake wearing his backpack and a Wonder Woman long-sleeve shirt, (Was she the kid's favorite hero? Not important, Dick. Concentrate.) he stood around the empty cave, calling out Bruce's name a few times before giving up with a shrug. He went over to a metal table by the Red X suit, snatched up some gadgets from the utility belt, and exited through the Zeta Beam.

"According to Zeta Beam records, Tim went to the Team base in California." Babs looked at Bruce.
"He must be visiting Superboy." Bruce sighed in exasperation like he should've expected this, "Barbara, would you mind phoning Conner and tell him under no circumstances is Tim allowed to go on any mission, self-proclaimed or otherwise? Also, advise not to let Tim work too hard or give himself caffeine poisoning."

"You're letting him stay there?" Dick was surprised.

"Holding him here away from his friends like a prisoner isn't the smartest choice." Babs said while dialing Conner's number.

"Maybe the smarter choice would be stopping him from being Robin altogether." Bruce said quietly, almost to himself. Leslie went up to the man and gently placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I've found," she said softly, "Whenever I tried to stop a certain someone from pursuing life as a vigilante, he would stop at nothing to do what he thought was right. Tell me, what would Tim do if you prevented him from being Robin?"

"Nothing good, I'm sure."

"Then allow him to grow stronger and help him heal, not just physically. From what I've seen, that boy's going to need a family to be there for him."

"How bad is it, Leslie?"

"Bad enough that I asked Alfred to brew a pot of tea. I think I'd prefer to sit down for this discussion."

...

Tim sat on the floor, surrounded in a circle of laptops, books, paper, and coffee. He worked and ignored the staring of Cassie, Garfield, Bart, Jaime, and Artemis. When he told Kon he wanted to meet up, he hadn't meant meet up with half the Team. After missing a month of school and crime fighting, there was too much to do that took priority over socializing. He apologized for attacking them, they said he was forgiven, but they just kept staring like they wanted to strike up a conversation. They probably were expecting some kind of story about being Red X, but if they weren't going to ask anything in particular then Tim was keeping his mouth shut. Kon walked in the room, hanging up his phone.

"That was Batgirl. Did you know you left your phone back in Gotham?"

"No."

"Well, you did."

"Oops."

"She wanted me to tell you not to overwork yourself."

"..."

"And to make sure you don't get caffeine poisoning, though I think it's a bit late for that."

"..."

"I can't believe Batman would force you to do all of this today," Kon took his foot and lightly tapped one of Tim's math books, "It's a lot to ask, even for him."
"Kon." Tim threw down his pen in favor of emphasizing his Bat-glare at the half-Kryptonian, "I don't need to be told to do this." He gestured to the piles of homework, "I missed a month of school. A month! You know what that means?" Tim's voice took an edge of hysteria as he dramatically continued, "I'm only one week ahead of my classes now! What if I'm kidnapped again? What if I fall into a coma? What if I die? I'll start falling behind in my studies and that is absolutely not acceptable. No, no, no, I'm not leaving here until I've completed all my homework for this year." Tim went back to working. Bart and Jaime shot each other a 'he's not serious, right' kind of look.

"...You know if you die I think you have bigger problems to worry about other than," Kon squinted, '"Listing in order the Presidents of the United States.' There are things in life more important than school."

"Like what?"

"Mental health, physical health, staying alive in general..."

"Knowledge is far more important than any of those things." Tim replied primly, not missing a beat. Okay, so he's exaggerating, obviously. Still, imagining getting behind in his classes filled him with panic. He needed to be prepared in case he was forced to miss more schoolwork.

"So, what you're saying is you think homework is basically the most important thing in existence."

"Basically."

"So, if it were a choice between completing this homework and saving my life, you'd let me die?"

"..."

"If the only way to complete your homework was by killing me, would you do it?"

Kill him? Tim remembered killing Kon in that hallucination, the look on his best friend's face as he was electrocuted. Stomach turning to lead, Tim saw Kon and suddenly the homework didn't seem as important.

"I would NEVER kill you." Tim vowed fiercely, "I would burn my homework before killing you! I would- I'd- I would even fail all my classes before killing you!"

"Fail a class? You wouldn't dare."

"Yeah, maybe that's going too far."

"Get a C minus in a class?"

"Hmm, well, you're at least B plus material."

"What about B minus?"

"Maybe if you refill my cup of coffee."

"B plus it is."

Tim smiled and stood up to hug the half-Kryptonian. (Not for long though, because Tim seriously needed to get back to work.) This time when Tim sat back down, Kon sat beside him and soundlessly started reading Tim's book for English class, a Shakespearean play. Things were quiet for about five peaceful minutes before La'gaan showed up.
"Neptune's Beard." La'gaan exclaimed, "Are you trying to build a miniature castle from textbooks? I thought humans only did that using sand and plastic toy blocks."

"The entirety of the universe will be in peril if Robin doesn't complete this year's homework today." Cassie said dryly. The heroes were still all staring at Tim, waiting for... something.

"That's like asking a baby lobster to kill and eat a whale in one day. It's not going to happen." La'gaan tilted his head slightly, "Does this mean you're still in shock or is this a sign you're back to normal?"

"Lagoon Boy." Artemis warned as if Tim would go psycho if the Atlantean didn't shut up. Tim was having difficulty concentrating through all the pointless chatter. Why couldn't they go back to ignoring him per usual? What did they want? Maybe he should say something as a reminder that they didn't actually want to be around him.

"It's fine, Artemis." Tim said flatly, "I'm a firm believer that young minds should pursue answers to their questions, even if those questions seem a little rude or blunt. For example: Thanks to evolution, many Diodontidae--more commonly known as porcupine fish or puffer fish--developed the capability to repel predators with poisonous spikes of which are over 1200 times more deadly than cyanide. In particular, poison heavily resides in the ovaries or other reproductive parts of the fish to ensure procreation. So, Lagoon Boy, theoretically if I bit off your dick would I die?"

Everyone in the room acted as if Batman flew up to them dressed like the Joker and started tap dancing. For some reason they all glanced at one another wordlessly. Kon looked like Hanukkah had come early, gazing at Tim while clearly using every ounce of self-control not to bust out laughing. Tim patiently waited for Lagoon Boy's answer.

"Uh," La'gaan said gracefully, "I'm not- I don't... I just remembered I have somewhere I need to be. Excuse me." Lagoon Boy exited left. Maybe now Tim could get some real work done.

"I missed you so much, Robin. You have no idea." Kon hugged Tim again, using Robin's shoulder to muffle the laughter the half-Kryptonian could no longer hold back. Tim blushed happily.

"They're like a cheesy sitcom." Garfield noted, talking to the other heroes.

"Little Green is right, when did Robin become so entertaining?" Artemis was clearly amused, which didn't happen too often since Wally's death, so it was nice.

"Easy. When he stole the Batmobile." Jaime said with confidence.

"No. It's when we discovered he's gay." Cassie argued.

"You mean when he discovered he's gay. Don't forget it was a surprise for him, too." Garfield grinned.

"You're all wrong." Bart announced, "It's when he confessed to being Jewish."

Everyone took a moment to stare at Bart, including Tim and Kon. Then Tim had a sudden epiphany. He's surrounded by amazing superheroes who are seemingly gathered around to pay attention to Tim, to honest-to-God talk with *Tim*. Timothy Jackson Drake, the invisible-no-name-kid, had suddenly become the center of affection from these wonderful people. They weren't doing it to be polite, they weren't doing it because they were thinking of Jason, they weren't doing it because they were mad about Red X, and even after attacking them in a fit of paranoia, they didn't hate him. If anything, it seemed the more they learned about him, the more they genuinely liked him. Maybe he wasn't as annoying as he thought.
"You know," Tim spoke up halfheartedly, "I love you guys. Really, I do. But when I got out my homework I thought to myself, 'Great! I can finally do some work without hearing Klarion's nagging or Teekl complaining that she's bored.' How do you manage to be more distracting than a tiger that decides she wants to use my leg as a scratching post?"

"Back up," Garfield raised a hand in a 'stop' signal, "You made it sound like you could understand Teekl, which would be weird because I as a cat have no clue what she's saying."

"Well, yeah. About the second week in I could understand Teekl's weird magic-meowing. I think it's because I'd been reading a ton of dark magic books. Fun fact: There are over 158 ways to say 'no' in her language. All of which I heard when she decided she wanted a catnap and used my lap as a bed, refusing to move."

"Oh my gods," Cassie gasped, "I almost forgot! You were Red X, so it was *you* who was flirting with Klarion, like, raunchy flirting. With Klarion." Tim wouldn't meet Kon's eyes.

"Um, he sorta has a crush on me so I guess I seduced him to help me escape the base? He was surprisingly cooperative."

"That bag you gave him had body parts in it, right? Where did you even get those from?" Jaime had the courage to ask.

"Oh, well, I sort of-" But Tim's story got cut off when his phone rang. It wasn't the phone Bruce provided him but the phone he got from Ra's al Ghul. Tim looked at his watch. Crap, he got distracted and lost track of time. It was already passed one 'o clock. Tim rushed to the fancy computers that were great tools for hacking other marginally, lesser tech savvy places. He remembered his mother once told him that in business he was to wait at least three rings from the phone before answering, otherwise he would appear desperate or eager, giving the other person the idea that they were in control of the situation. He found it to be good advice.

Tim answered the phone on the fourth ring.

"Leeeeexxx." Tim greeted with a smile like they were the best of friends, honestly he sounded kind of like a stereotypical, fabulous gay guy, "How nice to hear from you!" Tim set the phone on the table to have his hands free for the computer, "Now play nice, Lexy. You're on speaker phone."

Kon, highly alarmed, stood by Tim and obviously wanted to ask a great many questions. Tim gave a signal that no one should talk and then skillfully hacked into the Lex Corp security feed as he had practiced. He watched for the Luthor's reactions as man stood around his office.

"Yes, I got your not-so-subtle email. I'm glad you still have your phone as, unlike Ra's al Ghul, I don't enjoy making house calls." Bringing up Ra's al Ghul's pedophilia already? Ouch.

"Ha!" Tim laughed, "Wow. And to think they call Vandal savage."

"What do you want from me? Are you planning to sabotage another base?" Lex said in a bored, irritated voice. Straight to business then. Fine.

"I haven't the faintest idea why you think *I'm* the one who did such a thing," Tim fondly remembered the beautiful Robin insignia that consumed the Light's base of operations, "However, I want you to find the note I left in your office the other day."

"You couldn't have possibly gotten into my office. You never had the opportunity or resources for such a thing."

"Don't be ridiculous- I do try to make the most of my field trips. There's a perfectly constructed
paper bird hiding in that horrendously tacky tree by your desk. I have to give credit to Larry the Ninja for helping me improve my origami skills. The ninjas were willing to help me with practically anything that didn't involve drinking coffee." For instance, breaking into Lex Corp.

Lex strode over to the tacky tree and bent down, spotting the origami bird. He snatched it and unfolded the paper to read the note. The man's body tensed and Tim could practically see the gears in that bald head working in overdrive.

"I have no clue what this is about." Luthor lied disdainfully, "This is utter nonsense and I don’t appreciate you wasting my time with it." Lex crumpled up the paper and swiftly made his way over behind his desk. He pressed his thumb to the fingerprint scanner on underside of the table and a secret compartment clicked into view. Then he dug his hand into the compartment, reaching for a nifty piece of technology that Tim knew wasn't there. When Luthor realized its absence, he looked positively livid.

"Looking for something?" Tim mocked cheerfully, "You wouldn't be trying to find the hard drive that deletes the information I've gathered, right? Don't bother checking for the one behind that godawful painting of yours by the way."

"What. Do. You. Want." Luthor spat out like he was trying to swallow down bile in his throat, glaring at the security camera with the realization Tim could see him.

"Nothing unreasonable, I assure you. It's quite simple." Tim then said seriously, "You and everyone else in the Light stay away from my home life. After all, families can be oh-so important to people, don't you agree, Lex?"

"Why you little-"

"Now, now, not in front of the children."

"Why me?" Luthor began to pace in his office, no doubt thinking of all the ways to regain his stolen info, "I'm not the one obsessed with you, I'm not the one dressing you up and showing you off like some sort of child bride." At the words of 'child bride' Kon knitted his eyebrows together, confused. Well, more confused.

"Sure, I could blackmail Ra's, but he can be so... irrational at times. It's not his fault, he's had one too many Lazarus pool parties. You, however, don't have the liberty to disregard the possible consequences of your actions. So, you're going to be the one to keep the others away from me, particularly Ra's al Ghul if I'm correct in thinking he refused to share my secret identity with anyone else."

"I can't guarantee I can control him."

"Then I can't guarantee this information won't be leaked to Superman. I'm curious, how do you think he'll react?"

"You have no idea what you're dealing with-"

"Well, the Light should've thought of that before attacking me at home." Tim said sharply, "If you want to make it personal, I sure as hell can get personal. If not, then stay away from me. And if you really piss me off the Justice League will be the least of your worries. I'll deal with your secret personally, outside of Batman's regulations." Luthor's lips curled in a sneer.

"Empty threats? How pathetic."
"Empty?" Tim's voice became far too calm and collected, "Tell me, Lex. Have you heard anything about me in the past week to suggest my threats are empty? Do you think there's a shred of dignity holding me back or a line of morality I'm not willing to cross?"

"You know," Luthor maliciously smirked, "They told me you were meant to join the Light, but I didn't agree until this moment. I'll appeal to your demands simply because I believe one day we're going to be great friends."

Why are 'they' so interested in him? He's nothing special and they weren't trying to get to Batman... They didn't use him for information on the Justice League... Why target him specifically? He's not intelligent, attractive, or useful enough to go through all that trouble, not really. What is it about the Apocalypse Trinity that made the Light want his help so badly? Why couldn't the Light find someone else to translate the Apocalypse Trinity? They honestly didn't know how to translate the tablets, but surely someone more cooperative than Tim could be qualified for the job. He needed to take a look at the third tablet as soon as he was allowed and finally get some answers.

"Yeah, sure." Tim said flippantly, "Whatever helps you jack off at night, Lex. Your mechanically enhanced body guard is in the room with you, right?"

Lex had half a second to feel puzzled before it dawned on him why Tim would ask such a question. He didn't have the chance to run before the bomb in his desk detonated. The bald man was consequently blown out of the window, shortly following, Mercy dived after him. She rescued Luthor before he could hit the pavement. Done with talking with the corrupt billionaire, Tim turned off the computers and hung up his phone. Bart talked first, of course.

"Did you just blackmail Lex Luthor? Did you really just say 'whatever helps you jack off at night'? Why does he have your phone number? Are any other Light leaders going to call you? What information do you have on Luthor to blackmail him? How did you even get that information? Did you actually break into his office? You really think that tree is tacky? Did you say you can blackmail Ra's al Ghul? Can you blackmail everyone in the Light? Did you imply something about Lex Luthor's family? What does Superman have to do with it? Did you just imply you were going to kill someone? Why is Ra's al Ghul so interested in you? Who's 'they' and why do they think you're going to join the Light? Who's Larry the Ninja and why is he so good at origami?"

"Bart!" Artemis interrupted the speedster, "He can only answer so many questions at once."

"Child bride?" Kon asked quietly. Tim opened his mouth to say something, anything. Everyone had crowed around him and they all had such intense expressions on their faces. Were they mad? It was hard to tell. He knew he should've left when he saw them gathered here. As soon as he saw how they wanted to talk with him he should've gone to the Team base on the East coast and used the computers there, but he selfishly stayed because he missed being around them. Now, inevitably, they're upset and it's his fault. He's so useless. Weak. Annoying.

Tim's phone rang, screaming to be heard, but this time it was a ringtone he never wanted to hear again. Caller ID: Ra's al Ghul. Why was Ra's still trying to contact him? Was Tim not clear about their breakup when he chomped off the creep's penis?

"If you want to know anything, you can read about it in my report." Tim heard himself say numbly, not bothering to pick up the phone. He went and gathered his belongings.

"Robin, wait." Kon reached out to him, wanting him to slow down.

"Don't touch me." Tim's voice was ice, "In fact, don't come anywhere near me. You're not my friend, you never were. Hell, you were born in a test tube, you're barely a person. I don't know why
I ever bothered talking to you in the first place. Do yourself a favor and forget about me, let the Martian wipe your memory for all I care, just stay away."

Maybe most people would've left Tim after hearing that, but not Kon. Instead, the half-Kryptonian trapped him in a hug which Tim didn't bother refusing. Soon the phone stopped ringing and Kon wasn't letting go.

"Do you want the phone destroyed?" Kon murmured. Tim nodded and subsequently heard the sound of someone--maybe Cassie--break the phone in half. He already downloaded the pictures to another device anyway. Bruce would probably regret not destroying the phone earlier once he's heard Tim's been picking fights with criminals like Lex Luthor.

"Kon," Tim felt somewhat better, "I'm sorry."

"I know. It's okay."

"No, it's not. I still haven't finished my history homework."

"Theodore Roosevelt can wait, hugging takes priority."

"Well, maybe just this once."

"...Robin?"

"Yes, Superboy?"

"Who is Larry the Ninja?"

Tim spent the rest of the afternoon telling everyone in detail about the covert ninja rap battles, winning the friendship of several ninja of which he assigned random names out of boredom, and how the ninja assassins pretty much hated everyone other than Ra's al Ghul, leading to wickedly sneaky pranks to the chagrin of many villains.

All in all, it wasn't a bad day.

Chapter End Notes

Deleted scene:

After being so exhausted from crashing his funeral and everything, Tim actually forgot he wanted a cup of coffee that night. During breakfast Tim finally gets his miraculous drink and sits awkwardly across from Bruce who is also silently eating and sipping coffee.

Finally, to break the tension Alfred asks Tim if the coffee is to his liking. Tim immediately smiles and declares it's perfect and tastes like liquid freedom. Then, Bruce takes another sip from his mug and looks utterly bewildered. He looks at Tim and says,

"How strange. I thought we were drinking from the same coffeepot, but mine undeniably tastes like justice."
Tim laughs and after that it's easier to talk to him about the Light and Ra's al Ghul.
"Soooo, Conner." Cassie grinned playfully once the football game went to commercial, "I've been thinking about Tim..."

Oh Rao. It was officially November (about a week since Robin's return) and Kon had been asked about everything under the sun concerning him and Tim. Once Bart made both of them take a Buzzfeed quiz about 'who their soul-mate celebrity is' hoping that Kon would get Batman and Tim would get Superman. Instead, Kon got Superman and Tim for whatever reason got Plastic Man. He prayed Robin would get done with his therapy appointment with Black Canary soon before Cassie could make things too uncomfortable.

"Let me guess," Kon sighed, playing along, "You think he needs to stop obsessing about the Apocalypse Trinity because no one is negotiating with Klarion anytime soon?"

Babybird had figured out the flash drive the Team had gotten from the Light contained a list of books needed to translate the Apocalypse Trinity. The only book Tim hadn't read was something ancient called the "Dark Arts of Azarath," which was a text specifically required to understand the third tablet. Dr. Fate said he had no such book and Tim was confident Klarion must have it, suggesting they speak with the brat to see what he would be willing to trade for it. Literally everyone aside from Tim agreed that was a horrible idea, especially when Robin suggested he be the one to persuade Klarion through flirtation. Tim arguing "It's worked before, it's worth it to at least try." did not go over well with the Team who all more or less replied, "There is literally no good ending to that story. It's crazy. Hell. No."

"Nope. Well, yes, no one wants anything to do with Klarion. But not what I'm thinking about at the moment." Cassie replied, "Try again."

"Does it have anything to do with Ra's al Ghul?"

Ra's al Ghul had become Team enemy number one. Sure, individually they all had other number one enemies: Beast Boy and Queen Bee, Aqualad and Black Manta, Nightwing and Joker, Superboy and Lex Luthor, etc., but right now as a Team everyone hated Ra's al Ghul the most. There was an agreement not to pressure Tim into talking about the man, but someone had seen Robin without a shirt after training practice and, well, rumors spread fast. Ever since Lex Luthor had mentioned Ra's al Ghul and 'child bride,' it wasn't a huge challenge to connect the dots after they heard about the hickeys. Plus, Barbara seemed to get particularly angry whenever Ra's' name was mentioned and that was telling within itself.

"No." Cassie scowled thinking about Ra's.

"Does it have anything to do with homosexuality? Gay, lesbian, or otherwise?" Kon wasn't surprised when Wonder Girl came out. To date a lesbian to then later find out he's gay himself somehow seemed like a very Tim thing to do.
"Nope."

"Then I give up."

"Okay, so you know how he's freakishly good at lying?"

"Tim doesn't lie. He told me so himself."

"Ha ha." Cassie rolled her eyes, "But seriously. When Jaime and Bart were debating the other day how Tim could lie perfectly, La'gaan said no one can lie perfectly and we only needed to discover what Tim's 'tell' is. Then, Garfield came up with the idea that while we're discussing little signs of lying like breathing patterns or blinking too much, maybe we're thinking too hard. Some animals in the wild hide under rocks and crevices, but some animals hide in plain sight, just camouflaged"

"And that means..."

"I've cracked the code! That's what that means."

"Feel free to explain."

"I think Tim makes puns when he lies. Maybe he tells stupid jokes too, but mainly puns."

"Yeah, puns are his 'shtick' remember?"

"That's the genius of it. When he's Robin, he's pretending to be this super confident, social, and cool persona. Tim is actually shy, introverted, and embarrassingly nerdy. Sure, it's not like Robin and Tim are like two opposite people--they share plenty of characteristics--but it's still just an act to Tim. Robin, the character Tim plays, is a type of lie. As a result, he goes over the top with making puns and cringe-worthy jokes when he's Robin."

"I don't know..."

"Think about it, Tim was Red X. Red X made puns even more often than Robin. In fact, you heard the stories, Tim made puns and bad jokes excessively as he had to act friendly with the other criminals. It's because his behavior and personality were radically different compared to how Tim really felt."

"Not convinced. Playing a character that makes puns isn't the same as rattling off puns every time he lies."

"Puns are his camouflage. His normal humor is dry and sarcastic, it's not quite as obvious. I bet the next time he lies and he tries to act like everything's 'normal,' you'll see what I mean."

On cue La'gaan rushed through the door tailed by Tim. The Atlantean glared at Kon like 'get your human away from me before I find Kryptonite and cut you.' Tim on the other hand protested,

"What, La'gaan! Seriously? I'm not going to hurt you; I'm genuinely curious about the different kinds of Atlantean physiology. I *know* your genitals are toxic-"

"What?" Lagoon Boy turned to Robin, "And how do you know that?"

"Easy," Tim asked Kon, "Superboy, are your genitals toxic? Like if I bit off your penis would I die?"

"No." Kon said with a straight face.
"Cassie, what about you? If I bit off your clitoris would the toxicity kill me?"

"No." Cassie also managed to keep a serious expression.

"See, only a person with a poisonous penis doesn't answer 'no' to the question 'is your penis poisonous.' What I don't know is the level of toxicity."

"And you're not going to know, Chum!"

"Why not? It's a valid question. I mean, it's not like I'm secretly clipping off your gills or I've gotten a successful urine sample-"

"Successful? Like you tried and failed to get a urine sample before?"

"What?" Tim shook his head, "Of course not! I didn't mean- You're Atlantean, but when it comes to socializing I'm the real fish out of water." Pun alert. "I don't always say what I mean, y'know?"

"Dude." Cassie made a face, "Secretly taking someone's pee is seriously creepy."

"Ugh, you sound like Black Canary. Detective work can't follow every social nuance, okay?" Tim had entered passionate rant mode (which he needs to do more often because it's adorable), "I'm good at doing what I'm told, not at figuring out unspoken boundaries of politeness. Heck, I'm Robin because I stalked Batman for, like, eight years. No one told me stalking your heroes was creepy, so how was I supposed to know? It's not like I could ask because I was taught asking for permission or asking questions in general is taboo! No one said, 'don't take urine samples without permission' or 'don't stay in the company of rapist murderous scumbags without permission.' Are you honestly telling me people know these things through intuition?"

"...Yeah, sort of." La'gaaan confirmed.

"So... Are you going to-"

"I'm not doing any tests or giving you any samples!"

"Oh, c'mon!"


The next day, Kon waited outside of Gotham City High School to walk Tim to the Zeta Beam a few blocks away. He'd been doing this since Robin went back to school, and as far as he knew, Tim didn't mind. If anything each time babybird walked outside after class he seemed pleasantly surprised Kon was waiting for him, like he expected the half-Kryptonian to forget or have more important things to do.

The bell rang and Kon leaned against a tree, watching the hoards of hormone-riddled teens running about their day. Kon never like high school too much himself, but he did like going to high school with M'gann. Of course that was before she betrayed his trust, again. She and Dick were taking a leave of absence from the Team until further notice. In other words, everyone was taking some time away from each other to lick their wounds before turning over a new leaf.

After a while Kon noticed Tim was running late. Using superhearing, the clone attempted to pinpoint his friend's voice over the hundreds of other high school kids. Closing his eyes, Kon faintly heard the teen's voice, a moderately panicked voice.

"I'm telling you, I didn't attack her and I definitely didn't kiss her. She kissed me, I told her I wasn't
interested, and then for whatever reason—resentment, pride, embarrassment, confusion, panic, whatever—she bit her own lip so it'd draw blood, tore off her jacket, screamed, knocked some supplies in the closet, and lied saying I attacked her.

"And I suppose she did all this for attention?" A sharp voice snapped sarcastically.

"I don't know! She was insulted that I didn't want to be physical with her and told me she knew I wasn't 'getting any-'"

"Well, is that true?"

"Wait- what?"

"You're sexually frustrated so you resorted to forcing my daughter to 'relieve' that frustration? You think you have the right to use her?"

"No! I didn't even want to be in that closet, she asked for my help moving supplies! She kissed me-"

"You're honestly going to sit there and tell me she 'asked for it'? I've seen people like you before, Mr. Drake. You come from a rich family, spoiled, think you can get away with anything, think you as a man are entitled to someone else's body."

"No-"

"My daughter would never kiss someone like you and would certainly never lie about being sexually assaulted. You might've gotten away with this kind of thing before but you chose the wrong victim this time."

"I would never-"

"You're done at this school. Expelled. I hope your parents are proud of the son they raised when I tell them about what you've done."

"Wait, please-"

Kon hastily followed Tim's voice through the school, ending up at the door to the principal's office. If babybird could have a heart attack over being less than a month ahead of schoolwork, surely Tim would have a complete meltdown at the prospect of being expelled. The secretary at the front desk protested, but Kon barged into the principal's office anyway. Inside sat a petrified Tim Drake in front of an enraged woman, presumably the principal of the high school. The plaque on the desk read 'Ms. Jones.' Tim's eyes widened when he saw who it was.

"Kon!"

"Get your things." Kon ordered and then to Ms. Jones, "And you'll be hearing from our lawyers. The discrimination in this school is revolting."

"Discrimination?" Ms. Jones sounded indignant as she demanded, "Who are you?"

"I'm his boyfriend." Kon declared loudly, "I'm also a close relative to Clark Kent. You might've heard of him, he's a well-known journalist for the Daily Planet. He also happens to have the cellphone number of your boss, Bruce Wayne. Mr. Wayne has publicly supported the LGBT community for years, so I'm sure once he hears about the homophobia this school fosters, you won't be working here for much longer. I can see the headlines now, 'Principal Fired After
"Accusing Gay Student of Sexually Assaulting a Woman."

Tim went over to Kon looking overall stunned. The clone took a hand and gently cupped the side of Tim's face saying,

"Don't worry, Babybird. They won't get away with this." To make a point, Kon gave a small peck on Tim's forehead, hoping Robin would later excuse him for the show of affection. Protectively, Kon wrapped an arm around Tim's shoulders as they turned to leave and the teen played along by leaning into Kon. The principal must think her daughter was telling the truth; however, suddenly her daughter's credibility notably decreased.

"Wait!" Ms. Jones seemed to fully realize the position she was in, "Clearly there's been a misunderstanding. No need to involve any attorneys. I assure you that I and the faculty here at Gotham High hold no ill-will toward, uh, LGBT students. It seems I've been given faulty information, but don't worry, I will sort out the issue without involving anyone else. I apologize, Mr. Drake, for my hasty accusations. You're free to go."

They didn't waste time leaving the building as if the principal would abruptly change her mind. But as soon as Kon and Tim walked out of the school, Tim shivered and said,

"Oh no, I left my coat in my locker. Hang on, I'll be right back." Kon swiftly envisioned the perfect solution and stopped his pretend-boyfriend from going inside.

"No, this is precisely the lovey-dovey romantic nonsense we need. Here." The half-Kryptonian shrugged off his jacket and handed it to Tim, all the while seeing the principal looking through a window, "If we're supposedly dating then we need to act like it." Tim reluctantly put on Kon's jacket, which was far too big on the little guy. The sleeves were too long, he sort of looked like someone playing dress up, and his face tilted up at Kon in an adorable pout because he was concerned Superboy would get cold with wearing only a T-shirt.

"Are you sure?" Tim asked quietly, "It's freezing outside, Kon. Gotham doesn't do mildly cold days, she goes all out."

"Of course I'm sure." Kon grumbled while taking Tim's hand and holding him close, walking away from that godawful school, "I'm not the human one in this relationship. You've seen me get splashed with lava and walk away like it was nothing. Gotham's weather isn't even close."

"No, Kon!" Tim shushed, "Gotham might hear you and release a storm of hell upon the entire city. Never challenge her."

"Fine. I won't... challenge her.' You know, the citizens of Metropolis don't have superstitions like this. Gothamites are seriously weird."

"I was about to disagree but then I remembered this random rich guy who one day decided dressing up as a bat and becoming a vigilante was a full-proof, wonderful idea."

While the two were having their pleasant conversation, other kids around the school building blatantly gossiped and stared at Tim and Kon. As it turns out, being openly gay is a rarity for the school. Kon began to wonder whether or not he made a mistake when Tim spoke up wearing a smirk,

"By reading lips, I swear that girl closest to the parking lot totally complained to her friend 'ugh, why are the hottest guys always gay?'"

"Well," Kon said nonchalantly, "She's not wrong." In under a second, Tim's smirk turned into
surprise, which turned into a huge smile, which turned into an embarrassed smile, which then turned into an impressive poker face. They walked off of school property, heading down a long stretch of sidewalk.

"Thank you for helping me by the way," Tim said seriously, ignoring the previous statement "I wasn't sure what I was going to do. This girl, Margaret, I think was trying—though I'm not sure why—to go on a date with every guy in homeroom, which isn't as crazy as it sounds considering there are only six boys including me in that class. That's my guess because it was oddly strategical how one by one another guy would claim to sleep with her, and I had noticed a few times how she'd pick a specific boy and flirted with particularly suggestive motives.

She'd been making an effort to talk to me yesterday, but I didn't really notice her all that much because I have other things to worry about, y'know? So during the last class today she saw me in the hallway and politely asked me to help her move some supplies from the janitor's closet. Next thing I know she's practically on top of me. I think when she realized I wasn't interested she was angry and scared I might tell someone, so she tried to beat me to the punch by framing me as the culprit of sexual assault."

"I'm sorry she did that to you." Kon said sincerely.

"Thanks, but what I'm upset about is it's people like her which lessens the credibility of those who really have been sexually assaulted or raped. Rapists can get away with hurting others so easily because no one believes you or they just don't care. No one listens."

"I'd listen." If only Tim would talk about it.

"You did listen," Tim appraised, "I assume you used your superhearing to eavesdrop before bursting into the principal's office so theatrically." No one was around but they were still holding hands. Kon wondered if Tim noticed. They were getting closer to their destination.

"Yeah, sorry for outing you like that." Kon mumbled, "I know it wasn't really my secret to tell and I'm sure you have your reasons why you haven't told anyone..."

"Are you kidding?" Tim smiled, "That was awesome! I mean, if she discovers your name is Conner Kent and you're legally 21 it might bring up some red flags, but other than that it was a brilliant plan."

"You think people will give you trouble now...?"

"Nah, it's all good. You have been an amazing friend today... Dare I say- a super friend." A pun. Noted.

"Oh wow. Never heard that one before." Kon snorted, "Just let me know if anyone gives you trouble. Not that you can't handle it, but I kind of liked pretending to be the overly protective boyfriend."

"Hrm. Well, I've never had a pretend boyfriend before but I think we can consider that a decent trial run."

"Decent? It was great! I couldn't have done better if I painted myself rainbow."

"Yes, fine. You were very convincing... but you are... straight?" Tim phrased it like a question and stopped holding Kon's hand.

"Oh. Um." Kon never thought about it much because of his relationship with M'gann, "I guess I'm..."
not gay, but I don't know if I'm straight."

"It's not a big deal." Tim shrugged casually, "I didn't know I'm gay until a few months ago and I've been chasing Dick for years." Another pun.

"So, what you're saying is," Kon and Tim stopped in an alley in front of the Zeta Beam disguised as a broken phone booth, "You're actually really worried you're going to be bullied for your sexuality." It wasn't a question.

"No, I-" Tim saw the no nonsense expression on Kon's face, "Okay, sort of. I'm hoping any fuss about it dies down before my parents come home."

"When will they be back?"

"According to my mother's email, the 27th of December."

"It's high school. By the time winter break arrives they'll forget about this latest gossip and move on."

"You think so?"

"Yes, they'll be too preoccupied with Susan's teenage pregnancy or Joseph getting arrested for drunk driving. There's plenty of other drama to focus on. And until then I'll be here for you."

"Thanks, Kon." Tim hugged the half-Kryptonian. Instigating small forms of affection is something Kon helps encourage because--according to Black Canary--it's distinctly not healthy to have an aversion to any and all physical contact. Even if Robin struggles to initiate hugs to anyone who isn't Superboy, it's excellent progress.

"Anytime. Though, if you're really worried about bullies then the guy to talk to would be Dick."

"...

"I know you're still mad at him," Kon was mad, too. Still, Superboy knew how important Nightwing was to Robin. After all, Tim is technically the first hero--before even Bruce--to meet the circus boy. The two had hugged and taken a picture together, and that flicker of affection changed little Timothy Jackson Drake's life forever. Tim would likely be more at peace if he forgave his brother, "You have every right to be upset, but Dick came into a rich school as an outsider from the circus, he's a major nerd who's well-aware of how smart he is, and his name is *Dick.* Bullies were too intimidated to confront me, but he must've faced some heavy ridicule. I think it'd be worth listening to his hard-earned lessons if you'd be willing to ask for it." Tim's face transformed into a Bat-serious expression, and Kon couldn't guess what was running through Robin's mind.

"Alright, I shouldn't be late to the Batcave since I'm finally allowed to go on patrol." With that, Tim disappeared within the phone booth with a flash of light. Sighing, Kon hoped he didn't discourage Babybird from confiding in him.

... As it turns out, Tim heeded Kon's words of wisdom because later that afternoon at the California base, Bart sped up to Superboy and excitedly informed,

"Batfight in the lobby! Jaime made popcorn if you're interested." Oh boy.

Sure enough, on the long couch sat Jaime, Bart, and Mal. They were eating popcorn and watching
with rapt attention as Tim and Dick loudly communicated with each other.

"Wanting to talk to you doesn't mean I've forgiven you." Tim crossed his arms.

"But you hugged me," Dick said triumphantly, "So you've forgiven me at least a little, right?"

"I hugged you because I'm sentimental, but I'm still angry with you! Thinking about hurting Kon is the stupidest thing you've ever done. It's even worse than your sophomore homecoming!"

"My sophomore homecoming? What do you know about-" Then Dick gave a wounded gasp, "No. It was *you* who dumped that entire bowl of punch on my suit!?"

"It was polka dotted, striped, checkered, and plaid with metallic, neon, and *pastel* colors! Plus, somehow, it was too small and too big for you. It was the most putrid and horrendous piece of garbage conceivable to the human mind! Even if you wore that to a prom at the circus you'd be institutionalized!"

"That was a totally aster suit! I loved that suit! How could you?"

"I did you a favor!" Tim exclaimed, "No, I did the *world* a favor!"

"I can't believe you actually went to my schoo- Whoa, hold up. What else did you see me do that day?"

"I did what I had to," Tim replied darkly.

"What did you do? Are you the reason Lori never talked to me after that night?"

"You mean the gold digger who earlier that week told her friend about her plan to get impregnated by you? The girl who discovered less than 48 hours before the dance that she was HPV positive? The same Lori who proceeded to peer pressure you into getting drunk and who would've had unprotected sex with you had I not intervened? That Lori? Yeah, I might be the reason she stayed away from you after that."

"Oh my God. I- I never knew... You really? Wow. Uh. Thank you?"

"Don't mention it." Tim glanced at Kon, "So, Nightwing, um, let's go somewhere more private to talk. I'm pretend-dating Conner Kent now and wanted some advice."

"What?" Dick blinked in shock, "Yeah, sure. Advice. Okay. Let's go." The two walked out of the room, leaving Kon to deal with the nosy heroes using the local Bat-drama as entertainment.

"You're dating!" Jaime clapped his hands, "When you two get married I get front row seats, right?"

"We're not really dating." Kon rolled his eyes, "Notice Robin said 'pretend-dating.'"

"Okay, so when you get pretend-married then."

"I can plan the wedding!" Bart added.

"You? No, amigo," Jaime argued, "Planning a wedding ceremony takes a lot of work. Have you organized any kind of ceremony before?"

"Well, then I'll help plan the wedding."

"There will be no wedding." Kon felt his patience thinning, "We're not getting married and we're
"Conner, man, chill." Mal said calmly, "When we say 'dating' we don't mean 'sleeping together.' No one here thinks you'd do stuff like that when Robin is so young and he's still recovering from whatever happened to him in October. But it seems--um, according to Karen that is--that you two developed something stronger than a friendship. A lot of couples wait for years before trying anything physical, so *if* Karen's suspicions are remotely true then maybe talk to Robin and express your interest in dating him in the future."

"Yeah, you need to act quick or you'll be feeling the mode when Robin gets a different boyfriend." Bart nodded.

"Not to mention, we all know you wouldn't take advantage of Robin, but another guy might." Jaime said thoughtfully, "The kid is smart, but I could see him getting tricked when it comes to relationship drama."

"Look," Kon felt a headache coming on, "I appreciate your concern for my love life, but I don't think either one of us wants to be in a relationship right now."

"It's your choice." Mal shrugged.

They were all being ridiculous. Tim is a fourteen year old kid... Okay, he's technically older than Kon and physically just two years younger, but... Objectively attractive, of course, even though frustratingly Babybird doesn't agree with that opinion. If dating M'gann (technically 50 Earth years old) taught him anything it's that the character of a person is what matters- not their appearance. A person's mind is more important than attractiveness. But Tim had probably the most gorgeous mind in existence, and not just in an analytical way. He's determined, caring, loyal, and Superboy loved just being in the same room as him, even when they don't say a word. Thinking about it, nowadays Kon felt the happiest when he could get Tim to give a genuine smile. Would Superboy want to be in a romantic relationship with him one day? Yes?

No. Kon shouldn't bother entertaining those thoughts. Tim needs a friend, not a boyfriend. Babybird doesn't need the pressure of participating in traditional romantic gestures. What they had now made them both happy, so Kon wasn't going to ruin that. Besides, who was the half-Kryptonian to say Tim would agree to date in the first place? It would be arrogant of Kon to assume such a thing. Tim probably deserved a guy better than him anyway.

Lost in thought, Superboy barely noticed when the others left. He snapped back to attention when Nightwing jostled his shoulder.

"Earth to Conner." Dick said, "I need to talk to you." Kon looked around,

"Where's Tim?"

"He's back in the Batcave already. He's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually."

"Is this about Ra's al Ghul?" Maybe Kon would finally get some answers.

"No," Dick took a deep breath, "It's about Jack and Janet Drake."
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Tim gets invited to spend Thanksgiving with the Kent family. Ra's al Ghul is still a creep.

Robin frantically flipped through papers trying to find the notebook he wanted. He couldn't find his notes on what little he learned about the second tablet. Ugh, writing down these things was supposed to increase efficiency when he didn't have access to five computer screens at a time. He had been trying to find anything that might even slightly help translate the third tablet, and he also wanted to find a connection between the ancient books listed on the flash drive. Perhaps there was an alternative way to interpret the titles that contained a hidden message. Every second Tim couldn't find out anything new about the Apocalypse Trinity was a second the Light got closer to translating the stones themselves.

No use, he'd have to pull up the notes on his iPad. In a haze of sleep deprivation, Tim clumsily tapped and missed the file he wanted to pull up, instead clicking on the corner of the list of books. The screen flashed, "Error. File classified." What file? He hadn't clicked on any link to- Then he saw it. Someone had disguised the link so it couldn't be highlighted or otherwise identified. Whoever was behind the deception went to quite the effort to hide this file, though oddly enough it was the Justice League computer system blocking him. Tim had assumed he'd been given full access to the data on the flash drive, but apparently he was wrong. If the Justice League couldn't translate anything that was on the flash drive anyway, why would they attempt to hide something?

Trying to hack into the system, he realized he'd need the required retinal scan of someone from the Justice League to continue. Which Justice League member could be easily tricked into staring into a camera long enough to copy their eyeball? Batman definitely would know what he was up to and no doubt knew about this information, which meant he too didn't want Robin to see what it was... Captain Marvel? Maybe, but he and Tim weren't all that close. Who was naively trusting, friendly, and seemingly liked Tim enough to fall for a trick? Basically, who on the Justice League was the least like Batman? Tim's phone rang.

"Hello?" Tim hadn't bothered checking the caller ID.

"Hey, Tim." Kon's voice replied, "So, Ma and Pa were asking about you and were wondering if you wanted to swing by for dinner sometime this week. They figured you'd be spending Thanksgiving at Wayne Manor, but they said you're skinny enough to need two Thanksgivings this year and they'd be more than happy to celebrate a week early."

"Oh, wow." Tim wasn't expecting that, so he said politely, "You guys shouldn't go through all that trouble just to accommodate me. I'll be perfectly fine with one Thanksgiving this year, but thank you for the offer. It's very generous of them."

"Hold on," A series of muffled voices came over the phone before Kon spoke again, "Okay, so Ma asked me to rephrase. What day this week would be the most convenient for you to visit the Kent residence for Thanksgiving?"

"They really don't have to do that." More muffled tones and then,
"Clark said Lois is off work starting tomorrow so Thursday, Friday, or Saturday would be best for them."

"The whole family, huh? Um," Superman, he's trusting, friendly, and likes Tim to some extent, "Everyone really wants me to be there?"

"Yep. I think Clark is nervous about introducing Lois to the family so he wants you there as moral support."

"I forget, does Lois know Clark is...?"

"Superman? No. Actually, maybe he wants you there for damage control, in case of any slip-ups."

"Well then... Thursday works for me." Tim said hesitantly.

"Sounds good. And I'll see you tomorrow after school, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Tomorrow was Wednesday, so in two days he'd discover whatever was on the flash drive. He just had to stay on his best behavior during Thanksgiving dinner, which he could totally do. Maybe.

...

The next day was terrible. Well, since being outed as gay, every day at school was terrible for Tim. In particular though, Kon texted during lunchtime and explained Superboy was swept up in a Team mission so he wouldn't be able to meet up after school. He assured the Team mission wasn't too big of a deal but it was time sensitive, which was completely understandable. Honestly, Robin had no right to expect Superboy to needlessly walk him place to place when crime in the world never rests. It was selfish to feel upset. Yet...

As soon as the last bell of the day rang, Tim hastily exited the school grounds before anyone could notice his protective, muscular "boyfriend" wasn't around. Just when he thought he'd escaped, Karl and his friends were waiting directly up ahead. Wonderful. Plus, no other witnesses were in the immediate area so Tim was truly on his own. Dick had advised the first thing to do was ignore bullies. Pretend they don't exist. If they don't get the reaction they want then they eventually lose interest. That made sense, though Tim thought perhaps he could continue not being noticed at all. Being invisible for fourteen years had given him plenty of practice at staying under the radar. However, he apparently had a big rainbow target on his back and despite his best efforts, *everyone* noticed him.

"There's our school faggot." Karl smiled sweetly, "You know, a little bird told me you lied about being a fag so you wouldn't go to jail for raping a girl." Sadly, once upon a time Karl had been a really nice person, maybe someone Tim considered as a friend, but that changed in middle school when Karl's mom unexpectedly died of cancer. The poor guy ended up with his snobby uncle who wasn't abusive, but definitely not affectionate and made a point to ignore his nephew. It made sense for Karl to be mad at the world, especially when told repeatedly he should be "grateful" to be so privileged in life. Still, taking his anger out on any kid weaker than him was not acceptable.

Tim kept walking. Really, these were pathetic insults. It was twelve year old level at best.

"I disagreed of course. Those of us who really know you know that your parents have been trying to beat the gay out of you for years."

Sure, like he actually knew anything. Keep walking.
"Man, will they be pissed once they find out after football practices you're still hiding in the boy's locker room to jack off."

That struck a nerve because of course his parents would create an especially cruel punishment over his sexuality if they found out. Timothy Jackson Drake cannot be gay if he's going to run Drake Industries one day. They wouldn't go as far as to kill him, but... Tim kept walking, nearly passing the teenage idiots by.

"I'm surprised that for the safety of the other students they haven't kicked you out of gym class. Assuming your moron fucktoy dumped you," Did he just call *Superboy* a 'moron fucktoy?' Not even a fucktoy with an average intelligence but moronic. "It's always the quiet ones who want to rub their dicks on the nearest warm body. Look at him guys, he's getting off just thinking about it."

Tim stopped walking despite chanting in his head he should keep going and not turn back. Yet at the same time, occasionally it would be nice if people could treat him like he had emotions to empathize with. A coffeepot of suppressed intolerance had begun to boil over. He never did anything to Karl. He didn't deserve this. If he was going to be bullied, at the very least Karl should have a decent reason to hate him. The young Robin turned around with a sneer.

"Oh, Karl. I understand your concern to keep your virginity intact, but you have nothing to worry about. You see, gay men have higher standards than hetero females and no woman would ever fuck your puny, grubby excuse for a dick. Not that I'm implying your mother is any less of a woman," Tim gave a sarcastic gasp, "Oops. Sorry, I mean- not to imply she *was* any less of a woman."

Sure, Tim knew better than to insult someone's dead parents, especially by saying that dead parent was a child molester, but Karl was the first one to bring up those kinds of topics anyway. At least when Karl's ears turned red and the brute punched Tim in the face it was a well-earned hit. That was going to leave a mark. As Tim curled up on the ground to protect his major organs, a part of him ignored the kicking and wondered what he was going to say to Nightwing. 'Hey Dick, you totally know what you're talking about when it comes to bullying, so naturally I decided to ignore your advice and get beat up after school instead. Whoa, don't give me that look- now my new bruises completely cover up what's left of Ra's al Ghul's love bites, so its a good thing, honest.'

And what would Tim say to Kon? 'I swear, this isn't a scam trying to manipulate you into spending more time with me. Seriously, I can walk a few blocks without you as a bodyguard. This was a one time thing, promise. I'm not being a needy, selfish prick who's pining for your attention. I understand if you don't want me to go to dinner tomorrow. It's fine. Everyone needs their space. Now if you excuse me, I have at least three hours of self loathing I need to catch up on.'

Not to mention Bruce, 'I know it was immature and childish of me to react the way I did.' ... 'Yes, I understand insulting the death of parents is never acceptable, but what if they were really awful parents? I see. Not okay. Got it.' ... 'I'm benched? No- according to my Mental Health Assessment, I'm really improving and ready to go on missions with the Team again, and this tiny setback isn't cause enough to keep me on the sidelines. I have to go out and fight without you holding my hand. We're supposed to trust each other so please trust me when I say I'm capable of fighting crime without your constant supervision.' ... 'Yeah, don't worry. I won't disappoint you again. I promise to be a better Robin than ever because of my desperate need to feel useful and my pitiful desire to feel accepted by a father figure.'

Then the kicking stopped. Looking up, a police officer was chasing away Karl and his friends. Huh. It was nice to see the GCPD being useful (other than Commissioner Gordon of course). Tim did a damage assessment in his head and concluded the worst injuries he received were mere
bruises. That's acceptable. Then, seeing a crumpled up piece of paper by his hand, Tim picked up the object, perplexed. It was a normal piece of paper from a notebook and something was written on it.

"(554) 767-9280, Karl." A phone number, seriously? Karl was secretly asking Tim out. Karl was gay. Holy misleading homophobia, Batman. Tim got physically hit on as a cover for being hit on. What the fuck is wrong with the people at his school? Whatever. Tim pocketed the piece of paper.

The cop went over and helped Tim get up like a model citizen. Then just as he was about to thank the man, the officer purposefully handed him a coffee cup. Confused, (and the weight suggested the container was not filled with coffee, but something small like a pebble.) Tim rotated the cup to search for some sort of explanation. He saw just one familiar word in cursive, fervently written on the side.

"Beloved"

Tim's stomach and throat clenched though he firmly kept his expression blank. The penmanship matched that of Ra's al Ghul's and Robin's gut told him it was definitely that entitled creep behind this turn of events. Ra's had become obsessed. But higher on the priority list, who was this police officer?

"Where di-" Tim began to say before realizing the 'police officer' had disappeared. Ninjas. Right. He felt like such an idiot for not being more attentive to his surroundings. He should've noticed the man's face as someone not on the GCPD roster, he should have noticed there was no police car parked along the street, and he should've noticed there was only one person when it's mandatory cops travel in pairs. He missed so many signs. Idiot.

Tim decided to carefully open the lid of the cup, prepared for the mystery item to be a mini bomb or a disturbing declaration of love. Instead, it was a small glass vial filled with pearly liquid. This was a test then? Upon further inspection, a note was attached to the vial.

"Choose wisely." Oh thank goodness. To think he was worried it was going to be something cryptic and foreboding. He made a mental list of questions buzzing within his mind:

1. Choose what?

2. What is the liquid in the vial?

3. How does this mystery liquid affect this mystery choice?

4. Is it coincidence Ra's al Ghul sent this message on a day Kon wouldn't be here? (No.)

5. Was Kon on a Team mission to get away from Tim or was the mission more than a simple distraction?

6. What was that mission exactly?

7. Who else was in the squad(s) other than Kon?

8. Are they okay?

Nearly inhumanely fast, Tim ran to the Zeta Beam a few blocks over. On the way he took out his holographic communicator to pinpoint Kon's location, hoping Superboy responsibly had an emergency tracker with him. Kon was supposedly in the California base. Actually, a lot of the Team were gathered there, so maybe everything was fine. Tim called the base. No one answered.
In his haste he barely remembered to put on his sunglasses before stepping into the Zeta Beam phone booth.

Yeah. Everything was not fine. He saw Cassie and she seemed anxious at his arrival.

"Tim!" Cassie said uncharacteristically frazzled, "Sorry- I was about to call you back, I, um-

"Tell me what happened." Robin commanded.

"We were on a mission, and I'm so sorry we didn't tell you. Ra's al Ghul was involved and we thought it would be better."

"Wonder Girl." Robin cut in--making a mental note to review every mission firsthand since the others deemed him untrustworthy--"Did anyone get hurt?"

"They're in the medical center."

At that he left her in favor of seeing the damage for himself. The spacious first aid room was manned by Karen, Mal, Barbara, Bart, Kaldur, and M'gann. They were all in costume, fresh from their mission. Dick and Kon were in hospital beds unconscious but clearly in agony. M'gann sat in between the two beds with her eyes closed in concentration, no doubt trying to ease their pain through telepathy. Kaldur and Barbara were working on taking the vitals of the two, drawing blood, trying to find a solution to whatever was causing Dick and Kon such distress. Bart increased efficiency with his super-speed, his usual attitude replaced with grave silence as he followed various commands to retrieve whatever was asked of him.

"Their heart rates aren't slowing down." Barbara stated in frustration, needle in hand, "Vitals are just getting worse. We can't risk giving them anymore sedative."

"Bumblebee, Guardian, any updates?" Kaldur ordered, strapping down Kon's arm to keep it from hitting anything.

"No, according to the tests they should be fine." Karen reported. Mal nodded in agreement.

"There's no trace of any kind of nerve gas, disease, or injury. Whatever this is are we sure it's not magic or psychological?"

"The bracelet would've changed color." Kaldur confirmed, "As Zatanna is off-world and we can't contact the other magic users, that's all the testing we can do."

M'gann murmured in a faraway voice that the problem wasn't to do with their psyche.

"Then we need to find Ra's al Ghul and make him talk." Barbara said with determination, mentally piecing together a plan, "If he did this then he can undo it. Let's gather-" She spotted Tim who was unobtrusively observing the scene, and paused a second long enough that Robin stepped forward to confess his part in this mess.

"I just received this," Robin held up the coffee cup to show them the word 'Beloved', "It's courtesy of Ra's al Ghul." Batgirl immediately took the cup and examined the writing for herself. Like all of those trained by Batman, her eyes were calculating and filled with the desire to comprehend the dangers in front of her.

"This," Robin carefully held up the vial, "Was inside the cup with a note that reads 'choose wisely.'" By now Tim understood what the ominous message meant, and going by the expression on Barbara's face, she also made the connection.
"It's the antidote?" Seeing the vial, she then looked at Dick, "And there's only enough to save either Nightwing or Superboy."

"He's making me choose between them." Robin said impassively, "It's some sort of test. That's all I know concerning the situation."

"We can scan-" Karen began to say before Kon and Dick's heart rates skyrocketed. The two were gasping for air like their lungs were failing, straining against the straps holding them down as their bodies reacted desperately to fight to stay alive. M'gann winced but didn't pull away from their minds as she encouraged tricking their brains into thinking they weren't in as much pain as they thought.

"Oxygen masks." Batgirl called out. Bart rushed back and forth, handing Kaldur and Barbara various tools. Scanning the contents of the vial would take too long now. There was no way to copy the antidote before Dick and Kon's hearts gave out. Ra's al Ghul had timed this deliberately.

"Robin." Suddenly Bart was in front of him with a tray. On the tray were two syringes, one of which was marked as a needle able to pierce the skin of those with super-strength. The speedster continued talking, "This is your call. If you're going to use the antidote, you need to do it now."

Tim briefly wondered if he could choose Dick and then re-clone Kon. Robin could see himself locked away in a science lab, desperately trying to get his best friend back while slowly going crazy like Batman, drowning himself in sorrow and bitter coffee.

Coffee. There's a connection to coffee.

All of the tests on Kon and Dick showed nothing. Nada. Zilch. However, *all* the magical members on the Justice League couldn't be contacted. No way can that be a coincidence. Magic must be the problem, like a curse, which sounded exactly like a Ra's al Ghul type of mischief. Tim had read mountains of magic books, and if this vial of antidote solves a magical issue then it's a type of potion. If that's the case, what's happening to his friends would manifest as something substantial in the test results. Potions only work on curses that are visible in some form.

Coffee. Under the supervision of Ra's al Ghul, the thing Tim wanted most but couldn't have was coffee. What he wanted the most he could not have. Ra's hadn't given him an antidote. It was poison. The person Robin chose to save would actually end up being the person he killed. That explained why the bracelet hadn't picked up traces of magical influence! This wasn't some huge or powerful spell, it was something so minor that it couldn't be detected by instruments like the bracelet. Someone practiced in magic could probably fix this fiasco in a few seconds.

Dick and Kon weren't going to die. In fact, if the curse is as minute as he thinks, it will end just as everyone is certain the two heroes will die. The spell would have to be short, temporary, and work only once. It was like a type of old voodoo he had read about that would be used to warn others of the dangerous dark magic. Painful, yes, but very brief and certainly not lethal. As Klarion would say, 'baby magic.'

"No." Robin said confidently, "I'm not going to play his sick games." He began walking away, the vial of poison firmly caged in his fist. In an afterthought, he made a request. "Don't call me unless they die."

"Where are you going?" Bart called after him, though the speedster had to stay to help Dick and Kon.

"Are you really not going to help him?" Cassie angrily demanded. Apparently she was listening from the hallway.
"Which 'him' are you talking about?" Robin said ever stoically, not slowing down his walking pace. She followed.

"Either! If you're too scared to choose then someone else can do it. They're both going to die, Tim!"

"No names when we're on the clock." He went into a side room to get his costume.

"I don't- You're not- You're unbelievable! The people you love are dying and you're walking away to do what? Pretend like it's not happening?" Cassie then forgot her outrage in momentary confusion, "Why are you changing into your Robin suit? You have a plan? You have a plan! I'm coming with you."

"I'm not sure-"

"Do you know how it feels to be useless when all you want to do is help?"

"...Fine, but I'm not planning on fighting anyone. You can tag along in the event of a ninja attack." Robin clicked on his utility belt and took out a burner phone. He texted Ra's' phone on the chance the man kept his old number. 'going 2 gotham. hope i have ur attention.'

"Gotham?" Cassie read over his shoulder, "Who are you- Please tell me you're not texting Ra's al Ghul." He didn't say anything and they both walked to the Zeta Beam.

Robin decided to go back to the street where he got the poison. Cassie flew behind him as he jumped across the rooftops of Gotham. Instead of standing on the sidewalk like a pedestrian, Tim stopped on the roof of a building and held out the vial in the air for the world to see. With any luck, ninjas hiding around the area could be witnesses as Robin smashed the vial on the floor. He decided to wait a minute to see if he'd get a call from Ra's.

"Was that your big plan?" Cassie sat down on the roof, apparently not sure how she wanted to react. She stayed that way long enough that Tim figured she needed some form of comfort. Too bad when it came to talking he had the social grace of a dog licking peanut butter off its muzzle.

"Wonder Girl," He sighed, and crouched down to talk to her, "I have a theory that-"

"Look out!" Cassie snapped her arm in front of his face, her wristband deflecting a shuriken. Robin and Wonder Girl instantly stood up back to back, searching for hidden ninjas. Not seeing anything, Robin ordered Wonder Girl to scout the area. After she left, he heard a voice beside him. It came from the deflected shuriken which had gotten stuck to the side of an exhaust vent.

"Detective." Ra's al Ghul's voice echoed, "You continue to surprise me. You'd let them both die?"

"Cut the crap, Ra's." Robin bit back, "I know it's poison."

"Hmm, well, now I'm truly impressed. What brought you to that conclusion?"

"The coffee cup."

"I was rather convinced you wouldn't see the poetry in that until later. It would appear I've underestimated you yet again. Oh, well." Ra's sounded content as if they were exchanging pleasantries, "I anticipate many more surprises from you in the future."

"Oh, Ra's," Robin gave a condescending chuckle, "You seem to be under the false impression we have some sort connection or relationship. No, no. You're not my archnemesis, you're not my forbidden love, you're not haunting my nightmares, and we're certainly not destined to be together.
You didn't break me or change my outlook on life. It's not you I'll think about when I masturbate--hell—you weren't even the first guy I've castrated during oral sex. You mean nothing to me."

"But that's only a fraction of what makes you so fascinating." Ra's al Ghul sounded pleased, "Tell me, Detective. Do you think your friends love you? Do they legitimately care for your well-being? Know when they betray you, when they break your heart, I will always welcome you back."

"Go to hell."

"Until next time, Detective."

The line went dead and wisps of smoke floated from the shuriken in indication the tech was fried.

"Wonder G-" Robin had started to address Cassie over comm link before being swallowed up in a hug. Since Wonder Girl was a little taller than him and she had effectively pushed his face downward for a hug, Tim had to struggle against her suffocating breasts before she released him. Not noticing his lack of breath when she let go--which wasn't an uncommon trait in those who momentarily forget about their inhuman strength--she spoke happily. (You might say she had a gay disposition.)

"Bart just texted me Nightwing and Superboy are okay!"

"Great." Robin said flatly, "Let's go back, y'know, to where it's less ninja infested."

This time when Tim entered the base via Zeta Beam, he and Wonder Girl were greeted by a bunch of relieved teammates. Barbara, Bart, Kaldur, Karen, Mal, and M'gann were exhausted but pleased no one was dead. They had several questions for Tim like 'Are you okay? You look injured.' 'Where did you go?' 'What happened?' 'What about the antidote?' 'Did you figure out what was wrong with Nightwing and Superboy?' 'Will they be okay now?' Robin gave them a small summary, explaining how it had been a trick to get Tim to kill Dick or Kon. However, he didn't talk about being in verbal communication with Ra's on the rooftop. (He also left out the part of getting beat up by a group of punks after school and might've implied he was instead attacked by ninjas.) Once he satiated the worst of their curiosity, Robin strode off to the medical center to see Kon and Dick.

The two heroes were knocked out from the drugs still in their systems, but nonetheless the teen pulled up a chair by Kon's bed. To think, Superboy could've died due to Tim Drake's ignorance. He held onto Kon's hand, refusing to ponder living life without his best friend. The half-Kryptonian was the only person who made him feel comfortable relaxing, talking without fear of saying the wrong thing. Kon was the only one who let him feel okay with not being perfect. Tim didn't know why this Kryptonian angel wanted to be his friend, but their days spent together were some of the best days of Robin's life. In a way it scared him, how much affection the young Robin could harbor for a person. He suspected there was a correlation of how much love received to how much love was given back, but he would need to gather more intel before presenting a solid theory of causation between the two.

And then there's Dick who basically changed Tim's entire childhood from the moment the acrobat's parents fell to their deaths. No–Dick changed Tim's life when an energetic and loving kid hugged a younger, more nervous child who was so used to negativity that meeting the outgoing circus performer felt like a religious experience. Meeting him was a spiritual revelation giving knowledge that there's a lot of good in the world. There were people on Earth who were precious and needed to be protected. Then, as the youngest Flying Grayson held onto his parents, crying over the corpses who moments ago had been living and breathing and full of compassion, Tim couldn't help but cry, too. What love Robin stored in his heart he owed to Dick Grayson, because it was Dick
who proved to Tim that love existed in the first place.

"I'm sorry." Tim whispered to Kon, "I should've done something about Ra's al Ghul to prevent him from targeting you guys. This is all my fault. I'll make it up to you. When you wake up, we'll watch cute videos of puppies becoming friends with baby farm animals. I know they're your favorite because your left eyebrow twitches a little when you're trying not to smile. I love your smile though, so I saved a link of a golden retriever puppy cuddling with a piglet. You'll love it."

"Tim?" Kon stirred from his sleep, opening his eyes groggily. His half Kryptonian DNA must be lessening the duration of the drugs. "Tim, 'm sorry." His words were slurred.

"You have nothing to be sorry about." Tim gave his friend's hand a squeeze, "No harm was done."

"No." Kon grumbled tiredly, "I coulda helped you get away from your fuck'n parents."

"My parents?" Tim asked. It seemed Kon was too drugged to fully understand his surroundings. It wasn't likely he would remember this conversation.

"Ra's knows somethin'. He knows. Must got ev'dence on 'em. J'net and Jack... hurtin'... you..." Superboy was beginning to fall back asleep. Wait, Kon wanted evidence from Ra's al Ghul?

"Kon, stay awake a little longer. How are Janet and Jack hurting me?" Tim shook the half-Kryptonian, needing more information.

"Awf'l, bad things." Kon frowned, "But no proof. Dick said we can't confront 'em without proof." The heroes didn't have solid proof of the abuse, so then it was really more of a guess based on circumstantial evidence. No need to panic. Yet.

"Yes, but proof of what exactly? What did my parents do?"

"Hurt you. Bad." His friend's voice cracked, "Like Ra's Ghul. Worse than Ra's Ghul. They're still hurting you 'n we jus' let em'. Fuck'n let 'em. Shoulda known. Tim, 'm so sorry. 'M sorry."

Like Ra's al Ghul? So, perhaps Kon and Dick suspected his parents were sexually abusive. If Dick was involved then no doubt Batman was a part of it. Bruce Wayne couldn't afford (well, financially he could afford anything) to get pulled into some hopeless legal debate that at best would take away from the important job of Batman, and at worst Janet would deduce Batman's identity. Not to mention if Janet thinks Tim was going to cause much trouble for her, she might try and get rid of her pathetic son altogether. No, there were too many reasons they couldn't get involved like this.

He wanted to keep his home life and his hero life separate. Tim had control over the situation. His parents needed to think they were calling the shots until he could put together a full-proof case against them. Then, after his 18th birthday he would go to court against them, take full control of Drake Industries, and do that without involving Bruce Wayne or any superhero. The heroes needed to worry about the Light, not about Tim Drake because he's oh-so tiny and helpless. He could handle it on his own. After all, if he survived this long then he can make it through four more years. He just needed to convince Batman to drop the investigation.

"Shh, it's okay, Kon." Tim soothed, "It's okay. Go back to sleep." Superboy closed his eyes, losing what awareness he had. However, just before Kon was completely unconscious the half-Kryptonian mumbled,

"Love you, Tim." Robin felt the entirety of the universe stop and restart around him.

"I love you, too." Due to the lack opportunities to give this reply, the words were awkward and
unfamiliar on Tim's tongue. And though Kon was more or less asleep, not aware of saying anything, Robin's heart never felt happier.

Entering the main lounge, Tim passed by a few people still left in the building. Mal and Karen were talking about dinner.

"Mal," Karen comforted, "If my father acts up again you know mom will come to your defense. She adores you."

"It's nothing against your parents." Mal explained, "I just feel kinda... ostracized during Thanksgiving in general."

Thanksgiving! He'd been so caught up thinking of ways to manipulate Clark and dealing with Ra's that he'd been putting off stressing over the social aspect of Thanksgiving with the family. Kon wasn't even conscious to warn Tim about any of the family traditions at the Kent Farm! What he should wear, should he bring food, are there certain topics to avoid, does Lois think Kon and Tim are dating--oh no--Kon and Tim hadn't collaborated on a backstory to their fake relationship, which they should do since legally they have an age gap of 7 years. Lois was a reporter, a really good reporter. Sure, Tim could lie, but not if those lies contradicted what she'd already been told. Kon probably wouldn't be able to tell him these things until as late as tomorrow after school. Maybe Tim could pack different options of clothing to change into if needed. A plaid jacket would probably be a safe bet. Then again, secret identity Timothy Drake is supposed to be a spoiled rich kid so maybe something more formal...

"Hey, Tim." Cassie broke through his thought process. When did he walk into the kitchen? "Is something wrong? Is it Conner or Dick?" Before Tim had the chance to answer, Bart zoomed away and back.

"Nope. They're both crash." The speedster reported.

Tim's personal problem of eating dinner with Kon's family wasn't anyone else's concern. Although, that said, Thanksgiving is an American holiday and the USA is supposed to be all about voting. Maybe getting a few other opinions in the mix wouldn't be such a bad idea.

"I need help." Tim blurted out before he could change his mind, "I'm eating Thanksgiving with Kon's family tomorrow."

"We're talking about the Superman side of the family tree and not the Lex Luthor side, right?" Cassie asked.

"Yes, and Superman's girlfriend will be there," His words stumbled out in a panic, "But she doesn't know he's Superman so I'm going to have to put on the whole 'Timothy Drake' act. Not to mention, Tim and Conner Kent are dating but I'm not certain she knows that. Plus, I don't know what to wear or what traditions to prepare for and Kon's not awake enough to tell me!"

"Alright. Breathe. It's not the end of the world." Cassie calmed him, "We'll help you."

"Oh, I get it." Bart laughed, "If Lois thinks you and Conner are dating when legally he's 21 and you're 14, that is going to be sooo--" Cassie glared and Bart coughed, "Er, I mean, I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. Let's start with your outfit. What are your options? What first impression do you want to make?"

"I don't know. Um... Like a kind of 'he's wealthy, and he could be homosexual but we'll have to wait until we hear how he talks to be certain.'"
"Ah," Cassie said knowingly, "The sophisticated while subtly gay vibe. I have a few ideas that just might work."

Tim already felt more confident with the help of his friends. He predicted Thanksgiving with the Kents would go smoothly. Really, it was just one dinner. What could go wrong?
Tim eats Thanksgiving dinner with the Kent family! Unfortunately, Kon and Tim get into a disagreement.

Kon had never formally met Lois Lane as Conner Kent, but he heard a lot about her from Superman. From what he knew, she was brave, intelligent, and principled. She never shied away from the more controversial topics and she always fought on behalf of truth and justice. Kon wasn't sure if he believed in soul mates, but it was rather remarkable how two people from two different worlds--Krypton and Earth--by chance happened to meet and fall in love so fittingly. Truth be told, Lois wouldn't betray Clark's identity if she discovered he's Superman. (Though, she might be pissed off for quite some time.) In Kon's opinion- Clark should tell Lois the truth. But, nevertheless, it wasn't his secret to share.

"Timothy Drake," Babybird said as he shook Lois Lane's hand, "Please, call me Tim."

"It's nice to finally meet you." Lois smiled politely, "I've heard a lot about you recently." Okay, so far so good. Tim seemed in his element, cool, calm, and collected. Lois had to be impressed with the teen by how he carried himself. Anyone would be impressed if they saw Tim Drake at the moment though, even by a glance. Who knew black skinny jeans could look so charming? He gave off a Hollywood atmosphere, like a sort of cute, cheesy movie. The overall attire suggested Tim could star in a romantic comedy where the character in the movie is straight but the audience can tell the actor is gay. It was perfect.

"I don't know about you," Clark had a huge grin as he stared hungrily at food on the table, "But I'm ready to eat."

Tim and the Kent family eventually gathered eagerly at the dinner table. Clark and Lois sat side by side across from Tim and Kon. The little Robin appeared comfortable, but Superboy suspected Tim was nervous. Babybird was particularly quiet as if he didn't want to draw any attention to himself, and his smile was kind of frozen, fixed. He had thoroughly questioned Kon on the status of what Lois knew about their "dating" life, but as far as the half-Kryptonian knew, Clark hadn't mentioned anything about their romantic endeavors.

"Now," Pa spoke, "Here in the Kent house, before we eat, we like go around and share what we're grateful for. Usually we start with the youngest, but since Tim is new here, how about you, Conner? Why don't you start us off and we can go from there."

"Okay then," Kon cleared his throat and pushed up his glasses. He didn't normally wear glasses for his secret identity, but Clark emphasized that Lois Lane was sharp as a batarang. Better safe than sorry. "First of all, I'm thankful for apple pie." That got a couple chuckles. "But more importantly, I'm thankful for my family and friends who I know will love me despite of the fact I eat more than my share of desserts. Even when I mess up, they're here to get me back on track and criticize my taste in music."

"Country is better than rock music." Clark declared.
"Keep telling yourself that. The point is, I'm thankful for everyone here and that we can all be together, celebrating."

"Alright," Ma nodded fondly, "Clark, how about you?"

"Well," Clark jokingly glared at Kon, "I'm thankful for country music. And I'm also lucky to have such wonderful people in my life, both old and new." He smiled at Lois, "I hope we have more days like this, where we can relax and appreciate the nice weather, an amazing home filled with amazing people, or simply the fact we can dream of making a better future. I'm thankful we have the opportunity to make every day a little happier for someone else in the world."

"Okay, Tim." Pa said, "Think you have an idea of what to say?"

"Oh, um," Tim fidgeted anxiously before putting on a voice of false confidence, speaking quickly, "I suppose I'm grateful for innovation, adaptation, and metacognition. To process and rationalize our surroundings through individual consciousness is truly remarkable taking into consideration the theory everyone is originally derived from a singular substance that in turn expanded into this infinite universe, ultimately creating our solar system down to the molecular level, giving the potential for life on Earth, which eventually lead to this moment of celebration of a holiday that reflects our widely commercialized propaganda of skewed historical accuracy and our ability to willfully ignore our inevitable deaths through coping mechanisms such as idolizing the nation's white ancestors for creating the technologically privileged society we live in today even though in reality the past of America proves to be quite horrible and could be interpreted as an ongoing disgraceful tribute for a pattern of selfish human behavior due to an unquenchable thirst for power and dominance over others in a desperate struggle for survival. So... that's what I'm thankful for."

Did Tim need to breathe or was oxygen an optional resource for the Batfamily? That was amazing. Babybird looked relieved he had managed to stop babbling while everyone else wanted to be supportive, but weren't sure how to respond.

"Tim," Kon said reverently, "I know you're Jewish, but with history lessons like that... I would love to hear your take on Christmas sometime." Tim flushed.

"Sorry."

"No, really. I want a pocket sized version of you to explain everyday things to me. Like, why do we say 'bless you' when someone sneezes? Or, how can Tim Drake still be so adorable when discussing our inevitable deaths?" Tim's cheeks then matched the color of Ma's cherry pie, but there was a spark of genuine happiness in those sapphire blue eyes of his. From there, Lois mentioned what she was grateful for and dinner progressed normally.

Most of the meal was nothing new. Lois fit in with the family nicely as Kon predicted, and the topic of heroes wasn't mentioned, mostly. It was difficult to not talk about Superman when Lois Lane's work at the Daily Planet was strongly tied in with the Man of Steel. Ma and Pa both took delight in reliving some of Clark's more embarrassing childhood memories. Babybird politely laughed along with everyone else, but Tim hadn't uttered a word since the beginning of dinner, which eventually encouraged Lois to confront him.

"So, Tim." She said casually, "Clark tells me your parents run Drake Industries? That's interesting." Kon did his best not to appear irritated at the mention of Tim's parents.

"Yes." Tim politely nodded, "They're on an archaeological business trip as we speak." Exactly, they're far away from Tim like they should be.
"Do you know where?"

"Right now they should be in the southern region of Africa, legally taking and selling artifacts that don't belong to them."

"So, you don't approve of their work."

"You don't. That article you wrote about the company five years ago I remember upset my parents to a large degree. I had the chance to reread it lately and personally found it well written and unbiased, all things considered. For some reason I got the distinct impression you were forced to heavily revise the last two paragraphs about Janet Drake." Was the atmosphere at the table suddenly chillier?

"Well, you've certainly done your homework." If Babybird categorized background information on Lois under 'homework,' well, may Rao have mercy on her because Tim probably knew her preferred brand of toothpaste by now.

"I try to stay updated on how Drake Industries is portrayed by all major media outlets. After all, it is my name on the line." Cold. It was weird to see Tim conditioned to act the role of 'hostile business man.' Maybe if it wasn't for his horrible, malicious parents... No. No more thinking about Janet and Jack Drake during Thanksgiving. Ma would be very upset if Kon accidentally broke the dinner table. Again.

"Hmm, I take it you plan on taking over the company?"

"Ms. Lane, I was born because my parents needed an heir, not because they wanted a child. If I don't take it then who will? Probably someone foolish enough to merge with a larger organization."

"It wouldn't be the worst idea." She wisely avoided the issue of parents who have children strictly to use them instead of loving them. Although, her facial expression softened as if understanding Tim's frosty demeanor wasn't his natural personality.

"Perhaps, but it would end up being a company more corrupt like Lex Corp."

"It could be Wayne Industries. That would seem more likely, though I agree it wouldn't be the best idea, not if Bruce Wayne is still in charge." Then that prompted Clark to defend his friend.

"Lois," He said, "Bruce is honestly a good guy. His heart is in the right place." It sounded like they had argued about the billionaire playboy many times before. Before Lois could reply, Tim piped up in a lighter tone of voice.

"Of course *you* would think that, Clark." Tim said pointedly, "Bruce Wayne goes out of his way to flirt with you." Okay, that was not what Kon expected and he choked a little on a piece of turkey.

"W-what?" Clark spluttered in surprise.

"Seriously. Lois, you've seen how Bruce chats with Clark, right?"

"Well," She sighed in sad agreement, "You have to admit, Smallville, it is strange how you're the only reporter to get his phone number."

"Bruce isn't- he's not- he's been with all of those women over the years!" Clark disagreed.

"Yes," Tim rolled his eyes, "So many women that he's clearly overcompensating for something."
"He has publicly supported gay rights for a long time." Pa added. Clark shot the man a glare of betrayal.

Wow. This was officially Kon's favorite Thanksgiving yet. Part of Superboy wondered if Tim was testing their ability to not bust out laughing because Batman was doubtlessly heterosexual, and the thought of the terrifying Batman flirting with Superman... It was too much. If the Team could hear *Robin* making such definite claims, they'd be freaking out. Hmm, would Clark would tattletale to Bruce that Robin was starting rumors?

"He would've come out of the closet by now though, right?" Clark still fought on behalf of his friend.

"Would *you* come out of the closet if you had an adopted son who insisted on being called 'Dick'?" Kon couldn't help but point out, "The stories about Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson were bad enough and then coming out as sexually interested in men? It wouldn't be in anyone's best interest."

"Clark," Tim gave a small, mischievous smirk, "Do you really think it's coincidence Bruce has never had a steady girlfriend? But don't worry, you're not the one he's pining for. If that were the case he would've asked you out already."

"Oh," Superman raised an eyebrow in confusion, "Then who is he pining for?"

"Batman, of course."

"Batman?" Clark exclaimed, scandalized. As Tim tilted his head too innocently, it was then Kon realized his best friend was the devil.

"Well, obviously."

"Bruce Wayne has a crush on Batman?" Lois asked, amused.

"No." Tim explained patiently, "Bruce Wayne is in *love* with Batman. There's a mountain of evidence, y'know, like Bruce Wayne donating millions upon millions to the superhero community. It's not like his support of the Justice League is making much profit. Not to mention, he's been saved by Batman how many times now? In fact, it's almost like Bruce Wayne personally sets himself up to be robbed just so Batman can come and save the day. Risking his own life simply to get attention from the caped crusader goes beyond an eccentric crush. I think by now Bruce has fallen hopelessly in love with Gotham's own Dark Knight. Too bad Batman has been confirmed to have strictly female partners."

"Hey, I don't blame Bruce." Lois chuckled, "I thought about dating Superman once or twice." She held onto Clark's hand. "But those in the Justice League are like symbols, almost fictional characters. My hero is someone who's grounded in reality, a certain sweetheart with both good and bad traits who I love nevertheless." Lois gave Clark a swift peck on the cheek.

Tim nonchalantly glanced away, possibly feeling embarrassed. From the angle of his face it became apparent (to Kon at least) how much makeup was used to cover a bruise on his jaw. The ninjas had really beat the kid up. Kon hated the ordeal of Ra's al Ghul and the ninjas. It was so unnecessary and Babybird didn't deserve the psychological torture. If anything, Superboy wanted Robin to yell and scream in frustration that Kon and Dick were lured into a trap, leaving Tim to suffer the consequences. Instead, the teen insisted on going to Thanksgiving dinner like the fate of the world depended on it. No one would've blamed him for wanting to reschedule, but stubbornness was a trait everyone in the Batfamily acquired.
Kon nudged Tim and gave him a small smile to hopefully show a sense of pride and appreciation. Startled, Tim returned the smile while simultaneously breaking the drink he held in his left hand. It was ironic Robin--a person possibly the most trained of the group to handle delicate trinkets and sensitive explosives--would break dishes instead of someone with superstrength. Tim was mortified.

"S-sorry." He stuttered while hastily gathering shards of glass, "I don't- I didn't realize- sorry." Luckily, Tim was drinking water so it wasn't as if sticky soda splashed over the table. Pa immediately grabbed a replacement drink because the Kents were always prepared for these type of situations. Ma brought over a bag to put the broken shards in.

"Nothing to worry about, dear." She assured him, "These things happen." However, sometime during Tim's panic to clean up the mess, a sharp fragment of glass had managed to slice across his forearm. Babybird didn't even notice until Lois pointed it out.

"Oh." Tim said upon seeing blood spill out of a gash in his arm, dripping down toward his fancy watch.

"I think you might've gotten some glass caught under your skin." Clark scrutinized the injury. Kon attempted to use x-ray vision and saw a couple shards in Tim's arm, though Clark could no doubt see the pieces much clearer.

"Should we drive him to a hospital?" Lois stood up to take action. Tim's eyes widened and he vigorously shook his head no.

"I can help pick out the glass and stitch him up." Kon volunteered, "There's a first aid kit in the bathroom upstairs."

"That's alright Conner," Clark gently lead Tim away from the table, aware Kon lacked the level of precision Superman's x-ray vision provided, "I have more experience in stitching wounds. You stay here. We'll be back before you know it."

"I didn't know you could stitch up wounds." Lois raised her eyebrows, impressed.

"Uh, yes. Well, I've had my share of scrapes and cuts growing up on the farm. Conner can vouch for me." In other terms, 'keep her distracted from analyzing my suspicious behavior while I help your poor friend.' Clark hurried up the stairs to avoid further interrogation.

Kon, Ma, and Pa did their best to entertain Lois, making sure not to bring up anything incriminating about her inhuman boyfriend. Like Clark had said, it wasn't too long before he came back downstairs. He made brief eye contact with Kon, both of them silently saying to the other, 'It's fine. Nothing to worry about.' Those at the table had initiated the process of devouring what desserts were available.

"Where's Tim?" Kon asked Clark, because no one should miss out on Ma's awe inspiring apple pie.

"He should be down here any second."

"Alright... I'm gonna go check on him." The others perhaps thought Kon was overreacting, but even if Tim was physically okay, it didn't mean Babybird was fine emotionally. After going upstairs, Kon realized Tim was no longer in the house. Using infrared vision, he saw a heat signature inside of the barn. He sneaked out of the back door of the house, completely bewildered as to why Robin would hide in the barn instead of enjoying pie with the family. What was Tim doing? Superboy feared that the teen was privately having a mental breakdown.
"Hey, Tim..." Kon said as he opened the barn door, "What are you-" But he forgot he was talking when he saw a holographic image of Superman's face, particularly the projection of what appeared to be Clark's eyeball. Tim was sitting on a bale of hay, fixated on hacking into something apparently top secret. Kon found his voice again and shut the door roughly behind him, wanting an explanation.

"What are you doing?" Kon demanded.

"I am..." Tim didn't look away from the hologram, "Gathering information that the Justice League is hiding from others such as me."

"Why are you doing that now?"

"Because now I have Clark's retinal scan."

"Wait, let me get this straight." Kon could feel suspicion and anger beginning to bubble up, "You right now--a few minutes ago--scanned Superman's eyeball to hack into something the Justice League--as in the group of trusted heroes we work with--are keeping secret?"

"Yep." Goddammit. Tim was deliberately ignoring Kon's attempt at conversing.

"Tim!" Kon finally got the teen's full attention as Robin broke focus of his work, turning off the hologram, "Did you plan all of this- like breaking the glass and needing Clark's help with stitches? Did you honest-to-God plan all of that?"

"Well, yeah. I needed his face close enough to my watch to get an adequate retinal reading."

"What the hell, Tim!" Kon couldn't help but slightly raise his voice, "You broke one of Ma's glasses, you intentionally hurt yourself to the point of bleeding out, and you manipulated us all to get a stupid eye scan? That's fucked up."

"What do you mean?" He had to be playing dumb, right?

"You made us worry about you and you used our tradition of Thanksgiving to aid your paranoid agenda! I thought all this time you were nervous because you wanted to fit in with our family, but you were just manipulating those who trust you. Tim, we're not your enemy!" Kon struggled to make sense of his swirl of emotions. He felt angry, perhaps disappointed, and definitely hurt.

"I know you're not-"

"All I ever want to do is help you, but right now it feels like you used me. Couldn't you have bothered Clark about League business sometime not during a holiday? You shouldn't use an important family gathering as an opportunity to abuse our trust!"

"Kon, chill, it's nothing personal-"

"Of course it's personal! It's about you using us when we're treating you like family! You don't let anyone help you-"

"Help?" Tim suddenly turned furious as well, "What 'help' are you griping about? Maybe if you weren't such a distraction then I wouldn't have been kidnapped by Ra's al Ghul in the first place! I might've been more alert to threats instead of going to pointless parties and stealing the Batmobile. Then you get captured and I have to save you from the Light, so very helpful of you. And then, you out me as gay to my school, which has already gotten me beat up-"
"What?" Kon said disconcerted.

"Yeah!" Tim stood up with a hand hovering over his jaw, "These bruises aren't from ninjas, Kon. They're from idiot boys at my school who targeted me because I'm a faggot. To top it off, Ra's used you as a way to hurt me, trying to get me to kill you yet again-

"Again?"

"He gave me a hallucination in which I had to kill you. I killed you. I fucking killed you!" Robin's voice grew steadily louder, "And it almost happened *again* yesterday! Don't you see your help only causes more pain? I appreciate your goal of 'saving' me, but I don't need saved. I don't need you. I've been fine by myself for years, so screw you and your family and your Thanksgiving. Find some other charity case!"

"Just because your parents are abusive doesn't mean you're altogether better off without a family!"

"My parents are not abusive!" Tim was livid.

"Oh, we both know that's a lie!"

"I know you and Dick are trying to frame them for child molestation- you confessed to me yesterday. You're here yelling at me for working on ways to dissolve an evil organization that wants to rule the world, and meanwhile you and whoever else are spending time accusing my parents of abuse. Your idea of help is sending me into foster care! Is that your idea of family?"

"That's bullshit!" Kon roared as his temper flared up, "You're going to wind up dead because you're too stupid to understand there are people who care whether or not you're miserable! You treat us like you treat Ra's al Ghul! You're being so- so- You're acting like your mother!" Okay, Superboy probably shouldn't have compared Robin to Janet.

"You know," Tim switched into a horrifyingly calm demeanor, "I'm not the one here who's representing the worst of his bloodline. If you're going to behave like Lex Luthor then I'll tell you the same thing I told him- Don't fuck with my home life and I won't fuck with yours."

"...Did you just threaten my family?" Stop bluffing, Tim.

"And your little dog, too." Dude, c'mon, save the condescending sarcasm for a more appropriate setting.

"Would you stop?" Kon wanted to cry with frustration. It was like the teen would resort to any method to avoid the idea someone genuinely thought of him as family, "What's the point in arguing with you when you're like this?" Robin flinched slightly and took a step back, which frustrated Superboy even more because although he didn't want Tim to be emotionless, he didn't want his friend to be afraid either.

"Stop it." Lois Lane interrupted as she came into view with Clark not far behind, "This isn't the time or place to be fighting. I'm sure the Kents don't want to rebuild their barn, especially after being so hospitable." Oh no.

"Lois!" Kon yelped in surprise, "Um, how long have you been listening?" Crap, Clark was going to kill him and that wasn't how the half-Kryptonian wanted to die. Tim answered Superboy's question promptly, almost automatically.

"She been there long enough to hear about half of our dispute, and Clark only heard the last few comments."
'What- You knew she was here the whole time?' Even in the event Lois is trustworthy, if Clark didn't want her to know about their double life then how could Tim betray them so easily? At least Clark seemed to be coping well with this life-changing event. He wasn't freaking out. Yet.

"Yes, but-"

"Tim, that wasn't your call!"

"You know what," Tim shook his head and coldly started marching away, "Forget it." No. They were not done with this conversation until they resolved their argument. Kon sprinted out of the barn after the teen, ignoring Clark's call of protest against doing so.

"Wait-" The Boy of Steel reached out to grab Robin's shoulder and was consequently thrown down on the ground. Landing heavily on his back, Superboy admitted hustling a hero trained by Batman wasn't the smartest idea.

"Don't touch me." Robin snarled, "Don't you ever touch me." Then to Kon's alarm, he saw tears trickling slowly down Tim's cheeks. Superboy had never witnessed Tim cry. In fact, the half-Kryptonian had watched the hero take hit after hit without the slightest hint of tearing up. Jaime once joked that Batman removed Robin's tear ducts for the sake of the mission. (And the Team halfheartedly believed it.)

"Tim..." Guilt gnawed at Kon's stomach and he didn't move to stand, staying as nonthreatening as possible. Superboy wished he could reverse time and approach the entire conversation differently. At that moment Robin seemed to notice the crying and scrubbed away the tears, absolutely mortified.

"No, Kon." Tim's voice broke, "I'm sorry. Just- Just stay away. Maybe you should've let Miss Martian wipe your memory of me." Babybird ran off to the Zeta Beam to get out of Kansas, leaving Kon to wonder if their friendship was officially ruined. Heavy with remorse, Superboy hoped the Earth would open and swallow him whole. Superman instead pulled him off the ground and sighed with mild concern.

"If Batman finds out you made Tim cry, he's going to skin you alive."

....

Tim had climbed up to the top of the bookshelves in the Team's library. Hidden among the books, Robin finished hacking into the Justice League mainframe. As he waited for the data to load, he was forced to think about how upset he made Kon-El. To confess, he wasn't altogether positive why Kon was upset in the first place. It's not as if Superman or anyone had gotten hurt from the retinal scan, and the whole mess could've been avoided had the Justice League not kept secrets to begin with. To be frank, Thanksgiving was nothing special, just another meal with the family. Kon ate dinner with his family all the time, so what was the point in all the fuss? Then at the mention of 'help' Tim had used that as an opportunity to make the half-Kryptonian call off the witch hunt on Jack and Janet. In retrospect, it wasn't the most genius idea. Superboy had officially accused him of being a stupid, heartless, ignorant, manipulative, and an abusive sociopath. Was Timothy Drake really another copy of his mother?

Not to mention the expression on Kon's face when he assumed Tim had purposely revealed Superman's identity to Lois Lane. Superboy wouldn't even listen as Robin tried to explain Lois already knew Clark's secret. Did the clone seriously not notice how Lois was gauging whether or not Tim knew about their involvement in the hero community? She was totally discerning if the new rich kid from Gotham was a threat to the Kents. Plus, over the course of the meal she subtly
used every word in the dictionary that had the word 'super' in it: Superb, superficial, superstitious, supervisor, supermarket, etc. Honestly, it was ridiculous how many hints she threw out that Clark was entirely oblivious to.

Worst of all, Tim had legitimately cried over practically nothing. It was humiliating how easily Kon could strike precisely where Tim was weakest- Accusing him of treating friends like rapists, becoming Janet, and then the words, 'What's the point in arguing when you're like this?' Robin was familiar with that phrase. 'No, Timothy. Stop talking. Really, why are you like this?' 'Of course you're not getting dinner tonight, acting like this.' 'God, why are you like this? I'm very disappointed in you, Timothy.' It was a reminder of what a burden he is to other people. Crying in response was extremely childish though, and now everyone would think he was pathetic. No one on the Team will want to be his friend, guaranteed.

Whatever. Friends were overrated. As long as Kon believed Janet and Jack weren't abusive to the point they could go on trial, sacrificing his friendship with Superboy would pay off in four years the moment the Drakes were incarcerated. The half-Kryptonian could go back to not noticing Robin's existence and the rest of the Team could follow suit. It was fine. No big deal.

Kon could go back and focus on dating M'gann- no, Tim would have to put a stop to that nonsense because those two were completely wrong for each other. She did *not* deserve him. Maybe to be safe, Kon should stop dating altogether because too many people could take advantage of an attractive guy like him. Yes, it was one hundred percent, definitely logical to conclude that Tim should prevent such a tragedy from occurring. Really, Kon not dating anyone was the only reasonable solution in preventing heartbreak. Of course it would be easier to achieve that goal if Superboy and Robin were still friends. So that settles it, for Kon's sake, he and Tim *needed* to be friends. But could Robin convince the half-Kryptonian to forgive everything that just happened? Ugh, dealing with thieves and murderers was so much simpler. Trying to understand normal people was unpredictable, like traveling through unfamiliar jungle territory.

"You know, Short Stuff," Artemis said, sitting cross legged on one of the shelves in front of him, "A lot of people are searching for you." He hadn't even noticed her climb up here. "There's a training session in about half an hour taught by yours truly." Holy crap, she was right. Batman was going to kick him out of Wayne Manor for sure if he found out Robin nearly missed training with the Team.

"Okay." Tim said dully, partially regretting his inattentiveness, "I'll be right down." Artemis tilted her head, scrutinizing him in a way that made him feel judged. "Thanks for telling me, Tigress. I promise not to miss your combat lesson." His attempt at dismissing her failed. "No offense, but this Robin would like to be left alone in his self-proclaimed nest of brooding."

"Wally would've been twenty-two this week." She said simply. Whoa. Artemis wasn't particularly close to the younger members of Team, the exception perhaps being Cassie, so he wasn't even somewhat expecting this subject to arise, "Most people who didn't know us very well thought we were this perfect couple. But no relationship is perfect. Actually, we broke up once over something unbelievably stupid."

"Well... What did you do about it?"

"We talked, kissed, made up. The point is, I was certain it was over between us. I thought he hated me. Afterward, when he forgave me, I had an epiphany. I had viewed love as this fleeting and conditional thing that depended on what I offered to the person I was loving. Even though I'd forever love Wally despite our disagreements, I thought he'd abandon me the minute he thought I outlived my usefulness. It sounds cliché, but our breakup made me realize love is something
flexible, forgiving, and will grow if nurtured. The stronger your connection with someone, the harder it is to break."

"So--and don't take this the wrong way but--why are you telling me this?"

"Do you love Conner? Not necessarily in a romantic sense."

"Yes." He said with no hesitation.

"Does he love you?"

"...He told me he did."

"Hmmm, alright. Do you think he was lying?"

"Maybe."

"Pretending to love someone is an awfully mean thing to do. You honestly think Conner would be that cruel?"

"Well... no."

"So, if he wasn't lying about his feelings for you, do you think he'd easily give up on you after whatever I assumed happened at Thanksgiving?" Sheesh, why did she know about the dinner? Didn't anyone know the meaning of 'privacy?' They're supposed to stay out of his business while he in return keeps a scarily accurate record on their personal lives. It's his policy called 'Robin's a hypocrite.'

"If unloving someone is as difficult as it is to love in the first place, then by that logic... Kon still cares. I'm not sure if I agree with your reasoning, but it's a nice theory. That said, how do I apologize? Where do I start? My verbal communication skills aren't the most reliable concerning this type of thing." Tim's 'what I'm thankful for' list had sounded wayyy better in his head.

"There are plenty of ways to communicate non verbally." She reminded him, "Actions speak louder than words."

"Right," Tim perked up, "You're right! I should write an essay on why I'm apologizing!"

"Oh. Uh."

"No, I should make a power point!"

"That's not exactly what I had in mind."

"What am I saying? I should do both! Oh, and I could get one of those teddy bears that reads 'I'm beary sorry' and dress it in a Superboy T-shirt. Ooh, then as a backup plan I could threaten him by insisting in order to break up we have to sing Rent's 'Take Me or Leave Me' in front of my classmates. You're a genius! Thanks, Artemis!" Tim could make a whole list of videos with baby animals playing with puppies. Yes, he was mentally formulating a string of possible candidates already.

"...No problem. You seem inspired so I'm going to leave you to your own devices." Artemis gracefully jumped from the bookcase and exited the library.

Caught up in thinking about Kon, Tim had forgotten about stuff he was hacking. His laptop had downloaded the mystery information several minutes ago. Hmm, it looked like a series if rated
NC-17 home videos. Huh. How... graphic. Batman should've expounded upon the relevance of these videos though. Tim swallowed down his annoyance because there was no good reason to hide this content from anyone... Huh. Interesting, there was a video clip at least ten minutes long, yet it looked like nothing but a screen of white. Either it was a technological mistake or perhaps if he concentrated he could find some sort of hidden message, a vital piece of information. It was only a span of ten minutes and he had thirty to spare, so he might as well see what he could find.

He focused intently on any signs of movement or color change from the screen. Alas, the screen stayed white and empty until the video feed ended. With a huff of disappointment, Tim leaned back and closed his eyes, picturing what socializing he would have to do before the end of the day. Bart would probably attack him with a million questions about Kon's Thanksgiving. Tim might as well get it over with. When heopened his eyes, his laptop had vanished.

"Hey!" Tim complained, whipping his head around to see what moron had dared to steal his equipment. To his surprise, he noticed the entire library was gone. In fact, he was now sitting in a tree, wearing nothing but a simple pair of red shorts. To top it off, he also felt heavy humidity in the air, could hear a multitude of animals—everything from birds to insects—and his vision was blocked by too many trees to count. Everything was in shades of brown and green. Holy Steve Irwin, Batman. Tim had somehow transported to a jungle.

Was he dreaming? Did he actually teleport to another spot on Earth? The foliage was unrecognizable. Tim wasn't an expert on plants, but he knew enough to figure out what area of the world he was in. Still, it felt real. On the chance he was asleep, he needed to wake up so he wouldn't be late for... What exactly? Why did he want to wake up? He probably deserved some sleep. Scrunching up his face in thought, Tim couldn't recall why he wanted to be awake. It must not be too important if he couldn't remember. Actually, being alone in the jungle was kind of pleasant. Warm, alive, buzzing with energy, and filled with new discoveries, the forest welcomed him into a world with endless possibilities. Smiling, Tim leaped out of the tree and followed the sound of rushing water. A stream must be nearby.

Finding and following a crystalline stream, he carefully observed his surroundings. The detail that went into every leaf, every drift of wind brushing across his skin, everything was vibrant and inviting. Suddenly, he came upon a clearing and standing by the water was an angel. Was this heaven? The angel's skin shined almost too brightly and whoever this angel was, he gently spoke in a language Tim never heard before. In an outburst of courage, Robin confidently closed the distance between them, wanting a better view of the ethereal being's facial features. The angle of the angel's nose, the curve of his lips, and the length of his eyelashes seemed extraordinarily familiar. Could it be...?

Comforting hands framed the sides of Tim's face as the angel said something melodically soothing, eyes silently asking a question. It was Tim's dream, so naturally he was overwhelmingly certain he knew the answer to literally everything that was happening. All impulse control officially gone, he kissed the angel with every ounce of passion he could summon in that moment. Frozen, the angel took a second before hesitantly kissing back, slowly matching Tim's energy. It ended up being a kiss better than he ever imagined before and he felt a sense of exhilaration that extended beyond words.

"Jason," Tim grinned as they broke apart, "I've missed you so much." Because it was true. Everyone in the Batfamily continued to grieve for Jason Todd. There would always be a special place in Tim's heart for his favorite hero.

...
Kon had clumsily spouted off apologies to Tim as soon as they made eye contact. For whatever reason, Superboy's thought process scattered in panic even though in his head he'd repeated an organized speech of what he wanted to say. Apparently unfazed by Kon's nervousness, Robin strolled right up to the half-Kryptonian with a small smile. Taking that as a sign of encouragement, Kon placed his hands on the edges of Tim's face and sincerely said,

"Basically, Tim, what I'm trying to say is that I value our friendship and I'd like to consider you as part of my fam-" And then Tim shut him up with a kiss. Not a peck on the cheek, but a full on 'we're going to make out now' kiss. Accepting he would suffer eternal damnation, Kon eventually kissed back. Babybird had gone through some crazy traumatic things recently, but maybe a make out session could be considered therapy? Or maybe Superboy was caught off guard with the level of emotion Tim presented to him. Just maybe Kon had stopped thinking altogether because he was coming to the conclusion Tim was amazing and a fantastic kisser and they should probably fall in love and get married one day. But then-

"Jason," Tim grinned dreamily, "I've missed you so much." Superboy prayed he misheard.

"What? Um, are you feeling okay?"

"Do you hear that? I think I hear a tiger! We should check it out." Tim held onto Kon's hand, pulling it in the general direction of the training arena, "C'mon, Jason. It's probably up ahead drinking the water. Don't pretend you lost your love for adventure just because you're taller with more muscle mass. No, seriously, what fitness program do they have in the afterlife? I've never seen an angel so... appetizing. I like it. Anyway, let's go find that tiger!"

Well... this isn't good.
Tim and Jason trekked through the wilderness. Then they saw it- a magnificent tiger, with striking color and deadly claws. The lovely specimen paused to examine the newcomers in curiosity. Positive that Jason would protect him if needed, Tim approached the tiger with the intent to pet the orange coat that contrasted so excellently with the surrounding green vegetation. Thankfully, the wild feline made no attempt to attack as Tim touched the fur on its neck. If anything, the animal kept its attention on Jason who was speaking in music with a calming tone. The teen couldn't help but smile at the angel and watch as Jason casually communicated with the tiger. Faintly, Tim wondered what they were talking about. A rustling of noise in the background motivated Tim to explore a little further away. The modest stream expanded into a large body of water where a multitude of animals were gathered. Astonished at the presence of so many unique creatures, he decided to analyze the nearest animal, a massive lion with a golden mane. The lion held a kingly disposition as if he alone ruled over this domain. Feeling almost humbled that Tim was allowed in the king's presence, he respectively waited to see if the animal would protest him coming any closer. Satisfied when the lion only rumbled in a low, nonaggressive hum, Robin reached up to pet the cat's head. It was soft though had a different texture than the tiger's fur.

Jason carefully pulled Tim's hand away from the lion.

"Check it out," Tim gleefully exclaimed, "Aren't they all so cool? I don't know how they survive considering they're from totally different habitats, but stranger things have happened. I wish I had my camera with me."

The lion growled in response. Huh, the king of the jungle didn't like pictures? Eh, whatever. Jason kept a hold on Tim's hand, keeping the teen from petting any other of the animals, not that Tim was complaining.

... Kon let Tim pull him around invisible obstacles, still coming to terms with one hell of a day.

"I see you two made up." Artemis saw the two holding hands, "Everyone's already gathered in- Hey, Birdboy, you okay?" Tim let go of Kon and carefully walked toward Artemis. She kept still as Babybird began stroking her hair.
"Uh. I think he thinks you're a tiger." Kon felt like he couldn't provide a lot of information on the situation, but he didn't fully understand what was happening either, "I'm pretty sure he's... delusional?"

"What? He was fine literally twenty minutes ago. What the hell happened? Did you call M'gann?"

"Oh, uh, no. I probably should, right?" The Babybird seemed so overfilled with happiness that it almost hurt knowing they'd have to put an end to whatever was going through the teen's mind right now.

"I'll do it." Artemis brought out her cellphone, "You better hope he hasn't actually gone crazy."

"No, it's more like a dream I can't snap him out of, but... Artemis, he thinks I'm Jason Todd. Specifically Jason Todd in the afterlife as an angel."

"Oh, crap. Okay, you call Nightwing, he's gonna want to know as soon as possible. In the meantime we should keep him somewhere safe. Knowing Tim, he'd hate it if the rest of the Team-" They both saw Tim was no longer within their sights. "-saw him like this."

Both on the move, they quickly discovered Tim had only wandered the next room over. On the downside, Robin was petting the top of Kaldur's head. The Atlantean was patiently waiting for someone to explain, no doubt resisting the urge to push Tim away in irritation. Meanwhile, the rest of the Team (Other than a few senior members, namely Barbara, Dick, and M'gann) stared as Tim unashamedly brushed his fingers through Aqualad's hair. Taking action, Kon gently pulled Tim's hand away, wondering what to say. Unfortunately, Robin said something first.

"Check it out," Tim grinned at Kon, yet eyes still set on Kaldur, "Aren't they all so cool? I don't know how they survive considering they're from totally different habitats, but stranger things have happened. I wish I had my camera with me." Great, describe Atlanteans like animals in a petting zoo, that's fine.

"There better be something wrong with him." Kaldur scowled in slight annoyance.

"Don't worry, there is." Superboy assured, "So, we're just going to go-"

"What's wrong with him, exactly?" A wild Garfield appeared at Robin's side, nosy as ever. Tim, engrossed in whatever film was playing in his head, eyed Beast Boy with a desire for knowledge.

"Are you an alpaca or just a young llama?" Babybird questioned very seriously.

"Both! I can turn into any animal I want, remember Robin?" Gar helpfully demonstrated by shape-shifting into a flamingo, goat, pig, and back to his normal monkey-ish persona.

"Yeah, definitely a baby llama."

"So... he's majorly stoned? Like, higher-than-the-Watchtower high? Or is this a hallucinogen issue?" The green kid made a disgruntled noise when Robin leaned in closer, staring intensely.

"But then, where are your other llama friends, Mr. Llama?" Tim, seemingly upset at the prospect of a lonely llama, hugged Garfield.

"This is freaky."

"Yeah," Kon slowly began peeling Tim off of Garfield, "So, if you excuse us, we'll-"
"Hey- Hey, look! It's a bottlenose dolphin!" Babybird yanked his arm away from Kon and excitedly pointed to La'gaan.

"Ha! He thinks Lagoon Boy is a dolphin!" Gar laughed.

"Better than a llama." La'gaan snappily retorted. Garfield stopped laughing, but Jaime found it hilarious.

"Ooh! What am I? It's gotta be something totally crash, right?" Bart zoomed in front of Tim, blocking him from Kon. Tim didn't say anything, but he did move away from Bart as if disturbed by whatever he saw. Blue Beetle snickered at his friend's expense.

"Hermono, he must think you're something disgusting."

"No, he's probably intimidated because I'm that awesome."

"Hey," Kon said sternly, glaring at them, "Now is not the time to be playing around. Yes, imagining Lagoon Boy as a dolphin is hilarious, but whether Robin is drugged or has head trauma, Or something worse, "I don't want him to be-"

"No!" Tim shouted. Babybird slammed directly into Mal in a deliberate tackle. The taller man simply took a step backward to steady himself, half amused, half concerned.

"Quick!" Tim called out to Kon, "Get the dik-dik to safety!"

"What'd he just call you?" Karen's question was directed at Superboy rather than Mal.

"I don't-" Kon was losing patience, "Just- Mal, could you backup and show you're not going to attack Karen?"

"I'll get him for you." Cassie said confidently to Kon. Superboy held out his hand in warning.

"No! I'm trying to avoid any kind of physical confrontation, okay?" He responded quickly, "Giving him the wrong signals or stressing him out might make this hallucination worse. If he thinks you're a wild animal then he might assume you're attacking him."

"I think," Mal inched his way closer to Karen, confusing Tim, "I'm the dik-dik and Karen is the perceived threat... What is a dik-dik anyway?" To that, Garfield broke composure and started giggling.

"A dik-dik is an antelope about the size of a cat." As Garfield's giggles turned into laughter, Jaime and Bart joined in.

"Oh," Tim lit up with sudden realization, "You two are friends! That's adorable. I wonder if dik-diks and bears could be friends in real life... Probably not. Sleep with one eye open, little guy, because she's absolutely going to kill and eat you one of these days." He patted Mal's head cheerfully. "Between her and Lion Aslan over there, you're a goner."

"Aha! I'm a lion!" Bart said triumphantly.

"No, he was talking about Aqualad." La'gaan took delight in crushing Bart's dreams. Plus, Lagoon Boy seemed pleased Kaldur wasn't an animal with fins. Kon supposed it was a weird Atlantean pride thing.

"Hey," Barbara entered the room, confused, "Is everything okay? Artemis called about-"
"Such a rare species of butterfly... Blue Mission Butterfly, I think." Tim tilted his head, reaching out to Blue Beetle who politely stayed a good distance away from him. Something else caught Babybird's attention. "Woah! Did you see that?" He then waltzed over to Cassie in awe. "She breathes fire and everything. So. Cool. She kinda reminds me of Wonder Girl, actually. They both have the same fierce determination in their eyes, y'know?" Wonder Girl smiled at that and let Tim pet her.

"Exactly. Superboy! Aqualad! Why the heck isn't Robin in the infirmary?" Batgirl frowned in frustration.

"My apologies, Batgirl." Kaldur said, "It appears at the moment Robin is... enamored with his hallucinated surroundings. Some of his enthusiasm is affecting the other members." He glared lightly at Bart and Garfield.

"He could be infectious or something for all we know!" She griped, swiftly grabbing Tim's arm, getting a blood sample.

"Ow!" Tim yelped, "Jason, the fox just bit me!" Then he proceeded to complain about not knowing if it was common for that species to have rabies.

"Did he just call you...?" Barbara asked Superboy quietly enough he had to use his super hearing.

"Yeah." Kon felt like apologizing, "He thinks I'm Jason." Those who remembered Jason became instantly somber.

"Let's get him out of here." Barbara sighed, tired and exasperated. But then-

"PUPPY!!" Tim squealed, charging across the room to Wolf who had only recently awoken from a nap. "Look at you! You're so cute!!" He tackled Wolf in a hug that probably would've suffocated any dog not the size of, well, a wolf. Apparently Tim was too overwhelmed by Wolf's cuteness to appreciate how the animal didn't approve of the high-pitched cooing. The canine gave Kon a side eye of silent suffering.

"You look exactly like the pupper I used to have when I was little!" Tim exclaimed, (adorably not the least bit worried about looking immature or childish) "Except you're actually alive instead of being gutted open with an electric screwdriver! Jay, can we keep him? It'd be so nice to have a pet my mom doesn't kill to teach me a lesson." Then he cooed, "She's a psychopath, isn't she? Yes, she is. Don't worry, we're going to protect you and love you and make sure no one cooks you up and feeds you to children. In my dreams, dogs are friends, not food."

"He's saying that because he's not all here right now... right?" Mal chuckled in nervousness, trading glances with a few people like Karen.

"Of course," Cassie said unconvincingly, "After all, he still lives with his parents and I'm sure if they were really like that..." She trailed off, not saying 'Batman would get Robin out of their puppy-murdering custody.'

"Is that? No way!!" Tim stared in awe at Dick Grayson who had *finally* joined the party. "A blue bird of paradise! So pretty!"

"Nightwing," Barbara commanded, seeing how Tim planned to get a closer look at the 'bird of paradise,' "Superboy, you two go to the medical center. Now." Dick didn't ask questions though he clearly wanted to. Instead, he walked back out of the room, much to Babybird's disappointment.

"No, wait!" Tim called out to Dick, following halfheartedly, "Where are you going?" Kon took the
teen's hand, leading them to follow Nightwing. "Oh, we're leaving? Okay. The sloth was starting to creep me out anyways."

"Did he say A SLOTH? He thinks I'm a sloth?? ARE YOU FRICKIN' KIDDING ME-" Bart whined loudly before being out of earshot. Soon enough, Dick, Kon, and Tim gathered around the hospital beds, watching Babybird examine the bird of paradise's 'feathers' or something. Nightwing although confused, humored the teen. Kon wondered if he should tell Dick about the whole Tim-kissing-'Jason' thing. He explained what he could at the time.

"You know, that fox seemed like she wanted to kill you. Maybe try mating with someone less dangerous? Or at least someone who doesn't find you as annoying..." Robin murmured, which might've made Dick chuckle if they both weren't so worried. Then M'gann arrived just as Kon finished explaining to Nightwing the details of Tim's hallucination.

"I came as soon as I could. How is he?" M'gann glided toward them. Tim did not like that at all. He stood protectively in between her and Superboy.

...

Tim's POV

Tim blocked the python from getting any closer to Jason. He did not appreciate the way she slithered closer to the angel. Something about her eyes made him paranoid. Jason put a hand on the teen's shoulder, but he refused to move. No one was going to hurt Jason under Tim's watch. Not now. Not ever. The snake had eyes so bright they almost appeared to be glowing. Taking the unbroken eye contact as a challenge, Tim glared back defiantly. Well, that is until a wave of vertigo and nausea overcame him, powerful enough to knock him down on his knees. Unable to do much else, he threw up into a grass makeshift basket Jason hastily handed to him. After that, Tim's head felt fuzzy, like it had been stuffed with cotton. He figured it was best to stay sitting. Holy black plague, Batman. He felt beyond awful.

Jason, ever the sweetheart, kept his arms wrapped around Tim. It was... comforting. He felt bad for making Jason worry though and even worse for puking in front of his hero in the first place.

"Don't w'rry 'bout me." Tim's voice sounded cottony, too, "'M fine. I've had way worse." Which was true, actually. "Heh. One time when I was lots younger I had pneumonia. That sucked. I rem'nber 'cause it was Dick's birthday. I had to go to the, what's it called, um, pharmacy. But I had to walk 'cause I was alone 'n it was snowing so I could'n catch a cab. Almost died. Luck'ly, these two guys with black hair 'n blue eyes--'cause all the best guys look like that--saved me. I dunno why. They were jus' nice. So nice I told 'em my 'ntire life story." He sighed, "Never saw 'em again though. Can't say I blame 'em. 'M boring. Now I'm thinkin' 'bout it... One of the guys sorta looked like S'perboy... Angry but cute."

"You met Kon, right, Jas'n? Superboy? He's fantastic. F'ckin amazing." Talking about Kon for whatever reason made Tim feel better so he continued, "Like, everything about him is perfect. He's my best friend and he's smart and funny and my heart goes all warm when I see him, know what I mean? No really. His hugs are like- like dopamine straight to the system. And he's gorgeous and beautiful and... I gotta go back home so I can apologize for being such jerk today. I was an asshole so I gotta make a power point about it... I wish he were here... He's such a... super... friend..." He trailed off miserably, allowing Jason's cuddling to lure him into a state of drowsiness.

...

Tim fell asleep on Kon's lap, curled up like sick kitten. Superboy almost expected him to mewl
pitifully in his sleep. M'gann left after her failed attempt at fixing Robin's mind.

"Well, the good news is Batman says he knows what's wrong." Dick said at a volume soft enough to not disturb their sleeping teammate, "He and Martian Manhunter should be here soon."

"And the bad news?"

"Well, depending on how strongly Tim holds onto this world of subconscious, there might be brain damage."

"What kind of brain damage? What do you mean 'subconscious'?"

"Batman didn't go into a lot of specifics, but apparently everything Tim is hallucinating right now is on some level how he views us subconsciously. Switching back to reality might hurt him if he prefers to see the world this way. Although, judging by how he's already missing the real you, I think everything will be alright."

"A-02, Batman." Kon heard the Zeta-Beam a few rooms over. "A-01, Superman."

"Batman's here." Superboy informed Dick before eavesdropping on Batman and Superman's conversation.

"Look, Bruce, I know what you're going to say-" Clark sounded remorseful.

"How is it you can be stronger than steel, faster than light, and still not capable of keeping a damn fourteen year old out of trouble for more than three goddamn hours?"

"I know, I'm sorry-"

"No, 'sorry' is convincing my youngest child to listen to country music. That would be unfortunate, but I'd refrain from threatening you with kryptonite. But this, Clark? The fact Tim watched that video while in a base surrounded by trusted members of the Team is pure luck. What if he had been in an environment his subconscious deemed dangerous? People could have been hurt or killed. *Tim* could have been hurt or killed. He's being obsessed over by a psychopathic megalomaniac and he's practically defenseless in the state he's in!"

"You can't put the blame all on me when it was your decision not to tell the Team about those videos. Maybe if Tim trusted you more then he'd ask you for permission to see the files instead of going behind your back and obtaining information illegally."

"Well, gee, Clark. Why would he have trust issues with adults? It's almost as if I warned you about his abusive parents so you could prepare for his paranoid behavior!"

"Paranoid, yes, but cutting himself to get a retinal scan of my eyeball? How the heck am I suppose to prepare for that?"

"Well, you've been friends with me for decades, I'm sure you could've come up with something!"

"It's because I'm friends with you that I know there will always be people who can outsmart me despite my best efforts! Your kid in less than an hour deduced that Lois knew my secret identity when I--after dating Lois for months--had no clue she even slightly suspected me of being Superman. Did you honestly think in a battle of wits that I would be the one to win?"

"You're right. I've really been overestimating your level of competence lately." Then the Zeta-Beam sounded once again.
"A-07, Martian Manhunter."

"Martian Manhunter has arrived." Kon kept Dick updated. "They'll be walking through the door any second."

"That's good," Dick said lightly, "I also have Babs searching to see if she can find the two men who helped Tim when he had pneumonia. Maybe they can stand trial as witnesses against Janet and Jack."

"Yeah, maybe... What do you think Tim will see Batman as? Will Batman be upset that Tim thinks I'm Jason?"

"I don't know. I guess we're about to find out."

"...Do you think Batman will be mad that Tim and I kissed?"

"Well, I don't think- Hang on- YOU WHAT. Dude, what the hell??"

"HE kissed ME and at the time I didn't realize he was hallucinating, I swear."

"Okay, we are having a serious talk about this later. If you want to be alive for that conversation then say nothing to Batman about it."

"No problem."

"Ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod." Tim went from asleep to wide awake in an instant, eyes glued on Clark who had politely knocked before entering the room. "It's. A. Unicorn. HOLY TWILIGHT SPARKLES, BATMAN, AN ACTUAL UNICORN!"

"Oh, dear." Clark gave an uncomfortable smile as a greeting to Kon and Nightwing. "He really is delusional."

Then ever dramatically, Batman entered the room. All eyes were on Tim, wondering what Babybird would see.

"Oh, hey, Batman. What are you doing here?" Tim chirped.

"Huh. Figures." Nightwing shrugged.

"No way! This is perfect!" Tim excitedly showcased Kon to Batman before could think to stop the well-intentioned Babybird, "Look who I found! See, look, it's Jason!! Your son, Jason Todd! Now everything will be okay. You can finally be happy again." Kon could practically hear everyone's heart break a little bit, especially Batman's. "Well, don't pretend to be your usual constipated emotional selves, hug or something!" Tim commanded. Bruce awkwardly patted Kon on the shoulder, but thankfully it was enough to appease Babybird.

"Well, while you two catch up, I'm going to become best friends with the unicorn. Oh, and don't turn this into one of those weird dreams, okay? You know the ones. It makes training the next day with Batman uncomfortable and the tiniest bit disturbing." Satisfied with his demands, Tim literally began climbing onto Clark's back. Batman, apparently deeming this as an appropriate punishment for Superman's lack of judgment, gave the Kryptonian a look that roughly translated into 'you better pretend to be a unicorn as if your life depended on it.'

Dick gave the Dark Knight a detailed report of what had happened so far. Kon occasionally filled in the blanks when he was able. Then when Robin licked Clark's ear because 'if Voldemort spent
eleven years drinking unicorn blood then surely they can't taste too unapetizing,' Kon swore he saw
Batman's eyebrow quirk up in hinted amusement.

"Alright. I am ready." Martian Manhunter's low voice echoed around the room. Kon hadn't noticed
the alien up to that point. "Set him down on one of the hospital beds." Relieved, Clark wasted no
time in separating himself from Tim and promptly left the room.

According to Tim's facial expression, Martian Manhunter was something huge and terrifying.
Babybird froze with terror as if being hunted.

"A basilisk." Manhunter said casually.

"Huh?" Kon asked stupidly upon the realization the conversation was directed to him.

"He sees me as a basilisk. Essentially, a mythical, giant snake capable of turning its victims into
stone."

"Oh. Um. Interesting."

No one said anything else as they watched J'onn's eyes glow in concentration. They waited a full
twenty minutes before the Martian's pupils returned to their normal shade of red. Would Tim be
okay? The teen had drifted back to sleep peacefully.

"He is going to be fine." Manhunter assured them, "I should warn you though, he might not recall
today or even the past few days."

"Why not?" Kon scowled, instantly suspicious and then felt guilty about feeling suspicious. "You
know how he hates the idea of someone manipulating his memories."

"It was the only way to prevent his mind from fighting my presence. His recent distrust of the
League caused him to resist any help I offered."

"I'm sure if Tim knew the whole story he'd understand why we had to erase parts of his memory." Dick rationalized.

"When will he wake up?" Batman asked Martian Manhunter.

"A few hours. Five hours at the most."

"Thank you."

"If you could, you would do the same for me." J'onn said simply. Then the Martian left them alone
with the sleeping Robin.

"You know how this happened." Dick said to Batman. It wasn't a question.

"Yes. Robin hacked into some video tapes the League had been keeping secret. It was footage the
Light used as a way to experiment on those they held interest in."

"Interest how?"

"Only certain kinds of people can read the Apocalypse Trinity. It's similar to a metagene, but
perhaps has more to do with the psychology of someone's mind rather than purely genetics. When
someone with this unique ability is forced into such vivid subconscious awareness--like Robin just
experienced--showing them the writings of the Apocalypse Trinity have had... disastrous effects on
both the mind and body." Batman showed them a couple small clips of what he was talking about
and it was nothing less than horrific.

"This could've happened to Tim?" Kon didn't want to imagine that as a possibility and didn't blame the League from not releasing the videos to the younger children.

"Yes." Batman said gravely, "But as it turns out, Tim shows potential for being able to comprehend all three tablets. I think the Light didn't want to risk losing that potential."

"You said you didn't know why the Light took Tim, but you've known all along, haven't you?" Dick accused, furious.

"We still don't know exactly what specific trait the Light is trying to find within the human subconscious. But yes, I lied thinking I should gather more information before telling anyone on the Team about the videos."

"Yeah? And how did that work out for you?"

"Nightwing," Barbara interrupted, barely acknowledging Batman's presence before shoving a laptop into Dick's arms. "I followed that lead you gave me and I got something. Tell me you see what I see."

"This discussion is far from over." Dick promised Batman before checking out the laptop screen. "Is- is that?" He seemed shocked.

"Yes."

"But how?"

"I don't know."

"He wouldn't be the first speedster we know to time travel." Batman studied the screen, too. Curious, Kon peered over to see what the fuss was about.

"Wally?" It looked like Wally West sitting in a coffee shop, waving cheerily at the security camera, holding a sign that read 'December 1st, 2007. See you in April, babe.' Kon double checked the time stamp. "Hang on, if this is from 2007 and Wally is an adult in the picture... What does this mean?"

"It means," Dick smiled brighter than Kon had seen in weeks, "Wally is alive."

...  

Tim POV

Tim woke up unusually groggy. His mouth tasted awful, and he was... in a hospital bed? What happened? Suddenly, Tim noticed he wasn't in bed alone. Oh no. Had Ra's kidnapped him again? No. No, that's Kon. The Kryptonian had fallen asleep while sitting alongside the hospital bed and Kon's torso rested on the mattress beside him. Happily, far too happily, Tim cuddled closer to Kon and fell back asleep.

...  

Dick's POV

The next time Tim woke up, someone different was in the room.

"Hey there, Sleeping Beauty." Dick grinned. "How are you feeling?"
"What happened?" Tim asked groggily.

"What do you remember?"

"...Not much. Where am I?"

"You're in the California base."


"Um... You know *who* you are, right?" A sudden pang of panic hit Dick. Did Tim not remember anything at all?

"Of course. I'm Timothy Jackson Drake."

"Good. You worried me for a second, Timbo. Well, if you want we can go back to Gotham, but we thought you'd prefer to stay here."

"Are my parents here? Who are you anyway? Are you a nurse? What the heck am I wearing? Is it some kind of uniform?" Oh hell no. This couldn't be happening.

"Oh boy." Dick muttered before saying louder, "It's me! You know- Dickie Grayson!"

"Excuse me? Did you just call yourself..." Tim gaped, "You're name can't seriously be something so vulgar, can it? No offense, but what were your parents thinking?"

"You... You really don't remember me? What about the Flying Graysons? You went to the circus when you were younger and I was a performer there." Dick searched desperately for any hint of recognition in Tim's expression.

"My parents would never take me somewhere like the circus." Tim scoffed, "It's much too dirty and crowded and, well, fun for their tastes."

"Alright. Okay. Wow. Um, you stay here and I'll go get someone you can hopefully remember."

"Okay."

Nightwing nearly plowed into Batman in his haste for answers.

"Bruce, he doesn't remember me." Dick failed at not sounding panicked, "He doesn't remember me or the Flying Graysons and for all I know he doesn't remember anything about the Team or League and we have to fix this!"

"Are you sure?" Batman had the audacity to question him.

"Yes! Something went wrong and I've been completely erased from his memory!"

"Doesn't feel good, does it?" Tim's voice sounded from behind him. Dick turned around to see the teen munching on a spoonful of cereal, specifically the acrobat's favorite brand of cereal that belonged to Dick and definitely not Tim. "To be erased from someone's memory, I mean. It sucks. Could you imagine if, say, Babs had all memories of you erased? It's really quite a horrifying thought, huh?" As if emphasizing his point, Tim took a big crunching bite of cereal. Upon closer inspection, Dick could see Tim was in fact eating the last of his personal cereal supply. Nightwing was annoyed (to say the least) but couldn't think of anything clever to say. How did Tim even know where to find Dick's secret stash of cornflakes?
"What do you remember?" Batman asked in a no-nonsense tone.

"The last thing I remember is working on some cases last... huh. Last Tuesday apparently." Tim checked a nearby computer for the date and time of day, "But it's now Thursday evening. What happened these last couple days?" Dick traded a glance with Bruce.

"Nothing much." Dick lied, "We'll tell you all about it soon. Promise." Tim clearly didn't like that answer, but perked up when Nightwing said, "Your pretend boyfriend has been worrying about you. Maybe you should go find him." The teen looked questioningly at Batman.

"He has been worried." Batman nodded, and that was all the permission Timmy needed before running off to find Conner. After he left, Dick asked Batman,

"Are you sure you don't want to at least tell him about yesterday's incident with Ra's al Ghul?"

"J'onn suggested a period of three months before telling him about the more stressful events of the past few days."

"And meanwhile what do we do to keep him distracted from the truth?"

"There's an endless supply of crime to fall back on. Plus, the idea of getting a Batdog has been growing on me."

"A dog? Thank you for confirming my suspicions that he's your favorite child."

Chapter End Notes

Blue Bird of Paradise mating dance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDP2csmRy00

Artemis- Tiger
Aqualad- Lion
Batgirl- Red Fox
Beast Boy- Llama
Blue Beetle- Blue Mission Butterfly
Bumble Bee- Brown Bear
Guardian- Dik-dik
Kid Flash- Three-Toed Sloth
Lagoon Boy- Bottlenose Dolphin
Miss Martian- Python
Nightwing- Blue Bird of Paradise
Superman- Unicorn
Wonder Girl- Baby Dragon
Chapter Summary

It's Dick Grayson's birthday! Also, Tim suffers through some of the consequences of his memory loss.

Tim was given a detailed report by Batman himself to explain what had happened. Like Nightwing said, he didn't miss much. Ra's al Ghul more or less sent ninja to kidnap him again and during the fight Tim took a hit so hard he slipped into a coma. Whoops. The following days weren't worth mentioning, really. Thankfully, Miss Martian pretended to be Tim for the past few days. Something interesting though, the Team recently discovered Wally might be alive! In fact, Dick had Tim researching into several different possibilities involving time travel. It would have been perfect to get Wally back in time for Dick's 20th birthday, but by this time that wasn't going to happen.

Still, the Team seemed very optimistic at the idea and everyone had an elevated mood. Some would even insist on spending more time with Tim, just because. Bart in particular craved Tim's attention as if the speedster needed to prove something. He'd ask strange questions like, "So, what do you think about sloths?" Since Tim tended to have strong opinions on most forms of wildlife, he gladly answered in an hour-long lecture. And yet, Bart didn't seem satisfied with Robin's response. It was because of this that Tim made a note to send his friend some of the more interesting documentaries of sloths if Bart was truly fascinated with the animal. Perhaps Garfield's input would also be valued.

Kon actually celebrated Thanksgiving early with Clark and Lois. Apparently, Lois has a theory Bruce Wayne is in love with Batman. The idea was so amusing, Tim wished he had thought of it first.

After much planning with Barbara on how to best celebrate Dick's 20th birthday, when December 1st arrived, Tim found himself excited for school to end and for the partying to begin. Toward the middle of the last class, he got permission to work in the school library. He huddled in a corner, the only spot in the room out of eyesight of security cameras. He often hid out there when he wanted to work on mission related cases on his laptop.

In a good mood, Tim didn't mind all that much when he heard Karl--a notorious school bully--stroll into the library. Chances were that Karl wasn't about to bother him anyway-

"Hey." Karl said to Tim, kind of uncharacteristically shy. Despite knowing Tim was the only one Karl could be possibly talking to, the young hero looked around the room in confusion nonetheless.

"Hey." Tim said hesitantly back.

"So, can I... join you?" The way Karl stressed the words oddly.

"Uh... Yeah, sure."

Instead of sitting across from Tim like he expected, Karl happily sat down right next to him. Very close to him.
"How's your boyfriend?" Karl questioned.

"Fine, I guess." If Tim wasn't confused before, he really didn't understand what was happening now. "Why do you ask?" Instead of verbally answering, Karl leaned in and locked lips with him. Whoa, hold up.

"Um." Tim pulled away, "You- Did you- You just-"

"Shh." Karl shushed him with more kissing.

"Wait." Tim put a firm hand on Karl's chest, pushing him back. "Don't you have a girlfriend?"

"She's not really my girlfriend. She's not my... type."

"Oh. Well, either way, I have a boyfriend."

"So? Why would you let me sit here if you weren't interested? You knew I liked you."

"I-" Tim's protest ended as quickly as it began, replaced with uncertainty. "You told me you liked me?"

"No, I just give my number to all the nerds I punch in the face." He chuckled, tracing a thumb across Tim's jawline. Robin thought the bruise on his jaw had come from the ninja fight.

"I'm really not comfortable with-" Then Karl had his arms pinning Tim to the corner, trapped in a barrage of teeth and tongue.

"I SAID STOP-" This time Robin pushed with more force and Karl slapped a hand over the hero's mouth.

"Shh, you don't want anyone to catch us, do you?" Karl hissed, "It's not a big deal. There's no use playing hard to get when I know you feel the same way I do." And the bully was trying to tug down Tim's pants, "Relax, okay? Your boyfriend doesn't have to know. It can be our little secret. It's okay. Shh. It's cute when you're worried, but you don't need to be afraid, I promise."

Meanwhile, Karl was undoing his own zipper on his jeans.

"Please, stop." Tim hated the fact his voice wavered, and hated it even more that Karl seemed to interpret that waver as a sign of desire or wanting.

Logically, Tim could yell for help... and risk his parents being called over the incident. He could fight Karl even though someone of Tim's size shouldn't be able to have a fighting chance against someone of Karl's stature. After all, because Karl had been held back a couple years in elementary school, the bigger teen was now almost eighteen years old and an entire foot taller than Tim. Then Robin started doubting himself. After all, he was a teenage boy, wasn't he supposed to want this? He and Kon weren't even technically dating. Karl didn't seem to think the situation was morally wrong in the slightest. In the end, Tim decided it was simpler and easier to go along with what the bully wanted.

Later on that day, the Team celebrated Nightwing's 20th birthday. Because Dick was a child at heart, they played a lot of silly, childish games. In particular, they played Spin the Bottle. The rules being that if you were chosen then you got to pick one person in the room to drag into the closet alone for a full sixty seconds. You didn't actually have to make-out, but if you wanted to then you had your chance. Barbara might've rigged the game so that Dick had a moment alone with practically every girl in the room. (Most, Tim was certain, kissed Dick on the cheek and proceeded to tease him about his generous dating history.)
Tim hadn't expected to be chosen to go into the closet by Bart of all people. If Bart tried to kiss Tim though, at least Robin could punch the speedster in the face with no worries about betraying secret identities. Suspicious if not curious, Robin followed Kid Flash into the kissing closet. Just before they shut the door, Tim couldn't help but notice how resentful Blue Beetle looked.

"Do you hate me?" Were the first words out of Bart's mouth, "Do you find me creepy or something?"

"What? No. Why would you even think that?"

"I don't know. It's... it's just a feeling I have." Sounds fake, but whatever.

"Okay, well, I don't hate you. Actually, I-" Tim took a deep breath, "I think you're totally crash... dude."

"Really?" It was nice how Bart wasn't at all perturbed with how badly Tim expressed emotion.

"Yes. Definitely. Is this really why you dragged me in here? I thought you wanted to make Jaime jealous, honestly."

"Make Jaime jealous of what?" The speedster acted confused.

"Nothing. Forget I said anything. Everyone knows I have a terrible gaydar. I didn't even know I was gay, let alone you two."

"Gay? Psh. Nah, we're not like that. No way. Not at all. Nope. That's a crazy idea."

"Sure. I believe you. But, Bart... Do *you* believe you?" Then Tim and Bart made eye contact, instantly developing the same idea.

Kon watched as Tim and Bart exited the closet together. Both of them had ruffled up hair and clothes, significantly messier from what they were before. These small details did not go unnoticed by Jaime who acted both surprised and annoyed. Since Superboy had superhearing and infrared vision, he knew nothing had actually happened between Robin and the speedster, but Blue Beetle obviously thought the two had at least kissed, probably kissed a lot. Bart looked appropriately embarrassed and Tim looked unusually smug. (Tim even gave a glance toward Jaime as if to say 'You should've made your move before it was too late. ') The next time the bottle spun around, 'coincidentally' it pointed to Jaime who immediately grabbed Bart by the collar and hauled him to the closet.

"Are they...?" Tim asked Kon. Not wanting to intrude too much, Superboy glanced very briefly into the closet.

"Yep. I guess this means they're officially a couple now?" Kon shrugged. He wasn't all that surprised.

"Hell, yeah!" Cassie cheered, "Good job, Robin. Between the two of us, surely we can annihilate all heterosexuality within the Team."

"Is that the official plan?" Artemis quirked an eyebrow up in amusement.

"Plan? Excuse you, but we prefer the term 'gay agenda.'" Tim deadpanned, pleased when it got a chuckle from most of the others. When Jaime and Bart left the kissing closet, they were both
blushing brightly and holding hands. Garfield wolf-whistled, but otherwise no one did anything but smile in genuine happiness for their teammates.

The next time the bottle spun around, it pointed to Tim. The teen was tugging Kon to his feet before the bottle had even completely stopped. Taken aback by how eager the teen was, Superboy couldn't help but remember when Tim kissed him. Suddenly feeling guilty, Kon's sense of nervousness only intensified when he saw Dick take out a small box, which somehow the half-Kryptonian just knew contained a minor amount of Kryptonite. It was a silent threat of 'kiss him and I'll kill you.' No pressure though.

However, as soon as the door closed, Tim simply hugged Kon like their lives depended on it.

"You okay?" Not that Kon was complaining.

"Sorry." Tim mumbled. "School today was just... rough."

"What happened?" He thought Tim seemed a bit off kilter after school, but he attributed the behavior to high anticipation of Dick's birthday party. Tim and Barbara both worked hard to prepare for today.

"I was sitting in the library and... well... It doesn't matter now."

"You know you can tell me anything, right?"

"I know." So they stayed hugging until their time was up.

Eventually, it was revealed that Hayley's Circus was coming to the city of Bludhaven for one weekend only. Everyone got a ticket and thus the Team all went to Bludhaven to enjoy the circus. Sitka, an elephant Dick knew as a child, had grown up to have a baby of her own. And so Kizzy, the newest addition to Hayley's Circus act, was giving her first performance. Kon swore Dick had never been so thrilled for anything else in his entire life and the acrobat tended to be a pretty excitable person in general. Tim told everyone that Nightwing had on several occasions asked Batman for permission to keep an elephant as a pet.

"Hang on, I need to go buy another hotdog." Bart said as they were taking their seats in the giant circus tent.

"You've already eaten six hotdogs, three funnel cakes, and two pieces of pizza." Jaime sighed. One of those pieces of pizza had belonged to him.

"Yes, but this time I'm going to try the chillidog with pineapple."

"Be quick. The show is starting soon." Karen advised. The older members of the Team were sitting in the rows above the younger members. Well, except for Kon. He and Tim were of course sitting together.

"I'll go with you." Tim volunteered, "I was going to buy more popcorn for everyone anyway." Kon stood up to follow but Tim stopped him. "No, Kon. I don't want you to miss the grand opening!"

The third Robin was almost as passionate about the circus as the first Robin, so the half-Kryptonian followed orders and stayed put.

Once the teen was out of sight, Dick abandoned his seat beside Barbara and M'gann, plopping down beside Kon.

"So, how is he?" Nightwing asked Superboy in a quiet voice. They now did small note
comparisons to keep track of Tim's mental state.

"He still hasn't remembered anything."

"Good."

"But," Kon got a gut feeling to tell Dick about what Tim had said, "When we were in the closet, he mentioned that he had a bad day at school? Something happened in the library and he seemed really upset by it but wouldn't tell me exactly what had happened."

"You know," Dick's eyes lit up, "I used to go to Gotham High. There's a blind spot in the library that the security cameras can't see. Kids used to use it as their place to sell drugs until I installed a secret camera to try and catch them in the act. I haven't checked it in ages, but maybe..." Dick, using his amazing technological skills, brought up the video feed on his holographic communicator. Hiding the image from the rest of the group, he and Kon watched as the video rewound to the incident Tim must have been upset about.

"Who's that?" Kon asked when an older kid sat down next to Tim.

"I'm not sure." Dick frowned. Then when the older kid started kissing Tim, they both became steadily angrier. The worst part though was seeing the moment Tim gave up resisting, as if he realized there was no point in fighting what was happening. After that, Kon wouldn't watch anymore. Nightwing froze the screen and zoomed in on the older kid's face, scanning the school records for an identity match. They quickly got results and in Kon's opinion, Karl was a worse name than Dick. They were both on the brink of abandoning the circus performance in favor of hunting down this asshole kid, when Bart interrupted them.

"Hey, I just saw him!" The speedster said loudly enough to attract the attention of their surrounding teammates, "He and R went off to 'talk about homework.' So, R told me to come back here without him."

"What?" Kon shouted just as Dick shouted, "Where?"

"Across from the cotton candy stand. Is he in trouble?" Bart and the Team (and some of the previous members of the Team like Zatanna and Rocket) immediately sensed the distress in Kon and Dick's body language. As such, everyone went rushing off to help Tim, even though most didn't know exactly what was wrong.

...  

Tim couldn't believe his bad luck. Yes, Bludhaven was just south of Gotham, but what were the chances that Karl decided to pick today of all days to see the circus? They were arguing by a sturdy oak tree.

"Look, Karl, I'm only going to tell you once- I'm not interested, I'll never be interested, so leave me alone." Tim only wished he sounded as confident out loud as he did in his head.

"Hey, why are you acting like I did something to you?" Karl had the guile to laugh, "I didn't do anything you didn't want, remember? Huh, I don't suppose you're here with your boyfriend?" He stepped closer into Tim's personal space with a wink and the smaller teen felt his cheeks grow hot. "Yeah, I thought not."

"Fuck off." Tim spat before attempting to march passed Karl in dignity. However, in one swift movement Karl slammed Tim into the tree, consequently making Robin's skull crack painfully against the bark. Part of Tim didn't think Karl meant to manhandle him so harshly, another part
didn't care and was about to break the bully's nose. Furious, (and maybe a little scared) he realized Karl was yet again pressing their lips together. Before he could throw a punch however-

"GET THE HELL OFF OF HIM." And in a flash, Karl was collapsed on the ground, blood gushing from his face. Dick looked absolutely terrifying in his anger. Much to Tim's embarrassment, the whole Team was right behind the acrobat, all pissed off. Weakly, Karl stood back up, clearly not noticing the fact a small army of superheroes were ready to murder him unless he stayed unconscious. It wasn't until Dick's second punch to the face that Karl had enough sense to run away.

"Holy shit." Tim raised both eyebrows, smiling in gratitude despite what embarrassment he felt over the whole situation, "Any one of you could take out dozens of armed thugs and you all gathered together to beat up one measly teenage punk? Does this qualify as abuse of power?"

The rest of the day progressed according to plan and the circus performance was nothing short of amazing. And even though it was meant to be Dick's special day, Tim felt for the first time a true sense of belonging. He felt like part of a family.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Kon struggles with feelings of jealousy. Tim is a magnet for trouble.

Chapter Notes

Again, I really appreciate all the support for this fanfic! Starting out, I had no idea it would be so popular so thank you!

It was two weeks into December when Kon began acting... odd. Christmas decorations littered the hallways in the Team bases and Tim more than once accidentally stumbled upon Bart and Jaime making-out under the mistletoe. Often, Tim scoffed at how commercialized Christmas was in North America and criticized the purpose of the holiday being turned into a giant advertisement ploy. Superboy seemed to find Robin's criticisms amusing, but then began asking questions about Judaism, which honestly Tim didn't know too much about. Upon asking why Kon was so interested, the half-Kryptonian became fidgety and complained how much mistletoe was in the hallways.

"Like this one?" Tim pointed upward to the mistletoe hanging above them.

"Oh." Kon looked up. "Yeah. Like that one."

"Did you know mistletoe is poisonous?"

"Is it?"

"Yep."

"Huh. Well.-" And then Captain Marvel walked in.

"Hey, Tim." Captain Marvel was currently Billy Batson, a fifteen year old teenager with blue eyes and black hair. "I heard you wanted to see the new Star Wars movie. I'm going to see it next Tuesday. Wanna join me?" Billy was always friendly and happy.

"Uh- yes!" Tim beamed, "You like Star Wars?"

"Of course I like Star Wars!" Billy laughed brightly, "Checking to see if someone likes sci-fi is possibly the best way to judge someone's character."

"Exactly! So, um..."

"I'll pick you up next Tuesday at five. Sound good?"

"Sounds awesome!"
"It's a date then." Billy smiled, glancing up at the mistletoe while blushing though made no move to come closer to Tim. Robin couldn't help but smile back at those blue eyes.

"It's... a date." Tim realized. Suddenly feeling giddy, he impulsively gave Billy a peck on the cheek. "...Sorry, uh. Mistletoe. Tradition."

"No worries. I get it." Billy just smiled brighter, his face an adorable shade of red. Then Captain Marvel left.

"Holy Shazam, Batman." Tim nearly giggled like some stereotypical, hormonal teenager, turning back to Kon. "Did that really just happen? Am I going on a date with Captain Marvel next week? What?" He couldn't believe it. Wow. Of all the things Tim expected to happen that day, getting asked out by Billy was low on the list.

"I hope you two have a good time." Kon grumbled, acting strange again.

... 

"How am I supposed to compete with that, Dick? He's like me but the right age and happier and can fly and whose weakness isn't some dumb rock!" The half-Kryptonian vented over the phone to Nightwing. "Literally anyone else would be a better option than perfect boy Billy! Dammit!"

"Stay traught, Conner." Dick chuckled, "They're going on a date- not getting married. Well, not yet anyway."

"Not helping!"

"It's not the end of the world. Isn't Tim's happiness what's really important here?"

"Why can't he be happy while dating me?"

"I get the impression he thinks you're straight. Maybe that's part of the problem."

"Well, for the moment can't you... I don't know... Do your normal, protective bat-brother thing? You're in the Watchtower right now, right?"

"I'm not making any promises, but I'll see what I can do. Honestly, I think the two of them would make an adorable couple but-"

"Dick!"

"-But I know how much you care for Tim and I get you're really upset, so just this once, I'll try and scare off poor Billy."

"Thanks, Nightwing." And then the call ended.

Dick was in the Watchtower because he needed to drop off a hardcopy file of something Batman required for his Justice League meeting. The adults once again gathered together to discuss what new members--if any--would become a member of the League at the start of next year.

"I prefer to work alone." Nightwing heard Batman's voice echo through the chamber with an air of finality. Dick wasn't certain what context Bruce said such a bold statement, but the billionaire often said 'he works alone' despite being surrounded by a multitude of family and friends. It was kind of insulting.

"Hey, Batman." Dick announced himself. "I have those files you asked me for. Me- your oldest and
"...I see," Batman glared at him. The acrobat smiled back innocently, handing him the folder before beginning to leave.

"That reminds me," Captain Marvel spoke, he was sitting between Green Lantern Hal Jordan and Plastic Man. Dick paused to listen. "Although Robin is far from the oldest on the Team, he's extremely mature and level-headed for his age." He brought up a small holographic image of Tim as Robin, "He could be an excellent asset to the League." Now Dick wasn't actually invited to this Justice League gathering, but...

"Are you sure you're not just saying that because you're going on a date with Robin next week?" He asked pointedly, very much calling Billy out in front of the entire Justice League.

"A date?" Batman's voice went ice cold, full-on batglare at Captain Marvel. It was nice knowing ya, Billy.

"That explains why Kon-El has been so moody lately." Superman's eyes widened, "Also, this is all confidential information and none of you are allowed to tell him I said that."

"We're going to see Star Wars." Captain Marvel said hesitantly, not completely picking up on the murderous vibes Batman was laying down.

"Yep. I even heard he and Robin kissed. Bold move considering what happened to last guy who kissed Robin." Nightwing hinted. Long story short, even though Tim insisted the incident with Karl 'wasn't a big deal,' the bully no longer attended school at Gotham High.

"You two... kissed." Batman said flatly.

"Uh, on the cheek... Can we focus on the meeting now?" Captain Marvel seemed to finally fully notice the tension in the room, squirming in discomfort.

"I agree. Let's focus on what we came here to discuss." Wonder Woman said with authority.

"Good luck." Dick grinned at Billy before leaving him to suffer.

... It was Sunday. The Team held a brief meeting, hosted by Batgirl.

"The only thing missing from Star Labs was Pied Piper's flute." Batgirl informed, "But Hartley--the original Pied Piper--is still in prison. Given the focus the Light has on mind control, we can't rule out the possibility this mystery thief works for them." The Team was gathered around a holographic image of someone similarly dressed as Pied Piper. His face was masked by a green hood, part of a cloak. Something about the cloak design felt familiar to Tim.

"What does the flute do exactly?" Karen asked.

"It emits sound waves able to influence the minds of any human able to hear it." Kaldur said, showing silent video clips of people influenced by the flute. "It can also produce vibrations capable of shattering glass or cause deafness."

"So, basically," Garfield tilted his head, "If we hear a flute, cover our ears? Noted."

"This new villain has been using the flute to target children under the age of fifteen. According to
Hartley, someone has modified the instrument to force the victims to kill themselves. Sometimes in
the children under the age of ten, it's a message strong enough to linger within the child's mind
even after the music ends." Babs said gravely, "There have been reports of mass suicides all around
the country and we suspect in other countries as well. Entire neighborhoods have been wiped clean
of children."

"That's messed up." Mal shook his head sadly, "Who does something like that? Why?"

"The only thing some fish enjoy is poisoning the water wherever they go." La'gaa'n frowned in a
weirdly wise manner.

"Whatever the reasons, we're going to do whatever it takes to stop this psychopath." Cassie ground
out, cracking her knuckles.

"We should interrogate the Sewer King." Tim suggested, "He might know something about this."

"The Sewer King?" Nightwing questioned, "What does he have to do with this?"

"The who king?" Bart tapped his foot impatiently.

"The Sewer King," M'gann gave a summary, "As his name suggests, lived in the sewers underneath
Gotham. He enslaved children, forcing them to steal, not allowing them to talk or go above ground
during the daylight. He would beat them if they disagreed with him... It was horrible."

"Thankfully," Nightwing spoke, "About six years ago, Batman saved the children and the Sewer
King has been locked up in Gotham ever since then."

"He saved *most* of them." Barbara pointed out, "One of the kids was never found and presumed
dead."

"Hera help us." Cassie said somberly, "But what does this have to do with the Pied Piper?"

"Well, I'm 95% certain this mystery thief is Frog." Tim explained.

"Frog?" No one understood what he was talking about.

"The enslaved children, otherwise known as the Underdwellers, went by code names of animals. I
actually named him Frog because of his impressive acrobatics. He does his signature jump in the
video."

"Hang on... What?" Nightwing looked aghast.

"Figuring out secret identities is how I got this gig. Don't act so surprised."

"No, I mean- You named him? Are you telling me-"

"You're the missing child!" Garfield squawked, "You were the one presumed dead!"

"You were an Underdweller!" Bart exclaimed, "You were enslaved and lived in the sewers of
Gotham?? Talk about feeling the mode."

"Only for a couple of months..." Tim pouted despite himself, suddenly tense at the reactions of the
Team.

"How did that even happen, hermano?" Jaime crossed his arms, "Did you run away from home?
Why?"
"That's not important." Robin rolled his eyes behind the mask at their overreactions, "What's important is interrogating Sewer King to find out why Frog is killing innocent children." Because, why the hell would Frog be doing something like that? What had happened to the kid?

"No, actually." Karen said while Artemis nodded with her in agreement, "It is important."

"Yes. Start from the beginning." Dick commanded.

"Well," Tim sighed, humorizing them even though the story served no point, "Growing up, I'd 'run away' from home sometimes-"

"Why?" Jaime interrupted.

"Because," Tim furrowed his eyebrows, "I don't know. I'd get lonely and go out searching for adventure. Anyway, I wanted to map out the sewers underneath Gotham as a safer way to travel through the city."

"And this was six years ago?" Karen wanted to know, "So, you were around the age of...?"

"I'd just turned nine." Tim clarified, "So, I met a group of children, most of whom came from abusive homes. And since I knew how to sneak around and steal things like a professional-"

"Ah, yes. The typical skill-set of any nine year old." Bart snorted without humor.

"I had a lot of free time and an unusual fascination with vigilantism!" Tim defended, "So, anyway, I went and taught these children how to stay quiet, hide, and pickpocket, and then the Sewer King came in and took over. The conditions we were held under steadily got worse until I decided to involve Batman. Now, I don't know any of their real names because I thought it was safer for everyone to use the names of animals. Well, that and I watched a lot of animal documentaries growing up and would name the animals on TV normal things like 'Tony' and so when I met real people it was weird giving them normal names... So I gave them animal names."

"That explains a lot." Cassie hummed.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing."

"...Okay. So yeah, I think the thief is Frog so let's talk to the Sewer King."

"Alright. Batgirl and I will go to Arkham. Bart, Robin, and Garfield, you are all under fifteen and I don't want you three anywhere near this." Nightwing ordered.

"What?" Bart whined, "But I want to find out more about Tim's mysterious and obviously screwed up childhood."

"Then you can always ask him yourself."

"Hey," Tim squinted, "You two realize I can hear you, right?"

"Shh," La'gaan told him patronizingly, "It'll be okay, Robin. You're with us friendly minnows now."

"...I hate you." Tim face-palmed. Great, what if Dick became convinced that Jack and Janet were abusive all because Tim ran away to the sewers? Surely, it wasn't too unusual for children to run away from home out of boredom.
"A part of me did always wonder how you were so good at navigating the Gotham sewers during some of those missions." Karen reflected.

"What was your animal?" Garfield tapped his chin thoughtfully.

"Red Bird." Tim admitted, "Yes, Wonder Girl, I did name my motorbike Red Bird as well. I like the color red and I like birds. Simple as that. In fact, I've often joined cults under similar names over the years."

"What years?" Kon spoke at last, "You're not even old enough to drive! You spent your childhood joining cults for fun?" Wow... He seemed... Upset.

"Well, I might've stuck with one cult if they didn't keep kicking me out for being 'too into it.'"

"You're joking."

"Nope. Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm not okay! I just found out my best friend was so neglected as a child that he ran away and was enslaved by some nut-job in the sewers!" Oh boy.

"That's a little harsh, don't you think? I was young and wanted some adventure, maybe make some friends. It sounds worse than it is, I swear. Nothing traumatic happened to make me run away. I might not have had the most *super* childhood, but it wasn't half bad." Tim wanted to act defensively angry but he just felt guilty with how upset Superboy appeared.

"It's... it's not your fault. I'm not mad at you." Kon deflated. "...Sorry."

"Here's the pictures of all the children on record that were killed by this new Pied Piper." Batgirl pulled up the pictures on the holograph, "Do you recognize anyone else, Robin?"

"Mm, I don't see... Wait." Tim's stomach felt hollow, "That's Grasshopper. And... and that's Raccoon... Ostrich... He's targeting the neighborhoods of the previous Underdweller children." Batgirl and Nightwing traded glances before leaving. Tim just nodded numbly when Kaldur said something to the group and it was a blur as the Team went about their separate ways.

"Hey," Kon said gently, "What's wrong, Tim?" They were the only two left in the room now. Tim blurted out his fears before he could think better of it.

"These kids... I didn't talk to them after they were rescued by Batman, but they were my friends. And- and I think it's my fault that they're dead."

"It's not your fault."

"I'm the one who brought us together and who tore us apart! I mean..." Then Kon hugged him. Tim couldn't help but relax ever so slightly.

"You were nine, you did what you thought was best at the time, I'm sure. The only thing we can do now is stop this Frog guy from doing anymore harm."

"You're right." Tim squared his shoulders, going into 'Robin' mode. "We'll stop him from killing anyone else. I'm going to make a list of all the Underdwellers and find out who is still alive, who he'll target next."

"That's my Robin." Kon let go with a proud, small smile. Tim felt his cheeks heat up and thought
about that smile for the rest of the day.

The next day, most of the Team went to school, but Gotham High had already begun Winter Break. So, Tim found himself alone making a sandwich in the kitchen at the California base while keeping in touch with how the mission with the Underdwellers was going. Karen and Batgirl were tracking Harriet a.k.a. 'Duckling,' M'gann and Dick were keeping watch over Travis a.k.a. 'Fire Ant,' La'gaan and Artemis were watching Henry a.k.a. 'Swan,' and last but not least, Kon and Mal were keeping track of Camille a.k.a. 'Chameleon.' (Apparently Camille chose her name because she adored the nickname 'Chameleon' so much, and that made Tim proud for some reason.) Sadly, the Sewer King knew nothing about Frog's killing spree, so watching and waiting was all the Team could do. No one could find any information on what Frog went through after being saved with the other children.

"Nothing out of the ordinary here either." Mal reported. Robin turned off the communicator and huffed in frustration, feeling useless.

*BANG* Tim heard the sound of a crash followed by shattering glass. He whipped around, bo staff at the ready, but no one was there.

"Show yourself." He demanded. Someone had smashed a pile of glass plates onto the floor, but who? "Who are you?" As if responding, a cabinet from above opened, and Tim stared as more glass toppled out onto the floor. "I said show yourself!"

"Stupid." A growl came from the kitchen counter, "Mortals are all so blind and dumb."

"Teekl?" Tim blinked and sure enough, Teekl the cat materialized onto the kitchen counter, licking her orange paw aggressively. She paused and used that paw to knock a spoon to the floor.

"Hello, my moronic human." She meowed almost politely. "This whole place smells horrible. You look horrible, too. Have you been eating?"

"Teekl, what are you doing here? Where's Klarion?"

"He's missing. You will help me find him."


"Too many questions. First, give me food. After that we will find my caregiver."

"Okay, let me just call someone-"

"NO." Teekl hissed, "No others. Just you. I do not trust them. They don't even hunt properly as can be seen by the bones protruding from your weak, pale flesh."

"Right." Tim felt a headache coming on, "What... do you want to eat?"

"Do you have any newborn virgins? Their hearts and livers are quite tasty."

It was going to be a long day.
"Robin-" Kon called out. For whatever reason it had been a couple hours since Tim responded to any messages. Mal and Kon went back to the base to check it out and make sure everything was okay. "Hey, Robin, are you-" He stopped at the sight of the kitchen. Broken glass littered the floor and raw meat was strewn everywhere like some animal had gone on a rampage. "ROBIN!" Where was he? Oh Rao, what had happened now?

"Did you hear anything yet-" And Mal also saw the destruction of the kitchen.

"Something must've attacked, we have to find him!" Kon searched for any sign that Tim had gotten injured. Babybird wouldn't go down without a fight.

"I'm already checking the security..." Mal pulled up the video feed on his suit, "Here. Looks like he was... Oh no."

"That's Klarion's cat." They watched as Robin went through a portal with the demonic feline.

"Well, he wasn't taken by force, but..."

"Klarion is probably tricking him or worse, this is all a part of Ra's al Ghul's plan or- or-"

"And we have a Team of superheroes who refuse to let anything happen to him, Conner." But Kon's gut was screaming in protest.

"Where do you think he is now?"

....

"What is this place?" Tim asked Teekl. "Are we even on Earth anymore?" The sky was blue but the shade of a man deprived of oxygen. It was as if the color was being choked into existence. The shadows were too dark and everything felt too ancient, even breathing in the air was a little suffocating. He noticed his clothes had changed into all black, and that his utility belt and mask had gone. Frowning, Tim knew better than to complain of these changes to a cat.

"We're in my caretaker's homeland. Limbo Town." Teekl meowed. She had also changed, her fur coat a startling shade of black rather than orange.

"Why?"

"This is where he became lost."

"How?" For a second he didn't think Teekl would bother responding.

"His family. A warlock transformed them back into people. They *were* delicious-looking mice until recently."
"Right," Robin recalled, "Klarion turned them into mice. So, now that they're back to normal they're punishing him? After everything he's done, I can't really blame them."

"You should know," The cat hissed, "Better than anyone the kind of secrets a family unit will keep hidden. My caretaker is in trouble and you *will* help him."

"They're really that bad?" Klarion might be the embodiment of pure chaos, but he was still a kid and no child deserved to live a life of abuse. For the first time since Teekl appeared, Tim felt mildly concerned for the Witch Boy's well-being. Perhaps Klarion's upbringing drove him to a criminal lifestyle. Did his parents teach him how to murder others?

"You'll see." They stopped in front of a cottage

"Uh," Tim scrutinized the simple structure, "Is this the place? It's kind of old fashioned, huh?"

"Greet by saying 'blessed be Croatoan.'" Teekl growled, jumping up onto his shoulder. "Now knock."

"...Okay." He did as he was told and less than a minute later, Klarion opened the door. "Blessed be Croatoan."

"Blessed be Croatoan, brother." Klarion gave a polite smile, "What brings you to my doorstep today?"

"I come seeking guidance." Tim answered, trying to get into character, "Is this the Bleak residence?"

"Why, yes. I am Klarion Bleak. Have we met before?"

'Don't let them know you're not from here.' Teekl communicated telepathically.

"Perhaps." Tim cleared his throat importantly, "In passing. I don't mingle very often."

"Of course."

"Klarion, is someone at the door?" A woman's voice sounded from within the house. "Ah, so there is!"

"This is my mother," Klarion introduced, "Charity Bleak."

"Missus Bleak," Tim greeted, "You have a very nice, practical home."

"Indeed." She acknowledged.

"Oh, we have visitors? What's the occasion?" Another female voice and face appeared. She was taller than Klarion and the family resemblance was definitely there. She had an owl on her shoulder, a familiar. Apparently everyone who lived in Limbo Town was a witch? Teekl's whiskers twitched in confirmation.

"This is my older sister, Beulah Bleak. Did you come to court her?" Klarion tilted his head. Ew, what? ...Was he serious?

"No." Because Tim was not in the mood to pretend to be a citizen of this creepy backwards town *and* heterosexual, "My name is-"

'Gideon.' Teekl advised.
'I was going to say Alvin Draper.'

'Fine. Go ahead. Be burned at the stake. See if I care.'

"Gideon. Please refer to me as brother Gideon." Tim said out loud, "I'm here in search for a new teacher for my mystical arts studies. I heard this household has candidates quite skilled in such matters." Yes, play on their pride. Use it to his advantage.

"It so happens," Charity smiled as of she was hunting Tim, "Klarion is quite advanced in spells for his age. He'd be happy to teach you, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, mother." But Klarion's voice was strained, "Brother Gideon, why don't you come in for dinner?"

"What a delightful idea." Beulah crossed her arms. Yeah, Tim did not like the weird vibe here at all.

"How could I say no at the prospect of eating in such an enchanting home? It would be the efficient thing to do." The home was built to be useful, not pretty. They appreciated the compliment so he must've said the right thing. Woo. Also, they ate things that could still possibly be alive? Why did so much of their food move around on the table? The heck? Tim prayed that nothing he consumed was poisonous, but they were Klarion Bleak's family so wishing for any kind of normalcy might be too ambitious.

"Where's your familiar, Klarion?" Tim hoped that wasn't a rude question to ask.

"In the other room." He replied tartly. Tim thought he saw a flash of a dog tail, but he wasn't sure. Teekl mentioned (telepathically) that the mother had replaced Klarion's familiar (a.k.a. *Teekl*) with a black-furred puppy who wasn't even slightly magical and served no purpose. The cat really really *really* hated her canine replacement. Catching a better glimpse of the animal, Tim saw that the little guy was absolutely adorable.

After that, Robin gave a spiel on how his 'mother' died recently and up until recently she secretly kept him trapped in the basement to better his education. Beulah and Charity approved of such methods of hiding children away in basements and it was in that moment that Tim decided it was worth getting Klarion away from them. If he wasn't already certain, they gave him anecdotes on their favorite punishments for misbehaving children. Long story short, it reminded Tim of the time he toured a medieval prison where the guide explained all the different torture methods used back in the day. Being a master of small talk, Tim wound up invited to stay the night in their creepy house. The bedroom he was led to had no windows. The bed felt like a pile of rocks.

'My recommendation.' Teekl suggested telepathically, 'Don't go to sleep.'

'I couldn't if I tried." Tim murmured back. They waited until the house fell quiet before making their move. Teekl checked to see whether or not everyone (including their familiars) were sound asleep. When satisfied, they went to find Klarion. He, too, was sleeping like the dead.

"Psst, Klarion. Klarion- wake up!" Tim whispered urgently.

"Is it morning already?" He yawned, not completely awake yet.

"No," Tim sat down on the uncomfortable bed, careful not to disturb the sleeping puppy, "It's me, Robin."

"-Wha?"
"Robin, the Boy Wonder. I went by the name 'Red X' for a while. We'd fight all the time, remember?"

"Why are you are talking nonsense?"

"You'd call me a 'stupid, puny mortal?' I seduced you by gifting you Ra's al Ghul's severed penis. Remember any of that?"

"Are you ill? What ails you, brother?"

"Klarion," Tim scooted closer, "You're the one who's unwell. This life you're living- manipulated and caged- isn't who you are. You're a Lord of Chaos who likes causing mayhem and destruction."

"Stop. Whatever you're doing, stop it!" Klarion was beginning to remember, possibly?

"You're part of an organization called the Light. Until very recently, you had your family turned into mice so they couldn't hurt or control you. Now they're back and they cursed you or something. You left Limbo Town-"

"Not possible. There's nothing passed Limbo Town but rocks." Seriously?

"There's an entire world away from here and deep down you know that."

"No, you're wrong. And if anyone hears you preaching of such things then they'll burn you at the stake!"

"But it's true! I'm not even from here! I live in a place called Gotham City and work with a vigilante named Batman to fight for justice. You've seen him- he dresses like a giant bat and has a lot of psychological issues to work through."

"I'm begging you- please stop talking."

"You don't beg." Tim scolded, "You're Klarion the Witch Boy! You'd never stoop so low as to plead to a pathetic human like me!"

"I- I'm going to have to report you. You're claiming blasphemous things. Places outside of Limbo Town... Insinuating you're not a witch..."

"Is that so?" Robin challenged, "Go ahead then! There's only one way you can get me to shut up and that's by-" Suddenly, Klarion recited a spell, cutting off Tim's ability to speak. Damn.

"I'm sorry Gideon or Robin or whatever your name is," Klarion sighed, "But you leave me no choice." Urg.

'If he wakes the others then we both shall die!' Teekl hissed telepathically. 'Do something! Now!'

In a move of pure desperation to keep Klarion from alerting his family of this turn of events, Tim surged forward and locked lips with the Witch Boy. How many times has a kiss broken evil curses in the past? It works in the books and in movies, so... Oh god, what if he caught the Black Plague or some other rare, deadly disease from this saliva swap? Gross. Klarion froze, probably not sure what to do. After a minute, Tim pulled away.

"Robin." Klarion's eyes were comically wide, "I- I've never- your eyes... They're very blue. I didn't know."

"You remember me?" Tim smiled in relief. He could speak again so surely that was a good sign.
Who knew that would work? Maybe Garfield was right and he honestly did have some kind of gay superpower.

"They kind of glow." Klarion was still gazing *far* too intensely--too intimately--into Tim's eyes, "Like the dimming light of a dying star. They're stunning."

"Wow." Tim blinked, blushing instantly because the temperature of the room was significantly warmer, "That was... um. Very romantic. How are you feeling?" Did he just break a Lord of Chaos? Klarion so open and vulnerable was just, well, strangely charming. The whole situation felt surreal and Tim wasn't sure whether or not he liked it. The longer Klarion stared in adoration, the more Tim started thinking that maybe he enjoyed the attention.

"Yes, I remember now. I think. I can't believe you'd risk so much to help me. Could- Can I...?" Klarion was also blushing brightly, glancing at Tim's lips. Robin, being a brilliant detective, knew what that specific signal implied.

"Oh, um." Tim was so shocked that Klarion was genuinely getting permission to kiss him (this was all *so weird*) that he said, "Yeah. Sure. Uh, go for it."

"Are you certain?" Klarion hovered less than a centimeter over Tim's mouth, "You don't have to do this, Robin. I'm not Ra's."

"I know." But Tim took comfort in those words, "It's okay." Was it?

So, instead of fleeing for their lives, they were making out in a creepy house. Well, whatever, Batman and Nightwing both had their share of making out with women at inopportune moments. Kissing Klarion kinda felt like being electrocuted, but other than that it wasn't bad. Actually, it was relaxing, maybe calming. Instead of being suffocated or trapped by someone, Tim was matched in his hesitancy and shy demeanor, becoming more assertive the more they became used to kissing. Every move was done with careful consideration to how Robin reacted, which was unusual but hot as hell to think that Klarion would actually stop if the hero so desired. Plus, maybe this is what kisses were actually supposed to be like, voluntary and nonthreatening. Teekl who suddenly no longer worried about any danger, seemed content to ignore them and the more paranoid side of Tim wondered if the cat planned this all along. She most likely did, truthfully. She purred smugly.

"We should get out of this place." Klarion finally said breathlessly, untangling his fingers from Tim's now messy hair. Was it wrong that a part of him wanted to stay and kiss more? This irrational attraction must be some dark magic witch thing, that or proof Batman was becoming a bad influence.

"Right." Tim agreed, obeying the logical portion of his mind, "Before your family finds us-" 

"Too late for that." Beulah was in the doorway.

Crap.

...

Kon paced the lobby floor, not wanting to distract Zatanna too much but unable to sit still. The Team, mostly the younger members--Cassie, Bart, Jaime, and Garfield--sat around watching.

"He's not off world, exactly." Zatanna's eyes were glowing, searching to find Tim, "But he's not on the surface of Earth either."

"Time travel?" Bart guessed.
"Hades?" Cassie offered.

"Mm, not time travel at least." Zatanna sighed, ending the spell. "But I don't know for sure. Teekl is able to travel between dimensions and there are too many dimensions to search through one by one."

"If I were a spoiled, sadistic witch, what torture house would I keep Robin in?" Garfield mumbled. Kon's phone rang. Before the first ring could finish, the clone already answered the call.

"Did you find anything?"

"Yeah," Nightwing was in Bat-mode, "Dr. Fate translated the full conversation Robin and Teekl had, which doesn't tell us much more than we already knew. But, apparently, there's a rumor Klarion's family were the ones to take him. I guess his mom didn't appreciate being turned into a mouse and she's getting revenge? The usual family drama."

"So, they're in Limbo Town." Zatanna nodded. "I can find that."

"You might not need to," Nightwing's attention had shifted, "As of right now, sensors are picking up a disruption on the beach. It matches Teekl's energy from earlier."

"Where on the beach?"

"Southside. They're actually close enough you should be able to see them from the window. I'll be there soon." He hung up. Bart was already out of the room and everyone quickly followed suit, hoping Robin had come back.

What they saw: Robin--wearing some weird puritan garb--and Klarion fighting side by side against a small army of zombies. That's not too far off from what they expected, really.

... 

"Are you sure the mob won't try and follow us?" Robin shouted over bludgeoning one of the zombies with his bo staff. (Teekl had thankfully given him back his belt and mask before they left Limbo Town.) He distracted another zombie by smacking sand into its face. The black clothes he wore were singed from the mob of angry witches who previously tried to burn them at the stake.

"They probably think we're dead." Klarion shrugged, almost effortlessly decapitating three reanimated corpses with magic. "They're complete morons sometimes."

"Why won't these things stay down." Tim huffed in annoyance when yet another corpse latched onto his back. Teekl tackled the creature, sending it sprawling to the ground. Good kitty.

"We wouldn't even be dealing with this problem if you hadn't been such a mortal and just let the dumb dog die." Klarion seemed somewhat bored, somewhat amused.

"He's as much of a victim as you are!" Tim protested and better secured the little puppy in his utility belt. "Look at his cute puppy face."

"It's a filthy dog! I can't believe I kissed you. Ugh. If you tell anyone about that then I'll murder you and everyone you love."

"There! That's the Witch Boy I know! Hate me some more."

"Shut up. Why am I even talking to you?"
"I think I see Kid Flash and Zatanna." Tim smiled. In a flash, the zombies were tied up together. Bart immediately followed that by hugging the life out of Robin. "Kid, watch it! Don't suffocate the puppy!"

"Etaminani!" Zatanna commanded, floating in the air. The undead once again were nothing but corpses. Woot. However, it appeared that the spell took quite the toll on her, Jaime flew over to keep her on her feet.

"Pfft, baby magic." Klarion sneered, "I'll let you off easy this time."

Garfield joined the party, transforming from a bird into his normal persona, "Weren't you just helping us? How are you letting *us* off easy?"

"Farewell, Robin." Klarion ignored them all, "The next time we meet, we'll be-" Tim interrupted him.

"Going on an official date where you'll give me the Dark Arts of Azarath book like you promised me." Because they agreed in return for saving Klarion's life, Klarion would give Tim the last piece to translating the third Apocalypse Trinity. If Witch Boy wanted more kisses then he had to pay up.

"A date?" Bart's eyes panned back and forth between Tim and Klarion. "He's not- that's not- Guys, Robin's been bewitched!"

"And I suppose I'll keep that promise if I so feel like it." Klarion sniffed, still ignoring the others, "So-" Tim pecked him on his lips.

"So, I'll see you later? After Christmas, preferably."

"Yeah, n-no problem." And with that, a bumbling Klarion and a pretending-to-be-indifferent Teekl left the scene through another portal.

"What are you thinking?" Zatanna grunted in pain angrily. "Odnu lacigam esruc!"

"I'm not under some sort of spell." Tim began strolling back to the base, "It's a simple trade. He owes me one and he'll pay me back with that book."

"But why do you have to date him for that?" Garfield pointed out.

"It allows me extra influence over the situation."

"Noted. That's disgusting." Well, to each their own.

"Hey, what did we miss?" Cassie flew toward them carrying a couple corpses. "Is it over already? We caught a few runaway zombies." Kon jumped up through the air and landed beside her.

"Robin!" He rushed to Tim's side, "Are you okay? Where did Klarion go?"

"I'm fine, Superboy." Because Robin was a professional, he didn't instantly giggle and hug his best friend like a child, "Klarion more or less fled the scene."

"Did he do anything to you?"

"No, it was... nice if you don't count the angry mob and army of zombies. Plus, I have a puppy now." Tim showed Kon the dog, "I think I'm going to name him Ace."

"What about 'Bagel'?"
"He feels like an Ace."

"Cute." Cassie smiled.

"Yeah," Kon gently held Ace, grinning at Robin, "And the puppy is pretty cute, too." Tim blushed happily and didn't know how to respond.

"And this 'cutie,'" Bart pointed to Tim like a tattletale, "Is going on a date with Klarion. And they're probably going to kiss even more than they already have."

"W- What?" Kon spluttered, shoving Ace to Garfield so the puppy didn't get hurt, "You two kissed- Did he- What happened- How could- But Billy and you- God dammit- Nightwing is going to kill someone and with my luck that someone is going to be me. More importantly, why did you two kiss? Did he force you to kiss him? Are you cancelling plans with Captain Marvel for tomorrow? Is it serious between you and Klarion? Seriously, what's your relationship status?"

"Aren't you glad we don't have these kind of problems?" Jaime whispered to Bart.

"Kon, don't worry." Tim assured him quickly, "I kissed him to break some sort of curse--which in retrospect sounds like he set up the whole situation to get me to kiss him--but it was legitimate. Probably. He was weirdly polite and nice, which wasn't normal. His family was terrible though--if you had seen--I had to help him! No one deserves to live like that. Not even someone as horrible as Klarion."

"...I know." Kon hugged him, wonderfully unprofessional. "I get it. I'm just glad you're safe."

"Let's hope Batman sees it the same way, huh?" Though Tim wasn't worried. At the end of the day no one got hurt and that's what mattered, right?

...

Nightwing and Batman glared down at Tim in the Batcave two hours later.

"You're grounded." Batman growled, which would look more threatening if he wasn't standing next to a puppy. Nightwing nodded, feeding Ace some puppy chow. Dick had volunteered to take care of him for the time being.

"You're not benched, so you can still work as Robin." Dick informed as the good cop.

"But you're grounded for the next two weeks, no exceptions." Batman enforced as the bad cop.

"I can't be grounded!" Tim didn't want to whine but no *eating* for *two weeks?* C'mon! He didn't deserve that, surely?

"You should've told someone what was happening. Did you even check to see if the security cameras were operating before running off with the enemy?" Batman scolded, "They could've been tampered with. We might not have known who had taken you or otherwise had zero context for your disappearance. Klarion is one of the leaders for the *Light.* He's killed people before without mercy or doubt. You can't run off like that without alerting anyone. So, as consequence, you are grounded for the next two weeks. You will not be running off alone. You will definitely not be going on a date with Billy Batson tomorrow."

"You're not even my real father, so you can't do that!" Did Tim honestly just use that cliche line? Bad decision. Instant regret.
"You are living under my roof!" Bruce boomed, "You will do as I say and that's final!" Tim flinched at the volume. It had been quite the while since Batman raised his voice at Robin like that.

"Yes, sir." Tim said quietly, not looking Bruce in the eye. It was only two weeks with no socializing as Tim Drake and no food. He'd gone longer than that before. "Grounded for two weeks. I understand." Dick gave him a halfhearted smile.

"How about we go upstairs for some dinner?" Ah, the first test of Tim's willpower. He'd played this game with Janet many times before. He knew the rules.

"No thank you. I'm not hungry." And he wouldn't be for the next two weeks.

"Well, if you change your mind, just let us know." Dick ruffled his hair. "Alfred will gladly make you your favorite. It's partially how he shows he cares."

"No thank you, I'm not hungry." That was an insanely tempting offer, so tempting it was practically cheating, but he just had to last two weeks. He'd be okay. He could do this. Holy hungry hippos, Batman, being grounded was the worst. Tim wanted to angrily dwell in the injustice of the situation but instead he went to bed early with a mind filled of nightmares and an empty stomach for company. He'd get through this. He always did.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Tim isn't eating anything. His friends are concerned.

Kon watched as Tim hunched over a desk, working on some mystery contraption. It kind of looked like feathers? Ever since Batman grounded Robin, Tim's mood had steadily gotten worse and the teen turns such energy into projects like this. Although, a part of Kon was surprised that Tim wasn't working harder on the animal murder case that recently came to light. Over the past few days, animals had been arriving at the door of the California base dead or half-alive. Nightwing supposed it was some kind of message for the Team, maybe a threat. This morning a bald eagle showed up with an injured wing. Tim had been noticeably upset at the sight, so Kon had assumed the teen had planned on trying to discover the culprit behind the animal abuse. Heaven knows it's been particularly horrifying for Garfield.

"Hey, Tim." Kon greeted, unphased when he was more or less ignored. "Interesting gadget you have here. What, are you building your own pair of wings?"

"Yes." Tim grunted. "One of us should be able to fly, after all."

"Okay. Ouch. Harsh."

"What?" Tim finally glanced up, "Oh, Kon! No! I didn't mean- It's not like I mind- You don't need to fly to impress anyone, you could just take off your shirt for that." Kon raised an eyebrow and Tim winced visibly, "And by that I mean, um, no one should objectify you but if, that is to say, um..."

"Chill, I'm not upset." Kon chuckled. He reached to put a reassuring hand on Tim's shoulder but stopped when Robin tensed as if bracing for a punch. "You okay, Tim? Artemis told me you had a rough day of training. She was worried."

"Was she?" Tim sounded doubtful.

"Well, yeah. Is it a crime to be concerned about your friends?"

"She shouldn't be concerned. I'm fine."

"Okay..." Kon noticed how Tim's cheekbones were slightly more pronounced, "You know, one time Dick had a bad cold but still pushed himself just as hard in training to the point he keeled over. It wasn't until he woke up attached to an IV that he was willing to admit he was sick." True story.

"I'm not sick, Kon." Tim smiled slightly, which the half-Kryptonian took as a win.

"Good. Then can I hug you without worrying about catching some disease?"

"Hmm, not unless you believe homosexuality is a disease." Already infected, thanks.

"I'll take my chances." So Kon wrapped Tim up in a hug. Robin hummed happily but Kon suddenly realized how much lighter Babybird seemed. The half-Kryptonian was about to mention
"The new Pied Piper has been spotted." M'gann alerted them over intercom. "On the Southeast coast. Superboy, let's go."

"See you soon." Kon promised Tim, resisting the temptation to kiss him on the forehead goodbye. "Go get 'em, Superboy." Tim whispered back.

Tim waited impatiently to hear from Alpha Squad. The squad consisted of Kon, M'gann, Dick, Artemis, and Kaldur. Excluding Wally, it was the original Team back together like old times, in a way a sort of nostalgia trip. They each had a pair of headphones that would block the flute's hypnotic frequency, in case the flute had been remodified to control those older than 14. Comms were turned off. Everyone but Bart, Garfield, and Tim were in someway involved with the mission.

"Never have I ever..." Bart scrunched up his face in concentration, "Taken longer than fifteen minutes to eat a whole pizza pie."

"Seriously?" Garfield asked, "You don't even take the time to, I don't know, savor each bite?"

"Uh, dude, fifteen minutes *is* savoring each bite."

"Will you two, shut up?" Tim griped, "If the comms turn back on I won't even be able to hear anything!"

"Hello, Robin," Garfield rolled his eyes, "It's the *original* team. They have it handled." Bart smirked.

"Now, now. The love bird can't help but worry that his boyfriend will be feeling the mode."

"This isn't some game," Tim snarled, "They're going up against a mind-controlling mass murderer who specializes in killing children! Someone who's already killed over a dozen people who used to be my friends and-" He took a deep breath, "And I would greatly appreciate it if you *shut up* so I can hear if they call in needing anything... Thanks."

"Looks like you're already feeling the mode, huh?" Bart's previous playfulness had vanished, "I know you skipped lunch with the Team earlier. Do you want a bite to eat? I can be back in a flash with takeout of something."

"Thanks, Bart." Tim appreciated the offer to bend rules but Bruce would be able to tell then force him to throw up the food, worse, it would show a lack of determination and willpower on Robin's part, "I'm really just not hungry right now."

At least Bart wasn't trying to feed Tim endangered animals for food. Teekl had good intentions (and Tim wasn't certain how exactly Teekl knew he wasn't eating) but the cat had been attempting to 'hunt down food' for him. Three days ago, it started out small with five mice. The next day it was five raccoons. This morning the present she left him was a bald eagle with a broken wing and a telepathic message of "I brought you the bird of your people. Consume its flesh and gain strength." It was only a matter of time before the feline killed a whale and dragged the corpse to shore. (The eagle was still alive and Garfield was helping nurse the bird back to health.)

"Well, okay, if you say so... You know, there's this computer game Jaime and I have been playing that can be pretty calming. You might find it interesting. It's called 'Dream Daddy' and-"
"Wait," Tim checked the compartment where his prototype headphones should've been, "Did they take the headphones updated from Friday or Thursday?"

"Friday's because it was the latest updated." Bart confirmed. Crap.

"No, no, no, no. Those were the prototypes Mal and I were working on specifically meant for those fourteen or younger. If they're given to anyone older it could actually make them more susceptible to suggestion! Everyone on Alpha Squad is using those headphones! Where's the rest of the Team? Do we have contact with anyone right now?"

"They're all scouting the other Underdweller targets. Everyone's gone dark until Alpha reports in." Garfield stood up. "If what you say is true-"

"We don't have time to hunt down someone fifteen and up to help us." Bart finished the sentence. "Robin, what do we do?"

"Opening our radio line gives opportunity for it to be hacked, which could be the very thing Frog-uh, Pied Piper is hoping we'd do." At least, that would be precisely the kind of thing the original Pied Piper would do. "We need to go directly to Alpha Squad and warn them before it's too late."

That's the story of how the three people, who weren't supposed to be involved with Frog, ended up on the east coast, running around trying to save their teammates. Thanks to the last known location of Nightwing's tracker, they quickly found the abandoned shed Frog was gathering children for a mass suicide. Luckily, the children were all fine. Scared, but okay. According to one of the little girls, once the Team showed up, Frog fled the scene.

Sign of trouble was soon evident when on the beach nearby. They found M'gann unconscious. She looked unharmed, but there were scorch marks in the nearby sand and Tim ordered Bart to transfer her back to California just in case. Garfield turned into a fish and scanned the nearby water. A near-drowned Artemis confirmed their suspicions that either the headphones were making the Team susceptible to Piper's suggestions or the flute itself had been changed to affect older teens as well as children.

After Garfield saved Artemis, she shortly began coughing up water and gasping for air.

"Artemis, can you hear me?" Tim hoped she wasn't still under Piper's influence.

"Is-" She rasped,"Miss Martian okay?"

"Yes, she'll be fine. What happened?"

"Pied Piper got into our minds, made us all turn on one another." She sat up, "Miss Martian wasn't affected so we were forced to attack her first. Then Aqualad dragged me into the ocean... I'm not sure where the others are now, but-" She grimaced while she stood up, "I think they went that way." She pointed toward the trees in the distance. "Let's go, I'm fine."

"Are you sure you're oka-"

"Did I stutter? We're wasting time." She wasn't happy, and if Robin were in her position he'd probably feel the same way.

"Okay, do you still have your headphones?"

"Yes, but they didn't-"
"They're meant for people fourteen and under. I'll take those and Beast Boy, you stay an animal form. The flute doesn't work on animals, so maybe that'll give you resistance to the soundwaves."

"Noted." And Garfield turned into a falcon and flew toward the trees. Bart sped back wearing M'gann's headset and followed them.

"Up ahead," Tim checked the holographic map of the shoreline, "There's an old elementary school that closed down seven years ago. It's the only shelter for miles and miles in this direction. Kid Flash- don't get too far ahead."

"It's okay," Bart called back, "I just checked the perimeter. There's no sign of- Agh!" The speedster was tackled by Superboy who appeared like a bullet from nowhere.

"Superboy!" Tim yelled, but soon realized his friend wasn't in control. Fists ready to grind bones to dust, Kon roared and barreled toward Robin. However, due to lack of eating, the teen's reflexes were significantly lacking. Seeing his slow reaction time, Artemis pushed Tim out of the way before he was pummeled to death. Kon instead broke the trunk of a tree.

"Bart and I can handle this." Tigress ordered, "You and Beast Boy go ahead." Robin nodded and disappeared through the treetops. Kon wouldn't be as much of a threat in his current mindset. Kid Flash and Tigress could deal with the half-Kryptonian on their own.

Upon entering through one of the broken windows in the school house, Garfield found Aqualad passed out by the lockers in the hallway. Checking his pulse, Robin confirmed the Atlantean was still alive.

"The classroom at the end of the hall has its lights on." Tim muttered, "Beast Boy, go smaller. I'll do the talking- you'll do the sneaking. If you think the flute is affecting you, go and get Aqualad's headphones before doing anything else. Just... give me a chance to handle the situation without violence, okay?" Garfield, as a falcon, nodded once and turned into a mouse. Silent as the night, Robin glided into the classroom.

Frog was sitting in the corner on the dusty teacher's desk, playing the flute, face hidden underneath the cloak. More alarmingly, Nightwing stood in the middle of the room among the empty, broken chairs, holding a gun against his temple. If Dick's finger squeezed just a centimeter tighter then, well, it wouldn't be pretty and Robin wouldn't forgive himself for letting Dick die. Tim couldn't be faster--didn't need to be faster than Nightwing, he needed to talk long enough for Beast Boy to sneak up and get that gun away from the mind-controlled acrobat.

"Hello," Tim swallowed, "Frog." The flute playing kept playing even when the instrument was nowhere near Frog's mouth. The only way to stop the music must be by dismantling the instrument then.

"It's... been a long time since I've heard that nickname... Heh..." Frog's voice was scratchy, almost painful to listen to, "So... you think you know who I am?" It sounded like a threat. Like the wrong answer would lead to Dick's death. This was a hostage situation after all.

"I'm, well, I was an Underdweller. Like you." Tim confessed, trying to keep Frog's interest. It worked, maybe too well.

"You're the one he was telling me about. The whistle blower." Frog smiled unkindly, "I remember you... The one they never found... Red Bird. I was wondering if you were still alive. And now you're Robin. Plenty of Underdwellers got a nice life after being so-called 'rescued' but look at you! How fucking great your life must be. Really hit the jackpot, huh?" His voice was growing
dangerous. In Tim's peripheral vision he saw Beast Boy as a mouse, sneaking around the room.

"Who told you about me?" Robin frowned in confusion, "Why are you doing this? What do you want?" That was one too many questions.

"It's not about what I want!" He yelled, suddenly furious, "It's about what they deserve!"

"The Underdwellers, you think they deserve to die?" Robin remained calm. "You really think that's the answer?"

"They deserve no more than what I got!" Tim nervously noticed how Nightwing twitched as Frog became more agitated. "They deserve every ounce of pain that I went through after Batman stole me away from my home, my friends!"

"You blame Batman for saving the children from the Sewer King?" If Tim could just understand then maybe he could reason with him.

"I used to," Frog took a shaky breath, "But then I was told the truth, how there was a squealer who led Batman straight to us. Figures you'd end up playing hero yourself. I should've guessed. Tell me, how many more lives have you ruined in these past six years?"

"I'm not the one slaughtering children." Robin scowled, "Either way, your fight is with me. Let Nightwing go and I'll stay. I'm the one you want, right?"

"You took everything away from me... Why shouldn't I do the same to you and kill all your hero friends?"

"Because you don't know the whole story. If Batman hadn't taken you from the sewers then you and a dozen other kids would've been sold overseas. I had been talking the Sewer King out of it for weeks, claiming there weren't enough children to spare, but our numbers were growing, eventually it would've happened. The Underdwellers would've been dismantled no matter what. I did what I had to do."

"You took away EVERYTHING I LOVED." He screamed, his hood pushed down away from his face, distorted with rage, "EVERYONE MOVED ON AND FORGOT THEY EVER CARED ABOUT ME. I GREW UP ALONE AND UNWANTED. YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT'S IT WAS LIKE AFTER I WAS SO-CALLED 'SAVED.'"

"They were my friends, too!" Robin raised his voice, "I should've gotten Batman involved the moment Sewer King showed up but I didn't because I was selfish and scared of losing the only friends I ever had! It wasn't fair to anyone and- and I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to go through all of that, Frog."

"Liar! Ra's al Ghul told me how the whistle-blower didn't give a damn about anyone else. You did it to save your own skin and to crawl back to your comfortable, loving life!" So, Ra's al Ghul was behind this. Anger flared through Robin's chest and throat.

"LOVING? After the Underdwellers, I went back to parents who hated me! The abuse of the Sewer King was nothing--NOTHING--compared to them, but I don't use their treatment of me as an excuse to kill people! Even though I viewed life as an Underdweller as decent, I knew the other children were suffering and could live happier and healthier lives away from the Sewer King. I gave them an opportunity of finding a real family and THEN YOU KILLED THEM." Tim recognized with a jolt that he confessed of his abusive parents with Garfield in the room. Well, he'd come up with an excuse later.
"Yeah. Yeah, I did." Frog was too calm, clearly pleased he made Robin lose his temper, "And now, I'm going to kill you."

Nightwing moved like lightning, pointing the gun at Tim. Before Robin had the chance to duck, he heard the explosion of the gunshot. A sharp pain cut across the side of his head as he reflexively moved a hand over the wound. It was in that second he realized the target had been his headphones. The technology which granted him immunity from the flute was now destroyed.

Beast Boy transformed into a Gorilla and tried to apprehend Nightwing. The acrobat rolled out of the way of capture, but like Superboy, Nightwing wouldn't be as an impressive opponent under someone else's control. Tim wanted to command Beast Boy to target Nightwing's headphones, to break Frog's control, but he found he couldn't talk. He couldn't move. An unknown (yet eerily familiar) melody cut through his thoughts. His heart rate slowed dramatically and his muscles relaxed.

'This way, Red Bird.' Tim couldn't tell whether or not the voice was in his head or not. The world was foggy and dizzying. 'That's right. Follow me.' They left the schoolhouse and ended up back at the seaside, on top of a cliff rather than on the sand. A part of Tim's brain registered the water and sharp rocks below. 'No toys for cheating. Hand over your grappling gun. Okay, now, I was going to give a speech, but there's not enough time, that's your fault you know. Look on the bright side, you might not die from this. You could just break every bone in your body. I wonder, will Batman still keep you around if you become useless? Hmm, well. Good bye, Red Bird.' Tim didn't get the chance to protest or bargain. He stepped forward.

And then Tim was falling. He didn't scream, he didn't try to stop it, he just watched helplessly as the rocks rushed closer. Batman was going to be extremely disappointed in him, but at least Nightwing was still alive. Was it healthy if his last thoughts are about Bruce's opinion of him? Then he landed.

On a pile of soft grass.

What?

"Teekl wanted to give you this," Klarion waved a--was that a freakin' chinchilla??--in front of Tim's face. "She would've been very upset if you died before you got it."

Oh. Teleportation. They were surrounded by trees. Were they back near the schoolhouse? Seemed so.

"Eat, human." Teekl purred, "You're scrawny and revolting. You must eat."

"Thanks. Maybe later." Tim found he was able to talk, "Actually... I'd appreciate if from now on if you didn't bring me these... presents. I assure you, despite appearances, I can, um, hunt for myself." He needed to check in with the Team. Frog was getting away.

"You're kinda," Klarion shifted uncomfortably, "You're shaking a lot. Is that a normal, mortal thing?"

"Just adrenaline," Tim could feel his nerves buzzing in overdrive now that he wasn't hypnotized into staying calm, "It happens sometimes when you nearly die. I need to find the others."

"They're safe. I checked. The Piper twerp is long gone by now though."

"Really? Huh, well in that case," He kissed Klarion roughly, somehow trying to transfer over his adrenaline, "Thank you. You saved me."
"I did, didn't I?" Klarion sighed dramatically, "Maybe I'm losing my touch." His hand fluttered along Tim's jaw. "Though I wouldn't have to save you if you just took care of yourself. You really should eat something--"

"Oh, shut up." Tim growled, sick of thinking about food or lack thereof. He wanted a moment to stop thinking, to stop feeling helpless. He wanted to forget about his guilt over letting Frog escape, his resentment with Batman, and how his stomach hurt from hunger. His heart pumped too fast and too much heat flooded to his face to the point he felt lightheaded. "We can sit and talk or we can make out. Pick one."

"The second option is more fun."

"Good." And Tim put all his emotions into kissing Klarion.

....

"Robin!" Kon called out, searching for Babybird. Frog escaped with Tim and from what Garfield said, it didn't sound like the murderer planned on keeping the hero alive for much longer. Artemis, Bart, Garfield, Dick, and Kon went in different directions, trying to catch Pied Piper before it was too late. Suddenly, Kon heard something through his super-hearing.

"The second option is more fun."

"Good." That was Robin's voice! Kon ran toward the sound, about to call out Tim's name again but the words died in his throat upon seeing him. Robin was in Klarion's lap, straddling the Witch Boy, kissing him like the world was ending. Kon didn't want to see this, but he froze, surprised and numb. It was one thing to know about Tim kissing other people, but seeing it for himself, in person... It was so much worse. That whiny, spoiled, murderous, psychopathic witch boy had his hands all over Babybird. The half-Kryptonian began to feel a burning behind his eyelids, hatred for Klarion boiling to the surface. Kon's hands clenched into fists and he was ready to charge at the villain. Calm down, Superboy. Channel that anger like Black Canary always said. Control the impulse. Channel the anger.

He couldn't concentrate while seeing the way Tim clawed at Klarion's back or hearing the noises he never brought himself to imagine Tim would make. However, Robin halted the make out session before Kon lost his cool completely.

"Alright, fun time is over. I need to get back to the others." Tim announced in his 'Bat-official' voice, "If you want anything more, you better give me the Dark Arts of Azarath."

"Will do." Klarion grinned, lightly peppering kisses across Robin's neck. Kon was grinding his teeth.

"Okay," Robin stood up, "Now, I..." Tim swayed back and forth on his feet, "Klarion, I'm... Do you feel..." Babybird promptly passed out. That was the final push Kon needed to take action.

"What did you do to him?" The half-Kryptonian roared, charging at the Lord of Chaos. Klarion teleported behind him and blasted him with scarlet, magical energy.

"My, my, a spy. See anything you liked?" Klarion chimed, "I didn't do anything wrong. This time."

"Liar!" Kon spat, throwing two punches. They went through the witch as if he were only a holographic image.

"Someone's jealous." Klarion sing-songed, floating up higher to look down on Superboy, "Did you
see how he squirmed at my touch and not yours? Did you get here in time to listen to those
delicious moaning sounds he makes whenever I use my tongue to-

"Shut up!" Kon jumped to hit the brat but missed when the magic user teleported again. "Stay and
fight me!"

"Shouldn't you be concerned for your unconscious human friend instead of picking fights?"
Klarion was behind him again, "Well, no. I guess not since it's your fault he's like this in the first
place. Funny."

"What are you talking about?" A part of Kon figured the Witch was simply messing with him,
but...

"I'm the hero in this situation, as much as I loathe to admit it. I saved the day, won the heart of the
damsel in distress, and what have you done? Lead him to the brink of death, then claimed it's my
fault!" Klarion laughed, high pitched and cruel, "You have no right to complain if he chooses me
over you. I've already done more for him than you ever have."

"Don't you dare pretend you care about him!"

"Mm, I don't. But oh, that bird is sure fun to play with. We've only kissed here and there but, wow.
I can't wait for our official date. He's made big promises. I'll be sure to tell you all about it." And in
another blink of an eye, Klarion disappeared, leaving an echo of his laughter behind. Dammit. Kon
kicked a boulder in half in his rage.

"S'perboy?" Tim slurred, "Wha happened?"

"Thank Rao." Kon breathed, wasting no time in kneeling beside Babybird, "How are you feeling?"

"...Fine, I'll jus','" Tim tried to get up and failed, "'Kay, no. I- I'm kinda dizzy. It's so cold out
here..."

"I got you, buddy." Superboy picked up Robin, bridal style. "You're safe with me." The teen closed
his eyes, shivering and miserable. Kon swore revenge on whoever did this to his Babybird.

....

Tim woke up in the California base's hospital bed, an IV in his arm. God, he'd *fainted.* How
pathetic. Batman was going to be so pissed. First, the Team nearly all died because of
miscommunication over headphones, Frog was going on a rampage all to settle an issue he had
with Tim, and then for some reason Robin thought it'd be a good idea to make out with Klarion in
the middle of a freaking mission! What was *wrong* with him? Stupid, stupid, stupid!

"Hey, there, Babybird." Kon, the angelic half-Kryptonian clone, smiled like a model, "We've been
worried. I thought Frog or someone did something to you, but apparently... apparently it's been
quite some time since you've eaten anything..." Why did Kon sound so hurt?

"You don't say," Tim bit out more sarcastically than intended.

"Why haven't you been eating, Tim?" Kon asked desperately, "You could've died today. You're
only human. Sorry to question you like this the minute you wake up, but I need to know. I need to
understand why."

"What do you mean 'why haven't I been eating?' You know I'm grounded, Kon!"
"Yeah, so?" Was this a test? Then the realization hit Tim that Kon might not have even been grounded before. He was practically an adult the moment he was born! He didn't know what being grounded entailed. Yes, that made a lot of sense.

"When you're grounded," Tim patiently explained, "You're not allowed to go out with your friends or leave the house or eat anything."

"...What?" Kon gaped.

"Yeah, I know. It sucks. If anyone offers you food then you have to decline and if you eat anything, and your parents catch you, then you have to puke it back up and go even longer with no food. Be glad you've never been grounded before. Especially be glad that you don't have to decline Alfred's cooking for two weeks straight. I've been spending extra time at the base just so I don't smell the food. It's torture."

"Tim..." Kon's voice broke, "That isn't... no."

"What?" Robin panicked, seeing Superboy's eyes tearing up. "Oh my god. Kon, are you okay? Did something happen? Did someone get hurt? Who- who was it? Did something happen with Frog?"
He'd never watched his Clone Boy cry before. Something must be seriously wrong. Dammit, Tim should never have trusted Klarion when the Witch Boy assured him that everything was fine.

"No, no, Tim. Nothing happened. I just... You think..." The half-Kryptonian hugged him, "I have to go, okay? Everything's fine, just stay here and sleep."

"Everything doesn't seem fine. Kon, you're scaring me here. What's wrong? Was someone injured from the mission?" Tim anxiously hugged back.

"Everyone's okay, I promise. I was just... I was so worried about you. I can't lose you, alright? I love you." Kon pulled back with tears trailing down his cheeks, "You know I love you, right?" Whoa. Wow. Huh.

"Uh." Tim blinked, thinking he should give an appropriate verbal response. In the same moment, a strong sense of deja vu came over him. Had Kon told Tim 'I love you' before now? No, Tim would've remembered that, surely. It's not like Tim hears something like that everyday. Or ever. "I... love... you... too...?" Why did he make it sound like a question? "I mean, yeah. I totally love you too, bro. Dude. Friendo. Babe. No homo. Shit. I didn't mean- Can I start over?"

"Sure." Kon chuckled. "Take number two: I love you, Tim."

"I love you, too, Kon." Yes, perfect. "Are you sure everything's alright?"

"Yes, I promise. But there's something I need to do. Try and get some sleep, alright?"

"If you say so." Tim was cozy in this bed, unable to worry with his mind buzzing with Kon's 'I love you, Tim,' "We'll talk later?"

"Of course."

....

This. This is what Klarion meant. And he was right. Tim was starving, could've died, and no one would've known until it was too late. Klarion had done more for Tim, protected him when Kon couldn't. Superboy hated that idea. He fucking hated it.
Anger seeped through every thought and every cell in Kon's body. His eyes burned. This would've never happened if Batman had explained how punishments worked in a normal, non-abusive household! After everything that poor Babybird has been through, Tim didn't deserve to suffer anymore! Kon was sick of playing by Bruce's rules. Tim needed to be saved from his parents once and for all, not waiting around for something else awful to happen. He went to the Watchtower, practically seeing red.

"BATMAN." Kon yelled, striding toward the Dark Knight. The room was filled with half the Team and a few League members, but he didn't care. He was done holding back.

Kon didn't hesitate when he aimed a punch at Batman's head. However, because Batman was Batman, the man blocked the punch like it was nothing. In fact, Kon found himself face down on the floor in a matter of seconds. Batman pinned him to the floor.

"THIS IS YOUR FAULT." Superboy struggled despite knowing it was useless, "YOU BASTARD."

"You need to calm down." Batman ground out, "What are you talking about?"

"Yes. He can be faulted for a lot of things," Nightwing crossed his arms, accusingly glaring at Batman, "You'll need to be more specific."

"HA! 'World's Greatest Detective' alright!" Kon sneered, "And yet, you don't even notice what's right in front of you! You never notice him!"

"Is this about Robin? Is he okay? Did you talk to him?" Batman's grip tightened.

"Did you talk to him? Six days ago, did you bother talking to him and explain what being grounded meant? Did you talk to him anytime recently, asking why he's been refusing to eat food for the last six fucking days??" Kon felt Batman release him. Superboy stood up, but didn't try to attack again.

"You should've known. You should've at least suspected that Robin might not have an accurate idea of what normal disciplinary action is! He thinks if he eats anything that you'll just force him to throw it back up and he doesn't understand how that's horrible and wrong and- and- You have to fix this or so help me-" Kon mentally counted to ten. Channel the anger...

"..." Batman said nothing for a long while before, "I'll handle it." And left. The League members left, too, noticing the atmosphere was silent like the calm before the storm. Once the adults left, the Team members spoke up.

"Why does Robin think being grounded means he's not allowed to eat anything?" Cassie said slowly, cautiously, like she already knew the answer and didn't want it confirmed. "Why did he think it was normal to be punished like that?"

"That's his secret to tell, not ours." Nightwing attempted to sound final, but Kon could hear doubt.

"It's personal, so if he doesn't want you to know, respect that." Batgirl added, more confident than Dick.

"No." Garfield disagreed, "Earlier Robin said- Well, he said Sewer King's abuse was nothing compared to how his parents treated him. I thought maybe he was bluffing, trying to get inside Pied Piper's head, but... But there are a lot of things starting to add up."

"He's our friend." Bart pointed out. "We care about him."

"Sí. If he's in danger, we deserve to know." Jaime nodded, "Was Wonder Girl correct when she
said that Robin still lives with his parents?"

"You don't have enough evidence to prosecute, right?" Artemis said knowingly, "And Robin's parents are too well-funded to go on anything less but a perfect case."

"Robin told me in passing that his parents were in another country." Mal hummed thoughtfully, "Is that your doing?"

"Sorry, but, even if that were the case, I wouldn't- I'm not going to tell you..." Nightwing sighed in defeat when Kon glared at him, "Okay, okay. Fine. We're trying to keep his parents away from him until we can get more evidence, yes."

"Well, then." La'gaan puffed out his chest, "Tell us how we can help."

"Why don't we talk to him?" Karen suggested. "Instead of talking behind his back." Kon shook his head.

"He lost memories of this but when I called him out on his abusive parents, he became defensive. He denied everything. We argued and he insisted he didn't want or need help. He doesn't trust us. Not with this. Not yet."

"Or maybe he's too afraid to tell us." Jaime tapped his chin in thought.

"A lot of children who come from abusive households are taught not to talk about the abuse." Artemis spoke a matter-of-factly. Barbara spoke,

"Robin has been raised to strive for perfection and to cover up any sign of imperfections within his family dynamic. His family name already brings a lot of attention, pressure, and scrutiny. If through all that he can still keep the abuse a secret, the way to get him to confess isn't through the same kind of pressure. If he thinks there's even the mildest chance he can convince us that his parents aren't abusive, he'll argue it."

"Noted. So..." Garfield bit his lip in uncertainty, "If we catch his parents in the act...?"

"We're not using him as bait." Kon snapped.

"We need evidence he can't refute or we convince him it's safe to confide in us." Nightwing paced the floor, always one unable to stand still. "Something will turn up. No one is perfect, there will be some kind of evidence we've yet to find."

"In the meantime what do we do?" Cassie furrowed her eyebrows, "Pretend we don't know like we're pretending the whole animal hallucination thing never happened?"

"I know it's difficult, Wonder Girl. But this isn't an issue we can punch our way through. We have to be smart or we'll push him away. Still, if Robin mentions about coming into contact with his parents, contact Batgirl or I immediately. We suspect their history with him extends passed neglect and emotional abuse. Right now we're going to keep postponing their plans to travel back to Gotham the best we can, but if they do come back under no circumstances is Robin allowed to be left alone with them."

"Damn," Mal frowned, "They're that dangerous?"

"...The more we find out, the worse our suspicions become. Just keep an ear out and keep us posted."
Later that day Dick found Tim rummaging through the kitchen at the base.

"Hey, Timbo." Dick greeted his little brother, "You should be in bed. What are you doing in here?"

"You will never guess what just happened!" Tim chirped happily, putting various ingredients into a mixing bowl, "Batman talked with me and I'm not grounded anymore!"

"You don't say..."

"Yeah, and I guess even when I am grounded I'm still allowed to eat food!" He positively beamed, extremely, amazingly excited. "He said I'm not allowed to go a day without eating food! Isn't that great?" Jesus, it was like the kid found out he won the lottery.

"Yep. You know, for most kids being grounded has nothing to do with whether or not they're allowed to eat."

"I know, right? That's so weird." Tim, blissfully unaware at what Dick was hinting at, continued to pile food into the mixing bowl. What was he making that required ketchup and chocolate syrup?

"Well, I'm glad you're feeling the aster... Whatchya makin' there, Tim-slice?"

"Everything!" An ecstatic Tim replied, plucking a spoon from one of the cabinets and sitting down at the table. In the mixing bowl was ice cream, pudding, whip cream, chocolate syrup, marshmallows, pieces of hot dog, mac n' cheese, watermelon, buttered bread, tortilla chips, grapes, kiwi, three different types of cereal, scrambled eggs, fish sticks, and Dick couldn't even tell what else.

"Tim no!" Dick snatched the bowl away before the teen could shovel food into his mouth, "Just--just no!"

"But I'm allowed to eat!" He protested pitifully.

"You'd make yourself sick even if you hadn't eaten anything in the last six days! At the most, you can eat a bowl of oatmeal. Slowly. Otherwise you'll just puke this back up."

"But Nightwinnng." Tim slumped over dramatically, "I'm hungryyyyyy."

"Then I will heat up some oatmeal."

"Ugh. Fine." Tim was probably too tired to fight. How the kid survived on his own for this long was beyond Dick. "That's better than eating chinchillas anyway."

"What?" What??

"Not important." He sighed, "Frog is still out there."

"We'll catch him." Dick said simply as he poured oats into a bowl. Why would Tim eat a chinchilla? When was that offer made to him? Chinchillas weren't native to North America.

"And I think Kon saw me make out with Klarion." WHAT.

"Today? He didn't say anything about it." Dick attempted to sound casual as he poured water in with the oats and put it in the microwave. Why couldn't Tim just date Billy Batson? Billy was a nice boy that everyone trusted. This explained Conner's excessive angst today though.
"And then Kon told me he loved me. What do you think that was about?"

"I think," Dick fidgeted, "It means he loves you? I mean, we all do."

"Right," Tim grumbled, taking the bowl out of the microwave. "Thanks for the oatmeal, Dick."

"Don't eat it too fast!" Nightwing reminded the teen as he escaped from the kitchen.

"So," Babs sneaked up behind him, "Care to change your bet?" She looked at the 'everything but the kitchen sink' mixing bowl with a mix of curiosity and disgust.

"No." Dick gave a small smile, "I still think Tim and Kon won't date officially for at least seven more months."

"Whatever you say, Boy Wonder." Only time would tell.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Tim’s past is a mystery. Enter Catwoman.

Chapter Notes

Short but sweet

It was the night of the 22nd of December, nearly December 23rd. Gotham shined under the streetlights, the rain making the roads and sidewalk glisten in oranges and yellows. The sky stretched with grey clouds from horizon to horizon. Tim took a deep breath of the polluted, musty air. It began raining harder, icy and awful. Gotham was a hell hole, but he loved it.

"Commissioner," Robin acknowledged Gordon on top of the GCPD next to the Batsignal. "What can I do for you?"

"Where's the big guy?" Gordon put out his cigarette like he always did whenever a child was around, "You convince him to let you out here alone?"

"No, he, um," Tim spoke quietly, as if confiding in Gordon a secret, "Had a run-in with Catwoman."

"Ah." Gordon nodded in sympathy, "Well, I have a tip off that an outside force is planning a prison break at Arkham Asylum on the 25th."

"Typical Christmas in Gotham then?" Robin dryly quipped.

"Basically. I'd appreciate if you could drag him away from his, er, present company. He's going to have questions he wants answered directly."

"I'll try my best," Robin saluted, "If I don't come back within the next hour then assume I've died of awkwardness, embarrassment, or general mortification."

"Sure thing, kid." He chuckled.

Robin relished in the thrill of swinging from rooftop to rooftop. The air stung his cheeks while he racked his brain for the most likely places Bruce and Selina would, hrn, do their thing. He stopped to rest by an air grate on a random building. In the distance, a couple rooftops away, he spotted two shadows. They were very close to one another and one of them definitely had pointy ears. Could that be them? One way to find out... Tim sneaked closer, wondering if he was about to regret what he was going to see.

Yep. Batman and Catwoman. Tim opened his mouth to call out to them, but suddenly Batman took off his cowl. Wow, breaking rules much, Bruce? Tim was so going to scold him for that later. For shame. Selina took off her goggles and cowl as well. Whatever they were talking about seemed to
be very important. Something was off about their posture...

Then Bruce got down on one knee. Tim tried to process this. Did Batman need to tie his shoes? No, the Batman suit didn't have shoelaces. Bruce pulled out a box.... He opened the box, which contained something incredibly sparkly... Is that- Is he- Holy matrimony, Batman! Is he doing what Robin thinks he's doing?? Ohmygawdohmygawdohmygawd. Tim always carried a camera in his utility belt to snap pictures of crime scenes and he whipped out his camera before he could question whether or not it was ethical to secretly take pictures of this private moment. He inched his way closer to the scene before him.

"Marry me," Bruce's voice poured out, honest, emotional, putting his heart on the line. Tim snapped at least twelve pictures. Sure, it was dark enough to the point no one could make out the faces in the photos, but it was clear what was going on.

"..." Respond, Selina. Say it, say it, say it, say it, "...Yes." *YES. HOLY SURPRISINGLY SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL, BATMAN. SHE SAID YES. THIS IS REALLY HAPPENING. IT IS NOT A DRILL, REPEAT, NOT A DRILL.* Tim miraculously managed not to squeal in delight as he clicked more pictures of this monumental moment. Utterly giddy, Robin backed away, leaving the two to kiss in the rain. The trip back to the GCPD rooftop was a blur. Robin landed clumsily, grinning like an idiot.

"You okay, kid?" Gordon had the perfect amount of 'concern to gruff' ratio in his voice.

"I- I-" Tim was bursting to tell Commissioner Gordon what just happened, but, "I... don't know if I'm allowed to say." Was he supposed to keep this knowledge under wraps? "It's a secret? *It's a secret!* No! No, this is terrible! I can't keep this a secret!"

"What you saw was that bad, huh?"

"The opposite! I can keep gritty, horrible secrets no problem, but something this amazing? No! What am I going to do?"

"Hmm, well, I suppose you could find one person who you trust to tell the secret to." Gordon was undeniably amused by Tim's predicament. "Someone you trust to not spread gossip."

"Right." Tim had an epiphany, "You!"

"Oh, uh, that's not exactly what I meant." Gordon didn't want to get involved with Batfamily drama, no doubt.

"Nonsense, you're perfect for the job." Tim forcefully showed him the camera, "Look!"

"Is that...?" Gordon looked at the pictures of two shadows, one clearly proposing to the other.

"Yes, a proposal! She said yes! Can you believe it? Isn't this the most wonderful thing to ever happen ever?"

"Well, I'll be... I guess you're going to have a new mom then? Congratulations."

"Oh," Tim hadn't thought of it like that, "Batman isn't my- My parents aren't- I mean, I wish they were my parents. Mine are, well- They're... fine. I guess." He mumbled the last part, staring at his feet.

"Sorry," Gordon awkwardly shuffled his feet. "I just assumed like the others you were..."
"No. I'm not." Tim put the camera away in his utility belt, "...Thanks for keeping this a secret, Commissioner. If I told anyone else they'd blurt it out for the world to hear and I'm not sure Batman wants that."

"Sure thing. Does this mean Batman won't be here anytime soon?"

"Sorry. I didn't want to ruin the moment for him." Robin frowned, "But I can handle the information myself. What do you have so far?"

.....

On the 23rd of December, the Team gathered together, sharing their plans for Christmas. It seemed the only ones who weren't there were M'gann and Tim. Kon sat on the couch next to Cassie, waiting for the inevitable.

"So, Conner," She turned to him like he predicted, "You want to tell the others what surprise you have planned for Robin tomorrow?"

"Isn't tomorrow the first day of Hanukkah?" Garfield noted. Kon crossed his arms.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"There's no shame in giving your boyfriend presents for Hanukkah." Bart cheekily grinned before his face fell, "Also... What exactly is Hanukkah? Is it one of those gay things I don't know about like if someone is an 'otter' or 'twink' or whatever? Is it like that?"

"Wow. You really don't know anything about Judaism, huh?" Garfield snickered.

"Yes, I do! It means... It's a group of people who... It's like the main resistance group against a dictatorship? The rebels." Bart received a hug from Jaime who no doubt pitied the misinformed speedster.

"Look," Kon took a sip of nonalcoholic eggnog, "Even if I were planning some big surprise for Robin, I can't talk about it. He'll be at the party in any second."

"Fine, I'll tell them." Cassie smirked, "He's going to-" But then Tim strolled into the room. Everyone stared at him and then to Wonder Girl. Babybird raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Oh, hey, Robin," She tried to appear innocent, "We were just playing 'Bed, Wed, Dead.' So, if you were given the option of Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman... Who would you marry, sleep with, and kill?" Mal choked on his drink. La'gaan used a hand to smother his laughter.

"Uh." Tim was insanely uncomfortable, probably thinking about the security cameras listening in, "Well, those are... choices... and big decision... What would you do?"

"Oh, easy." Cassie improvised (or maybe she thought about this before), "I'd kill Superman," Whoa, okay then, "I'd bed Wonder Woman, and I'd marry Batman." Batman was rich so that made sense, actually. Kon was impressed in her haste and confidence in her decisions.

"I can't believe we're talking about this." Batgirl rolled her eyes, "And trust me, you don't want to marry Batman." Robin's face twisted oddly at that, but it changed back to normal so quickly that Kon might've only imagined it. "Kill Superman, screw Batman, and marry Wonder Woman."

"You would be marrying a princess." Artemis pointed out.
"Yeah, she'd be fun to live with." Karen agreed. Tim sat down on the other side of Kon.

"Why does everyone want to kill Superman?" The half-Kryptonian complained.

"I wouldn't do that to you." Tim patted Superboy's arm comfortingly, "I'd kill Wonder Woman--not
that anyone knows how to accomplish that--and marry Superman. That way we could hang out
more often. And I would torture you with Dad jokes."

"So," Nightwing shook his head in shame, "That means you would bed Batman? Ew. No. The only
acceptable answer is to kill Batman, bed Wonder Woman, and settle down for a quiet, simple life
with Superman."

"This topic of conversation is disrespectful," Kaldur glared at Nightwing, "We should not be
talking about members of the League in such a crude manner."

"Hang on," Tim checked his phone, "Batman just texted me..." Then he began giggling. "He
advised to kill Batman, bed Superman, and marry Wonder Woman. Apparently both Superman and
Wonder Woman agree that's the best option." Kon laughed along with the group.

"Sounds like you all are having fun." A lower female voice entered the room. A woman head to
toe in black walked with an air of ease. Her high heels clacked evenly against the floor as she took
her time observing the room.

"Catwoman?" Nightwing raised both eyebrows in surprise. "What are you doing here? How did
you even get into the base?"

"Nightwing," She tsked, "You should know cats come and go as they please."

"What are you doing all the way out in California?" Barbara asked with more force, slightly
suspicious.

"I was curious... It's been a while since I saw either of you in Gotham and, well, I wanted to know
how you've been doing." She talked far too innocently.

"We've been fine." Barbara replied tersely, not impressed. Kaldur spoke,

"Catwoman, if you have no business here, I suggest you leave."

"Calm down, water boy. I swear I'm not here to steal what little money you children have.
Although, now that I think about it..." Catwoman smiled mischievously, "There is a mystery I've
been trying to solve. Robin, do you think you could help me with this one?"

"Hmm?" Tim batted his eyelashes, far too innocent as well. "What mystery?"

"Someone stole a priceless family heirloom from the crime boss Falcone last night. And then, this
morning, I found this gift wrapped for me," She held up an expensive looking emerald and
diamond necklace, "Any idea how that happened?"

"No clue," Tim didn't miss a beat, "Although, I do think the green brings out your eyes."

"I see..."

"Plus, since it's known you were nowhere near Falcone's warehouse last night, he's not targeting
you as a potential suspect." Babybird gave a small, almost evil, smile, "He might be very grateful
to anyone who found it. Last I heard, there's quite the reward out for its return."
"You stole from Falcone for a present for Catwoman?" Nightwing huffed in frustration, "Why?"

"Me?" Tim faked shock, "You're accusing me of stealing? Why, that would be unethical."

"I believe you," Catwoman shifted her weight to one hip, "On one condition."

"What?"

"Come here."

"I-" Tim blushed pink, "Um, okay." He got up and waltzed over to Selina. Immediately, she wrapped her arms around him in a hug. The others on the Team glanced at one another, wondering if they were missing something. By the expression on Batgirl and Nightwing's faces, they weren't entirely sure what to make of it either.

"We should go for coffee. It's been too long since we really sat down and talked." She ruffled his hair, undeniably motherly. "How about later today?"

"Sounds purrfect." Tim gave her a big smile.

"Alright," She let go of him, "And I know I'm a bad influence but you need to be careful. You can't steal from all the crime bosses in Gotham without expecting karma to get back to you." She held up his grappling hook that she stole from his utility belt.

"I know what you mean," He lifted up his right hand, which held Catwoman's whip. "You have to be careful."

"Touché." She laughed and they traded the items. "See you later, Kitten."

"Later, Seli- Catwoman." Tim waved as she stalked away.

"Kitten?" A bewildered Nightwing interrogated, "I didn't know you and Catwoman were so..."

"Familiar with each other." Barbara finished. "When did that happen?"

"Ages ago," Tim shrugged it off, "We lost touch when I became Robin."

"You know what, I'm not even surprised." Artemis sipped her alcoholic eggnog. "After joining cults and stalking Batman without getting caught, why wouldn't you befriend Catwoman."

"What changed?" Kon asked when Babybird sat back down, "Why the gifts and the hugs? Why now?"

"Well, back when we did talk it was the cat's meow. I guess in becoming Robin I thought choosing the superhero life might rub her fur the wrong way, but lately I decided it was time to reach out to her. Or maybe I was a scaredy cat because if Batman found out then he'd have kittens. But I can't let sleeping cats lie forever, can I?"

"Oh dear Zeus, make it stop." Cassie pleaded for the cat idioms to end.

"You're hiding something." Bart accused.

"You're right. Cats out of the bag, I guess."

"Robin, stop." Garfield face-palmed. "What's wrong with you?"
"Nothing is wrong. I'm feline fine, thanks." Despite the Team's best efforts, they were incapable of getting a confession from Tim about whatever he was keeping secret. Eventually they gave up and the party continued.

A few hours later...

"I wasn't expecting to see you here. At least, not this soon. Did Robin let slip the secret then? I know he was watching on that rooftop last night." Catwoman (no longer in costume) sat down at the kitchen table in her apartment, feeding her cat, Isis.

"What secret?" Dick asked curiously, "We could tell he was hiding something, but we couldn't figure out what."

"Oh. Never mind then. He was always good at keeping things hidden I suppose." Selina hummed as she pet Isis.

"I did come here to talk about Tim though." Dick admitted, taking a seat at the other side of the table. Isis twitched her tail in annoyance but continued eating.

"Well, go on. What do you want to know?"

"He said you two knew each other before he was Robin?"

"Mhm. I believe he was nearly ten by the time he showed up at my doorstep by accident. Although, he wouldn't reveal his real age or name so I could never be sure."

"Did he ever mention, um-"

"His parents?" Selina gave him a sad smile, "No. For the longest time I assumed he didn't have parents considering how often he was out alone on the streets. I always suspected he originally came from a wealthy family though, perhaps orphaned early in life. Like I said, he was good at keeping things hidden."

"Oh," And Dick couldn't deny he felt disappointed. He had truly hoped Selina had some insight into Tim's life that could help him.

"I'm sorry, if I knew at the time... I would've told someone. I would've gotten him away from Janet and Jack."

"It's not your fault."

"Looking back, it explains a lot. Like, how he'd react in certain situations. And I did wonder why he was so eager to help me steal from the rich. It always seemed rather personal and he was very particular about who to target as the next victim." Hang on, that could be something.

"Particular how?"

"Well," Catwoman tapped her fingers in thought, "It was as if he had a list of people he deemed acceptable to steal from. I could never find a pattern to why some people were on his list and why some were not. The only common factor was wealth, but some of the wealthy were off limits. Bruce Wayne, for example. Stealing from Bruce was a big no. Yet, there were others who were also rich, also gave to charity, who seemed just as noble, that Tim determined were bad people."
"Huh," Dick chewed on the inside of his cheek, "Maybe they were the wealthy groups who were friends with the Drakes or had business ties with Drake Industries. Do you have names of all the people Tim didn't like?"

"I have several names. But recently I checked to see if there were parallels with Drake Industries and couldn't find anything."

"Still, it's something. There has to be some reason why Tim targeted those people."

"Well," Selina took out a piece of folded paper from her jacket pocket, "Here's the list of everyone I can remember I stole from during that time." She handed it to him, "If there's anything else that I can do to help, let me know."

"Thanks... You really care about him, don't you?"

"He was almost my protégé instead of Bats, y'know. If Jason Todd hadn't died, things might have turned out very differently." Then she smirked, "Oh, but don't tell him I told you that. I'm fairly certain he's embarrassed to be reminded just how close he was to becoming a Cat for the sake of flirting with Jason. He had quite the crush on Robin."

"Seriously?" Dick had a difficult time picturing Tim in a catsuit.

"He had a name picked out and everything."


"I think that's his story to tell." Selina winked, "Now, if you excuse me, I promised my fiancé I'd help him plan on breaking the news of our engagement to his coworkers." Catkid? Black Cat? Kid Cat? Captain Cat? Cool Cat? Catastrophe? Kitten? Furry Fury?

"Right," Dick pocketed the piece of paper, already on the verge of climbing out the apartment window, "Thank you for the intel, Catwoman. I'll talk with you another time about this, keep you updated."

Nightwing had left the building entirely before what she said fully resonated with him. Tim's secret he won't confess... Why he gave Catwoman a far too expensive present out of the blue... Less than a minute later Dick tumbled back through her window,

"Who did you get engaged to??"
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

It's Christmas Eve and the first day of Hanukkah! Kon just wants to make the day special for Tim.

The first thing Tim noticed was the gag in his mouth. Shivering, he realized even though his eyes were open he couldn't see. Blindfolded. He couldn't even feel his arms or legs. What happened? Where was he? More than likely he had been captured, again. Before Robin had the chance to think of an escape plan, the blindfold was ripped off of his face.

"It's okay, Tim. I'm here." Bruce assured him, apparently trying to untangle the chains around Tim's arms. Geez, his bones felt like ice. Was Mr. Freeze somehow involved? And why the hell was Bruce not dressed as Batman? Someone explain the situation, please. The teen wished he didn't have he gag prohibiting such questions.

"You'll be out of here soon, Tim. I promise. I-" But Bruce's sentence halted abruptly, the man's eyes bulged with shock. Alarmed, Tim saw red blossoming across Bruce's white button-up shirt. Suddenly, the man was pushed to the ground, bleeding out helplessly. No! No, no, no... Tim struggled against the chains even though he couldn't feel his limbs. He needed to save Bruce.

"Let's give this poor fellow a final show, shall we, Beloved?" Ra's al Ghul's voice echoed from behind. A tongue stroked down Tim's spine, all the way to his thigh. In that moment, Robin realized he wasn't wearing clothes. And Bruce continued bleeding out, just... watching. Oh, god. Ra's was going to make Bruce watch.

"Ra's, help him, please." He didn't care if he was begging, anything to stop this. Bruce gasped for what little breath he could manage with accusing eyes. Robin needed to be stronger than this. Batman's death would be his fault. "Ra's, don't do this." He began crying, which made everything so much worse.

"Now, now, Timothy. I think he deserves to see how much we love each other."

"Indeed." The cold voice of his mother echoed in the room.

"Mother," Tim sobbed, "Please, don't let him do this. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please let me save him. I'm sorry, please, I'm sorry."

Pain. Pain and Bruce was just watching and dying and Tim couldn't do anything but cry. How pathetic. He closed his eyes.

"Tim, shh, it's okay. You're okay." That sounded like... Selina? He opened his eyes, still thrashing, trying to escape Ra's. Hands were holding him in place. Where did the chains go? "It was only a dream, Kitten. You're safe." A dream...

Finally, calm enough to look around, he saw his bedroom in Wayne Manor. The window had been left open, frigid wind blowing across his face. He trembled violently, unable to ebb his tears. Bruce and Selina sat on his bed, each holding onto him as he tried to breathe.
"S-sorry." He blubbered, "I'm sorry." Because they shouldn't have to waste their time on him. He shouldn't be crying. He was a disappointment, embarrassing them like this. They were going to hate him. How could he be so selfish? Childish. Stupid. Failure. He had never cried in front of anyone since that one time at when Kon and he got into a fight last Thanksgiving- Wait... That-that never happened? What fight? Thanksgiving? God, what was wrong with him? *Stupid. Failure. Evil child. Useless.*

"You didn't do anything wrong, Tim." And Bruce sounded... comforting, and brushed Tim's bangs back. The teen sat upright, wanting to tell them not to worry, that he's overreacting.

"Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." He repeated, hastily scrubbing away tears that wouldn't stop pouring. "Please, I'm sorry."

"Shh," Selina hushed him, "Deep breaths, Kitten." She hugged him, apparently not caring if he got snot on her shirt. He took a shaky intake of air, clinging onto what human contact was offered to him. Bruce hummed an unknown melody, low and soothing. They were warm, comfortable, and before Tim could fully appreciate what was happening, he drifted back to sleep.

......

"You want me to what?" The teen scoffed at Dick. The acrobat could see lines of disbelief etched throughout Tim's expression. They stood outside of the California base, keeping their back toward the wind. The weather had been particularly cold lately. With already five inches of snow stretched as far as the eye can see, tomorrow would be a beautiful white Christmas.

"The Light is planning something big soon. We need Wonder Girl to go undercover and you're the only one on the Team who's ever been to the Wintertide Soirée before."

"Yeah. Batman never took you because it's the worst high society gathering in the history of gatherings." Tim griped, "You want me to teach her in a few days something I've had to be trained in for years and years for? They'll eat her alive, Dick."

"Have some faith, Timmy."

"You don't understand how truly arrogant and blatantly discriminatory these people present themselves. They're the absolute worst."

"Don't be so dramatic." Really, how bad could the Wintertide Soirée be? It's just a bunch of snobby, rich people.

"It's the worst, Dick."

"Fine," Dick sighed, "I guess I'll be the one to give her advice on how to act at a fancy party in public."

"No!" The teen shouted, then snapped his mouth shut as if he regretted raising his voice.

"No?" Dick raised a questioning eyebrow.

"No offense..." Tim wouldn't look him in the eye, "But I've seen how you act at these kinds of parties and, well... It's obvious you don't really... fit in..." That was an understatement and everyone who knew Dick would agree.

"So, you'll show Cassie what to do?"
"Yeah, I'll do my best."

"Glad to hear it." Dick smiled, clapping Tim on the back.

"Don't mention it. We better go inside. Kon said he needed to show me something." Uh oh.

'I heard that.' Conner's voice came through the intercom in Nightwing's ear. 'I'm sending back up. Don't let him go inside yet.'

"What's the rush, Timmy? Enjoy the view. Have you ever seen such a pretty snowfall before?" Tim wasn't impressed.

"It's freezing out, Dick." He said flatly, "I don't have time to gaze at snowflakes when I have a huge list of important tasks to be completed by-" But the kid was interrupted when a snowball slammed into Dick's face. The force of it actually made the acrobat stumble backwards.

"Mwa ha ha ha!" Babs gave a playful laugh, "You heroes are all the same. You shall never defeat me in this fight of snow and wit." Lo and behold Batgirl stood with fiery red hair, a smirk, and eyes sparked with determination. Dick fell in love all over again.

"I think not!" He replied in an overdramatic Superman impression, "Good shall always triumph over evil! Robin- I'll need your assistance... Pretty please?" Tim hesitated before transforming into something scarily calculating, only the slight crinkle of his eyes betraying his sense of humor.

"Distract her for as long as you can, Nightwing, dear brother, for I have a plan that will not fail. Prepare yourself!"

So, Tim and Dick teamed up against Babs, ducking behind piles of snow like they were dodging bullets, melodramatically throwing snowballs, and striking the most ridiculous poses. Just when they had Batgirl cornered...

"You think I would really come here alone?" Babs hissed.

"Alas, a trap!" Timbo called out as Wonder Girl and Karen fell from the sky, landing in front of him.

"Get to safety!" Nightwing ordered and they fled to a nearby boulder for cover. Snowballs pounded the other side of the rock with unnatural force.

"We need backup!" Tim shouted. Not a second later Bart appeared.

"You called, oh Fearless Leader?"

"Kid Flash, thank heavens you're here! Pray tell, who else on the horizon shall aid us?"

"Um, well, Artemis and Garfield just joined the other squad-"

"Uh oh." Dick muttered.

"But, look! It's the fabulous Blue Beetle!"

Jaime, flying, struggled to dodge the snowballs and had to use his Blue Beetle armor to get to safety.

"They're closing in on us." He warned, joining them.
"Good," Tim chuckled maliciously, "When they get close enough we will strike mercilessly and grind their fragile bones into dust!"

"...You know this is just a game, right?" Jaime glanced at Nightwing, concerned. Dick shrugged. Robin got a little too intensely into character, but it was all in good fun.

"This is a snowball fight not a snowball game." Tim announced passionately, "We're outmatched in numbers which means their team will win unless we have some sort of-"

A thud shook the ground.

"-super weapon." Tim swiftly grabbed an armful of snowballs, "Superboy is drawing their fire. Kid, you get them from behind. Blue, I need air support, keep an eye on Bumble Bee. Nightwing, you know what you need to do."

And so they charged into the battle, Nightwing targeted Artemis as Bart ran circles, drenching Cassie in snow. Blue Beetle aimed true and took out Beast Boy almost immediately. Superboy threw snowballs the size of watermelons at inhuman speeds.

"Oh no!" Bart pointed, "Blue's hit!" Looks like Bumble Bee got the best of Jaime after all. Artemis (using arrows to shoot snowballs) aimed her bow at Nightwing's head. Predicting this, Dick kicked her arm to the left at the last moment, causing her arrow to fly toward Bumble Bee. Karen, shrunken to the size of a bee, had her back turned and was consequently enveloped in snow.

Artemis, watching Bumble Bee take the hit, dodged a second too late for Nightwing's attack.

"Noooo!" She fell to the ground, defeated. Three down, two to go. Cassie soared upward.

"That's it!" The Amazonian boomed, "No more playing nice!"

"Who's playing?" Bart grinned, "This is war!"

"And I'm a warrior!" She dived and hit the ground with enough force to shower everyone in a light dusting of snow. Bart, unable to see clearly, ran right over the the icy shoreline. Flailing about, he tripped and slid while getting pelted with snowballs.

"Good job, Wonder Girl!" Babs cheered, "Now, on my signal-"

"Attack!!!" Cassie roared, charging at Tim.

"Wonder Girl, no!" Wonder Girl yes. Cassie didn't heed Batgirl's protests. Tim dodged the attacks, leading her away from the others.

"It's just you and me." Dick winked at Babs.

"If I'm being too much of a third wheel, I can leave." Conner rolled his eyes. Oh yeah, Dick forgot he was here.Oopsie.

"You can take 'em, Batgirl!" Karen and Artemis whooped. A crowd of people already "dead" were watching them.

"Yeah, Batgirl, make 'em feel the mode!"

"Bart, whose side are you on?"

"I discovered this totally retro thing called 'being realistic.'" Ouch. Okay, then.
"Show me what you're made of, Boy Wonder." Babs flirted. She was so mesmerizing that if not for Conner, Dick would've been taken out within the first minute. Superboy fought harder the more Nightwing faltered. Though Babs fought valiantly, she couldn't stand forever against the years of teamwork Dick and Conner had together. The final blow involved Superboy jumping fifty feet in the air while Dick dived in between Batgirl's legs. She didn't have time to block Superboy's attack and prevent Dick from hitting her from behind. Accepting defeat, she gracefully collapsed into a pile of snow.

"Huzzah!" Timmy shouted in the distance, successful in defeating Wonder Girl, "We are victorious!" Superboy smiled dreamily at how triumphant Tim seemed. Well, someone should ruin this happy moment, right? Besides, the opportunity was too good to miss.

"Plot twist." Dick whispered to Conner. Before the half-Kryptonian had the chance to question this statement, Nightwing threw one last snowball at him. So, getting smacked in the face, Conner slowly sank to the ground with an expression of fake betrayal.

"SUPERBOY!" Tim screamed, racing to Conner's side. The teen fell to his knees, leaning over the clone, and cradled Conner's face, "You're- You're going to be okay, Kon. Just stay awake for me, alright? Keep your eyes open. Don't go into the light. Don't go into the light, Kon."

"I'm sorry... Robin..." Conner coughed pitifully, "I wish I didn't have to go... You were... the best friend... I've... ever... had..."

"Kon, please, I love you." Tim sniffed, fake crying.

"That's... gay..." He shut his eyes, apparently dead.

"Kon..." And Timmy wailed, his cries reverberating off of the nearby cliffs. He stood up slowly and faced Dick. "You! How could you?"

"I did what should have been done a long time ago." Dick retorted darkly, "Join me, Robin, and together we shall rule the world."

"Never! I trusted you. I thought of you as a brother. And now, you will pay for what you've done!" Tim snapped off a long icicle from the rocks and held it like his bow-staff.

"So be it." Dick snapped off two smaller icicles, one for each hand. They made their battle extra impressive for the sake of their audience. If Batman taught his Robins anything, it was how to perform. Of course, good would need to triumph in the end, but Dick didn't make it easy. Twirling, kicking, flipping, and a smidge of classic bantering, finally Tim pretend-stabbed Nightwing in the heart. Dick staggered back a good five feet before collapsing parallel to Conner. He closed his eyes.

They waited for Tim to give the finale speech. A pause. Silence. No speech. Dick opened his eyes.

"Robin?" Conner asked. Tim tensed, frozen, staring at Nightwing and Superboy blankly.

"What's wrong?" Dick stood. Timmy shook his head, breaking out of whatever trance he was in.

"Nothing- nothing." The teen glanced at the team members. "We should go inside. The weather out here is almost as cold as my three-sizes-too-small heart."

"Fine with me." Conner grunted, "There's something I wanted to show you anyway." Tim gave a half-smile.
"Lead on, Clone Boy."

...........

Tim began to question his sanity. Kon and Dick on their death bed? A test from Ra's al Ghul and an antidote that wasn't an antidote? It didn't make sense... It had to be remnants of a dream... Something about it felt off. Something was wrong. Lost in thought, Tim didn't notice his surroundings until Kon spoke.

"What do you think?"

Whoa.

"What is all this?" Tim blinked.

"Don't you know today is the first day of Hanukkah?"

"I... Yes... But..." A frickin' huge menorah towered over them. The room shimmered with Hanukkah decorum. In the corner stood a white tree, decorated in chocolate coins, dreidels, and lights. A sparkling Shield of David hung from the ceiling, almost resembling a chandelier. The dining table took up most of the room, carrying fine glass, silverware, and soft glowing candles. A carefully stacked pile of presents sat close to the tree, all wrapped in royal blues and dazzling silvers. It was breathtaking... It was... "Wow."

"You like it?" Kon blushed.

"Are you kidding- It's incredible! Did... Why did you...?"

"Well, you're Jewish, right?" Yes, ethnically. Not religiously. He'd never celebrated Hanukkah or Christmas or really much of anything.

"You did all this for me?"

"I'd do anything for you, Tim. You're my Robin. remember?" Kon stared at his feet.

"Kon," His voice broke. This whole day had been fantastic. He had friends to have silly snowball fights with, amazing people who cared about him, and a best friend who would go out of his way simply to celebrate Hanukkah with someone as unlovable as Tim... If so many people appeared to want to be around him... Maybe he honestly deserves this type of joy in his life, the kind that makes him glow inside, a feeling of belonging he never imagined could be possible. The idea made him feel loopy and giggly and he had no chance of stopping himself from hugging Superboy. Life was perfect.

"I can't believe this." Tim's voice was muffled against Kon's shoulder. "You're like a real-life alien angel." Superboy mumbled something Tim couldn't understand. "What did you say?" The teen pulled back to look at Kon's face.

It wasn't Kon.

"How-?" Tim took six steps back, trying to see the figure before him, someone made of light. "What's- Where-" Why was he in a forest? "Where am I? Who are you?" The figure before him opened its mouth but no words came out. The details of his surroundings were blurred. He had a serious headache. Had he been drugged? "Is that..." Tim squinted, "No, you can't, you're dead." Jason? But how? Panic swelled in his chest. From the corner of his eye he saw movement. Turning sharply he saw what could only be described as a tiger and dragon. They were walking toward him
with intention to--what--eat him? Death by dragon would be pretty epic, but now wasn't the time. Alright, calm down, think rationally. What could explain this phenomenon? Magic, drugs, alternate universe, or he was simply going insane. Was he in immediate danger?

Suddenly, a sloth sped into his line of sight. A sloth. With super speed. Oh hell no. It was like a four-legged tarantula with a human face. Immediate danger confirmed.

"Nope." Tim squeaked as he ran away. Step one, get to safety. Step two, gather information.

He had only gone about seventy feet before a fox tackled him. It was an extremely pretty fox and he felt guilty for hitting it, though, surprisingly, it wouldn't relent no matter how much he struggled. After about a minute of fighting with the animal he understood it wasn't trying to hurt him, just hold him down. Weird, but he could handle weird. More creatures gathered above him, apparently communicating with each other somehow. They weren't attacking. Why weren't they attacking? What did they want from him?

Then Jason appeared once more. He was undeniably gorgeous, but he couldn't be real. His face was so familiar... The Not-Jason leaned down and put a hand on Tim's cheek, eyes piercingly sky blue. Suddenly, Robin vividly recalled kissing Not-Jason, a person who smelled like sunshine and hay, someone warm, and someone whose hugs felt safe.

"Kon-El." Tim swallowed, "Kon, what's- what's happening to me?" The sloth was back. Wait a second... "Bart?" It clicked: The animals were his teammates. "Guys, am I- Why am I hallucinating?" He focused with great difficulty to see the animals as his friends. Little by little, the illusion began to fade.

"-Martian Manhunter?" Garfield nervously muttered.

"What about Martian Manhunter?" Tim asked.

"Robin!" Barbara released him, "Can you understand us?"

"Yes..." And why did everyone seem so guilty? Unless... "You're hiding something. All of you."

"Listen, Robin," Dick sighed, "It's not what you think. You're mind was compromised, it was the only way to save you."

"Compromised how? What happened?"

So, Nightwing explained about the videos the Justice League kept a secret, how Tim watched a video that dug up his subconscious to the forefront of his psyche, how Martian Manhunter had to erase the past few days of memory in order to fix his brain, and how they were ordered to keep this a secret because recalling the memories could do some serious damage. They did what they had to do and in retrospect it explained a lot. He still had questions, he needed more details (Did he really kiss Kon?? How much did he need to apologize for???), but then another thing occurred to him: This over-the-top nice behavior the Team showed him lately... It was all a cover-up. And everything made so much more sense. The protective behavior when Karl kissed him, the jokes, the kindness, the snowball fight, and this insane display of Hanukkah celebration- they were all trying to distract him, keep him content, to protect him from his own mind. After all, Tim's intelligence is his best asset. He'd be useless otherwise.

"It's fine. You did what was necessary." He attempted to not sound as hollow as he felt. Idiot. Pathetic. Worthless.

"Really?" Bart gave a surprised laugh. "Crash!"
"We wanted to tell you, Robin. We really did." Cassie promised.

"See? I told y'all he'd understand." Karen nudged Mal who flushed in embarrassment.

"I know it won't be easy," Barbara said carefully, "But you can't strain to remember the days you've forgotten. It will hurt you."

"It won't be an issue, I assure you." Robin reported. *Failure. Fuck up. Unloved. Evil. Weak.*

"You okay, Robin?" Artemis questioned seriously.

"Yes, I'm fine." Ugly. Rotten. Burden. Horrible. Pointless. Unloved. How could he think these heroes would ever really care for him? God, he was such a fucking moron. He didn't deserve that kind of love. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He hated himself. He knew better, but he got his hopes up. Why did he do this to himself? Why couldn't he be a good person, someone worth loving? Why couldn't he do anything right? Don't disappoint me, Timothy. You pathetic child. We never wanted children, much less a failure like you. Be grateful we didn't kill you the moment we saw that awful face. Why can't you do anything right? Go somewhere else, you annoy me. Do you want to sleep in the closet again tonight? Keep your slobbering mouth shut.

Startlingly, the emergency sirens began blaring. "Gee, how alarming." Robin muttered, puns being the only thing he trusted. Kon frowned at him.

They all rushed into the main lobby. Everyone on the Team gathered around a holographic image.

"Team," Batman's grim face glowered at them from the screen, "There have been reports of 'monsters' rampaging in every corner of the world." More holograms showed humanoid beings resembling something similar to Bane and Clayface, tearing apart buildings, attacking civilians. The creatures looked like they were in pain. "These are meta-humans injected with a new strain of Kobra-Venom."

"I thought we saved all the meta-humans from the Reach." Batgirl stated with frustration.

"We now suspect the Light is running a meta-human trafficking circle. We're working on a cure as we speak. Until then, we need to keep everyone safe. Help is needed immediately in Africa, Western Europe, Australia, and South America. Robin-" At that, Tim perked up, full attention, "I need you in the Watchtower, keeping eyes on where support is needed most, direct and inform us when the situation changes."

So... Robin wouldn't be fighting with the Team. Batman didn't think he could handle battle. It must have been the crying Tim succumbed to last night. Dammit. He worked *so hard* to prove he was capable and he ruined it with one moment of weakness. Anger flooded him for a second before he nodded,

"Yes, sir."

He had to watch as his teammates went out risking their lives while he transported to the Watchtower to sit behind a computer. Not saying goodbye to any of the Team, he went straight to the Zeta transporter.

Upon entering the space station, much to Tim's irritation, holiday decorations littered every corridor. There was even a table of untouched snacks in preparation for their holiday party. Bah, humbug. Everything reminded him of how he didn't belong, how everyone already had some kind of a home where they were loved or at least wanted. They were invited to holiday parties because people honestly liked and cared about them.
Ignoring this bitterness, Tim turned his attention to keeping tabs on the different squads. Kon's squad, Beta Squad, did just fine. They managed to protect the innocent while not seriously harming the mutated meta-humans. Huh. That's weird. A strange signal popped up on the East coast of the USA. More specifically, it seemed to originate from Gotham.

"Batman," Robin furrowed his eyebrows, talking into his communicator, "There's an unusual power fluctuation, radio frequencies are-"

"Robin- It's a- satellites. We need these- In order to find the- can- hear me?"

"Batman, you're breaking up."

"Get the signal- back up- the cure for- we need-"

"Batman? Batman?" Crap. All communications cut out. Not a minute later, major power shortages occurred world-wide.

Think, Tim. What in Gotham could influence this kind of radio and electrical interference? The only answer to his knowledge: The mainframe at Arkham Asylum. Of course hacking that mainframe would be far from easy. Ten different people had different parts of the password to gain access. Even then, the password changed randomly every three months. The guards with that information were still safe. (Batman made sure of that.) So, how would the Light find out how to get to the mainframe?

Zsasz. Zsasz had a level three high secure cell near the computer for the passwords and the chosen few who meet to memorize the access codes. Theoretically, he could overhear information during eating times and during transport to therapy sessions. He was the only inmate on the floor who was grounded in reality enough to report back to the Light what he discovered. That's why they had Robin--Red X--break into the Asylum and retrieve Zsasz. And this way the League didn't realize the Light's goal would be hacking the satellites and communications.

This was Tim's fault and he needed to fix it. The Zeta Beams still worked thanks to the Watchtower's generator and Tim wasted no time in transporting himself into Gotham.

What he saw when he got there was pure chaos. With all the heroes fighting monsters, no one was in Gotham preventing a massive Arkham Asylum breakout. Saving Gotham would be up to him today. "Robin Boy Wonder Saves Christmas." Ugh, and Tim didn't even like Christmas.

"Robin! Thank god. For some reason we can't contact anyone outside of the city." Gordon's gruff voice greeted him on the bridge leading to Arkham. Smoke polluted the air and snow. Sirens, screams, and gunshots were heard in all directions. "Is Batman-"

"He's out saving the world. Power is down practically worldwide so I need-" Robin paused to throw birdarang at an oncoming thug, knocking him unconscious. ",to get inside the Asylum and fix it asap."

"Your best bet is sneaking through the back then. The boys and I are single handedly fighting an army in the front."

"Got it."

"And, kid," Gordon urgently added, "The worst of the worst broke out and are unaccounted for. Be careful."

"Hazard of the job." Robin half-smiled, shooting a grappling hook to the top of the giant Asylum
gate. Indeed, the police were fighting an army of criminals who though they had little individual skill, were quite the threat in large numbers. Not able to swing by without helping, Robin took a detour incapacitating several felons. When it seemed like the police could hold their own, he started his way to the other side of the building.

"Robin, wait!" The voice came from Detective Montoya, "They took hostages on the East side!"
Okay, another detour then. Changing direction, he spotted a group of officers tied up together and in clear distress. However, he didn't see anyone else in the immediate area. A trap, perhaps?
Landing, he hurried to untie the hostages while keeping a lookout for enemies.

"You're going to be okay." Robin assured, ungagging them, cutting the ropes.

"A bomb is about to go off." One woman urgently informed, pointing to the wall nearest to them,
"It's going to destroy half the Asylum!"

"I'll handle it. You all," Tim spotted a nearby police car, "Take that car and drive to the bridge. Go. Now." As the police fled to the vehicle, Robin ran to disarm the bomb. He found it attached in between the bricks of the building with a countdown of five minutes. Typical setup and it connected to more explosives hidden around Arkham. Luckily, because they were wire based, he could disarm them all at once. It took thirty seconds to disarm the extra bombs. Whoever set this up must have been a real amateur, and now to disarm the main explosive-

The clock clicked down to fifty seconds. Oh. Not amateurs then. The blast radius now wouldn't do anything much other than destroy a large chunk of the building and the person attempting to disarm the bomb, aka, Robin. And, oh look, the main bomb requires an encryption key Tim doesn't have time to find. So, he bolted, aware that he's pretty much toast on foot. If he could just find a secure place to use his grappling hook-

"Robin! Robin, over here!" Someone called out from a yellow SUV. One of the police officers or guards must have doubled back for him, which wasn't a very smart thing to do, but Tim appreciated it. He leaped into the passenger side of the car and they immediately began driving away. Phew.

He looked up to thank whoever helped him.

The Joker sat behind the wheel, wearing a Santa hat. He grinned down at Robin with a cheery,
"'Sup?"

Tim coughed, recognizing the taste of knockout gas. Then everything went dark.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

"What Gothamites are calling the 'Strangest Christmas Yet...''"

Tim woke up disoriented and in a haze. First, he knew he'd been forcibly knocked out. Second, he was in a car. Third, the heat was turned up far too high. Then he remembered-

Joker.

"Well, wouldya look at that! It's officially Christmas! Say, kiddo, what's your favorite Christmas song? Mine has to be Jingle Bells- 'Batmobile lost its wheel and the Joker got away, hey!'" The psychopath cackled, singing in a shrill voice. Ugh, what was that horrendous smell? "Sorry about the gas earlier. Oh, and I had to belt you in, precautions and all that." Tim fidgeted, tied up with a string of Christmas lights and rope. A Christmas ornament was also lodged into his mouth, held there by duck-tape. "Speaking of belts, I threw yours out the window about ten minutes ago!"

"I'm gonna break every bone in yer body." Robin growled, sounding more annoyed than threatening or angry. Heat washed over him and he struggled to stay awake. Concentrate. Keep the adrenaline up. Don't let the drugs win. Joker ignored him.

"Funnily enough, I didn't even plan on kidnapping you! No- really! This is just a happy accident. And why not? We never do this, just, 'hang out.' We're always trying to, hmm, is 'destroy each other' too melodramatic?"

Tim refused to answer. He refused to even look the clown in the face.

"Maybe it's because this evening came as a surprise or maybe I'm simply feeling that good ole holiday spirit, either way, I'm letting you go." Liar. Definitely lying. What was the clown's plan? "But first, I want to have some bonding time. Why don't we swap funny Christmas stories? Better yet- let's make some new ones! For instance, one of my favorite holiday traditions this time of year..." Joker pulled out a cheap flip phone, pressing a few buttons.

911, Emergency

"Yes, I'd like to report a hit and run, corner of Market and Broome." Joker giggled, the car turned sharply to the right, hitting a woman crossing the street. "Oops. Make that corner of Market and Boyle."

Who is this?

"Suh of ah bith." Robin glared, really wishing he could punch Joker in the face. The maniac clicked the phone off.

"Now, now." He glared back, "There's no need for such language. It's snowing and the roads are slippery." They ran over a pot hole with a loud 'thump.' "Whoops, that wasn't a good idea. Hey, check to see if he's okay back there." What?

Robin turned his head to look at the backseat. There were bodies. Dead faces of a young man and
woman smiled back at him. Oh, that's what he's been smelling. That's... not okay. Tim shoved aside a new wave of terror and forced himself to think. If this was a young couple's car... They're bound to have young children, small children play with toys, and those toys easily get lodged in the seats. With his hands tied behind him, Robin reached as far as he could down in the seat cushion, searching for anything to help him escape.

"Anyway, I've shared something with you, now you share something with your ole Uncle Joker."

No. Tim refused to play this sick game. He pointedly turned his head away from the monster. His hand came into contact with a toy car. Oh god, they did have a child. The poor kid- Stop. Focus on escaping, Tim. Imagine punching this sick bastard in the face.

"You seem agitated. I know, you must be hungry! Hmm, I could really go for one of those eggnog shakes. I know they're pure fat, but I love 'em-" The Joker rambled on as they pulled up into a nearby drive thru. "This place looks good." Oh no.

*Can I take your order, please?*

"Yes, I'd like the Big Beefer, heavy mustard, double pickles, three strips of bacon, make them crispy, ranch dressing on the side-"

*Ah, sir, you'll have to speak slower.*

"-Side order of fries, also crispy, one of those fake pie thingies with the boiling hot juice that scalds your mouth, I love that-"

*Sir-*

"-Two of your special eggnog shakes, a boy's kiddie meal, and I'll pay extra for the full assortment of toys that comes with it."

*Sir! You were talking too fast, you need to repeat all of that!*

"While, of all the incompetent-!" Joker slammed on the gas, screeching to the front window of the restaurant. Furious, he began cursing at the teenage girl who had tried to take his order. Sensing this exchange could not possibly end well, Tim desperately tried to get the toy car to cut through the rope tying down his hands. "I demand to speak to your manager!" C'mon, Robin. Hurry...

**BANG**

Shit. Joker shot the manager in the forehead. Tim scowled, swearing to himself that the psychopath would pay for this. Every time Tim thought he couldn't possibly hate the Joker any more than he already did, the body count caused by the maniac increased.

"Damn," Joker pouted as they drove away, "I really wanted those shakes." Then he smiled, "Ah, well. That's life. We don't always get what we want. Speaking of which-" He snatched the toy car from Robin's hands. "I'll take this. I planted it earlier as a prank to instill false hope. Like that line I fed you about letting you go!" He tossed the toy out the window. "I've decided you won't do what I want and play nice without a little incentive. So..." The engine revved and they barreled down the street, "Instead of threatening your life, I'll threaten someone else's!"

They were headed for the window of a little store. A Santa Claus sat in a chair surrounded by children, some sitting in line, and some sitting on his lap while parents took pictures. Tim had never done the whole, 'Tell Santa what you want for Christmas' thing. Joker ripped off the duck tape that helped gag Robin. It stung, but not nearly enough to make Robin wince.
"So, tell me, what's your favorite Christmas song? C'mon, now. Everyone has one."

"I'm Jewish." Tim retorted. The car's speed increased.

"Last chance, junior. Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell dear old Santa Claus?" People inside the building now spotted the car. They began fleeing for their lives. What was the song Joker claimed was his favorite? Tim's drugged mind couldn't retain the information properly.

"Uh, Jingle... Sleigh..." He blurted, masking his uncertainty behind stoicism. That sounded like a Christmas song, right?

Joker slammed on the breaks. "Jingle... Sleigh?" The car jerled away from the civilians. "You know, I wanna laugh, but I don't think you're joking."

"..."

"'Jingle sleigh.' Ha! You don't know a single real Christmas song, do you? And here I thought you were just being difficult! I must say I'm disappointed in Batsy for not making you listen to any of the classics."

"..."

"Really, what kind of Bat-freak of a father doesn't spend December kicking back listening to Christmas songs with his small henchman? Don't tell me the Batmobile doesn't get radio."

"He's not my father." Robin snapped, deciding his best chance of escaping alive would be keeping Joker interested in him. Maybe if he bought some time then he could slip off his glove and escape...

"Oho, did I hit a nerve?" Joker beamed. Tim hated that face. "I wasn't expecting to do that until I talked about Ra's al Ghul, the scoundrel."

"..."

"Don't stop there! Why are you and Batsy in a bad place right now? Let me guess- He figured Ra's had the right idea and wanted a piece of the action?" Thinking himself hilarious, Joker began howling with laughter. "And here I didn't think the rumors flying around Gotham were true! Ah, who am I kidding? He definitely sat his last Robin across his lap more than once. That kid could sure take a pounding, if you know what I mean..."

"..."

"Well," Joker chuckled, "The best thing about Christmas-"

"Stop!" Robin huffed, letting his frustration seep into his voice, "Just stop it with the Christmas crap!"

"But it's the most wonderful time of the year!" Joker challenged, a calculating glint in his eye. Robin decided to take the bait.

"It's the worst time of the year." Tim ranted, "Extremely over-commercialized, a consumer targeted hoax, only successful in bringing up long-forgotten discourse and empty promises of familial love. It only serves to give a bigger platform for freaks like you to come along and terrorize the public! I hate you and I hate Christmas! Why don't you just shoot me and get it over because I'm going to lose it if I have to look at one more tacky holiday wreath..."
"If you insist," Joker nonchalantly pointed a gun at Robin's head. Tim waited.

"Well? Go on! Shoot me!" He demanded, knowing Joker wouldn't do it simply because Robin was ordering him around. "Shoot me already!"

"That was the plan..." He sounded unusually thoughtful, which was never good, "But... Clearly Batman has done something awful to you. C'mon, hating Christmas? Luckily for you, I know a way to remedy that. What do ya say, J.J.?

"J.J.?" Robin blinked, not understanding.

"That's right." Joker grinned, "'Joker Jr.' I'm not getting any younger and Bats already has so many children. It's about time I had someone to carry on my legacy." Oh no. This can't be what it sounds like. "Cheer up, Junior. We'll be home soon. By this time next year, you'll make the perfect gift to present to all of Gotham. Who knows, maybe you'll be the one to kill the Bat himself! Ha! Now that's what I call funny!"

"Joker-

"That's Uncle Joker to you-"

"You don't want this-" But Robin got sprayed in the face once more with knockout gas.

............... 

"Stay focused, Superboy." Warned Nightwing soon after they incapacitated another meta-human victim. They were currently in France.

"Communication is still out. Maybe we should go back to the Watchtower-"

"They need us down here." As Dick spoke an car exploded in the distance.

"A little help!" Mal called out to them, rolling out of the way of yet another explosion.

"I'm worried about Robin, he was really upset-"

"Conner!" Nightwing snapped, "We can have this talk later! Keep focused on the mission." Dick ran off to help Guardian. Kon heard him shout, "Aim for his eyes! He has to look at an object in order to make it implode!"

Superboy scowled, knowing Dick was right. They needed to protect these innocent people first... But what if Tim ran off to do something selflessly stupid again? He clearly disliked the idea of not fighting alongside the Team. The half-Kryptonian had a gut feeling that something was wrong. Shaking it off, he jumped into the air, landing a punch to the mutated meta's face. The poor creature hissed in pain and started rampaging away from its abusers.

"C'mon, let's lead him away from the city!" Nightwing ordered the squad. Kon tensed, ready to join the chase, but then he heard a familiar voice in the distance.

"Why, hello, Superboy. You can hear me, correct? I don't believe we were ever properly introduced. I'm sure my Beloved, Timothy, has told you much about me." His 'Beloved?' Kon instantly zoomed in on which direction the voice derived from. Wherever the bastard was hiding, he was too far away from Superboy to see.

"Nightwing-" Kon yelled before realizing the others had already moved too far away to hear him.
Gah, why couldn't everyone have superhearing? It would make things so much easier.

"I simply wanted to give my Beloved the opportunity to say goodbye to you. To my great amusement, he becomes sentimental over his toys."

*I'll escape. You won't get away with this, Ra's.*

He had Tim. **He had Tim.** Kon, shaking in anger, seeing red, charged in the direction of Ra's al Ghul. Of course a part of him thought this was exactly what the bastard wanted, but a larger part couldn't think rationally. Robin's fearful face flashed in his mind, hopeless, not for a moment convinced any of his friends would come help him. It was the face of someone used to being alone, used to defending for himself, used to being hurt by men like Ra's. Well not anymore, not **ever** again. He would not fail Tim this time.

He spotted Ra's al GuI. Snarling, arm pulled back ready to punch, he didn't bother holding back any of his strength. If the old man got his skull crushed then, whoops, too bad.

And that disgusting piece of scum dodged Kon's attack effortlessly, even gracefully.

"Where's Robin?" Kon scanned the area wildly, searching. "*What have you done with him, you piece of-*"

"Oh, I have no idea." Ra's hummed, lifting up a recorder. *I'll escape. You won't get away with this, Ra's. I'll escape, you won't get away with this, Ra's. I'll-*

He didn't have Tim. Thank Rao. Then Ra's al Ghul smirked.

"You must be wondering why I wanted your attention-"

"Not really." Kon cracked his knuckles. With a roar he charged at the man once again. Suddenly, a flash of red light temporarily blinded the half-Kryptonian. Superboy's legs weakened as he fell to his knees. "Wha..." The ground tilted sideways. He tried standing up but his arms shook too violently. Ra's placed a foot on Kon's back, effectively pinning the hero down to the floor.

"Quite the device," Ra's gloated, "It mimics the light of a red sun. As I was going to say, your father would like to spend this celebrated day with his son." Lex Luthor. Of course, this has to do with him. "And I must admit, I'm curious as to why dear Timothy shows so much interest in someone as gullible and insignificant as you."

"I.. hate... you." Kon gritted through his teeth.

"Oh, I assure you by the end of the day, you shall hate me even more."

----------

Knives scrapped across his bones, gnawing viciously, unrelentingly. Skin melted off of his hands. He couldn't remember why or where or how, he just wanted the pain to end. Anything was better than this. He couldn't breathe, he could only listen to someone screaming horribly in the distance.

"Tell me, Junior." A familiar voice casually chimed, "What's Batman's real name?"

"..." Tim. Tim Drake. Robin. He was Tim Drake, Robin, Boy Wonder, training under Batman, Bruce Wayne, billionaire playboy. He had been taken by the Joker and strapped to a metal table in whereabouts unknown. He saw a yellow and red circus tent in the background. Maybe they were in some abandoned amusement park. Pfft. Cliché.
"A little foggy? Don't worry, we'll move onto the next question! What's your name? This should be an easy one. I'll give you a hint- it starts with a 'J.'"

"My name is..." Geez, his chest heaved like his lungs were full of lead, "John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, an English writer, poet, philologist, and university professor who is best known as the author of the classic high fantasy works of *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings-*"

"Wrong-o! You're my nephew: Joker Jr.! C'mon, now, say it out loud. What's your name?"

"John Lennon, an English songwriter, musician, and peace activist, who co-founded the Beatles, the most commercially successful band in the history of popular music-"

"Let's up the voltage this time, hmm? Try looking into the camera when you scream. You wouldn't want to embarrass your dear ole Uncle. And, huh, we'll try adding a drop of fear gas this song mixed with..." The clown put a green mixture into the IV attached to Tim's arm. A wave of nausea and vertigo consumed him, muscles spasming. His breathing became slow and shallow. "Using your words, tell me how you feel."

Tim whimpered.

"That's more like it! You're finally getting into the spirit of things! Now, this might come as a shock to you..." He began cackling, reaching to electrocute Robin once more.

"Give it up." Tim croaked, trying to buy time before the pain resumed, "You've been trying to break me for weeks and it hasn't worked. It's pointless." Joker positively howled with laughter.

"No, my dear boy! We've only been having fun for a few hours!"

"You're lying." Tim accused.

"Tsk tsk. Calling me a liar? I don't think I like your tone of voice, Junior. We'll have to fix that-" But a near-deafening crash cut the Joker's speech short. "Who the- Harley??"

"Happy Hanukkah, chump!" Yep, that accent definitely derived from Harley Quinn. Tim couldn't see very clearly but presumably a scuffle ensued. Loud noises reverberated through the room. At that point, Tim didn't care. He just wanted to pass out.

"Hey, Harl," Poison Ivy voiced spoke after a minute, "You'll want to see this."

"What is it, Red? I thought we agreed to- Is that- He has the kid??"

"Apparently so."

"Hey!" A thump and a crash sounded as if someone's head smacked open against concrete, "You lousy, sick, rotten- What did you do to him?"

"He can't answer you, Flower. You knocked him unconscious."

"Damn."

"It's okay. I think I have something that will help..." A cool liquid touched Tim's lips. Unthinkingly, he drank what he was given, soon realizing it soothed his throat. Not long after, he felt overall better, in a lot less pain and more energetic. His blurry vision sharpened until he could distinguish Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn's facial features.

"What- What are you going to do with me?" Because it would be stupid to assume they would
simply release him. Without being in unbearable agony, his fear became harder to ignore. He glanced over at Joker's limp body, hoping to all gods that the clown wouldn't wake up.

"Aw, we're not gonna hurt ya, kid." Harley smiled.

"What was he doing to you?" Ivy's voice had a lower and softer tone, "What is all this?"

"Ain't it obvious?" Harley snorted without humor. "He was tryin' to turn the kid into a mini version of himself! All the times I tell him I wanna young one of our own and then after I leave-"

"It doesn't matter. You're better off without him, Harley."

"I know, I know." And Harley gave Ivy a peck on the cheek. Meanwhile, vines sawed through the restraints around Tim's arms and legs. Still weak, he let Ivy support his weight instead of collapsing to the floor. "We'll get you back home, kid."

"Right." Tim's voice was thick with disbelief. "After I betrayed you back in October?"

"Aw, c'mon. We're not gonna go lie to ya like that today of all days. 'Sides, betrayin' us just proves you're a true Gothamite." In response he rolled his eyes behind his mask.

"Sure, happy second day of Hanukkah to you, too." Before either villain had a chance to respond, the Joker must've regained consciousness as he stood directly in front of them. Gasping in surprise, Robin attempted to bring himself into a position for combat.

"Calm down, it's fine." Ivy soothed and didn't let go of him. Confused, Robin noticed the Joker wore a mask and... Wait... This was a mirror. This was a reflection of Tim. Robin gripped Ivy tighter from distress.

"What- What did he-" His face was white, his hair green, and his lips were painted in an exaggerated smile.

"Hey, it's just paint. It'll wash off." Harley assured him. "And, even better, you're all in one piece!" Weakly, Tim lifted a hand to his face making eye contact with the clown staring back at him. He tried to smear off some bloody lipstick in vain. And his hair was disgusting. Holy dye job, Batman. Did that psychopath bleach Tim's hair?? He couldn't have used a wig or spray paint?? And how'd Joker find a perfectly tailored purple suit in such short notice?

He looked exactly like, well, like Joker Jr. It was horrifying. Mortifying.

"Don't freak out. You're safe now." Harley promised.

"Safe?" A panicked laugh escaped his lips, adding to the image he saw in the mirror. "If Batman saw me right now..." He flinched thinking about how angry Batman would be.

"Yeah, how come the Bat isn't here?" Harley judged.

"You would think," Ivy frowned, "He'd be better than this since..." Since the last Robin was murdered by Joker.

"Hey, Red. I have an idea!" Harley grinned, "The kid here needs a proper parental figure. Someone needs to actually take care of him. You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea..."

"Aw, c'mon! Look at the little guy. He's terrified! I know a case of child abuse when I see one. He
screams 'neglect.' He's like... a plant that just needs some love and nurturing to bloom."

"I can hear you." Tim muttered bitterly, wishing he had the strength or resources to escape.

"Well," Poison Ivy examined Tim who put on his best face of defiance. "Robin, are you happy with your current situation?" Oh. He wasn't expecting that question of... genuine worry and concern...

"I... Uh..." His situation? Unloved, lied to, scared, trying so hard but never good enough. "Of course I'm-"

"Stop right there." A new voice entered the scene. "What gives you the right to take custody of him?"

"What are you doing here?" Ivy snapped. "Mind your own business, Riddler."

"I came to collect some money a certain clown owed me." He sneered indignantly, "But seeing as he is currently indisposed, I couldn't help but overhear your plan to parent Robin. Ridiculous, as I am clearly the most qualified to be his guardian."

"Say what?" Harley complained.

"What?" Tim blinked.

"Not so fast!" With a growl, Two-Face walked through the door, "If anything, he belongs to me."

"Over my dead body!" Ivy snarled.

"Happily, I have weed killer standing by."

"This appears to be quite the dilemma." Riddler tutted, "How do you suggest this be solved?"

"I could simply kill all of you." Ivy said simply. Harley nodded in agreement.

"You would be so uncivilized." Riddler griped.

"I think the broad has the right idea." Scarface appeared from freakin' nowhere. "He's coming with me or you're going to be sleeping six feet under."

"Yes, yes." Pengiun's nasally voice drawled, "We're all very intimidated by a puppet with a bad attitude."

"Who're you calling a puppet you-"

Why are you two even here-

"Let's solve this like adults." Two-Face smoothly cut in, flipped a coin in the air and caught it without looking. "We'll bring this case to court."

Harley smirked, "You think 'cause you were a lawyer that you'll win? Ha, bring it on!" They couldn't be serious.


"You simpletons have no chance of persuading any jury of getting custody of Robin."
"Oh, yeah?" Scarface took it as a challenge of showing dominance. Tim shook his head hastily, "No, this doesn't make sen-"

"Shh," Ivy interrupted, "Go to sleep. You'll need some rest before the trial." Tim tugged against her hold on him. "This- This is just insane! I'm not up for adoption! Why do even want- You can't just-" But a plant wrapped around his arm and sprayed his face with pollen. Instantly, Tim swayed, too drowsy to stand, and closed his eyes.

"Still no word from Conner.' Miss Martian reported through telepathy. 'I'm worried about him.'

'We'll find him as soon as we have our tech back on grid and cure these meta-humans.' Nightwing promised. Wonder Girl sighed.

'Robin is not going to take this well.'

'That's an understatement.' Garfield noted. Dick bit the inside of his cheek, guilt flooding through him. He should have paid closer attention, made sure Superboy had been keeping up with the rest of the squad.

'It's not your fault.' M'gann felt his guilt.

Will Tim see it that way?

Calling all Teams. Bumble Bee's voice broke through the intercom, We're back online. The antidote is being distributed as we speak.

"Thank Zeus." Cassie said out loud. "What took so long?" Honestly, Dick agreed. They were all exhausted, battered, and bruised. He thought Bruce would've fixed this problem ages ago. He must've gotten swept up in the more powerful meta-human catastrophes. At least things had calmed down a bit now.

Meet up in the Watch Tower as soon as you finish up. We're going to have to do a lot of damage control on this one.

Thankfully, Nightwing's squad had successfully incapacitated the meta-humans in their designated areas so it didn't take long to apply the drug to the various victims. After they made sure all the civilians would get proper medical treatment, and no other squads required further assistance, they used the Zeta-Beam to travel back to Justice League Headquarters a.k.a. The Watchtower. Honestly, the child in Dick still thought the Tower was the most aster thing in existence. It had a garden in space! It had a practically endless supply of cereal! Not to mention, he had quite fond memories of him and some certain female teammates when they were alone in the hallways...

Anyway, about half of the League and Team were walking into the Meeting Room when he arrived. There weren't enough seats for all the members, so the majority of them stood around the table awkwardly, tired as hell.

"What kind of damage control are we talking about?" Superman asked, crossing his arms to show he was in 'serious hero' mode. Batman got straight to the point.

"There's already a demand from several countries to find and eradicate all meta-humans."
"What? They didn't do anything wrong- They're the victims!" Wonder Girl cried in outrage. Jaime and Garfield were enraged as well. Mal swore under his breath.

"Yes, but people don't see it that way right now." Wonder Woman calmly explained, "They're frightened."

"They want someone to blame." Green Lantern Hal scoffed.

"Then perhaps we should give them someone else to focus their distress." Kaldur suggested. Aquaman agreed,

"That's not a bad idea."

"Am I the only one who thinks this fear is exactly what the Light wanted?" Babs pointed out.

"A mass hysteria." Batman didn't let his anger show, "The fear and awareness of meta-humans will increase the amount of human trafficking occurring."

"And a lot of potentially powerful, helpful, good people will be wiped out." Green Arrow sighed.

"So," Nightwing furrowed his eyebrows, "They're gathering meta-humans and trying to silence any meta not under their control." Hawk Girl had confidence in her voice in saying,

"They're building an army and getting rid of whatever competition they can."

"Perfect."

"You know," Hal pointed at Batman, "We could have saved hours of damage if you had fixed the power outage faster. This wouldn't be half the mess it is now."

"I never fixed it." Batman raised an eyebrow. Superman added meaningfully,

"We were tied up... Sort of frozen in time for a little while... Long story..." Artemis turned to Mal.

"Mal? Did you-?"

"It wasn't me. We were all out fighting. The only person I know who wasn't was-"

"Robin." Batman spoke. "I ordered him to fix it." Though others wouldn't notice, Dick saw a wrinkle of worry in the tilt of Bruce's frown.

"But he... isn't here." Babs said slowly. Garfield threw his hands up in the air.

"Oh, great. We lost Superboy and now we lost Robin! Again!" A second of silence passed before all three Bats were at the computers, scanning for any sign of Tim or Kon. It wasn't difficult to find Robin. In fact, he was all over the news. They pulled up several different feeds. Things got weirder from there.

"What Gothamites are calling 'The Strangest Christmas Yet' happened while the rest of the world suffered from monsters overtaking the streets. After the breakout of Arkham Asylum, newest internet sensation, Robin, the well-known sidekick of Batman, was filmed as he sat through a deranged custody battle. That's right, you heard correctly, a custody battle. Several patients or previous patients of Arkham gathered into the court house to argue why they should be the guardian of Robin. This unusual event ended with a musical number, sung by the Boy Wonder himself, already reaching the top charts of 'most popular song of the month.' Furthermore, at the start of the mock trial, the criminals signed the titled "Christmas Peace Treaty," a promise that they
won't cause harm or mayhem on the 25th of December any longer. Whether or not the infamous criminals will honor this agreement is yet to be seen. However, the citizens of Gotham have hope for a peaceful Christmas this time next year. Some even want to dedicate a day in December as 'Robin Day.'"

What the literal hell was happening.

"This just in," Vicki Vale announced from a different feed, "New footage has arisen from Gotham. It appears to have been taken earlier in the day. What we're about to show is not appropriate for young children. Viewer discretion is advised."

A video clip showed the Joker smiling at the camera, gesturing to a boy dressed in a purple suit. Was that? Oh God, Joker had captured Tim. Eyes glued to the screen, Dick watched as the maniac pulled a lever to electrocute the teen. And Robin screamed. Everyone flinched at the sound and Batgirl immediately shut off that particular channel.

"His tracker says he's in the middle of Gotham Harbor." Babs reported. "But his tracker was in the belt he no longer has."

"Okay," Nightwing decided they needed to take action, "Batman and I will start scouting out Gotham and--"


"Status update: I still hate Christmas." Tim's emotionless face appeared on the holographic screen. He was still plastered white with red lipstick. He wore what seemed to be Riddler's bowler hat, his green hair was tied back into pig tails, and he was wearing a blue Alice in Wonderland dress. On his back appeared to be a collection of weapons such as swords, guns, and even an umbrella.

"Wow. You look terrible." Bart blurted, covering his mouth with his hand almost immediately.

"Why? Is there something on my face?" The remark was dryer than the burnt cookies Dick baked two Decembers ago.

"Where are you? What happened? Are you okay?" Nightwing ignored the hardcore sarcasm.

"I'm fine. I went to Arkham to fix the satellite signal and it took longer than planned. Did you get the cure?"

"Yes, crisis averted for now."

"Robin," Batman demanded, "We can't pinpoint your location. Where are you?"

"And is Superboy with you?" Clark asked with concern.

"No," Tim raised his eyebrows in surprise, "Why do you ask? Did something happen to him?"

"He's missing."

"Clark." Batman hissed at Superman in annoyance before commanding, "Robin, what's your location?"

"He's missing?" Tim's voice went higher than normal, "So, he could be injured or captured or- or-"

Oh no. Robin was panicking. Dick suspected fear gas could be involved.

"Robin." But Tim started giggling. Then he laughed. Then his laughter turned hysterical. With the
makeup, the resemblance to Joker chilled Nightwing to his core. Glancing at Batman, he saw the billionaire showed similar signs of dread.

"Listen, Robin," Dick attempted to gain the teen's attention, "You need to get traught. You're not going to help Superboy if you can't get it together."

"It doesn't matter. He's dead. I know it. He's gone." Tim said around cackles. "I wasn't there to help him. I left him to die. He's- He's... No." Robin's expression went dark and he stopped laughing. "This is your fault."

"Mine?" Superman replied. Oh no. Tim was on a brink of a full psychotic break. The teen shook with rage but his mouth twisted into a deranged smile.

"You're his father. It's always the parents... Always the parents." Tim mumbled something incoherently.

"Robin," Batman's low voice rumbled, "Before you do anything, please, tell me where you are."

"Did Batman just say 'please'?" Hal taunted.

"Relax, Bats. I feel fine. In fact, I feel better than ever. Heads," Tim showed them a coin, giggles resuming, "I kill Superman. Tails, I kill Lex Luthor. Let's have chance determine which parent is to blame."

"Hera, have mercy." Wonder Woman whispered in shock. Babs scrunched her face in frustration.

"I still can't get a location. Wherever he is, something's blocking me from tracking the call."

"I'll search for him." Superman promised.

"Check Arkham Asylum first." Batman growled.

"Got it." And with that, Superman disappeared through the Zeta-Beam. Tim flipped the coin, caught and examined it. From the angle the video provided, they couldn't see the results.

"Heh. Interesting. See you soon." Robin saluted them, reached behind his back, and pulled out a gun. With a pop, Tim shot the device he used to communicate with them. This was so not how Dick wanted to spend Christmas this year.

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Wow, they believed the insanity act way too easily. But his plan had only just begun. Tim had hoped after escaping the court house and getting the radio frequency back up in Arkham, perhaps he could go back to Wayne Manor for a nap. The day had been brutally exhausting. The perpetrators in Gotham insisted whichever weapons and persona came "naturally" to Tim would match villain who deserved custody of him. He was forced to imitate the demeanor of Gotham's craziest, and of course no one could agree who Robin should team up with. (Although Riddler had almost convinced a few people. Tim undeniably excelled at solving riddles.) Robin possessed bits and pieces of every villain sticking a claim to him. He had a variety of poisons and weapons. Since he lost his belt, he took most of these tools with him, just in case.

Toward the end, Catwoman strutted into court and suggested to Harley that she make the teen sing a song. Surely, if Robin could perform as a singer then Harley Quinn would be the perfect parent for him. Although Tim was extremely reluctant, he sang his heart out while Selina slipped him the device Mad Hatter often used to mind-control his victims. It wouldn't be possible to fully control so
many people, but his subtle suggestion that they all dance and sing had been successful. At least, it had been enough to allow Tim and Selina to sneak around, sedating inmates one by one before anyone knew what was happening. Robin left the scene while Catwoman made sure no one would escape before being locked up in Arkham. (Still, Tim had a feeling that Selina's frienemies, Harley and Ivy, would mysteriously disappear before the police arrived.)

But now Superboy had been taken. Robin paced the floor. It was time to get the attention of a certain troublemaker.

"This is real. This can't be real. This is real. I'm not really here. What am I doing? This could all bee a trick, a hallucination. I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I need to know. How? How can I tell? There's only one way to be sure. My future I have to ensure." Rhyming was a nice touch, very Mad Hatter. His stiletto, high heeled boots clacked unevenly on the tiled floor as if he couldn't properly hold his balance. (The boots were a gift from Harley, which Tim decided he liked because they made him so tall.) Slowly, deliberately, he pointed the gun to his temple. "I have to know."

Before he pulled the trigger, someone tackled him from the side, flinging the gun from his hand.

"Are you crazy?" Klarion shouted at him while Teekl hissed in distress.

"Hello to you too." Tim greeted. "I was almost worried you weren't going to show, call my bluff." Realization hit Klarion, knowing Tim's crazy behavior was a ruse.

"You couldn't have known I was watching."

"Well, I'm guessing you had nothing better to do now that the meta-human chaos has finished. How sweet of you to check up on me. It almost makes me think you care."

"Absurd."

"Of course." Robin tilted his head, "Stop glaring. The gun wasn't even loaded. See?" Tim slunk around Teekl and picked up the gun. He opened the bullet chamber and a multitude of shells poured out. "Oh. Oops." That could've ended badly. "Well, anyway, I have a favor to ask..."

"You want to save your dear pal Superboy." Klarion guessed with an angry huff, "As much as I'd like to help you-"

"No. I want revenge on the person responsible for taking Superboy."

"Ah," Klarion gave a small and excited smile, "Round two with Ra's al Ghul? What are you going to bite off this time?" So, Ra's was behind the kidnapping. Not surprising. Still, the heroes said Superboy was 'missing' not 'kidnapped' so the Demon Head captured Kon without much of a fight. This reeked of Lex Luthor's help. The two must have come to some kind of arrangement.

"Anything I can get my hands on."

"Fun. But... What's in it for me?."

"Chaos. Pure and simple."

"And I'm supposed to just trust you'll blow something up and terrorize hundreds?" Klarion dismissed with a flick of his hand.

"Oh no," Tim lowered his voice, "You shouldn't trust me. I'll do whatever you want, be whoever you need. I'll kiss you in every beautiful place, introduce you to possibilities you never dreamed of,
I'll intertwine myself in every part of your life. Then, the moment you can't remember life without me, I'll end you." He whispered into the Witch Boy's ear, "I'll destroy everything you love, rip apart anything that makes existence worthwhile. All that will be left is echoes of what you lost as you stare into nothingness and taste me like blood in your mouth. You will suffer until you're a shell of a being without passion, without any purpose. No, you definitely shouldn't trust me."

"I..." Klarion swallowed, subconsciously leaning toward Tim, "I know what you're doing..."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Robin purred, brushing a hand along Klarion's waste. The Witch Boy closed his eyes.

"...Fine. I'll drop you off near where they have the clone. But you'll owe me a favor. Big time. I mean it, you'll regret this."

"Mm, promise?"

"You're lucky Teekl finds you suitable for living." (Teekl flicked her whiskers in amusement to that remark.)

Klarion kindly transported him outside the building of Lex Corp. Luthor was hiding in plain sight. Classic Lex. But Lex Corp was humongous and Kon could be hiding anywhere. If the League were here, Batman would say they couldn't simply barge into the building and rip the entire place apart until they found Superboy. They would have to be sneaky. Luthor was a member of the UN. They needed to be smart.

Tim was smart and sneaky, but he sure as hell was going to do as much damage as possible. He pulled out the whip Catwoman gave him before they parted ways. Since Robin last blackmailed Luthor, Lex Corp had switched up the security. The blueprints for the new designs had been a secret shared with very few people. Four people to be exact. Tim had researched them all, broke into their individual homes, and took pictures of whatever information he could find. It never hurt to memorize the building layout or security patterns of Lex Corp. He knew passwords, where the security cameras were placed, the time shifts of the people who worked there, the ventilation systems, etc. Basically, he couldn't have been more prepared for this if he took a tour of Lex Corp and built the building by hand. Not to mention, hardly anyone was in the building because a. t's Christmas, and b. mutated meta-human were rampaging on the streets a second ago.

"Sit back and enjoy the show." He waved goodbye to Klarion, already headed to the skyscraper with determination.

It was painfully easy. Luthor doesn't make his building impenetrable in case someone wants to use his creations against him. He has a contingency plan, a complicated but not impossible way to sneak in and out of the skyscraper, just in case. Even if that weren't the case, half of the generators in Lex Corp were messed up due to the power fluctuation. The more public-accessible areas were no trouble whatsoever. Eventually, Tim did come across a few dozen scientists. They seemed to be on lunch break? One of them spoke,

"And then my youngest said, 'She's so basic that everything she touches turns into a PH level of 7.' I've never been so proud." Aww, what a cute story. And the man probably can't wait to spend this Christmas with his family! Wouldn't that be nice? A family who cherishes their children, praises their accomplishments, and spends the holidays together like a loving family should? How. Very. Sweet. Tim's left eye twitched and he decided to use a smidgen of fear gas to clear the room. (Happy Hanukkuh, Scarecrow.) Not enough to cause hallucinations, but enough that they'll do what he says out of fear.
He strapped on a gas mask and, while hanging upside down from the ceiling, dropped a tiny vial of fear gas. The liquid quickly turned to yellow gas. Panicking when they noticed, the scientists ran to push the "emergency contamination" button. Good luck with that. With a flick of his wrist, Tim threw a small knife in front of the button moments before they anyone could touch it. One person actually screamed.

"Who- Who's there?"

"What do you want from us?"

"Please- it's Christmas!"

"Don't hurt us!" They coughed as smoke infiltrated their lungs.

"Unless you want this to be your last Christmas," Tim slid behind a lab table, using Bane's voice modulator gift. (Happy Hanukkah to you, too, Bane,) "Gather in the middle of the room." No one moved. "NOW." They ran like the Flash himself.

"Please- please." One man blubbered.

"We'll do whatever you want!"

"Oh, God. Oh, God, we're going to die."

"Quiet!", Tim's voice boomed, "Stay here and I'll spare you." Before they could reply, he flicked the lights off. They all yelped, terrified. Before anyone's eyes could adjust, Robin used a steel cable to tie them up. (Very, useful tool. Thanks, Black Mask.) He moved on.

Ah, yes. Guards on duty. There were always guards on duty for this floor. Bonus, they all had gas masks. But they also had their necks showing. Hmm, if he replaced these poison darts for some needles dipped in Joker's poison... Now he had a nonlethal dart gun. (Thank you Deadshot and Harley.) Still, no way could he take these guards out without being noticed. And he'd prefer to not have more witnesses than necessary. He could hide behind Penguin's umbrella! It's bullet resistant, too. (One bird to another, much gratitude, Oswald.)

He took out three people before the guards' laughter alerted the others. Hiding behind a giant black umbrella, Tim didn't waste a single dart because Deadshot was the best sharpshooting teacher.

After the effects of the Joker's poison subsides they'll pass out, the body can only handle so much stress.

Tim calmly walked up the stairs and to Luthor's brand new office.

"Robin," Lex greeted expectantly, sitting at a fancy desk, "I suspected you were here. Though... I didn't imagine you'd look as... unique as this..."

"Where's Superboy?" Tim asked as casually as possibly.

"Not here. Would you like to sit down to talk? Mercy can go make you coffee."

"You'd send away your body guard?" Tim glanced over to the woman standing in the far right corner.

"I think we both know you're not going to hurt me."

"You sure about that?" Tim grinned, pointing the freeze ray at Luthor. (Happy Holidays, Mr.
"Can we try to have a discussion first? I'd hate for Mercy to go through all this trouble on Christmas." _Christmas. Stupid, stupid, Christmas._ Lex sighed, "Very well, then. Mercy?" Mercy took one step forward to Tim and he declared the code words,

"You're fired, Mercy." Blinking in confusion, Mercy discovered she could no longer move her right arm. "Oh, did Lexy here not tell you that your mechanical arm has an off switch? Like the one he programmed into Superboy and Red Arrow back in the day. So, riddle me this: I drift forever with the current down these long canals they've made. Tame, yet wild, I run elusive, multitasking to your aid. Before I came, the world was darker. Colder, sometimes, rougher, true. But though I might make living easy, I'm good at killing people too. What am I?" Robin showed them a small green question mark with a button. He pressed it and Mercy convulsed, passing into unconsciousness. All security cameras in the building short circuited. "Electricity."

Now, without his body guard, Luthor took the situation seriously. The bald man stood up and walked toward Tim.

"I understand you're highly upset. You've every right to be. Simply hear me out-"

"I'm listening." Tim shot Luthor's legs with the freeze ray.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" From the hips down, Lex was encased in ice. His body temperature dropped, causing him to hyperventilate as his heart beat faster. His body panicked as it slipped into hypothermia.

"You have ten minutes before you pass out from the cold. Use them to tell me where Superboy is." More importantly, now that he used Riddler's surge of electricity, he sent the league a signal to his whereabouts. He'd like to be done before they arrived.

"You're crazy!" He spat. "I already told you he wasn't here!"

"What..." Tim gritted his teeth, "Do I have to do to prove to you that I'm not fucking joking?"

"Ra's al Ghul took him. I don't know where."

"You're lying. They're still here. Better fess up because your 'off switch' is much more permanent than Mercy's."

"I'm. Not. Lying."

"Oh, well, in that case," Tim pulled out a leftover needle. "I guess there's nothing better to do than stick around here for a little while." He put the needle under Luthor's left eye as a threat. "You don't know where he is? Guess."

"I don't know. I swear."

"Listen to me very carefully." Hissing, Tim found himself losing patience, "If Ra's touches, hurts him, if he does anything close to what he did to me--I will kill you. No one will stop me. There's nowhere you can hide that I won't find you. I don't care who gets hurt, whatever you try to bribe me or blackmail me with, I will kill you without hesitation or regret. Look at me. Look at me. Do you think I'm bluffing? I'm not Batman. I will hunt you down."

"No... You're not..." Luthor grunted in pain, clenched his jaw and admitted, "If they're still here then they'll be in loading bay three." Ah, yes. Just one of the very many of the 'secret' sections of
Lex Corp. "Now, if you'd please-

"Nope. Later, loser." Tim left Luthor to enjoy his hypothermia, sprinting to the fifth floor, praying he wasn't too late.

"Superboy?" Tim barged into the room, not bothering to be subtle, purposely giving up the element of surprise because Ra's al Ghul was literally a ninja so it was pointless. "Superboy, can you hear me?" The room was littered with metal and wooden crates. So far, no sign of the half-Kryptonian.

"Indeed he can, Detective." Ra's crept up on him. The tip of a sword poked Tim in the back. "You got here later than I expected. Interesting attire. I am not fond of that shade of lipstick. Your natural color is far more appealing."

"You just couldn't resist seeing me, could you? Luthor isn't going to be happy that you didn't leave when you had the chance."

"Oh, there's still plenty of time. Allow me escort you to the transport vehicle."

"No."

"I insist."

"You'll have to kill me."

"Timothy," Ra's sighed, "I grow weary of this pretense of yours. I'm the only one who truly understands you, appreciates you. Why do you insist you don't feel this connection between us. I could give you anything in the world. I can love you like you deserve."

"There is no connection. You're a delusional old man."

"Perhaps, nevertheless, I'm interested in what you deem as worthier than me." Ra's lead Tim around a corner, showing him a metal and glass pod. Kon stared at Tim, eyes wide and blue.

"Let him go, Ra's. This is between you and me."

"W-what?" This was just like that nightmare... "So, you captured him just to, what, just to rape me in front of him?"

"Such harsh words. But perhaps you're correct." Ra's al Ghul turned his hungry gaze to Kon. "I do wish to better understand your... affection for this creature."

"No!" Tim turned to be relatively face to face with Ra's, "No, please, wait. I came here... I came here for a trade. His freedom for my capture."

"Go on." Ra's held an air of victory as if this was precisely the reaction he predicted."

"Let him go, don't harm him or touch him. Just let him go and I'll come with you. I won't try to escape again. You can have me. I give you my word."

"I suspected as much." The sicko smirked. "Still, it is not enough."

"Then, I'll- I'll- I'll join you, too. I'll help you fight against the Justice League. Just, please, promise me he'll stay out of this. Promise me he'll be safe."
"Hmm, tempting." Ra's pretended to mull it over. "I accept your offer. It will be good to sleep next to you once more, Beloved... One day you will finally realize how much I care for you and realize how you care for me as well. We were meant to be together. You're too precious to lose." He leaned into Tim's face, lips parted. The teen wished Kon didn't have to see this. The man crashed his lips onto Tim's, aggressive but oddly sweet. It was confusing and awful, but Robin let Ra's take what he wanted. Finally they broke apart.

"You've no idea how long." Ra's blinked. Once. Twice. "What. What is..." He stumbled sideways, slurring, "What have you done?"

"It's a shame you didn't like the lipstick." Tim kicked the man to the floor, "Poison Ivy gave me the perfect lip balm to go with it."

"...You." But he was too far gone.

"Goodbye, Ra's." Tim sneered, picking up the fallen sword and stabbing the man between his legs, "Hopefully, this time it won't grow back."

Babybird turned his attention to Kon.

"Are you, okay? What did he do to you?" Robin hurried to free his friend from the pod. Kon collapsed into his arms, weak but otherwise okay. However, Tim clearly wasn't okay, kissing Ra's aside. White paint, green hair, blue dress, it couldn't be more disturbing if Dick had chosen the outfit. What happened to his poor Robin?

"Red sun..." Kon winced, "You...look like hell."

"Yeah, well, hell's never looked sexier then. We're on the brink of dawn. Let's get you some sunlight, okay buddy? Here, hold this tight and don't let go." He slipped a small object of who-knows-what into the half-Kryptonian's hand. Frankly, Kon was too tired to ask questions. He did what he was told, leaning heavily onto Tim for support. They limped out of the room, making their way down to the first floor.

"Robin! Superboy!" Dick's worried face showed up, "Are you two-" Kon interrupted.

"Fine. Need. Sunlight."

"I- right. Okay. C'mon." Nightwing simply scooped Kon up in his arms bridal-style. Show off. "So, um, I should probably warn you that there are some Team and League members here... The bioship is out back"

"You do realize I never planned on hurting Superman?" Tim asked dispassionately. He threatened Superman? What in Rao's name did Kon miss?

"After you sent us your location? Yeah... But... Well, Superman is working on thawing out Luthor as we speak... You could've killed him, Robin."

"I knew what I was doing. I had it all timed out."

"Do you have any idea how much you freaked us out?"

"Why do you find it so easy to just write me off as going insane?"
"That's not fair. You were hallucinating, you were tortured, you did that crazy laugh- anyone could've lost it if they went through all that! This isn't about anyone doubting you!" Tortured. So, Tim had been captured, too. (As if the dress and clown makeup wasn't clue enough, Kon? Sheesh.)

"...Whatever." Tim scowled, no longer speaking.

The bioship was in camouflage mode when they boarded it. Sunlight. Yes. Thank you clear skies of Metropolis. Every cell in Kon's body started buzzing in rejoice. Nightwing let him stand by himself. Everything became warmer and Kon hugged Tim who squeaked from surprise.

"Thank you." Superboy smiled into Robin's green hair.

"No- No problem."

"Dick," Kon remembered suddenly, "Ra's- he's still in there." Nightwing grabbed the nearest comm.

"Ra's al Ghul reported in the building."

"He'll be gone." Robin said, "Ivy's sedative won't last long with all of the Lazuras water in his blood." Then they heard Batman's voice over the comms.

"Are Robin and Superboy safe, Nightwing?" Dick proudly grinned,

"All eggs are accounted for. Ready to hatch when you are."

"Oh, brother." Tim snorted, then louder, "He means, 'yes, sir, they're both safe and need no immediate medical attention.'"

"We're leaving in five."

"Roger that."

Garfield and Batgirl entered the ship.

"What was it like being captured by the Joker?" Shit, Tim was actually taken by Joker? Kon hated himself for not being there, for not helping. If Joker tortured him... How was the poor Babybird even standing? "Did you know you're number twelve on the 'Top 100 Songs of this Month'?" Wait, what? "Is it true Catwoman saved you? Batman's mad she didn't call him about it. Did you know they're naming a day after you? Are you going to keep the green hair? We could have matching hair!" Garfield chatted away until Nightwing stopped him.

"Slow down, Beast Boy. You're sounding like Bart."

"Oops. Sorry. Noted."

"Ra's al Ghul is gone." Barbara grimly confirmed. She stepped in front of Tim and pointed, "You. Your New Year's resolution is including your Team in your crazy plans before you freeze UN secretaries half to death."

Superman, Batman, and Green Lantern stepped in.

"You caused a lot of trouble tonight." Hal scolded Robin.

"Hey, back off." Kon snapped, shielding Robin, "He saved me."
"Well, your boyfriend could've done it without causing a hundred workers go to the hospital on Christmas on top of the countless number of citizens hurt by the meta-humans."

"Seriously," Tim mockingly asked, "You couldn't get one of the competent Green Lanterns to tag along?"

"Is this just a game to you?" Hal barked. "If you'd like me to treat you with more respect then stop acting like a child!"

"My bad, I thought you only understood childish behavior."


"The building is evacuated. Let's go home." They began flying away.

"So," Tim observed the Lex Corp tower below, "How mad was Lex that I blew up his building?"

"You didn't-" But then they saw the detonator in Tim's hand. In one smooth swipe, Superman plucked the device from Robin and sat back down with a simple,

"No."

"Guys, c'mon! I'm joking!" Tim assured them, "I gave the real detonator to Superboy." What? Kon recalled the item Tim gave him earlier.

"Conner, don't-!" But it was too late. Kon opened his hand, releasing the pressure on the button. Damn. This was planned, of course.

Lex Corp began crumbling before their very eyes.

Superman and Green Lantern volunteered to stay and help Metropolis considering how many blocks of people would be hurt by the collapse of a building as large as Lex Corp. Tim installed those explosives months ago and regretted nothing.

"Everyone. Out." Batman commanded the instant the Bio-ship landed. The whole ride had been in silence and no one dared to speak even now. "Except you, Robin. We need to talk." Kon gave Tim's shoulder a squeeze before leaving.

And the Dynamic Duo were alone.

"Robin..."

"I'm not apologizing. You can fire me, kick me out, but I don't regret it. Luthor thinks he's untouchable because he's popular with the public. If blowing up his best-known building is how I prove to him that he's not as protected as he thinks then maybe he won't try to kidnap Superboy again. Maybe he'll think twice before trusting Ra's al Ghul. And I wasn't about to let that- that- that creep do anything to Kon. I couldn't let Ra's take him and do what he did to me- I couldn't let the Light pick him apart for whatever sick thing they're planning. They could've tortured him- mutated him like they did to the meta-humans- they could've beat him with a crowbar and left him in an explosion-!" Tim caught himself. "I- I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... I just... I just hate Christmas so much. The Joker asked me what my favorite Christmas song is and I couldn't think of any and he said it was a tragedy and then he wanted me to be his nephew. I hate it, Bruce. Everyone is so
happy to be with their families and friends. I'm so angry and I don't know why. I hate everyone for being happy, for having friends, for having families. What's wrong with me?" Tim refused to cry even if his voice was cracking, "I keep thinking, what's wrong with me that I don't get that? Why does everyone think it's so damn important to be with their family on Christmas? It's stupid! I've never needed any of those things and I'm fine!"

"...Robin..." Batman crouched down to match Tim's height. The teen braced himself to be hit. After all, he'd said too much, far more than any child should, especially Batman's sidekick. Tim knew better, he needed to be better than this.

Then Batman hugged him. Crazier, Tim hugged back.

"...I don't understand." Tim croaked.

"Tim... you have no idea how happy I am that you're alive. And I am so sorry I wasn't there for you tonight. Can you forgive me?" Batman was apologizing to him?

"Yes."

"Good." Batman stood. "Let's do a blood test and see what drugs are in your system."

"Am I grounded or...?" In response Batman gave him an offended glare.

"I'm not going to ground you during Hanukkah, Tim."
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Tim apparently can't go very long without getting himself into trouble. As usual, everyone has some kind of ulterior motive behind the scenes.

click

Gosh dang it. Blurry. Hmm. Maybe if he adjusted....

click

Better. Pretty good, actually. He'd have to remember that for the next time it was raining.

His new camera was awesome, but as always, getting used to the new settings took some practice. It had taken him forever to scrounge up enough to afford such high tech. Mother and Father had recently shortened his food allowance, consequently delaying his goal by entire weeks.

Shivering even though he chose a spot guarded against the howling wind, Timothy waited patiently for his heroes to show. Surely they would considering they were last seen at the docks. They always used this rooftop. He had almost decided to call it a night when he heard a voice: The latest Robin, somehow, impossibly, a person more intriguing than his predecessor, Dick Grayson.

"Ha! Did you see the look on his face, B? Can you believe he thought he had you cornered? You. Shit, you think they'd learn by now."

"Language, Robin."

"Yeah, yeah."

They paused on the edge of the roof, overlooking their city, the city they've devoted their lives to protect. Timothy rapidly clicked pictures. A flash of lightning illuminated the scene behind them. Wow, that was going to look cool as heck.

"So... ice cream?" Robin grinned hopefully at Batman. The billionaire sighed and shot his grappling hook to a nearby building. "I'll take that as a yes." The teen victoriously chirped. Timothy smiled from secondhand happiness. If anyone deserved ice cream, it was Jason Todd.

.........................................

"Whoa, are you allowed to be here?" Kon whispered, "Nightwing is going to blame me if you aren't."

"You worry too much." Tim grinned.

"Pot meet kettle."

"I'm officially un-drugged, my hair is black, so now I'm back. Pretty simple. Besides, I'm bored."

"You know he keeps Kryptonite in his back pocket just waiting for an excuse to use it?"
"Dick would never do that to you over something this petty, Kon." In Superboy's defense, he wasn't exaggerating that much.

"Clearly you haven't noticed how tense it's been since the whole Joker incident."

"Do you want me to leave?" Tim frowned. No!

"I didn't say that. I mean, I've missed you." All Kon could think about was Tim day and night. If anything, everyone was already getting bummed out by his moping.

"Missed me? It's only been, like, five days."

"Yeah... well... Ah, crap." Nightwing walked into the living room. "Too late. He's here."

"Shh." Tim tugged him down behind the kitchen counter, taking a seat on the floor, "Babs is right behind him. Let's see how this plays out." Sure enough, a familiar red head tailed Nightwing, somewhat amused. It appeared that Dick had been flirting with her.

"Um, this is kind of creepy." Kon watched in pain as Nightwing batted his eyes in an attempt to be endearingly cute. Batgirl rolled her eyes but smirked playfully. Superboy purposely did not listen in on the conversation.

"It helps if you think of it as 'gathering information.'" Tim suggested. Dick laughed at something Barbara quipped.

"It's called stalking." And they should quit before they get caught and wind up in even more trouble, "I'm beginning to think you're a bad influence on me."

"Nah, it's like a nature documentary. See?" Tim deepened his voice, "The brightly colored male calls to mate, flaunting his feathers in attempt to impress the female. He dances to keep her attention for fear she might lose interest." Dick leaned down to kiss Barbara's hand, "In a bold move, a peck symbolizes to the female that his intentions are genuine. Will she fall for his charm or will she move on to a more impressive specimen? The only thing the male can do is puff out his chest in a last effort to prove he's worthy." She leaned in for a kiss, pushed Dick away at the last second with a smile, and shook her head 'no.' "Alas, it seems the male has failed as the female flutters away leaving nothing but crushed dreams behind. Perhaps the male will have better luck next year, but in the meantime he will try to improve his dance and mating calls... alone." Using his normal voice Tim whispered to Kon, "Isn't nature beautiful?"

The half-Kryptonian smothered his laughter with his hands. He almost felt guilty for finding Dick's failure so hilarious. Almost. "Is this really how you see us?"

"You mean like creatures with fascinating rituals that I don't quite understand but try to understand nevertheless? Isn't that kinda what everyone does?"

"Huh." Kon stared at him. Really, he couldn't help it. Tim was uncharacteristically relaxed with the smallest yet genuine smile. He trusted the half-Kryptonian enough to let down his defenses. "How can you not understand how clever and valuable you are- Oops, am I talking out loud right now?"

"Shuddup." He gently gave Kon a push, blushed furiously, and smiled a little wider.

"I can't help it, you saved me. I guess I consider you-"

"Don't say it."
"My hero."

"Ugh- Yeah, I'm definitely a bad influence on you."

"But seriously," Kon mussed up Tim's hair, "You seem..."

"Composed? Calm? Together? Levelheaded?"

"I was going to say, 'better,' but yeah."

"Well, I feel better. And now that you're here-"

"Don't you dare-"

"I feel super."

"Wow. Okay. You're going to pay for that one." Kon scooped him up in a bear hug as Tim snickered. Then the moment was ruined.

"Robin! Why are you two on the floor?" Dammit, Bart. Startled, they fell over, Babybird landing on top of Kon with an 'oomph.' Great, they could now be seen from the living room.

"What the-" Aaand Nightwing saw them. Busted.

"Nightwing!" Tim called out in a panic, "It's not what you think! We were only-- We were only making out! No, that's not right. Uh."

"Conner, what the hell?" Dick yelled. It didn't help that Kon by this point busted out laughing. Tim flailing about in distress was too cute. Babybird then tried to stand up but smacked his head on the kitchen counter and fell back onto Superboy. Batgirl ran into the room.

"What's going on? I leave for one minute-"

"I don't know I walked in and they were on the floor--"

"Conner and Robin were doing inappropriate things-"

"I didn't do anything, this is all a misunderstanding-"

"Ow, my head. Can everyone just chill for a second-"

"STOP." Artemis roared as she strolled in, "You're giving me a headache and we're supposed to be in the training room for Team Bonding or whatever. Don't give me any sass, Richard Grayson. You're the idiot who insisted on Team Bonding in the first place so get your toned ass into the training room. Now."

"Fine," Dick grumbled, "Robin- go home."

"I have to," Tim grunted as he got to his feet, "Teach Cassie how to waltz for that awful Wintertide Soirée."

"Absolutely not! You're staying home today."

"..."

"Now."
Oh no oh no oh no. Did Robin see him? Please, no. It would ruin everything. Timothy leaped to a fire escape, ducked into an open apartment window, and dived behind a couch. It smelled like musty and dusty, not pleasant, but an estimated trillion times better than getting caught by his heroes. What if they didn't like him? Worse, what if they caught him and let him go, carrying on like he didn't exist? Would Robin confirm Timothy's fear of being relatively worthless as a person?

A new wave of smell assaulted his nose, a kind of cleaner like Lysol. It reminded him of the fresh and pristine smells of home. The thought made his stomach clench painfully. His parents would kill him if Batman told them about his nighttime activities. Worse, Janet would- she would- No. No time to think about that. He needed to keep his head in the moment or he'd be caught-

"And who are you, Kitten?" A sharp turn of Timothy's head and he was face-to-face with Catwoman. She tilted her head, holding onto the bag of jewels she had stolen from the nearby museum. She was hiding from Batman and Robin, too. Gosh dang. What were the chances they'd pick the same place to lay low? His heart pounded so loudly that he couldn't hear the next thing she said. No talking, Timothy. Don't fight it. Whatever she can do he can take.

"-and what pictures have you taken?" She reached for his camera. With a sharp intake of air, Timothy scrambled backward and stumbled back through the open window because he needed this camera. This camera was everything. He could live in the sewers, get beat up everyday, play along with his parents' demands, as long as he could capture the moments of heroism by Robin and Batman by the end of the night. No, no, no, he couldn't let Catwoman take his camera. He clumsily sprinted through the alleyways of Gotham, attempting desperately to find a new place to hide.

"Wait!" She called out after him. Of course in his heart Timothy knew he couldn't outrun her but he could try. He eventually slid under a parked bus, going still, hoping she'd pass him over. A hand grabbed him by his collar and dragged him out. He stood limply, not fighting the grip she had on the scruff of his neck.

"What are you doing out here?" She demanded, eyeing his too-nice jacket that he foolishly decided to wear today. In response he gave an involuntary squeak. And she seemed... amused. "You really are a kitten." Her expression softened, "What's your name?"

"..." The most important rule: No talking.

"Well, whoever you are, you just witnessed something you weren't supposed to. So," She snatched his camera.

"No!" But then Timothy snapped his mouth shut because he wasn't supposed to talk and certainly wasn't supposed to talk so loud. And Catwoman was going to get so upset when she finds pictures of her at the museum heist,,

"These are..." Catwoman took off her goggles, revealing eyes that contrasted perfectly with the night sky. Timothy wanted to take a picture of them. "These are really good, actually." What? "Heh. You even got my good side. Although it's not as if I have a bad side." She winked at him. "You captured Batman's grimace perfectly. This doesn't look like the work of an amateur- How long have you been doing this, kitten? Are you out here alone?"

"..."
"Hmm. Has the Bat ever caught you following him around?"

Timothy shook his head no.

"Interesting." Her eyes twinkled, "But you really shouldn't be out here wandering the rooftops. I'm going to have to confiscate this." She let go of him and took a step back. "Stay off of the streets this late at night. It's not safe." She turned around to leave with his camera.

"Wait!" By this point Timothy was trembling, "Ms. Kyle, if you take that then- If you take that then I keep this!" He held up the small bag of jewels he pickpocketed from her. Maybe stealing from Catwoman was the dumbest thing he could do, but it had been the only thing he could think of at the moment.

The Team sat in chairs facing each other in a circle.

"So," La'gaan crossed his arms, "What's the Team Bonding exercise for today?" Everyone stared expectantly at Kon. Oh. Was he in charge of Team Bonding this week?

"Well," Kon tapped his fingers nervously before becoming irritated, "This is so stupid. We don't need this when we bond as a Team by actually being a team in the field." Dick sighed.

"Conner, we've been over this-

"Yeah, and I still think it's stupid."

"Well, maybe," Everyone jumped as Tim appeared from nowhere. "It all depends on the exercise we have to do as a Team. I vote we do a scavenger hunt. I already have it all planned out-"

"Robin," Nightwing said through gritted teeth, "Go home."

"I did. Then someone" From Tim's tone it sounded like he meant Alfred, "Told me I shouldn't keep myself isolated and locked away from other people."

"No."

"Care to hear my scavenger hunt idea?"

"No!"

"C'mon... Please?" And Tim actually pouted. Barbara answered.

"Nightwing, don't be stubborn. I'd like to hear his idea."

"Thanks." The teen gave a grateful smile, "So, I made a list of items we have to find and gather up. There's one rule--gather all items in one place together for at least five seconds." With a press of a button he showed them a holographic list of ten items:

Superman's cape
Wonder Woman's lasso
Green Arrow's bow
Aquaman's Trident
Green Lantern's lasso (from any or all Green Lanterns)
Martian Manhunter's Moreo cookies
Flash's shoe (preferably the left one)
Hawkgirl's spiked mace
Black Canary's necklace
Batman's utility belt

"This is a joke." Jaime spoke first. "You want to steal from the Justice League?"

"Uncle J'onn would never forgive anyone that took his Moreo stash." Miss Martian added. Everyone gave Tim a look of pity.

"Maybe Nightwing's right. You should go home."

"Guys, seriously," Tim patiently replied, "We don't necessarily have to steal anything. It doesn't matter how we get the items. If you're especially clever you could convince them to lend it to you. Of course they'd immediately know who's to blame if they say no and the item in question was stolen regardless. What we're gathering has significant personal value, that's basically it. We're not leaving them helpless for a world takeover or anything. They still have their unique abilities to protect themselves and others."

"Okay, that's crash and all but," Bart paced the room in agitation, "They're going to be soooo pissed if we do this."

"We're not actually considering this idea right?" Garfield squeaked nervously.

"Well..." Mal mused, "Right now the League are having their annual meeting deciding what course of action to take for next year." Artemis caught on.

"So now would be the perfect time to have the ability and access to these items."

"In fact," Karen raised an eyebrow, "It might be the only shot we have at pulling something like this."

"This sounds foolish, immature, and disrespectful," Kaldur, the wet blanket, declared.

"And the Kid has a point," Barbara pointed out, "The League certainly won't appreciate this. It would damage the trust between them and the Team."

"Wait." Tim stopped further objections, "I understand your concern. Really, I do. But I have a plan on how to deal with the aftermath. This isn't something I'd propose without thinking critically and weighing the consequences of the situation. And honestly," Tim took a deep breath. This would be the tricky part of his argument. "The appeal of this challenge is precisely because of who we're dealing with. A lot of us idolize the Justice League, put them on this pedestal that's too high for anyone to reach. Something that makes us hesitate and hold back, it's fear of disappointing our mentors. It can even hurt our confidence during missions. We have to really trust each other, focus, and be resourceful if we want to successfully overcome those problems. If we can gather these items from the Justice League, take something personal from them but accomplish the task regardless of guilt and fear, it's another step to viewing each other as equals. Because being on this Team isn't about failing or not failing the League, it's about living up to our potential, and helping make this world a better place. If we can come together and do this, there's no challenge we won't face head on. I can see already some of you doubt yourself, but I know we can do this. And like I said, I have a plan to deal with the aftermath. If the League is angry over this, I'll handle it, I have it all planned out."

"So, we're expected to trust you that we won't get thrown in with the sharks for doing this?" La'GAAN shook his head.
"Well, yeah. I mean... I'm not- I wouldn't just ruin your relationship with the people you care about for a Team exercise." Tim frowned, "Do you- Do you all really think that? That I'd do that to you?"

"Not on purpose." M'gann said kindly.

It's just... You've been through a lot lately." Jaime shifted his feet awkwardly. "Your judgment might be different than usual."

"Oh." Tim blinked in surprise as though he didn't expect this exact reaction. "Then I guess I'm just asking you to trust me."

"I'm in!" Cassie, who had been oddly silent, cheered, "I mean, Wonder Woman doesn't exactly let me have her lasso and she'll probably get mad if I take it, but hey you're right, it's important that we have the confidence to accomplish seemingly impossible feats without fear of disappointing our mentors. Everyone else agree before I change my mind and wimp out."

"You really thought this through?" Mal smiled, "I'll do it." Karen rolled her eyes.

"Ya'll are crazy, but I might as well."

"Blue Beetle and I are in, too!" Bart grinned.

"I didn't agree to that! ... But fine.... Crap... We are going to get in so much trouble."

"Fine." La'gaan surprisingly agreed, "But I refuse to be the one who dare tries to steal the trident."

"Kon?" Robin didn't mean to sound so desperate, but Kon's vote was important. After the previous incidents, did Kon trust him? Did Kon think Tim was simply crazy now?

"You have to ask? Of course I'm in. It's more fun than trying to do the usual boring Team Bonding exercises."

"Let's do this!" Garfield anxiously twitched his monkey tail, but he seemed determined. Artemis, M'gann, and Kaldur glanced at one another. M'gann spoke for the group.

"We will only do this if Nightwing agrees."

"Well," Barbara raised an eyebrow smugly at Dick, "What say you?"

"..." Nightwing made eye contact with Tim. "...I trust you. But," Tim tensed. "On one condition. You see," Then Dick smirked, "A certain cat told me about a certain present she gave you for Hanukkah."

"No." Robin gasped in betrayal, "Did she- Did she tell you?"

"Oh yes. She told me all about how you planned on becoming her protégé before you became Robin."

"What??" Cassie's eyes widened. The others shared similar reactions.

"So, Robin," Dick drawled, "What were you going to name yourself exactly?"

"I wasn't- That wasn't- I..." Tim hung his head in defeat, "I was going to go by the name of 'Stray.'"

"That's one mystery solved. As for the present she gave you..."
"Please don't make me do this-

"It's a suit like Catwoman's."

"Nightwing be reasonable-

"And you have to wear it for the scavenger hunt if you want my approval."

"Nightwing." Tim hardly cared if he was whining.

"Final offer. Take it or leave it."

"I'll do it." For a second Tim was afraid he agreed too readily, but Nightwing beamed at him.

"Alright. Now I definitely trust you. I'm in. Well, Team, get ready to feel the aster! If we don't regret this by the end of the day, I'll be very disappointed in all of you."

"You're both crazy." Barbara failed to hide her own smile.

"Okay, cool." Wow. Tim got them all to agree. Holy natural twenty persuasion check, Batman. "Let's get started."
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Scavenger hunt! How many thing can the Team steal from the Justice League before getting caught?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The entire outfit was black, except for the blue lenses of the goggles. Tim's Stray suit fit perfectly, obviously tailored specifically for him. It fit almost too well, as if he wore a second skin rather than clothing.

"You're staring." Babybird accused.

"Sorry." Kon mumbled.

"..."

"..."

"You're still staring. Does it- It looks that bad?"

"No! It's just..." he chewed the inside of his cheek trying to find the appropriate words. "Suggestive?" There wasn't a lot of skin showing and the suit wasn't necessarily too tight, but something about Tim in a catsuit felt... not wrong... just... seemed to have sexual implications.

"Good." Tim seemed pleased with himself. "It's supposed to look non-threatening, out of place to keep the enemy off-balance. It can be used as a distraction."

"Cool. And, no offense, but do you even know how to use that whip-?" Before Kon could fully finished his sentence he found himself flat on his back.

"Did you really doubt me?" Tim sat cross-legged on Superboy's torso.

"Okay, yeah, I asked for that one."

"You really did."

"Hey," Bart obnoxiously called out, "Quit flirting, we're all ready out here!"

Helping Kon to his feet, Tim led him into the debriefing room. Everyone lined up with determination in their posture, almost ridiculously serious. Though if Tim observed closely enough he could sense traces of nervousness. The tension was so high no one even commented on his outfit. Rude, really. It was Tim's own design and was frickin' awesome. At least Kon was impressed.

"Okay Team," Tim used his famous 'Robin' voice for his inspirational speech, "You all have your
designated tasks. Keep communications open. We can do this." Then Jaime snorted with disbelief, attempting to disguise it as a cough. Tim glared, "Is there a problem, Blue Beetle?"

"Well..." Jaime sheepishly shrugged, "They're the Justice League. This whole thing It's... what's the word I'm looking for..."

"Loco?" Bart guessed.

"Impossible?" Garfield suggested.

"Yeah, impossible."

"Good."

"If memory serves, we've done the impossible before."

This whole exercise was targeted toward the younger members who haven't fully realized that the Justice League aren't immortal, untouchable beings, and there's a difference between respecting them versus practically worshipping them. The original Team, back when Nightwing was Robin, they rebelled and formed their own path. But Cassie, Bart, Jaime, La'gaan, Garfield, they put heroes on too high of a pedestal. Understandable. Tim has been there. Heck, he still is sometimes. However if these kids want to be the Justice League one day then they need to understand no one is perfect, including their mentors.

"Look at how far we've come this past year. Look at what we've accomplished. The progress is astronomical. You've all dedicated your lives to make the world a better place, making sacrifices, refusing to give up because you want to do the right thing. You've each earned the title of hero and made this world proud. Right now I'm staring at the future of this Earth and it's never been in safer hands. It's an honor to have you as teammates."

"No."

"It's an honor to have you as friends."

"Friends, huh?" Tim raised an eyebrow.

"Friends." Karen confirmed.

"Friends." La'gaan agreed, yet again surprising Robin.

"Friends." Everyone echoed, nodding, some making eye contact with one another with a smile. They were more confident and aware of themselves. They knew they had each other to depend on. Maybe they still had doubts, but they had faith in one another.

"Friends." Tim repeated, the word felt heavy on his tongue like it now carried more weight than it did before. These people were... his friends. They saw him as their friend. Officially. Like they cared. Like they genuinely liked him and didn't only view him as a useful resource. And why would they fake that friendship this time? What would be the goal in that? A familiar feeling hit him again, something warm swirled in his chest, pleasant, too good to be true.

But now wasn't the time.

"Okay, Team." Robin declared with authority, "Let's move out." With that, everyone headed to the Zeta Beam to be transported to the Watchtower.

"Good speech." Nightwing whispered to Tim with a pat on the back before running off.
Kon and La'gaan strolled casually through the Watchtower.

"Do you want to begin or shall I?" Lagoon Boy asked Kon, sipping on a jug of saltwater. It had a putrid odor.

"You should." Superboy replied, "After all, you're usually the one to start it."

"What's that supposed to mean, Chum?"

"Nothing." Kon shrugged, "You just always feel the need to prove you're better than me so you're always picking fights."

"I'm not the one searching to argue. Merlin's beard, you always desired to make a fool of me in front of Miss Martian."

"I don't have to make a fool of you. You do that yourself."

"You think you're so clever. Everyone thinks you're so pure and innocent, but I know an eel amongst the seaweed when I see one. You're jealous of me and you lash out accordingly."

"I'm jealous of you?" Kon scoffed, "I wasn't the rebound boyfriend for M'gann. You were only used as a tool for her to win me back." That struck a nerve.

"Using your friends- you two deserve each other. You come from the same school of fish."

"Oh? Who am I 'using'?"

"Isn't it obvious? Robin." Now it was Kon's turn to get angry.

"What?"

"Clearly."

"How?"

"You're using him to make M'gann jealous. And considering what he's been through, you've truly reached a lower depth."

"Maybe you're not over it, but I'm not interested in M'gann like that anymore. I'm friends with Robin because I like him and because you all were talking shit about him thinking he didn't know! You think he didn't hear all the times you guys said he was emotionless or a snob? How do you think he felt when the people he respected so much gossiped like that? Even worse, he believed you guys were right about him when he is one of the most caring people I know!" Apparently La'gaan felt guilty.

"In my defense, he disregarded invitations of socializing-" They stopped in front of Superman's room.

"No. There is no excuse. You didn't just ignore him, you actively disrespected him. And it hurt. And if you--if we--had gotten to know him sooner then maybe- maybe-"

"I apologized-"

"That's not good enough!" Kon snarled.

"What else do you want me to do? I can't go back and fix everything!"
"Try harder to be less of a jerk!"

"Well, Chum, that's hypocritical considering you lust after him like a shark that's smelled blood! I think the real threat to Robin is you."

"I'm not-!"

"Ever since he's become friends with you he's disobeyed orders, gotten kidnapped, tortured, raped, and what help have you been?"

"Shut. Up."

"You've been used as bait, he trips over himself trying to impress you and you encourage it."

"Shut. Up."

"Are you trying to help him, or are you just looking for a mating partner? You're no better-"

Kon pulled his fist back in order to punch La'gaan in the face, but Superman's door swooshed open.

"What in Rao's name is all the commotion about? I'm trying to sleep." demanded Clark, both irritated and concerned.

"Nothing, sir." La'gaan politely apologized, "We're sorry for disturbing you." Kon snorted.

"Kiss ass."

"Language." Clark reprimanded.

"It's called showing respect." La'gaan added.

"I swear, Lagoon Boy, if you say another word I'm going to break your face in."

"Go ahead." La'gaan challenged sarcastically, "Make Superman proud."

"You slimy son of a-"

"Kon-El, Don't." Clark ordered.

"You're taking his side?"

"No, I'm just-"

"Oh, I get it. I'm half Luthor so I'm always in the wrong."

"You know that's not true-"

"Well," La'gaan chimed in, "He's certainly acting like a Luthor-" So then Kon attacked him.

Clark did his best to hold Superboy back without hurting him, so when La'gaan's jug of smelly water flung through the air it splashed all over Superman's cape, Kon and Lagoon Boy froze.

"Superman," Kon's eyes widened, "I am so sorry."

"I apologize profusely, sir." La'gaan joined in on their pleas of forgiveness.

"It's okay." sighed Clark, "It dries quickly and, well, it's been through worse."
"We'll, um, we can clean it for you." Kon offered, "Like a truce between Lagoon Boy and me."

"No, no, that's alright. I think you two need some space to cool off." Kon could already tell the scent bothered Clark to no end.

"Superboy. Lagoon Boy." Kaldur briskly walked over to the group, "Take five. I don't want to hear so much as a grumble of complaining."

Pouting, Kon and La'gaan started going their separate ways. Using superhearing, Kon eavesdropped on Aqualad's conversation. Kaldur spoke gravely.

"I just don't know what to do about those two. The animosity between them grows everyday. I could really use some advice, perhaps in a place we will not be... overheard."

"Yeah, I get it. Let me just take off this cape first. The smell is murder." Soon the two were out of hearing distance, presumably entering one of the specially designed soundproof rooms Batman helped build.

"They're gone." Kon spoke over communicator to La'gaan. Acting quickly, Superboy rushed to Superman's door, scanning his thumb for permission to enter the room.

"Guest Kon-El." The computer buzzed, "Access granted." A hint of guilt gnawed at Kon for abusing Superman's trust, but it was for a good cause, right? They wasted no time in grabbing the cape and stuffing it in a lead-lined bag. Listening to see if the coast was clear, Kon and Lagoon Boy walked casually if not quickly to the Zeta-Beam.

They got so close to escaping.

"What do you think you're doing?" And, oh, Superman did not look happy. La'gaan tried explaining first.

"We felt so responsible for soiling your cape that we absolutely insist you let us clean-"

"Don't. Lie. To. Me." Oh, this wasn't good. Superman's eyes were almost tinged red.

"Honestly," Kon said, choosing honesty, "It's a scavenger hunt."

"What?" That made Clark pause and tilt his head in curiosity.

"For our Team bonding exercise we're gathering items from some of the members of the Justice League."

"Okay, but why?"

"Robin said it's supposed to improve our resourcefulness and determination or something."

"This is Robin's idea then?"

"Well... yeah. But everyone agreed to it." Would Clark be upset with Tim for convincing everyone to do this?

"Well in that case, take good care of my cape, okay? My mother made it for me."

"What?" La'gaan obviously taken aback, "You- really?"

"Sure. I don't see why not. Sounds harmless enough, and some of the League need to lighten up
once in a while, have some fun. I'm sure if Robin planned this then everything will be fine." Clark winked at Lagaan for some reason? Eh, whatever.

"Thanks." Kon nodded.

"Thank you, sir." La'gaan still appeared surprised.

Then they walked away with their prize. Task complete. As they left La'gaan spoke.

"I didn't mean what I said. You're a good friend to Robin. He's... happier than before. Everyone can see that."

Kon didn't reply, but he hoped La'gaan was right.

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"Okay, I got Wonder Woman's lasso. Dear Hera, please don't let her murder me when she finds out I took it." Cassie prayed.

"Excellent." Tim praised, "Blue Beetle?"

"We got Aquaman's trident from his room. Hopefully, Mal's hologram will be convincing enough and Aquaman won't try to use the trident until after the Justice League's conference."

"Very good. Bart?"

"Yep. I got Flash's left shoe."

How'd you manage that?" Artemis questioned.

"I just ran up in a panic and said 'quickdon'taskquestionsbutIneedyourleftshoe' and I took it."

"Right." Artemis rolled her eyes, "Typical speedster. Well, I got Green Arrow's bow by asking nicely. And Bumblebee-"

"Got Black Canary's necklace." proudly finished Karen, "I told her I wanted to turn it into a prototype that would measure the decibels her scream gives off."

"Beast Boy and I got Uncle J'onn's cookies." M'gann shamefully confirmed. Kaldur then reported.

"We've yet to retrieve Hawkgirl's mace or Green Lantern's power charger."

"This just in-" Barbara joined the gang, "I stole the mace. But Hawkgirl is going to freak when she finds out so..."

"Okay," Tim turned to Blue Beetle, Bart, and M'gann, "Hawkgirl's mace can disrupt magic. Take it to Green Lantern's room and swing it above his bedside table. He hides his lantern in a pocket dimension there. The mace should cause a rift in the pocket that will give you access. Blue- you can hack into the alarm system, Miss Martian- you can use camouflaged mode to hide the group, and Kid Flash- if there's trouble you need to take the items and run like hell."

"Yes, sir, oh fearless leader." Bart saluted. The three assigned promptly left.

"Alright, so, you gonna tell me how you plan on telling me how I'm supposed to get Batman's utility belt?" Dick crossed his arms at Tim.
"Glad you asked," Robin smirked, showing Dick the map of the Watchtower third floor. "So, you and Batgirl come in from the left entrance while Superboy causes a distraction over here."

"Okay, whoa. Hold up." Nightwing stopped him, "This is a great plan, but Batman isn't going to fall for it."

"Oh." And Tim didn't deny he felt disappointed. "Do you have a better idea?"

"As a matter of fact..."

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"This isn't going to work." Timmers kept mumbling under his breath.

"Relax." Nightwing grinned, more excited than was appropriate, "He isn't in the conference room yet. This is perfect timing."

"We look so stupid."  

"Speak for yourself." Babs chided, "I actually make this look work."

"And I've never felt so sexy before." Dick added. Timmy only sighed as the three of them waltzed into the control room.

Batman stood, unplugging a flash drive he no doubt planned on using for the conference he was about to lead. The expression on his face when he saw them, priceless.

Timmy Tim of course was wearing his new Stray outfit. Meanwhile Babs dressed in Nightwing's old costume, back when he couldn't decide what style he wanted to settle on. It had a huge collar with an obnoxious v cut. There was light blue and gold trimming, truly a masterpiece. Too bad no one took Dick seriously whenever he wore it.

And Dick, well, he was wearing a Robin costume. Not just any Robin costume though, it was based off of his original outfit, complete with scaly green underwear and pixie boots. He loved the suit when he was nine, hated it two years later, but in retrospect he now considered it iconic. Honestly, the lack of pants felt nothing less than refreshing. It had been so long since he experienced this kind of freedom. He sort of felt like his ten year old self again. Hmm, maybe there was a chandelier nearby he could swing from.

The first words out of Bruce's mouth were, "Why."

"Family photo!" Dick chirped at him, "Lookin' pretty snazzy so far, huh?"

"No."

"C'mon, Batman," Babs put her hands on her hips, "We've put a lot of effort into this. Look, we know you have your meeting, we just came to ask you for your belt."

"My belt." It was a question.

"For authenticity!" Dick proclaimed loudly, dramatically, "Are you really going to make Alfred dress as Batman without the proper utility belt?" In response Bruce glared so Babs showed him a picture on her phone.

It was Alfred. Dressed as Batman. You could tell it was Al because of his perfect posture and the fact he was still carrying a tray of cucumber sandwiches.
Bruce muttered something that sounded like 'what did I do to deserve this.'

"Look," Dick explained, "Selina is dressing as Alfred and you'll be dressed as Batgirl. It's going to be hella aster!"

"Tell you what," Babs smirked, "If you give us the belt now then we won't make you wear the red wig we got."

By this time Bruce was running late for his meeting.

"We'll talk about this later." He growled, trying to maneuver around them.

"I told you this was stupid!" Tim hissed. Then louder he apologized, "Sorry for disrupting you."

"Tim, wait-" Dick called out when the teen turned to leave.

"I told you he wouldn't want a family photo!" Robin pointed accusingly at the acrobat, "I'm not-I'm not-I'm..." his voice became smaller, "I know I'm not him. I'm sorry, Bruce. It's not my place to... I'm not trying to replace your son, I swear. I wouldn't disrespect his memory like that. I'm sorry. I understand if you don't want me to be in the family photo."

Dick's stomach dropped because Tim wasn't acting. Robin honestly thought Bruce was saying no because the kid wasn't part of the family. Oh no, this plan seriously backfired. Panicked, the acrobat gave Bruce a look Alfred would be proud of, translating into "Don't you dare let poor Timmy walk away."

"Here." Bruce's low voice grumbled in defeat, handing his belt to Babs. "Take it. Don't let Alfred get any ideas about becoming a vigilante."

"Are you sure?" Tim hesitantly asked, hope sparkling in his eyes.

"Hnnh. I'm not wearing a wig... Itchy..."

Okay, so it wasn't "No, Tim, you're my son and i love you" but the kid lit up like a Christmas tree anyway, er... or maybe like a menorah on Hannukah? Hmm. Anyway, they left Bruce alone and Zeta-Beamed their way to the California base.

"Alright," Babs greeted the Team, incorporating Batman's utility belt to their pile of treasure, "Do we have everything?"

"Miss Martian's group isn't back yet." Tim noticed with a frown.

"Yeah, we haven't heard from them." Karen informed. No more than a second after she said that did Bart come crashing into the room followed by Jaime and M'gann.

"We got it!" He yelped, "But Green Lantern caught us and then we heard Hawkgirl screaming from the other room-" M'gann hastily put the mace and lantern with the other items. "-She didn't sound happy."

A thunderous bang echoed through the adjacent hallway as they saw green light glowing around the corner. They just needed the items in one place for five seconds. Just five seconds.

5.

"WHERE ARE THEY?" That sounded like Hawkgirl. Someone punched a wall in the distance.
"They better have a good explanation." Was that Wonder Woman? Aw, crap.

"Maybe we should get out of here." Garfield suggested.

"I agree with the green guy." Mal nodded. Tim glared.

"Hold your ground."

"Be reasonable Arthur-"

"Be reasonable? They took my trident." Was the whole League here? Everyone must've connected the dots.

"Hey, they took my left shoe but I'm not complaining."

"Found them!" Green Lantern, Hal Jordon, crowed upon seeing the group. Nightwing found himself in a fighting stance. "Do you children have any idea how much trouble-"

"ZERO. WE DID IT. Guys, we did it!" Cassie yelled. "Thank Zeus. I never want to do this again." She slumped against Artemis in relief.

"Crash!" Bart cheered, but the congratulations were cut short when most of the League filed into the room. It was... terrifying. The Team looked to Robin for his "plan" on handling the fallout of this exercise. The teen kept his face stoic, gazing ahead in concentration.

"What exactly did you do?" Wonder Woman's tone was a plunge into icy waters.

"Um, well, you see..." Cassie squeaked, fumbling over an explanation.

"Kaldur," Aquaman snapped, immediately striding over to claim his trident, "Tell me what happened. Is this treason?"

"No, my King." Aqualad assured, "It was a... a training exercise." And wow did that explanation not seem adequate for the situation at hand at all.

"And it was a success," Nightwing felt the need to say, ignoring how blatantly the Leaguers stared at his Robin costume, "Your items are unharmed and we're sorry for the inconvenience."

"Your 'training' exercise was to steal from us?" Hal spluttered in anger, "And your response is thank you, you can leave now?" By this point Black Canary and Green Arrow retrieved their things and got out before things got too heated. After all, technically no one stole from them, although Dick was sure they didn't appreciate being lied to. That was an issue to be dealt with later. Superman got his cape but stayed to watch. J'onn silently took his Moreo cookies, ate one, decided all was forgiven, and promptly vanished through the opposite wall. Flash ruffled Bart's hair, told him "good job," and left.

"I've never been so disappointed in you, Cassie." Wonder Woman shook her head.
"It's not her fault-" Garfield began defending before stopping as Wonder Woman glared at him.

"Where's was the idiot who thought this was a good idea?" Hawkgirl cracked her knuckles, "We're going to have some words." Everyone remained silent.

Then Batman glided into the room. Fashionably late, like usual.

"Batman." Tim greeted, finally speaking, "I have the psych evaluation on the Team ready for you. I'm sure you realize by now the one I gave you before was a decoy." Bruce nodded. What?

"Psych evaluation?" Jaime squinted at Robin.

"Yes. The other part of this exercise. I'm contributing to the discussion of what Team members would be valuable assets to the Justice League by giving a psych report on how you all coped with stealing and manipulating the League."

"So," Wonder Woman turned on Bruce, "This is your doing. I should've guessed." Hal joined in.

"You're teaching children to steal? I don't know why I'm even surprised."

Aquaman, however, seemed to be fairly satisfied knowing his pupils were following orders, acting on faith in their leaders, not just messing around to cause trouble. He gave a nod in approval before leaving. One less thing to worry about then. Tim sighed that the adults didn't seem to understand.

"He didn't say to do this exactly as an exercise. But I found it to be the most accurate way to judge everyone's state of mind and critical thinking. You should be pleased to know they've all met the basic requirements to join the League: Loyalty, Ethics, Trust, Resourcefulness, etc."

"I don't remember 'stealing' being on the list." Oh, shut up, Hal.

"Unorthodox, but effective." Batman admitted, sort of impressed.

"You're not going to do anything about this??"

"You're right. I almost forgot. Robin- as we agreed, you're no longer benched. You can go back on patrol... but not dressed like that."

"I accept those conditions." Tim almost smiled.

"From where I'm standing, none of you are ready to join the League." Wonder Woman still glared at Cassie.

"Read the evaluation before deciding." Clark suggested, "If Robin says they're ready then we should here him out. Besides, no harm no foul. They promised nothing would get damaged."

"How can you... Wait... Did you know about this, Superman?"

"Uh."

"You knew!"

"Well, okay, yeah. Seemed fine to me. And the fact they managed to take something from all of us? You've got to admit, that's impressive for anyone."

"Alright. Wonder Girl, you're forgiven, but don't you ever steal from me again. Batman-Superman- we're not done talking about this." And Cassie sighed, probably glad she'd been more
"You're all crazy!" Hal gave up, irritated, "Let's just get back to the meeting and get it over with!"

Hawkgirl had been... oddly quiet as she stood next to Hawkman.

"You." She pointed at Conner. "Give me my weapon." Superboy picked up her mace and walked toward her. But Tim stopped him, confusing everyone.

"What are you doing?" Conner whispered, and yeah, what did Tim think he was doing? Why would he- No. He wasn't? Would he?

"If she wants it," Tim stood straight, defiant, "She has to come and get it." He did. Hawkgirl scoffed.

"Are you challenging me little boy?" Seeing what was about to happen, Batgirl signaled everyone to clear a space for the battle. God, Dick should've known. With Hawkgirl's culture, the planet she's from, of course the only path to forgiveness was through violence. That's how one earns respect.

"Unless you're surrendering before we even begin."

"Very well." Hawkgirl easily borrowed Hawkman's mace, yielding it at the ready. Just as dramatically Tim picked up the mace Superboy held, and immediately it thunked to the ground, Tim struggling to lift it.

"Heavier than I thought-" Tim grunted before getting hit in the gut. The small teen flew backward into a table, breaking it and half and buried under the splintered pieces. It made Dick cringe.

"Don't pick a fight with a true warrior," Hawkgirl strode toward the table Tim was buried under, "And come unprepared for-" But she was interrupted by a mace to the face. She stumbled back several paces, holding her jaw.

"Sorry," Robin stood, smirking, twirling the mace as if it were weightless, Wow, what a deceitful brat. "I couldn't hear you through the blood in your mouth."

So the fight really took off. Tim could mostly dodge, not quite confident enough to take the initiative. Something strange, Dick couldn't help but notice his change in fighting style. Unlike his fighting in the Robin suit, Tim focused more on agility, a style closer to Catwoman's. Interesting. Dick wondered not for the first time how much of Tim's personality depended on the persona he wore. The kid got a few good hits in but lost in the end, of course. The goal wasn't to win, it was to have a good fight.

Hawkgirl smiled by the end of the it, lifting her mace triumphantly.

"You fought well." She complimented Tim who didn't bother getting up off of the ground.

"Thanks. You too." He replied out of breath, wincing when he tried to move.

Hawkgirl turned to leave, telling Batman, "You should be proud." Then the Leaguers, needing to finish their annual conference, went back to the Watchtower.

"So, your plan was to blame Batman for everything?" Artemis raised an eyebrow at Tim. "And pick a fight with Hawkgirl?"
"Basically." Tim confirmed. "It worked, too. Everyone involved might be annoyed at him for a while but eh. At least I'm not benched anymore. Woo." He winced in pain.

"You did a psych eval on us?" La'gaan huffed in slight annoyance. But really, it's less intrusive than sneaking around to get a urine sample so don't look a gift horse in the mouth, sheesh.

"Yeah. I've come to conclusion anyone who dedicates their lives to this job is frickin' insane." The teen still made no attempt to stand.

"Uh," Jaime offered, "You want some help or..."

"Nah, I'm good. Just going to chill down here for a little while. Catch my breath. Wait for the room to stop spinning. You guys aren't mad I lied to you? I understand if you are."

"You're wearing a catsuit and got pummeled by Hawkgirl. I just kinda feel bad for ya." Karen shrugged.

"Besides," Dick grinned despite everything, "Batgirl and I bet Catwoman we could get you to wear this suit so I'm pretty pleased with myself." He fist bumped with Babs.

"Yeah," Tim rolled his eyes, "Catwoman so happened to bet you that I wouldn't wear this purrfectly designed suit right as I needed a reason to convince you to accept this scavenger hunt idea. That doesn't sound planned at all."

Holy- Dick had been played. Like a flute. Like a violin. Like a cheap, two dollar kazoo someone's selling in a yard sale for 50 cents. Okay, that hurt his pride a tad more than he'd like to admit.

"Well, I think it was crash!" Bart exclaimed, "Anyone want to do it again-?" And everyone agreed, "NO."

Chapter End Notes

Note: It's pretty much impossible for anyone on the League to hold a grudge against the Team when they read Tim's psych evaluation, which highly emphasized how much the younger members admired their mentors, and emphasized the progress they've made because of their dedication and determination for protecting the Earth.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

The first time Tim learned to hate someone he was three years old. His parents took him to the circus.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for all the nice comments!! I can't believe I almost have 1,000 kudos on this!!

The first time Tim learned to hate someone he was three years old. His parents took him to the circus.

Noises deafened his ears, bright colors blinded him, but he wouldn't--couldn't--complain. He couldn't act like a baby because important people might be watching, and Timothy had to make a good first impression. His mother held his hand, far too painfully, but it never occurred to him to protest. Instead, he struggled to walk properly while still keeping up with his parents' pace. He knew they were taking him to someone who had lots of money and he'd be staying at their house for a few days. His parents called them "clients." Timothy didn't like clients very much, but he was told it made his parents happy and that made it okay.

His mother smiled too wide when she saw cameras around, and his father laughed too loudly. The laughter sometimes made Timothy jump, which caused his mother to give his hand a painful squeeze. He tried his best to stop fidgeting and kept his questions to himself. Why did those people have white faces and red noses? Is that a lion? Why is everything so bright and loud? Who are these people? What is he smelling that's making him so hungry? Why are these children running around screaming? Don't they know children are supposed to be quiet and well-behaved?

Then Timothy met him and everything changed.

"There," Timothy's mother whispered to his father, "This is the kind of fluff piece the newspapers are looking for." They stopped in front of three people, all of them dressed in red. One of them was a child, older than Timothy, and he smiled. It was a... kind smile, not like Mother's. Timothy felt his face heat up the longer the kid stared at him so unabashedly.

"Timothy is just a little nervous to see you perform." His mother's smile grew tight and Timothy realized he was gawking impolitely the entire time. He snapped his mouth shut. Mother laughed, "Don't worry, Timothy. The Flying Graysons are professionals. Dick will be just fine."

"Yeah, Tim, you better watch me 'cause I'm going to do the quadruple somersault jus' for you." The boy, Dick, puffed out his chest proudly and no one seemed angry that he spoke out of turn. Timothy out of politeness didn't correct him for saying "Tim" as if Timothy were a baby. What was a quadruple somersault anyway? It sounded cool the way Dick talked about it. He wished he was allowed to ask questions. There were so many things he wanted to know.
"Do you mind if we take a picture with you?" Mother asked.

"Of course, we'd be delighted." The lady--Dick's mother?--beamed in response. Her smile mirrored Dick's grin exactly.

"C'mere, Tim." Dick scooped him up and placed Timothy in front of everyone, facing the camera. "Say cheese!"

"Cheese?" He blurted before thinking. Oh no. Would Dick get angry?

"Yeah, cheese. It's what you say when you smile for the camera." The boy explained easily, wrapping one arm around Timothy's shoulder. It felt... soothing.

"Oh." He nodded, glad to get an answer to his question. "Cheese." The camera clicked. A mere second later Dick swept him up in a hug.

"Be good, Tim." The hug was nice and safe and soft and wonderful. And confusing. Why would Dick be so nice? Timothy didn't earn a hug, especially one so nice. Didn't Dick know the rules? "I'll see you later!" They let go and the family in red walked away. Timothy waved goodbye, disappointed they had to leave so soon. Still, they probably had better things to do than entertain him.

He decided red was his new favorite color.

After they left his mother sniffed in disdain.

"Disgusting," she muttered.

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Tim sighed with an odd sense of contentment. It was snowing outside, but the snow drifted down gently, blanketing Gotham, giving the city an illusion purity and innocence.

He walked to the school library after finishing test he was 99% certain he aced. Cassie's lessons on fitting in with high society were going well. Ace the dog was being trained by Dick who claimed the pupper learned quickly. Kon and Robin often chilled together after training. Things had been fairly peaceful giving Tim hope this year would be more to his liking. In fact, to better enjoy this brief moment of peace he decided to take a day to himself, something he has never done by choice before. Honestly, he'd likely to get bored soon enough and fling himself back into a case file, but until then he could pretend otherwise.

On the way down the empty hall he bumped into Margaret. Her suspension over falsely accusing Tim of sexual assault must be done. Fan-freakin-tastic.

"Oh, hey." she glanced away. Tim didn't say anything and went around her.

"Wait!" Margaret called after him much to his annoyance.

"Oh, hey." she glanced away. Tim didn't say anything and went around her.

"Wait!" Margaret called after him much to his annoyance.

"What?" Tim snipped.

"I just... Look. I never apologized. I'm-- I'm sorry. I just panicked and I was stupid and, well, it was just wrong of me to kiss you like that. I get that. And then saying you attacked me... God that was stupid. I didn't want to get in trouble and I freaked. I was scared. I did all these shitty things to prove myself to my friends but they ended up ditching me and you got outed to the whole school... I never meant for any of this to happen. I never meant to hurt you. I'm sorry."
"Okay."

"But, um, and it's fine if you say no. I mean, I would. But- but, uh..." she took a deep breath, "I'm failing algebra and you're the smartest in our class and my parents are going to kill me if they find out and I really really need to pass this next exam."

"..."

"I know I don't deserve your help but please. My parents already think I'm a disappointment, especially my dad. I don't want to give them a reason to hate me even more. They're threatening to kick me out of the house as soon as I'm 18 if I don't get my act together. They're so- so ashamed of me, and I don't know how to fix it. I just know I can't fail this class."

"..."

"I get it. You don't trust me. I'm - I'm sorry for bothering you. Just forget about it, okay? I can find someone else." And Tim was content to let her walk away... but... Her eyes were puffy as if she'd been previously crying earlier that day, hair tangled in knots, her posture conveying a sense of hopelessness... Dang.

"Alright." Tim and his stupid bleeding heart, "I'm trusting you. You want to keep the tutoring a secret I suppose? I'm free this evening. I can text you my address." He hadn't been 'home' for weeks, but the housekeeper still cleans the Drake residence every other day so it would be in good order.

"Really?" Her mouth dropped in surprise. They traded numbers. She seemed genuine in her apology and went in to hug Tim before stopping herself. "Sorry, I should probably ask before..."

"Yes. You should. I'll see you tonight. Don't be late." Tim walked away without another word, already worried he would regret giving her a second chance.

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Kon was the tiniest bit disappointed that Tim didn't want to hang out today. But Robin had been through so much lately, who was Kon to stop him from relaxing for a day? The poor teen shoved all his trauma to the side to train and help Cassie to prepare for that Wintertide fancy dance thingy. It was selfish for Kon to ask more from him.

Slumping deeper into the couch, Superboy blankly stared at the TV screen, wondering what Tim could be doing. Wolf trotted up beside him and laid down, softly nudging his hand. Great, he was depressing his dog with his moping. Was this all his life was now? Fretting over Tim like some mother hen? Maybe he could just send a text... No. No, he had to stop hovering like some love-struck fool. One call though... He could pretend he called by mistake... Gah.

"For Zeus's sake, Conner!" Cassie's voice startled him, "Just call him already. You're giving us all second-hand anxiety!"

"Yeah, I'm sure everything's crash." Bart shrugged, "No harm in calling to say hello."

"I know he's fine." Kon snapped defensively, "Batman's probably, like, tracking his every move."

"Then stop worrying." p>

"I'm not worried."
"Here," Cassie handed him her laptop, "Distract yourself by taking an online quiz." Kon squinted at the quiz pulled up. *What kind of gay are you?*

"Pass."

Then he got a text that read, "EMERGENCY. DRAKE RESIDENCE. GET HERE ASAP. NOT A DRILL." See? This is why they should worry! Bad shit *always* happens.

"Robin needs help!" Kon bellowed to the young heroes who were lounging about in the base with him.

"Wha-?" Garfield woke up from his nap, promptly falling face-first to the floor.

"Why?" Jaime stood up from the couch, holding hands with Bart.

"I don't know. He said it was an emergency though." answered Kon, "We have to get there asap."

"Alright, Team, suit up and move out!" Cassie ordered. So Superboy, Wonder Girl, Beast Boy, Kid Flash, and Blue Beetle rushed to help their friend.

And when they got there it was nothing like they were expecting. Last time Kon got this kind of text from Tim it had been because Ra's Al Ghul had broken in. This time... there were a lot of drunk teenagers partying. Hiding behind a small collection of trees in the snowy backyard, they hesitated over how to proceed. Music vibrated the ground and, oh, someone was upstairs doing... things. They were about to call Tim when-

"You brought half the Team?" Tim appeared from nowhere, "In full gear? This is a *Tim* problem, not a *Robin* problem." Okay, okay, but how was Kon supposed to know that? "I texted your Kon phone, not your Superboy phone!" Clearly Babybird was not having a good time.

"I can't believe you'd have a party without inviting us." Cassie observed the chaos within the house. Kon guessed he wasn't the only one who heard a vase break. This guess was confirmed when Tim winced as if in pain.

"This is not a party! This is a disaster!" Tim waved his arms in distress, "The cleaning lady is going to be here in half an hour and when she sees this she'll tell my parents and- and- and-" He took a deep breath. "Actually, I can make this work. Beast Boy, turn into a python and scare all the teens out of my house. Blue Beetle, I'm messaging you the coordinates of Ms. Mac, try to delay her from getting here so Kid Flash, Superboy, Wonder Girl and I can work on clean up."

"Uh." Kon blinked. "Okay. We have our orders, I guess. Are you okay, Tim?" The guy paced back and forth, eyes wild, not wearing a jacket but seemingly oblivious to the cold.

"There's a party in my house, Kon. A party. *My house.* Babybird's voice cracked. "We have to fix this. They've already stained the living room sofa, broke a chair in the sitting room. The bathroom wall downstairs has a huge chunk missing from it. And they--god--they broke into my father's drinking cabinet. *His alcohol, Kon. They got into his alcohol stash.* That's the one thing in the house he cares about and these kids are drinking it all!"

"Whoa. It's alright-"

"No, it's not!" Kon heard Tim's heart beating faster by the second. "I'm pretty sure a couple of people snuck into my parents' bedroom and I don't even *know* what it's supposed to look like in there because I'm not allowed in that room and there are important historical- historical- what if they break an ancient artifact?? My mom's not stupid, Kon! She can tell if we get a fake one to
"Tim--"

"I'm- I'm going to have to burn the house down. That's the only safe solution. At least then we can get money from the insurance company and it won't be my fault. Oh, who am I kidding. Whether or not I'm responsible for burning down the house they'll still blame me."

"Tim, no one is going to set anything on fire-" Kon heard the screams of teenagers who were running away from a giant green snake in the house. "- it's going to be fine. We'll help you." He gave a look to Cassie and she got the hint.

"Right! Of course! Yeah, Tim. We'll get this fixed up and your parents never have to find out."

"Uh..." Bart searched his pockets before helpfully pulling out a pack of gummy worms, "You want a snack?"

"No," Tim gave a half-smile, "But thanks. All of you."

Garfield came back. "The house is clear."

"Right. Let's see the damage."

The inside of the house... Well, Kon has seen worse, but by the expression on Tim's face, the wreckage was nothing less than inconceivable.

"They broke the drinking cabinet, smashed it." He whispered, horrified. "That cabinet was handmade. My dad... shit. And we can't even bribe Ms. Mac because Mother promises twice as much for anyone who snitches on me."

"Um," Bart tapped the teen on the shoulder, "Not to add to bad news but," he held up what looked like an animal bone split in half, "This isn't important, is it?"

"Ohmygod." Tim gawked, "My mother found that in South America... She- she won an award for her findings there, got a trophy and everything. There's no way to fix this. She's an expert archaeologist. She's going to know when she sees-" And his heartbeat increased again, worse than before. Tim's eyes widened and he clutched at his chest like he couldn't breathe. Feeling panicked himself, Kon put a hand on Tim's shoulder.

"Deep breaths. You're okay. Just focus on breathing."

"She- they- I can't-" Tim curled in on himself. "I'm okay. I'm fine- I'm- I'm- I can't believe this is happening right n-now." Kon crushed him in a hug until Tim stopped shaking as much.

"Hey, the woman," Cassie asked Babybird, "Ms. Mac, will she know the difference?" He shook his head.

"No. I- I doubt- doubt it."

"Then let's focus on the things she will notice, like the beer stains on the floor."

"I know how to get those out." Kon volunteered.

They worked on what they could, Bart really helped speed things up. He even built a new cabinet after reading a few books about wood carving. Blue Beetle came back to help them. With the help
of Tim's money, they completely replaced some of the furniture. They even replaced the bed sheets in his parents' room.

"Is he going to be okay?" Bart whispered to Kon at one point, nodding over at Tim. Babybird was viciously scrubbing the countertops in the kitchen, still trembling head to toe.

"Yes?" Superboy squinted, "Nothing physically wrong with him, but..."

"Jaime thinks he's on the brink of a nervous breakdown."

"When isn't he?"

"Haha. But seriously- You said his parents were abusive but look at him, he's terrified. He's never this bad before. What are we dealing with here exactly? What did they do to him?"

"It's not really my place to say..."

"Wow," Bart snorted, "Try telling that to Cassie when she decides to interrogate you." True, Cassie cleaned while shooting Kon questioning glares. "If it's something bad, like really bad, and you don't tell us and then something happens to him."

"Nothing is going to happen to him!" Kon hissed.

"As far as we know when they ground him it means he's not allowed to eat food. What else is there? Do they hit him? Do they-"

"We don't know exactly." Kon grunted in an end-of-conversation way. Frowning, Bart didn't mention it again while they worked.

"We're almost finished!" Garfield eventually smiled, talking to Tim.

"We are, aren't we? Still need to replace the liquor though-" Babybird ran a hand through his hair. Then they heard the door unlocked. Blue Beetle cursed under his breath and Tim leapt into action. "Everyone, hide in my room. Now!" Instantly obeying, they scrambled up the stairs, quiet when they closed the door to Tim's room behind them.

......................................

Timothy had never seen anything so amazing, so impossible. His parents said he was allowed to smile and cheer with the crowd as long as he didn't do so too loudly. So he cheered when Dick soared through the air, defying gravity, flying. He flipped once, twice, three times, four times. The crowd went wild, he heard someone shout "The Flying Grayson quadruple somersault!" Oh, that must've been what Dick had meant earlier! In that moment, seeing the freedom and joy on Dick's face, Timothy knew he wanted to feel like that one day.

Dick's part in the show sadly ended. His parents went up the ladder. His mother went first. Then his father. And they were equally amazing, dancing through the air. Timothy found himself holding his breath more than once, stunned by their grace.

And then it happened.

The trapeze rope snapped.

He watched as Dick's parents fell through the air and closed his eyes. The audience screamed. Timothy's parents grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, pulling him toward the exit amidst all the
noise and people. Then he heard sobbing, heartbroken wailing. Opening his eyes he turned back
and saw Dick, holding onto limp bodies. Timothy didn't have words to describe the feeling of
overwhelming loss, empathy for the boy. And so Timothy started crying, too.

In vain, he tugged against his mother's grip, suddenly seeing a large dark figure looming over Dick.
No, get away! Dick, a monster, get away! The monster reached out... and Tim realized it wasn't a
monster at all. **Batman.** His brain made the connection. **Batman was there to help Dick.** After the
stories he heard about Batman being a myth or terror to the people, he almost couldn't believe what
he was seeing. **He was seeing Batman for the first time. Batman wasn't a monster; he was a hero.**

"You're embarrassing us, Timothy." His mother snapped as they dragged Timothy to the car. His
father gruffly shoved Timothy through the door.

"Are we not going to give him to our client-"

"With the police taping off every corner? Don't be stupid, Jack. For god's sake, Timothy, crying is
for babies. Stop it right now or you'll spend the rest of the night in the basement." But Timothy
couldn't stop, he tried, but he couldn't. Dick's face, his cries, they wouldn't leave his head. Janet’s
face twisted in disgust and she slammed the car door shut. Jack took the front seat.

"Figures this would happen." He sniffed, "Cheap circus."

"Not just cheap." Janet griped, getting in the car, "Dirty, tasteless, amateur at best. Take a note,
Timothy. If you were raised by common circus freaks you'd be lying on the ground dead as well,
too idiotic to make sure the ropes work properly before preforming. That's the last time we go to a
place like this."

"That child of theirs was a horror. Hopefully he learns something from this."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Mark my words, that brat will get involved with another
failure performance art and land face first just like his parents." They continued talking like that
the entire drive. When they got home Timothy wasn't allowed clothes or food.

Sitting on the cold floor of the basement he stared at the wall, angry, remembering Dick's smile. It
wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. And Mother and Father... talking with such contempt... He hated
them. **He hated them. He hated his parents.**

..........................................

"Ms. Mac," Tim greeted, but froze. It wasn't Ms. Mac.

"Timothy." Janet strode passed him, "You're here, good, saves me time. I wanted to give this to
you directly." She wore a business suit like usual, hair pinned back professionally. Her face barely
moved when she spoke; Tim couldn't decipher her motives.

She handed him an intricately decorated card. Clearly expensive paper and it looked professionally
printed. Suspicious, Tim took the card like it could be a bomb.

**Wintertide Soirée.** An invitation? But then he saw the key words, **co-hosted by Timothy J. Drake..**
Holy silver spoon hell, Batman.

"You're old enough to go in place of your father and I. Consider it training for the day you host
parties such as these by yourself." Janet eyed the living room. "It shouldn't be a problem
considering I heard from a neighbor you were hosting parties already."
Tim felt every muscle he had tense, ready to run. He forced himself not to move or flinch.

"Don't be so dramatic Timothy." She chastised, "Making social connections is important for business. If your peers approve of you that could very well work in your favor one day. But," Impossibly her demeanour became colder, "Remember they are not your friends. You don't have friends." Tim nodded showing he understood. No friends, got it.

"I'm sure you won't disappoint me." Janet checked her watch, "I have to go back to Africa before your father asks where I am." She's keeping secrets from Jack? Noted. Hmm, she must've taken a private plane to get here then. "Timothy," And then she... she... hugged him... Her arms wrapped around him, oddly warm for someone so icy. "You've done well so far, I'm proud. I might not say it, but I see how far you've come. You have the potential for wonderful things."

Tim never noticed she smelled like strawberry shampoo before this. She brushed her fingers through his hair and they just stayed like that for a few wonderful seconds. Did he enter the Twilight Zone? A part of him wanted this for so long. A part of him wanted to scream. What did this mean? Does she like him now? Has he earned a place in her heart? Is he finally worth something in her eyes? He didn't dare hug back, he didn't want her to let go.

When she pulled away, far too soon, she harshly gripped Tim by his chin, her fingernails digging to the point it stung.

"Do not," she snarled, "Fail me at this event."

"I won't." Tim promised, suddenly wanting to do anything to earn another hug. Wow, how pitiful was he? Pathetic.

"Goodbye, Timothy." She straightened her posture and walked out the door, gone. If not for the card still in his hand, Tim would be certain he imagined the whole thing. He sat down at the dining room table to collect his thoughts and reread the invitation. He was going to the Wintertide Soirée, forced to interact with the worst of the worst of rich pricks. Ugh. Ughhhh. Still, at least Cassie wouldn't have to face the obnoxious gathering alone.

And maybe, a small voice in his head thought, his mother would finally... No. She only cared about herself and her image... And yet... what if...

By the time Kon and the other came downstairs he had forgotten that they were waiting.

"Did she notice?" Bart of course spoke first.

"Oh. Uh, no." Tim was still caught in his thoughts, processing, analyzing this turn of events before asking Kon, "Wait... Weren't you listening in?"

"We were talking." Cassie smiled a little too innocently and Tim didn't miss the glare Kon shot her. They must've had an argument. Curious. Tim casually folded the invitation and slipped it into his jean pocket, not wanting to think about it for the time being.

"I can't thank you guys enough for helping me on this one. It really would've sucked disappointing my parents, so... you want pizza after replacing the drinks for the cabinet? I'll pay, of course."

"Yes!" Bart crowed while clapping his hands together in sheer excitement. The alcohol instantaneously appeared in the drinking cabinet. Maybe Tim shouldn't have offered.

"Heck yeah!" Garfield enthusiastically agreed along with the group.
"Alright then." Tim put on a jacket from the clothes rack by the door, "I'll show you the best pizza place in all of Gotham."
Tim has a busy day.

The pizza place was in a forgotten corner of Gotham. Business was usually slow because of the nearby gangs. Still, it was the best pizza known to mankind and it didn't have a lot of competition around. It managed to stay afloat no matter what kind of hell Gotham was suffering through that week. Not to mention... it was Jason's favorite, too.

They sat down at a large curved booth while Tim ordered pizzas. Bart practically buzzed upon entering the building and Kon couldn't blame him because the pizza smelled amazing.

Honestly, he figured it was lucky the cashier didn't notice Garfield's unusual skin color. Most of their costumes looked like every day clothes anyway. Blue Beetle only had to power down his armor, and Bart rushed home to change. But green skin? Not the easiest to hide. Gar did his best to cover as much skin as he could with his hoodie and avoid eye contact. Poor kid. Luckily it was so cold out that covering half his face with a scarf didn't seem weird.

They chose a booth in the corner of the restaurant, hidden away from the windows. The moment they all sat down Jaime excused himself to go to the bathroom. Bart sighed and his fingers drummed rhythmically on the tabletop.

"So," Cassie immediately smirked at Bart, "Trouble in paradise?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." The speedster crossed his arms defensively.

"You've acting jittery around your boy toy for days." That was true, or so it appeared to Kon.

"No I'm not!"

"Yes, you are." Garfield confirmed.

Tim raised an eyebrow at Kon who simply shrugged, not having much of an opinion on the situation. After all, it was none of his business. Rao knows he has enough drama in his life already.

"It's not - I don't - I- okay, okay, but this is top secret." Bart took a deep breath before blurting, "I think... I think Jaime is cheating on me. I know he's hiding something! He cancels date nights saying he has to go home to do whatever, but I show up and he's not where he said he'd be!"

"That sucks." Kon offered sympathy the best he could (which was not very effective.) Tim snorted, trying to disguise it as a sneeze.

"What?" Bart glared at Robin.

"He's not cheating on you." Tim rolled his eyes like it was the most obvious thing in the world.
"How would you know? Did he tell you something?"

"No. I just... know. It's tedious to explain."

"You can't say that and then not explain." Bart whined in protest. The others were staring expectantly at him now... Kon was about to tell everyone to back off but Tim caved-

"Your date nights have habitually been on Wednesday evenings around 6:00," he said, "So far you've been alone at the base for three of these past Wednesdays pouting. So he's cancelled on you at least three times."

"I couldn't help but notice the coordinates Jaime enters into the Zeta-Beam lately are in fact not the teleport nearest to his home. It's actually near a neighborhood with 32% less income than his hometown makes, which is pretty significant."

"That area so happens to be the place his friend's mother recently moved to in order to get away from her abusive husband--his friend is a meta whose background file is on the Batcomputer--it doesn't actually say Jaime and he are friends but it wasn't difficult to connect the dots. Plus, Jaime has been texting you less. Most weekdays aside from Team training he texts you during the school day, between 2:15 and 3:00, then at 5:30, and often doesn't get around to messaging you until after 10:00."

By this point the Team were staring in awe but Tim wasn't finished.

"This seems to suggest he's working an after-school shift in order to help his friend's mother financially until she's able to get a decent job in her area. There's more evidence I could get into like how he probably chose a blue collar job in construction because of the better wage, the concrete material stuck to his shoes, his newfound fatigue and increased upper body strength due to the physical demands of his job, etc., but that will take too long and we have a limited amount of time before he comes back from the bathroom."

Tim was absolutely, positively, awesome, but he just sat there oblivious to how smart and cute and caring - Kon should stop gaping at him, probably.

"Okay. So.." Bart blinked, "Why didn't he just tell me about getting a job?"

"I have several theories but you should probably ask him that yourself."

"That's some thorough detective work." Cassie gave a low whistle, "I bet you could tell me what I had for breakfast."

"You haven't eaten yet today." Tim informed. "Which by the way isn't healthy considering how late it is now."

"Okay, that's a little creepy." Garfield said. Kon slyly kicked the kid under the table and he made a little offended squawk.

"I don't mean to be," Tim burrowed his eyebrows, "I don't try to notice stuff like that. I just do. It's... frustrating sometimes. Like the time I knew about Dick cheating on Zatanna" And thank goodness that scandal blew over eventually.

"It's useful though." Kon pointed out because Babybird was frowning, "Especially when part of your job is being a detective."

"I guess. Welcome back, Jaime."
"Do not use the bathroom here," Jaime whispered, sitting down next to Bart, "It's terrifying."

"It's Gotham." Tim nodded, "Oh hey, first five pizzas are here."

"Five?" Kon asked the same time Bart complained, "Only five?"

Tim didn't answer in favor of eating pizza. (Garfield slapped Bart's hand when the speedster tried to take one of the veggie slices.)

Since Kon just so happened to have a seat next to Tim, he very casually stretched his arm over Babybird's shoulders. They were "dating" after all, right? They should keep up the act while they're in public. Frozen for a second, Tim then leaned into Kon like it was the most natural thing in the world. Kon felt the flutter of success.

"So, Tim," Cassie tried saying casually but tremendously failed, "When are your parents planning on coming home?" Did she have to bring that up right as Tim was beginning to relax?

Tim swallowed his mouthful of food, took a sip of water and said, "Dunno." Drop it, Cassie. Although... a part of Kon wanted her to keep prodding for answers.

"Like. At all?"

"At this point, no."

"Okay... look, I'm just going to come out and say it - your parents are horrible people." Cassie, not helpful. Yes, it was true but the last thing Kon needed was Tim recalling more of their fight from last Thanksgiving. And if Tim got defensive this would not end well.

"Okay." Tim shrugged, apparently nonplussed. "But horrible parents are better than no parents at all."

"Actually," Garfield spoke, "I'm an orphan and I'd rather have dead parents than have yours." Sheesh, tell us how you really feel, Gar.

"I admit, they're stricter than most." Tim laughed awkwardly, waving it aside, "If they even knew I was in this place eating 'commoners' food they'd ground me for, like, a week."

"You wouldn't be able to eat for a week?" Garfield exclaimed loudly and Kon didn't bother reprimanding him because not eating for an entire week, what the hell? Worse, the half-Kryptonian could tell Tim had been lying, clearly he'd been grounded longer than a week before.

"I'm exaggerating." Tim quickly backtracked, "Four days at the most."

"Four days?"

"Three."

"Tim."

"Two?"

"Tim, mi hermano," Jaime frowned, "It's not normal for parents to starve their child as punishment. Skipping dinner, eh, okay. But going an entire day with nothing? That's loco, ese."

"What?" Tim scoffed, "People do it all the time... Right?" Looking for help, Tim turned to Kon. Superboy shook his head sadly, dying at Babybird's genuinely confused expression.
"It's child abuse." Cassie scowled, making Tim recoil a little, and Superboy worried this pizza outing would end in tears.

"No. It's- it's not..." Tim squirmed, "It- When kids get grounded they don't get to eat. Just because Jaime's family doesn't- I don't... All this time when people at school complain they're grounded what are they complaining about?"

"Well, let's use the crash power of technology." Bart pulled out his phone, "'Grounding is a common punishment for children and teens, often restricting the child to their room or house, only to be let out for things like doctor appointments, school, to use the bathroom, eating meals, etc.'"

"Well, that's hardly a punishment." Tim bitterly snapped, refusing to meet anyone's gaze. Kon squeezed his shoulders, not entirely sure how else he could comfort Tim. Why couldn't they just share a mental link like Superboy did with M'gann so they could- actually, no, Kon was sick of mental links.

"Sometimes they take away toys or videogames." Garfield added, "One time I wasn't allowed to watch TV for a whole two weeks."

"Being benched from Robin is similar to being grounded." Cassie offered.

"But," Tim glanced around the room as if searching for an explanation, "Parents totally prevent their kids from going to school because that's where they hang out with friends. It just makes sense!"

"No, children are legally required to go to school. Wait, did your parents not let you go to school? How many times?"

"Yeah, aren't they super obsessed with your grades?" Bart asked. "How're you going to get straight A's if they ground you from school... Unless..." Unless Janet and Jack would sabotage their son, an excuse to punish him again after setting him up to fail. Now Babybird finished his homework months and months ahead, terrified to fall behind. Those sadistic fucking "parents" who would-

*crack*

Kon accidently crushed a little bit of the table corner. Oops.

"I'm going to go check on the other pizzas." With that, Tim hastily left the booth.

"Cassie," Kon growled, mad she'd bring up such a sensitive subject, furious at Tim's parents, and upset at himself for possibly scaring Tim away.

"I'm getting information!" She growled back, "Because someone won't tell me anything. And guess what? I got results! See how that works? If we ask questions then we get answers." True, Tim has never been so open about his private life before... but

"If we push him too far then he'll never let us help him."

"Um, we've got a new problem." Jaime nodded toward the front door where about seven jocks stumbled in, all drunk. Weren't they at the party from earlier? Rao dammit.

"Ayyyy, it's Tiny Tim!!" One with dark hair yelled.

"Hey, Chad." Tim sighed, finding himself surrounded. Chad laughed obnoxiously.
"Your party was sweet!!" a blonde congratulated and the others bellowed their approval. Kon stood up, muscling his way through the group of jocks to get to his boyfriend Tim.

"You okay, babe?" Kon made a point to wrap his arm around Tim's waste.

"Oh, man, I'm so sorry!" (Chad) exclaimed, genuinely upset, "Shit guys we're crashing their date!" Kon then heard Bart whisper, "Pfft, like they could crash anything."

"Hey, I have an idea." Tim politely smiled, "Why don't you have a few pizzas? On me, of course."

"THIS GUY! DUDE, you're the best!!" One of the guys clapped Kon on the shoulder. The waitress who passed by with a few pizzas shrugged and handed them to Chad. The tallest jock immediately grabbed a slice,

"Enjoy your date dudes, and hey," he winked, "I heard he really knows how to give, if you know what I mean. Ayyy, luckyyy." And they all laughed. Not a mean laugh, they were drunk, and a part of Kon knew they weren't trying to be jerks, but Superboy was already pissed off. Before he could stop himself, that idiot was on the floor holding a bleeding nose.

"Conner, no!" Tim held on to one of his clenched fists before he could strike again. Bart and Jaime were also holding him back though Cassie stood to the side with a little smirk, no doubt wishing she was the one doing the punching.

"Uh, thanks for the pizza!" Chad said as he helped his friend off the ground. They practically tripped over themselves leaving the building.

"Kon, what were you thinking?" Tim immediately chastised, rightfully so.

"He deserved it." Kon mumbled, wishing not for the first time he could control his temper. Tim could get in trouble because Kon did that. What a stupid move.

"Did you see how surprised he was though?" chuckled Garfield.

"This isn't funny!" Though now Tim was trying not to smile. "His nose might be-" giggle "-broken. And he's going to make up some story about being mugged because he won't admit he was decked by some gay guy and- and-" Tim's giggles broke into a fit of laughter. "He just dropped to the floor like a rag doll! God I wish we'd gotten that on camera." However, his laughter then turned into cackling, hysterical, painful, and his eyes widened in panic. "Kon." he choked out. Superboy pulled Tim into a hug as he did his best to smother the alarming noise, laughing uncontrollably into Kon's chest.

After a minute Tim calmed down and apologized, "Sorry. That's- That's been happening since Christmas. A side-effect from whatever Joker's chemicals did... Sorry."

"Is it, like, a permanent thing?" asked Garfield nervously.

"No one knows. I think it's getting better though." Tim cleared his throat, "Um, well, it's getting late. After the pizza we should all go home."

"If that's what you want." Kon said before anyone could argue.

"I mean, you guys don't have to, I just thought..." But Tim was looking beyond them, focusing on a yellow flier taped to the window. "What..."

Tim drifted over and snatched the flier. His eyes narrowed in concentration (which was unbearably..."
"No way. Guys, we have to go to Gotham Central." Tim put on sunglasses.

"The mall?" asked Jaime.

"Yeah! C'mon, Bart, grab the pizzas and let's go!" He took Kon's hand and marched them out the door.

......

The mall, Gotham Central, should've been destroyed decades ago. It wasn't until Tim was entering kindergarten an anonymous donor allowed the entire building to be rebuilt with gothic architecture to match the rest of the city. Looking back, Tim wondered if Bruce had done that as requested from Dick.

Gotham Central stayed open until 1:00am everyday even though few people stayed after dark. By now the sun was setting over the horizon yet the mall was crazy busy, more and more kids and teens flooding through the doors.

All this for a silly arcade game?

...........

"What are they doing?" Garfield swam through the crowd of people around what seemed to be a stage with a projector. "Is there a concert or something?"

"Something about a kid called 'R.E.D.,'" Kon listened, equally befuddled.

"Yo," Jaime caught the attention of some 5th grader and gestured to the crowd, "What's the deal with this?"

"You don't know?" She chirped in a dubious little voice, "It's a competition! Winner gets twelve free tickets to Red's concert next July! Second place gets ten tickets, 3rd gets 7 tickets. Then, y'know, 4th gets 6 tickets, yada yada. Even if you get as low as 10th place you can still get a ticket so everyone thinks they have a chance."

"Who's 'Red?'" Bart asked.

"You're not from around here, huh?" she tutted impatiently, "Red is the ultimate arcade master. My older brother saw his Guitar Hero performance last year but I wasn't 'old enough to go.'"

"Everyone is here to watch this Red guy play Guitar Hero?" Kon thought that was ridiculous. Apparently Tim did, too.

"No one knows who Red is," Babybird said, "How do they know he's even going to show?"


"Why doesn't anyone know him?" Cassie crossed her arms.

"He keeps his face hidden. No one even has pictures from last year's concert because all phones turned off, like, completely. It was a total dead zone."

"How?"
"I dunno. Maybe he's a hacker, too."

"Weird. Awfully suspicious for a guy whose only crime is playing videogames."

"Maybe his parents don't approve." Tim guessed. "Playing arcade games all day? Kinda a waste of time."

"Who cares?" Freckles exclaimed, "Last year was the first concert and it was awesome! The dude got perfect scores playing guitar and singing at the same time. He sounds exactly like the original artists of the songs, he mimics them perfectly. Like it had this neon light show and everything. It was so big that this year they're actually selling tickets... It's a lot of money though so I'm hoping to win in this Guitar Hero competition."

"Oh, I'm gonna crash this competition! I'm signing up! C'mon, Blue!" Bart exclaimed the moment Freckles walked away. Jaime sighed and followed his boyfriend into the crowd.

"It's stupid to sell overpriced tickets to a concert that might not even happen," complained Tim, "The owner doesn't even know Red."

"And how do you know that?" Cassie tilted her head.

"I just do." Tim turned away, blushing.

"Oh! So you know Red! Who is he?"

"It's none of your business."

"Wait... do you like him?" she grinned. Kon froze, that hadn't even occurred to him. Did Tim have a secret crush? There's nothing wrong with that, of course. Tim's allowed to like whoever he wants, right? No big deal. Not at all. Well, Tim would be better off not dating anyone and taking time for himself... but it was his choice. And that's fine. Kon didn't have a right to all of Tim's attention or affection.

"No, I just... I went to the last 'concert' and met him." Tim's heart was definitely beating faster.

"Aw, Tim, usually you're better at lying than this."

"I don't have a crush on anyone."

"We're all friends here, you can tell us."

"I'm not discussing this with you."

Suddenly, a familiar character broke through the crowd.

"Garfield?" Dick said, wearing sunglasses, "What are you doing here- Wait, Conner? Cassie? Tim?"

"The gay power couple, too." Cassie informed, amused. "They're entering the competition."

"Why do you sound surprised that I'm here?" Tim complained, "I actually live in Gotham."

"I didn't know arcade games were your speed." Dick grinned and hugged him before grimacing, "I need you to win some tickets for me so I can crush R.E.D's dreams."

"You have beef with Red?"
"The jerk beat all my high scores the day after I'd get them! One day I'm going to show that punk who the real arcade master is, but I literally just got an update from Babs. Something bad is coming this way. It's perfect that you all are here, actually. Conner, Cassie, Garfield. Suit up. Oh, and find the gay power couple. We'll need them, too."

"What exactly are we dealing with?" Tim went into 'Robin' mode.

"No." Dick said firmly, "It's your day off."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Sorry, Tim." Cassie whispered before running off with Gar to get Bart and Jaime. Tim huffed in frustration.

"This is ridiculous, Dick. I can help!"

"Are you still having the laughter issue?"

"No! Not even a giggle."

"Right. Enjoy your day off. We can handle it."

"Oh really? Then why do you want half the Team backing you up?"

"Well, as long as they're here they might as well."

"As long as I'm here I might as well!"


"Is it... something to do with Ra's?"

"No. It's something... animal. We don't know exactly what it is, but we're going to find out. You, however, are staying here."

"Fine." Then Dick left.

"We'll be okay, Tim." Kon promised.

"Why didn't you back me up?" Tim demanded suddenly, "I would've defended you!"

"It's not-" Kon blinked, "Just... Maybe you staying out of this isn't a bad idea, okay?"

"No, it's not okay. I ask you guys for help and now you think I'm some sort of 'victim' and can't fight for myself?"

"You know that's not true. You've been under a lot of pressure and you never stop working so..."

"So what? I'm not weak! I can handle it!"

"We're not saying you can't, Tim!" Kon yelled, drawing the attention of people nearby, "But instead of trying to 'prove' your worth because so you're insecure maybe think about your own health and safety for once! We're not your stupid parents, you don't have to work yourself to death trying to get our approval!" And yeah, he really said that. Aloud.
"I don't and have never needed your approval." Tim said quietly, shutting off, going cold.

"Look, I'll see you soon." Kon berated himself, "We know you're smart and capable and talented and- and- but we all need a break sometimes. Please, just, think about it. If it were someone else, wouldn't you insist they relax for a day?" Tim didn't say anything and walked away.

................................

Tim was brooding. There could be no other word for it. He could tell because people glanced at him and backed away like they were scared of being stabbed. This sort of effect he got from his mother's side.

Sure, he knew if the situation were reversed, if Kon had been kidnapped, tortured by the Joker, yeah, okay, he'd be encouraging him to take a day or so off. Heck, forcing someone not to push themselves too hard was the main dynamic between Batman and Robin. 'Bruce how 'bout maybe not going to fight crime with three broken ribs and suffering from fear-toxin?' 'I can handle it, Robin,' 'So help me I'll have Alfred tie you to this bed.' Oh god, was Tim turning into Bruce? Gross.

Cassie interrogated him about his parents. Did they really expect him to believe withholding meals from children is child abuse? Whatever. They didn't know anything about his family, not really, throwing out words like "child abuse" as if there were proof. They didn't know. They couldn't really know. Sure, they might suspect things, Dick and Kon definitely were onto something dangerously close to the truth, but they didn't really know. And they weren't going to, not if Tim could give them another story to focus on. "Oh, I wish my parents would pay more attention to me, they leave me all on my own." That's bad but not call-the-police bad, right? Not if he's a capable 14 year old. Leaving a kid home alone, grounding him, holding him to high expectations, that's not enough to warrant so much anger. They were being overprotective. He can handle himself. Deciding to get out of this stupid mall, Tim headed to the front entrance.

Then someone ran into him.

"Robin!" Klarion called with distress. The Lord of Chaos seemed slightly disheveled and out of breath like he'd been running.

"Klarion? What the heck are you doing here?"

"They're after me," he grabbed Tim's arm, "I need your help."

"What's after you?" Instantly Robin went into a defensive position.

"Strangler Beasts." hissed Teekl,

"Why are they after you? What did you do? You were in Hell?" Strangler Beasts didn't chase after someone for no reason. They were a sub-type of demon Stranglers, a kind of demon who is commanded to hunt prey. Klarion must've brought some with him from Hell, but why?

"It's a long story and we don't have much time." Klarion pleaded, "If they catch me they'll kill me. If they kill me you'll never get the Book of Azarath and because I'm a Lord of Chaos the world will become off-balance and-"

"Of course I'm going to help you, idiot. Are they after you specifically or?"

"They're technically after this," and Klarion held up a small sapling in a simple brown pot. "But even if I give this back they'll still come after me."
"And they're from Hell?"

"Yes, they-"

"Followed you through your portal. Right. So we need to open another portal and send them back to Hell, correct?"

"Yes, but I can't open another portal."

"Why not?"

"I don't have the resources! I have blood of fallen angels, saliva of sinners, but I need certain chemical wastes and a large body of water."

"Chemical wastes, the green acidic kind like in the book 'Basics of Corruption'?"

"Uh, maybe?"

"The waste at Ace Chemicals can be used as a substitute. We have plenty of water around Gotham to use so that's not a problem."

"But the water needs to have at least thirteen dead bodies in it."

"...Like I said, we have plenty of water around Gotham to use so that's not a problem. We'll use the Gotham Bridge as our drop point, try to lead them away from civilians. You get the chemicals you need. I'll take the tree and meet the Stranglers head-on before they get too far into the city."

"You're talking like you know where they are?"

"I have a pretty good idea, yeah." Ha, so much for his day off. Sorry, Dick.

"What are these things?" Beast Boy shouted, dodging a claw. (arm? paw? sword?) "They're not animals! You think it's a meta experiment gone wrong?"

"Whatever they are, they're not staying down." Wonder Girl kicked one in the snout, "Nightwing, what do we do?"

"Don't let them get any further into the city! If we can't keep them down then we need to find a way to contain them." Nightwing suspected magic by this point. These black masses seemed demonic in nature.

"I called Zatanna," Blue Beetle said, "She thinks they're from Hell? She says she'll be here as fast as she can but it could take a minute."

"We might not have a minute." Kid Flash pointed, "One of 'em broke through."

"Superboy, get that dog, er, cat, er, demon thing!" Nightwing ordered while dodging the tail of another beast. These abominations were hunting something, but what? Superboy jumped through the air and landed on the creature, punching it mercilessly in the face.

"Maybe we should call Robin for backup," Blue suggested before a demon tackled him to the ground. Kid Flash raced to his aid, smashing into the monster. Nightwing attempted to taser the one to his left but electricity did nothing.
"No one is calling Robin for backup! He. Stays. Out of this." A demon blob screamed as Dick tried hitting it from underneath. Wonder Girl threw one beast into another.

Then, melodramatically, an engine roared to life in the distance. There sat Robin on his motorcycle, Redbird, holding up what appeared to be a cute baby tree. The monsters all froze, staring intently at him.

"Looking for something?" crowed Tim, "You gotta catch me first!" And the race was on. "Okay, Team." Tim spoke to them through the communicators, "I'm leading them to Gotham Bridge where Klarion is opening a portal to Hell. Keep them from straying off." Superboy, Beast Boy and Wonder Girl chased after the monsters immediately.

"So Klarion is behind this." muttered Dick. Figures. Now he needed to get to his bike to catch up with-

"¡Ay, mierda!" Jaime panicked, "Kid Flash is hurt!" Indeed, Bart was on the ground, clutching his side which was bleeding far too quickly. Upon closer examination it was a bite mark, and clearly a venomous one.

"Kid Flash was bitten." Dick spoke via communicator. Tim cursed in response.

"Change of plans. To get a cure we'll need one of these Strangler's teeth. Get Kid to the med bay in California. Kon, can you get a tooth?"

"On it." grunted Superboy.

"You heard him." Nightwing told Blue Beetle. "Get him to the med bay, now. We'll get him the cure, don't worry." Jaime nodded and picked up his boyfriend. No time to fret about that, he needed to join the rest of the party. They were going to need his help.

Timothy Jackson Drake always had a plan. This time was no different. Zooming along the gloomy streets of Gotham at dangerous speeds on an icy road, Tim came to the conclusion is plan wasn't the safest. Then again, it didn't have to be safe, it just had to work. It didn't help that the creatures didn't seem affected by the lack of friction on the ground. Cassie followed on his flank, beating back monsters that came too close to his tail. Garfield flew along further behind, keeping anyone from straying and pushing civilians out of the way. Tim wasn't sure where Dick wandered off to, maybe he was holding back a demon, helping Kon get a tooth.

"We're having a little difficulty pulling out its teeth!" Kon informed over intercom. A Strangler leaped and ran into a light post up ahead. The post fell and Tim narrowly managed to slide underneath it before it crushed him. Wonder Girl pushed the monster back with the rest of the pack.

"Use something iron." Tim suggested, "Demons are usually susceptible to iron."

"Got it. It's going to be a second. Don't go to the bridge just yet."

"Take the scenic route. Got it." Although the scenic route meant traveling in areas even more icy, and it was only getting darker now that the sun was setting.

Taking a sharp left, he dodged a monster who got a little too ambitious and it went flying into an old brick building. Ouch.
"I got him!" Cassie assured and flew off to tackle the creature. Then flying back beside him she called out, "If you give me the tree then I could lead them to the portal instead, it might be easier."

"No," Tim explained, "They've got my scent now, I'm a target, too. And the last thing we want is to split the pack- over there!" A Strangler almost took a chunk out of a civilian's arm. Cassie swooped down and threw the beast back, allowing for the man to escape.

"There are a lot of people up ahead!" Beast Boy trilled as a falcon.

"Right. Let's double back." Tim was getting awfully close to the cliff-side anyway. He turned and jumped down to a road going the opposite direction. Not a minute later he spotted Superboy and Nightwing in the distance.

"We got it!" Kon said. "Beast Boy, take the tooth and go back to base!" Finally. Tim made a turn to the right with the monsters just behind him.

"Klarion, you better be ready." Tim hissed under his breath. This time of day the Gotham Bridge drawbridge would be lifted and that's exactly what they needed. However, the Stranglers were apparently getting annoyed about these people throwing them around. One decided to attack Superboy.

"Keep going, Robin! We got this." Nightwing commanded so Tim kept focus on the road. The more restless the Stranglers became, the more difficult it became to herd them.

The Gotham Bridge was tilted so steeply that it had become practically vertical. But good ole Redbird had been equipped for this. Magnetic grip on. Jet thrusters on. (And to think Dick thought jet thrusters were a dumb idea.)

Luckily the beasts were doing such a good job at distracting his teammates that he didn't have to hear "What the fuck, Robin, are you crazy?"

Underneath Gotham Bridge a swirling green drain to hell was churning menacingly. Good, Klarion was keeping his word then. He started jetting up the bridge in time to see Nightwing crash off road on his bike. He'll be fine, hopefully. While distracted, a beast cut Tim off and forced him to jump up on the railway of the bridge. Wow, this bridge was steep. Wow, if he moved a fraction to the left he will most likely die.

Then came the jump at the end of the road. And, sadly, it was time to say good bye to Redbird. Tim was flung into the air and he spread his arms to quite literally open his wings. This addition to his suit was new and untested, but his artificial red wings branched out and glided him over a gust of freezing wind.

He heard the desperate howls of the Stranglers behind him as they all plummeted into the swirling pit to Hell.

All according to plan. Except, his mechanical wings weren't built for the freezing weather. With a small squeak his red feathers broke and Tim found himself plummeting to his death.

That was fine. That's what grappling hooks are for. But Wonder Girl was flying to his aid regardless, which would be fine if a Strangler hadn't caught her by the ankle during its fall.

He didn't even think about it, about how Cassie could survive a fall this intense and be fine, unlike him. He didn't think about how she could survive in Hell and eventually escape, unlike him. Instead he fired his grappling hook around the jaws of the beast and pulled until the Strangler tossed Wonder Girl to the side, sending her flying back to safety. So now Tim was plummeting
towards Hell with no backup-backup plan.

A flash of light. Then silence. He opened his eyes.

"Did you honestly expect me to let you fall to your death?" Klarion sniffed with disdain, "After all the trouble I've gone to in order to reserve us a decent dinner for our date?"

"Oh. Hi, Klarion." Tim realized they were in a warm green field who-knows-where and he was being held bridal style. Could he smell lilac? "You can put me down now."

"Fine." Klarion dumped him to the ground unceremoniously.

"I have your tree." Tim got the sapling out of his belt. "You're welcome."

"You didn't drop it?"

"Yes, I did. What I have here in my hands is a fake."

"It is?"

"I was being sarcastic, Klarion. Here, take it for whatever chaos you have planned."

"Actually... it's for you." And Klarion turned rose pink.

"For... me?"

"Yes," purred Teekl, "It's a courting gift." Courting? But, like, that meant eventual marriage.

"Klarion," Tim said slowly, "Are you catching... feelings for me?"

"Of course not! Don't listen to that stupid cat!" Klarion turned pinker. "It's a Tree of Knowledge and I saw it and, um, thought of you. I figured a mortal like you would appreciate its power. Especially since you actually know what a Tree of Knowledge is, and obviously it's not all that knowledgeable right now because it's only a sapling but nevertheless-"

"You traveled through Hell to get me a gift?"

"No! I was already in Hell and I saw it on my way out..."

"Liar." Teekl licked her paw.

"Shut up, dumb cat!"

"You know," Tim frowned, "My friend got seriously injured because of this stunt you pulled tonight." And really he should be headed back to see how Bart was handling things.

"I didn't mean to bring back Stranglers, I swear!" Klarion sheepishly smiled. Tim wanted to be angry. Yet... isn't that exactly something Tim would do? Wouldn't he do something reckless and over-the-top (although more thought out) trying to impress someone or prove himself? Isn't that a fault in Tim that Kon was pointing out earlier?

"It's... sweet of you to do this." Tim decided, "But don't you ever put my friends in danger like that again. Not like that, not with creatures from Hell." Because Hell was not something to be messed with, no way.

"I- so- you like it?"
"A Tree of Life? Klarion, this is so cool! Of course, I love it!" Because, yeah, this tree might seem like any other but it was a *magical* tree. It absorbed any information going on around it and remembered it *forever*. Like a video camera but also able to feel its surroundings, and the deeper its roots grew the more stuff it learned from the earth. This conversation he and Klarion were having right now? The tree would remember that forever.

"Excellent." Klarion puffed out his chest, "I wanted tell you to wear your very best for our date. It's a, what's the word, 'black tie event.'

"Fancy." Tim smiled, "but, um, I need to get back to the others. Could you...?"

"Alright. But you might need this." Without warning Klarion locked lips with him and there was *far* too much spit involved. Ewwwww.

"What was that-" but Tim blinked and found himself out by the Gotham Zeta-Beam. No time to get grossed out by sloppy spit swaps.

Upon entering the base, Tim knew something was wrong. He rushed to the medbay to find the Team gathered around Bart. The speedster was passed out, an ugly purple tinging his skin pigment. Jaime clung to his side with tears threatening to spill over.

"We're still missing a few ingredients." Zatanna sighed.

"Which ones?" Dick asked. But Cassie interrupted.

"Robin? ROBIN!" She hugged him until he couldn't breathe. "We thought you went to Hell and died! Superboy is still in Gotham seeing if you fell in the water."

"I'll call him. But right now, Zatanna, what are we missing?"

"Oh, um. We have paste from the Strangler's fang mixed with the tears of the damned and water blessed by a Lord of Order. We just need something holy and something from a Lord of Chaos."

*Oh. Duh.*

"Is that the vile with the cure?" Tim guessed.

"Yes, it's - What are you doing?"

Tim assumed Klarion wasn't lying about the Tree of Knowledge aka something holy. And what was more cursed by a Lord of Chaos than his own spit?

He plucked a small leaf from the tree, chewed it, and spat it into the vile.

"There, that should do it." Tim sounded more confident than he felt.

Zatanna only nodded and applied the paste to Bart's wound. Everyone tensed, waiting to see how Bart would react. The clock ticked. Bart didn't even twitch.

"We might have been too late." Zatanna admitted quietly.

"No. No!" Jaime cried, "It can't be too late! It's not... Bart, I'm- I'm so sorry I haven't been there for you lately. I know I've been a shit boyfriend. I'm sorry, okay? Don't give up on me. I'm sorry I cancelled so many times. But I- I love you. Don't do this. Don't leave me."

A pause. And then.
"Why didn you jus tell me you had a job?" Bart groaned. Everyone simultaneously let out a sigh of relief.

"He'll be fine." Zatanna smiled and turned to Tim, "You, however, are about to have one hell of a ride." What? Oh, right. He chewed up a leaf off of a Tree of Knowledge. Well, maybe the sapling is so young that he wouldn't feel any extreme effects- whoa nevermind. Holy acid trip, Batman. This was going to be an experience.

"Robin!" Kon charged into the room sopping wet and scooped him up, "You're okay!"

"Yep. Hey, Kon?"

"Yeah."

"Taking a day off is exhausting."

"You certainly have a unique way of taking a vacation."

"Yeah, huh, you smell like the sky on a rainy day." His head was buzzing really intense-like.

"Thanks?"

"That's the tree talking?" Dick tilted his head.

"Probably." Zatanna shrugged. "He should spend the night in the med bay, too. It's going to really escalate from here."

"But high Robin is so much fun!" Gar snickered.

"High?" Kon bit his lower lip in worry.

"Don't hurt your lips." Tim wasn't sure if he was talking aloud at this point, everything was so bright, "They're too perfect. You need them. Lips are useful tools. An excellent advancement in the human body. How else could we play trumpet or whistle or hide our teeth so we don't have a weird smile all the time?"

"You're very talkative like this, huh?" Cassie lit up, "Hey, Robin. Tell us what you really think about your parents." Cassie was so pretty. Her hair was golden and her eyes sparkled, like, a lot. Why were the cute ones always lesbians? Why couldn't they be, like, dudes.

"Which one? The bad one or the worst one? I'm joking. I love them both so very much. They're great." And Tim giggled because wasn't it so funny that he almost went to Hell today when his parents should be the ones to go to Hell? His giggling turned into laughter. "Shit. Kon, knock me out, please, before-" his laughter turned into cackles.

"I got you, buddy." Dick said gently, and Tim felt the small prick of a needle. The room faded to black.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Tim has a trippy dream. Or is it a prophecy?

A blinding light, the relief of breathing after suffocating for so long, and then oranges and reds, fire and smoke, they all consumed his vision. Even though the heat should be melting his skin, he felt calm. Strangely, he knew nothing could hurt him.

So. This was Hell. Well, it was at least a fraction of Hell, the part that the Tree of Knowledge had witnessed. The fire burned for days, weeks, months. Life was peaceful. Eventually someone picked him up and, oh, he knew that voice. Klarion.

"He'll like it... won't he?" Klarion murmured to Teekl. She just meowed in response the human equivalent of "Meh." Teekl wouldn't dare step on the ground, she seemed scared or at least wary of her surroundings.

They traveled through a craggy passage, careful not to disturb the shadows lurking nearby. A bottomless pit opened before them. Suddenly, screeching pierced the air and it hurt. It was a pack of Stranglers. A rush of colors, wind shaking him to the core, sounds Tim couldn't understand, and then he was surrounded by dark, depressing buildings. The air was thick and musky, breathing became labored. Ah, they were in Gotham.

Klarion ran into past-memory-Tim, "I need your help!"

And Tim knew the rest of this story. Still, it was all truly fascinating listening to himself, reliving the action as something else entirely. Being a tree was kinda cool. When they caught up to the present, Tim wasn't sure what would happen next.

Everything disappeared.

He didn't see white or black or anything. His senses were just... gone. Did he die? He couldn't bring himself to panic or really do... anything.

*Just show me what happens next.*

The scene changed. He was sitting on a grassy hill. It was breezy and a little chilly but that was fine because he was leaning against something warm.

*Kon.*

They sat, gazing at the stars... There weren't that many stars because they were on the outskirts of Gotham, but it was a pretty night nevertheless. Tim glanced up shyly to appreciate how Kon looked when he was daydreaming. His expression wasn't stern and he wasn't frowning... Kon was... content. Sitting on a hill, relaxing, cuddling, Kon was content to be with Robin. And wasn't that something Tim never thought would be possible, that someone he cared for would be so happy to just spend time with him?

Then Kon turned to him and smiled, warm, comforting, earnest.
"Tim," he said softly, "I love you."

"I know." Tim grinned back, because hearing those words made his insides all fluffy, "I love you, too."

"No, Tim, I..." Kon took a deep breath, "I, y'know... love you."

"What?"

"Tim, I love you- I- Okay, people like each other, right? But I like-like you. I actually love you."

"I'm not sure I'm quite understanding?" Because he couldn't mean what Tim thought he meant.

"I love how you believe everyone can be redeemed. I love the smug grin on your face you get when you know your plan is going to work or you've figured out a mystery. I love how you smell like coffee and how your hair sticks up every direction after you wake up in the mornings. I love how deeply you care about your friends, that even if you keep secrets we all trust where your loyalties lie and, yes, in the end you never let us down. I love that you never stop trying to be a better person. I love how you scrunch up your nose when you're deep in thought. I love you."

"Oh." Because what the heck is Tim supposed to say to that? "Wha- When did this happen?"

"I'm not sure but... I've felt this way for a while and... I know, I understand that you might not feel the same way. And that's fine! I'm not asking you to feel differently or treat me differently. I like being your friend. You're the best friend anyone could ever dream of having."

"I... Thanks." And they looked up at the sky some more. A few minutes passed. "So, you're saying you're in love with me?"

"Yeah."

"That's, um, nice, I think."

"I'm... glad you think so."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"...Hey, Kon?"

"Tim?"

"How would I know if I'm in love with you?"

"Oh, um, maybe you'll know it when you feel it?"

"But what if I don't feel it because I'm already feeling it so I'll wait around my whole life waiting
for a feeling I'm already feeling and I'll never realize I'm in love with you, too? We'll just live the rest of our lives not knowing, not dating, or getting married, or having kids-

"Kids?"

"Yes, kids, Kon el. Children. Two of them. I'm not letting our genes go to waste."

"Two kids?"

"Preferably both girls because let's face it, they'll either be high class politicians or leaders of science and we need more diversity in those fields."

"Huh. Wow, that's... something to think about."

"Maybe we should go on a date so I can decide whether or not I'm in love with you?"

"Well, that certainly sounds like a plan."

"Okay, but fair warning I'm going to overthink it all and act totally weird."

"I wouldn't want it any other way, Babybird."

"Alright, Clone Boy, it's a date."

The scene fades. Another picture comes into view.

The horrible smell, wet feet, the tunnel... Oh. They were in the sewers. Tim and children of all ages, (hundreds of children, maybe thousands, maybe more) were packed together, trudging through the sewers. Why? He heard the gentle waves of a flute drift through the air. Pied Piper. They all had fear blazing in their eyes, but they had no choice. One boy stiffened as he was forced to walk on his broken leg, his cast getting drenched in sewer water. It was so dimly lit that they had no idea where they could possibly be going. A squeak of a rat shuffled by and, sheesh, these children were totally going to need therapy after this.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kon marching beside him as if he too were under the Pied Piper's control. But then his boyfriend Kon winked at him. Oh. Everything was going to be okay.

A flash. Now he was in a different part of the sewers. Suddenly Tim was face-to-face with Frog, Pied Piper.

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't have come here." Frog said and opened his palm. Tim, still unable to move, watched as Kon fell to his knees. Kryptonite. "I didn't want to do this, but I have to take away what was taken from me. He-" Piper sneered at Tim, "-needs to know what true loss feels like."

"Tim, I-" But Kon didn't get to finish what he was going to say because a jagged shard of Kryptonite pierced his chest. This... This wasn't happening. This was all Tim's fault. Kon collapsed, bleeding out. Surely, someone else will come, someone from the Team, the League, someone, anyone. But no one came and Tim stood and watched the person he loved most... No, this can't be happening. This isn't right. This isn't fair. He needed to fix this.

The scene changed.

"This isn't working!" M'gann had tears in her eyes, "Tim, I can't take it anymore, we can't keep doing this!" Below his feet a lump of flesh trembled and bled. It was a half-formed human being, a
warped clone of Kon. Experiment 455, yet another failure. This one died after 30 seconds, which was a new best record.

"You just want to give up?" Tim screamed at her, throwing down the mountain of files in his hands, "I thought you loved him as much as I loved him! I thought you'd do whatever it takes to get him back!"

"He wouldn't want this!"

"It doesn't matter what he would want, he's dead." then Tim sighed, "If you're not going to help me then get out."

"But Tim-"

"I said GET OUT!"

The scene faded once more.

"Detective," purred Ra's, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know what I'm here for," snapped Tim. His clothes hadn't been washed in weeks. Why bother? He was practically too tired to stand but that didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered, not really.

"You want the Lazarus Pit to bring back your... friend."

"Superboy."

"Your friend, Superboy."

"Yes."

"And what will you give in return?"

Tim met Ra's eyes with determination, "Anything. Absolutely anything you want."

Next scene.

Screaming. Terror. The Apocalypse. It was his fault. He should've known. He should've- and then-

PLEASE. STOP.

I don't want to see this, please, no more. I want to go back. Send me back.

Tim woke with his heart pounding, his head throbbing. He gasped for air as he processed his surroundings. It was the med bay, but Bart wasn't there anymore. It was just him, alone, and on a chair next to him was that stupid potted Tree of Knowledge. After his eyes adjusted to the room he shakily got to his feet, carefully removing the IV from his arm. Everything was fine. He was safe. Whatever he just saw, whatever things the tree showed him, that wasn't real. It was a lovely nap and now he needed to get back to business as usual.

The moment he stepped foot out the door someone tackled him and nearly knocked him over.

"Robin!" Cassie squeezed the life out of him before letting go, "Sorry, it's just- you've been out for almost two days."
"Great," he groaned, "What did I miss?"

"Nothing much. Well, Bumble Bee's suit malfunctioned and she kept shrinking to the point we thought she'd disappear completely, but everything's alright now. She's fine."

"Good. That's good."

"How do you feel?"

"Like I just came off of a bad trip. Don't do drugs, Cassie."

"As Garfield would say, 'noted.'"

"Why are you all dressed up?" Tim noticed her dress and high heels. The dress was ripped in several places and the heels were gaudy, awful things.

"This gross dress? I was practicing dance moves with Batgirl and Nightwing. They... don't really know what they're doing so I'm glad you're awake!" Ah, yes. The Wintertide Soiree. Shit, he had to go to that. As if reading his mind, Cassie held up an invitation to the gala, "When were you going to tell us you were co-hosting the biggest snob fest in history?"

"I forgot." Tim replied honestly. "Can we, um, go? I need to shower, badly."

"Oh! Duh. And, hey, Conner is here! He's going to be so happy you're awake! He was so worried!"

Tim, I love you.

"Yeah, I bet."
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Time to dance! Tim goes to the Wintertide Soirée! It's a night to remember. Hopefully, nothing bad happens.

Things Tim Drake knows are facts: Kon wasn't in love with him. How could he be? That just... didn't make sense. It sounded like a bad joke, Superboy in love with him. Superboy with half the genetics of a criminal mastermind and half the genetics of frickin' Superman? Superboy, a hero who could lift semi-trucks over his head like it was nothing? So this literal miracle of a person was supposedly in love with Tim Drake? Bull sh*t.

And if Kon didn't love Tim then--well--the Tree of Knowledge was just projecting onto Tim's subconscious desires or something. (Of course that theory implied Tim subconsciously wanted Kon to be in love with him which was a whole other issue.) Basically, the Tree of Knowledge didn't show him anything about the future that was actually going to happen. Kon wasn't about to die anytime soon. Case closed. The end. Moving on. Except... And they still hadn't really talked about it, but when Tim was hallucinating... didn't they kiss?

"Alright, I'm ready!" Cassie stepped into view.

Her hair glowed under the florescent lights like a golden halo, her blue and silver dress flowed like a silky waterfall to the ground, decorated with jewelry practically worth more money than the Batmobile cost.

"Wow... you... Look like a high-class prostitute." Which coming from Tim wasn't a compliment or insult, it was simply him applying his past experiences at upper-class functions to his opinions in the present.

"...I'm not sure that was the response I wanted," she collapsed dramatically into a nearby chair, "This is going to be a disaster, isn't it?"

"Oh, totally," Tim chuckled before realizing Cassie was legitimately worried, "I mean, really, you look great. If I were straight I'd be all, um, 'damn your shoulders are so... sexy?'" She laughed and shook her head.

"Gee, thanks. You should get ready, too."

"But I wanted your opinion," Tim presented two different colored pocket squares. "Green or yellow?"

"Be bold. Go with yellow."

"Good, I didn't like the green one."

"Are you procrastinating?"

"...Maybe. I don't want to go to this stupid thing anymore than you do!" He collapsed even more dramatically into the chair across from her, "'Oh, good evening, Miss. How are you today? You
look splendid, Debra, I see life is treating you well! Timothy Drake, charmed I'm sure. And how has life been for the Richman family? That's wonderful to hear! This is gonna suck so bad, Cassie. Ugh." It felt nice to complain.

"At least you have practice with this sort of thing."

"Yeah, because this is my life! It's what I was made for, what I was bred for. I have this to look forward to for the rest of my days, which is why I cannot screw tonight up. At least you get to walk away from this when it's all over. Meanwhile I get a call from my mom telling me how 'successful' I've been, and honestly I'd rather be electrocuted by the Joker again."

"She's really putting the pressure on you, huh?"

"...Cassie, can I tell you a secret?" At that Cassie's posture straightened, at full attention. One of Cassie's best traits is that she was a wonderful audience, she never held back her reactions or emotions.

"Of course!"

"Last time we talked," Tim whispered conspiratorially, "She told me she was proud of me... and then she hugged me."

"What? When did this happen?"

"A few days ago, after the party, before we went out for pizza."

"She was there while we were in the house? And you didn't tell us?" She stood up, "I wanted to have some words with her."

"Gee, and you wonder-" heh, wonder "-why I didn't tell you guys... But you see why tonight is such a big deal? I think I'm finally proving to her that I'm worth something!"

"Good Hera, you do know parents are supposed to value their children without the kid needing to 'prove' anything, right?"

"I'm not a child, I'm an heir to a business."

"You're in need of therapy."

"That's fair."

"Hey," Artemis casually walked by, "Debriefing is in five, Wondergirl."

"Got it." Cassie muttered, "Can't wait..."

*******

"What the hell do you mean there's been a 'change in location?'" Tim's voice was cutting, a calm form of anger beginning to bubble to a full-on rage, "Why wasn't this run by me? ...A special guest? And I don't suppose you know who this important 'guest' is? Yeah, of course not."

Kon stared awkwardly, not sure how to proceed. Occasional glances to Nightwing indicated that they were just supposed to wait this phone call out. Yikes.

"At least tell me you're competent enough to know where the gala is to be held?" A long pause, Kon heard the man on the other end practically whimper before Tim tutted, "Lord Hotels... that is
suitable, I suppose. Fine, I'll keep you in good word with your employer. Your secret is safe with me, at least for now." Without so much as a goodbye, Tim hung up the phone.

"There's gotta be better ways to get information than blackmailing interns." Dick grimaced. Tim apparently decided to ignore that,

"Batman was right. They must be paying hundreds of thousands to rent out the majority of Maxwell Lord's grand hotel. Changing venues last minute, this surprise guest better be nothing less than royalty." Rao, Tim sounded like, well, what aristocrats are apparently supposed to sound like. He was dressed head to toe in the best suit money could buy, tailored perfectly, even the sunglasses he wore looked expensive. They also made him look like a douchebag, a super attractive douchebag, but a douchebag nonetheless.

"If it is royalty and the Light is behind this," Cassie fidgeted with her hands, "Do you think it'll be Queen Bee?"

"No," Nightwing hummed thoughtfully, "Since she was more or less dethroned, her first public appearance isn't going to be a gathering this small. It must be a new player in the game. They're making their move like we knew they would. Wondergirl, it's up to you to get intel. Keep a low profile, stay with other young women, they have a network all their own when it comes to gossip. Do not use your powers under any circumstances."

"Under any circumstances." Tim emphasized, glaring at Cassie.

"...Right." Nightwing, clearly uncomfortable, continued, "It's worth mentioning another surprise guest will be at the gala." He put up a hologram of a face Kon didn't recognize, although Tim's heartrate skyrocketed, "He disappeared from the face of the earth almost five years ago, peviously rumored to be involved in dozens of murders, killing his way to stay in power. His name's Tommy Elliot, from one of the founding families of Gotham. He'll be sought after by the upper middle class at this event, people trying to get donations or whatever. And although it was never proven, it's highly suspected he murdered his own parents when he was ten. Whenever Tommy is involved in a fancy get-together like this one-"

"Someone ends up dead." Tim finished gravely.

"Basically. He's worth keeping a close eye on. In fact, keep two eyes on him. Three if you have another to spare."

"Where will you be in all of this?" Kon asked Dick impatiently.

"Bludhaven. There's some, well, business I have to take care of... which is where you come in, Superboy."

"..."

"You need to be standby on the radio if anything unexpected happens. I can't guarantee I'll be readily accessible for emergencies."

"..."

"I'll take that as a yes. Any questions?"

"I'm good." Cassie confirmed, "What about you, Ti-" But Tim was already gone.

"Um, guess he doesn't want to be late for the big event." Dick pathetically attempted to excuse
him, "He's nervous, probably."

"It's fine. He told me to punch him after the gala every time he says something racist or sexist tonight."

"Oh. Wow, um, good luck with that."

*********

The gala was beautiful and extravagant. A chandelier glimmered, brilliant, dozens of cut crystals showered the walls with light. No detail went amiss, no curve or edge of the room was without intricate design. It was by far the most high class Wintertide Soiree that Tim ever had the misfortune to attend.

If only the change in location implied a change of people. Trying to talk to everyone was like a maddening dance. The Sven family needed to see he was getting along with the Regori family but not that he was making conversation with the Johnsons as well. The Johnsons didn't mind if he talked to the Regoris as long as he kept away from the Andersons. The Andersons hated everyone so it didn't really matter who Tim talked with under their watchful eye. Everyone was petty and everyone was ready to stab one another in the back.

Tim was so busy trying to entertain socialites that he forgot Cassie was even amidst the crowd of floor-length dresses and silken ties.

"Hello, 'Mr. Drake.'" Cassie grinned at him while he was making conversation with Mr. Anderson (the senior Anderson with the impressive grey mustache).

"Do you know each other? Ah, Timothy, have a girlfriend already?" Mr. Anderson laughed at his own joke and stage whispered, "She's a pretty one, too."

"Why, thank you!" Cassie batted her eyelashes, "And how rude to not introduce myself! My name is Cassandra."

"A royal name for a royal beauty!" Mr. Anderson lightly kissed the back of Cassie's hand. He winked and she reluctantly giggled. Dear lord, this was making Tim sick.

"Cassandra," Tim cut in, "Would you like to dance?"

"Why, Timothy, I thought you'd never ask!" Tim almost flinched hearing the word 'Timothy' come from Cassie's mouth.

She pulled him onto the dancefloor, very lightly putting her hands on his shoulders. Maybe she was being extra careful not to use her super strength by accident.

"If one more rich ass white guy makes another pass at me--" she growled.

"You won't do anything because you're undercover." Tim warned, "Speaking of which, did you find anything?"

"No. Whoever this 'special guest' is, they haven't bothered to show up, and no one I've talked to seems to have a clue who it's gonna be."

"And what about Thomas Elliot? I haven't seen him--"

"I have. We talked."
Tim froze for half a second, "About what?"

"Just, I don't know, small talk. Something is off about that guy. He might just be the creepiest person I've ever met. For a second I thought he was going in for a kiss and I was this close to breaking his jaw."

"Yep, sounds like him. Did he ask you about 'green gowns?'"

"Yes, actually. How do you-"

"'Giving a girl a green gown can only happen in the grass.'" Tim grimaced, "It's a euphemism for sex from the 1800s. No one uses it anymore but him."

"That's disgusting."

"He's disgusting. He was probably trying to make you uncomfortable or scare you. That's what he does, it's how he, uh, gets his motor running."

"What is wrong with men!" Cassie couldn't hide her expression of hatred so Tim attempted to turn her away from the majority of people casually watching them.

"Just... he's dangerous. Don't go wandering off alone with him."

"What? Tim, I can handle some sleazy-"

"I know, I know... But... Please? For me?" Tim could barely handle someone kissing her hand let alone her spending time in the presence of Tommy Elliot. Just because Tim had to put up with that creepy shit does not mean he's willing to put his friends in the line of fire. More importantly, if things got physical, Cassie wouldn't hesitate to put Tommy in the hospital and completely blow her cover.

"Fine. But promise me after this we hunt him down and I get to punch him in his stupid face."

"Now, now," Tim smiled, "But it's not very lady-like to stoop to such violence."

"Say that again and I'll punch you in your stupid face."

Then some schmuck wearing a pocket watch butted in and asked Cassie to dance. Soon they whisked away, leaving Tim roam the floor alone.

Wandering, he passed by a group of older ladies talking about how they don't want their sons to marry black woman, even if it was good PR. Then he passed two men, one complaining that he can't convince his wife to get plastic surgery to make her look younger, the other suggesting in all seriousness to get a mistress and just cheat on his wife. Another woman was overheard talking about how her fur coat was made of real snow leopard. Her uncle pulled some strings and had it illegally killed a few weeks ago to get the fur. She laughed about it. A stoutly fellow with a bowtie muttered, assuring his friend there are ways to induce abortion without letting the pregnant lady in question know. The weight of the moment suddenly pressed down on Tim. This was his future. These were his people. He was one of them. Oh, god.

In an unexpected bout of nausea, Tim excused himself to the bathroom. Ugh, and even the bathrooms were grossly fancy. What kind of pompous prick said, "No. They must only ever go number 2 on a 24 karat gold toilet seat." Jeez. Still, Tim took a second to look at himself in the ruby encrusted mirror. He seemed a little pale, but then again he always seemed a little pale. Other than that he looked fine. He just needed to get his head in the game. Timothy Jackson Drake
doesn't lose his composure at events he hosts. It's simply not done. He can do better than this. He
can get through the night and later get a call from his mom congratulating him on a job well done.
Yeah. That's what's gonna happen. And then the next time she comes home she'll hug him again,
saying how proud she is, how she was wrong about him, how she loves him. Yeah. Sure. Realistic
goals only. Good.

"Oh, sorry," someone opened the door, "I didn't know you were- Hey. Look at that. Timothy
Drake. It's been a long time."

Shit.

"Mr. Elliot?" Tim turned to face Tommy, "I didn't realize you'd be attending tonight."

"Good to see you, too." Tommy grinned with a row of perfectly sharp teeth. He had one arm
around the waist of a girl who definitely wasn't comfortable with this situation, "I see you've
grown."

How to describe Tommy... He was like a knock-off Bruce Wayne. Like he tried so hard to be as
handsome and charming as Bruce but it never quite worked. Bruce didn't try to fill his wrinkles
with botox, attempt to dye his hair black from grey, or get plastic surgery to rearrange the entirety
of his nose. Tommy almost had a doll-like face, unnatural. It was a face ironed down with
desperation. It was the face of someone who would do nearly anything for attention, including
murder his own parents.

"Yes," Tim politely nodded, "I see you've aged as well."

"Ouch," he laughed, "Not pulling any punches tonight, eh? You've done well co-hosting so far. I
knew you had it in ya. You always were a bright kid. Well, anyway, pardon us. Clarissa and I were
just trying to find our way to a more... private setting. As you can tell, she's by far the prime article
of this event." He grinned even wider.

"Right... The nearest open rooms are to your left, up the stairs."

"Thanks, sport!" He backed out of the room and the girl shot Tim an eyeful of panic before the
door closed. Damn. Tim couldn't let that poor girl get cornered like that... Whoever Clarissa was,
she needed an escape or an excuse to escape Tommy's greasy clutches.

After a moment of deliberation, Tim slipped quietly out of the bathroom to follow them. Trailing a
good ways behind, he kept to the shadows. For a second he lost sight of his target because a few
people walked by and blocked his view. Luckily, further down the hallway he heard the faint click
of a door shutting. That must be Tommy. Tim stood by the door and listened for a second,

"Ah, yes. That's much better." Yup, definitely Tommy's voice. Time to stop this before the girl
wound up in a less-than-pleasant position. Not bothering to knock, Tim waltzed into the room,
ready with an excuse and apology for interrupting them. But... the girl wasn't there. It was just
Tommy Elliot standing over a polished marble desk with a bottle of champagne.

"Oh, dear..." Tommy glanced up sheepishly, "You've caught me breaking into the drinking
cabinet."

"I... hi..." Tim scanned the room, "Where did... Clarissa go?" He ventured timidly closer, searching
for any suspicious signs. Had this monster hidden the girl under the table? Where had she gone?
The air weighed heavily, stale and tense.

"Well, she wasn't comfortable, so she went back to the party. I'm not about to force her to spend
"How considerate of you."

"Just basic human decency. I hate how these men treat women as if they're possessions, objects, disposable." Tim didn't miss how Tommy made his way around the room to close and lock the door.

"But not you... You respect women..." Tim said it more as a challenge than a question.

"I respect all human beings. Why? What do you think I do to women who dare resist my charismatic personality? Force her into a green gown?"

Tim's blood went cold.

"So," Tommy stepped closer to him, "You two are working together. You know, she's not very good at pretending to be something she's not... Unlike you. It's impressive, just seeing you stand here as if you don't remember all the nights we spent together. Your parents trained you well. And... I couldn't help but notice they're not here tonight. Why is that? Did they know I was coming? Are they afraid of me? They should be." His voice didn't have any polish of aristocrat charm. It had turned to something angrier, darker. Tim found himself backing away slowly.

"Why would they be afraid of you?" Tim asked, genuinely bewildered.

"Because I didn't stay hidden like they thought I would. Because they thought they could scare me into hiding in the first place." Oh. He was blaming Tim's parents for the disassembly of his sex trafficking business in Gotham.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Probably not," Tommy admitted, "Or they wouldn't let you be here tonight... Unless... they really didn't know I was coming back..." He began mumbling to himself, momentarily forgetting his surroundings. Tim took the opportunity to sneak his way around to the exit and--slam--get slammed into the wall, apparently.

"I know you're involved with this somehow." Tommy held him nose-to-nose, clinging to Tim's collar. "You have someone watching me, so you must be keeping tabs for goddamn Janet. I've been crawling below the radar for five years because of her." Then he suddenly let go. "But you're a good kid, Timothy. You were always quiet, did what you were told... I don't blame you for what she did. You're not your parents. At least, you don't need to be them." He took a few steps back. "I'm... sorry. I'm sorry for scaring you."

"It's- it's okay."

"No, it's not. I'm sorry for my behavior and for... I'm sorry for what I did back then, too."

"What?" Is this about to be what Tim thinks it's about to be?

"Using you like that... I can't... I'll never be able to forgive myself. If I could go back, Timothy, please, believe me, I'd never lay a hand on you. I'm so, so sorry." And now Tommy had tears in his eyes?? "You know more than anyone what kind of people your parents are. If you help me bring them to justice, I'll make it up to you. I'll give you everything I have and I'll disappear off the earth forever. If you only knew how I wish I could go back and-"

"But you can't." Tim's voice quietly cut through his sobs, "You can't go back and un-fuck a child.
And how many times did you rent me out, exactly? How many times did you make the 'mistake' of touching me? How many nights did we spend together? Oh my g- **shut up!** Stop pretending you can feel anything remotely resembling guilt!" Tim snapped and Tommy stopped with the crocodile tears. "My mother and father had nothing to do with the downfall of your little slave sex ring. They were scared off from it, too. They suffered financially because of it. They were just smart enough to get out of the business before they could be threatened directly, unlike you."

Tommy stood straight, towering over Tim, no more pretenses of humanity, "Maybe I underestimated you, Timothy." And _this_ was the Tommy Elliot that Tim remembered. "You're too smart for your own good. But even with this fancy suit, even though she's not selling you out anymore, you haven't changed. You're still the same kid." They locked eyes, "And I still control what you do, what you say, and how you feel. I _own_ you."

"As flattering as that notion is," Tim rolled his eyes, "You're too old for me, so- mmph"

Tommy hissed, one hand closing around Tim's throat, "You think acting like you're not scared means you'll stop getting nightmares of men like me? You don't get to walk away from this deluding yourself into thinking you've won."

"Let... go..." Tim struggled, trying to decide what to do now. Would Tommy actually try to kill Tim here? That seemed... sloppy, somehow. Unlikely. He could probably wait out this tantrum.

Then Tim felt something pushing against his lips and- wait, was Tommy kissing him?

With a lurch, Tim could see that bedroom again, he could feel the sheets on his skin, how cold the air felt on his skin. A hand reached behind his head and made itself into a fist. It felt like it was ripping his hair out. **Shh, no noise.** It hurt. The fist yanked his face downward. Everything smelled like sweat, tasted salty-

**No.** Anger seized ahold of Tim. He punched Tommy in the face. But he didn't stop there--no--he kicked him in the gut and as the psycho doubled over in pain, he kneed him in the jaw. A sickening crack echoed through the room and Tommy face-planted onto the floor, not moving.

"Don't you _ever_ touch me again!" Tim snarled, fully ready to break a few of Tommy's ribs. Then a fraction of common sense washed over him and maybe kicking a man while he's unconscious and concussed wasn't a very hero-like thing to do. With a deep breath, Tim realized he needed to compose himself before walking back into the snob festival. His lip stung. Ugh, that bastard had bitten into him hard enough it broke skin. Great, now everyone would wonder why he had a bloody lip.

With Tommy passed out, Tim decided he didn't want to be present when the man woke up. He left without a second glance.

Lost in thought, he barely noticed his cellphone had been ringing in his jacket pocket.

"Tim," came Cassie's voice when he answered the call, "She's here. The special guest from the Light."

"Be right there." Tim hung up.

Back on the dancefloor, sure enough, a girl wearing a golden and purple ballgown had taken the attention of everyone present. Body guards were seen standing to the side as this mystery guest danced with a very star-struck man. Her face was certainly familiar. Getting a better view, it all came together.
"Well, you were partially correct." Tim casually took a stance by Cassie's side, "That's Queen Bee's younger sister, Beatrice. Strange, but I guess it was only a matter of time before the Light pulled her into all of this."

"Does she have mind-control abilities?" Cassie whispered.

"I don't know. We don't a lot about her at all, actually. She hasn't been an active part in all this, she's just a kid. Like, fourteen years old."

"You're fourteen."

"Ew, don't remind me."

"Oh, shit. She's walking this way."

And, wow. She was pretty like an angel. Cassie actually gasped and took a step back.

"Care to dance?" She spoke with a faint Bialyian accent. Wait, was she talking to Cassie? "You're the co-host of this grand event, correct? Timothy Drake?"

"Y-yes." Tim blinked. She dazzled them with a smile and took Tim's hand to guide him to the dancefloor.

"I've heard a lot about you," she said, eagerly and immediately launching into conversation, "You're quite the latest buzz."

"It's nice to be wanted." Tim replied dryly, "I'm curious, why talk about me?"

"Well, at least, Ra's al Ghul talks about you a lot."

"You're friends with Ra's? Hang on... You know that I'm..."

"Robin? Yes. Ra's told me. But we're not friends. If anything, I think he's jealous of me."

"And why is that?"

"Well aren't I the one dancing with you tonight? ...I can tell you're worried. Don't. I'm sworn to keep your identity a secret. It's part of the plan."

"And what plan is that?"

"Hmm," she tilted her head, "You don't know how you fit into all of this?"

"I will if you tell me."

She laughed, "Not used to things being quite so cryptid?"

"I work with Batman, so I wouldn't go that far."

"Let's just say you're a person of interest. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"Does the rest of the Light know you're here, or is this just Ra's al Ghul's doing?" Just like him to drag a child into this.

"I'm here to... make connections. Dancing with you? That's all Ra's."

"Make connections?"
"Consider me an incentive."

"You're a person of fame and fortune surrounded by those who crave these exact things... They're willing to go as far to murder for it. So, what are they offering you in return for your attention?" Then Tim thought back to Tommy and Tom's failed 'business practice', "This is about human trafficking. Meta-human trafficking."

"You're even smarter than they say," And she blushed, "Cute, too. Lucky me."

"I... You know I'm gay, right?" The last thing he needs is another person crushing on him.

"The heart wants what it wants," she blushed harder, "I'm joking, of course."

"...Right. Well-" But then a scream ripped through the room. What now? It sounded like it was coming from the opening lobby. Rushing to see what the fuss was about, a group of people had already gathered to the scene. Tim pushed through the crowd to see a body lying in the middle of the floor. Someone had already checked for a pulse. "He's dead." "It looks like he was poisoned." "Why is his face bruised?" "Someone murdered him." Oh no. Tim turned around to escape and find Cassie.

"What is it? What happened?" She interrogated him as soon as they bumped into each other.

"Contact Kon," Tim instructed, "Tell him Tommy Elliot is dead."

Many thoughts ran through Tim's head. Who poisoned Tommy? Why? Was it Ra's? Was it someone with a personal agenda? The security guards had already taken Beatrice away. Damn. He still wanted to ask her questions.

"Hey," Cassie interrupted his train of thought, "He said Batman is on his way. I guess he already heard about it."

"What?" Of course Batman was keeping an ear open. "Good. He'll get here before the police and-" And no doubt find evidence that Tim and Tommy had a... disagreement earlier. What if Tim's saliva or blood was still in Tommy's mouth? Crap. Holy murder suspect, Batman. Bruce was going to be so disappointed that he let anger get the better of him... Of course, Bruce wasn't going to be more disappointed than Tim's...

Parents. Oh no.

Tim's parents were going to kill him when they found out about this.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Tim and Kon finally get the chance to talk.

Chapter Notes

Short. But important, I think.

No time to panic. Tim had stripped in the bathroom, revealing his Robin suit underneath. (Yeah, he wore his suit underneath his suit. Yeah, it's cliche. Whatever.) He needed to get to the crime scene first, maybe he could... Say that Tommy was still alive and give him mouth-to-mouth? Well, if Tommy ingested poison then maybe not... But he needed to contaminate the crime scene somehow! He needed an excuse as to why Tommy might have Tim's DNA on his person. Of course, there was a possibility that the Bat-computer wouldn't find anything anyway. But could he afford that risk?

It didn't matter. Batman was already there. Crap. And he got the samples he needed. Double crap. Jeez, that was fast. Ugh, why did Batman have to be so Batman?

No. No time to panic. He needed to get his story straight. Maybe it seemed sketchy that Timothy Drake left his own gala before the police arrived, but he could deal with those rumors later. Besides, almost no one expects the "little kid" of the party as the culprit. But Batman... How could Tim explain? It was an accident. They bumped into each other face-to-face? That would explain Tim's busted lip, but it's a far-fetched story at the most. They drank from the same wine glass? Less far-fetched but didn't explain his lip and could interfere with the investigation of who the true culprit is and... Maybe Tim could just pretend he's as confused as the next guy. "Gee, I don't know how my DNA got there! Uh, what happened to my face? Don't remember!" Yep, that's convincing.

Cassie snuck away with him and carried him to the nearest Zeta-Beam where they parted ways. He expected that by the time he got to the Batcave Batman would already have the samples scanned and processed. Tim prayed for a miracle.

And thus a miracle arrived.

He had barely stepped foot in the Cave when Batman suddenly stopped him. "Robin," Batman spoke business-like, "Use the Team's mainframe to scan these." Tim delicately took the samples in hand, not believing his luck.

"Is something wrong with the Batcomputer?" Robin shouldn't question it, but it was all too easy. Disturbingly so.

"No. The computer is preoccupied with another case I'm working on. Report back to me what you find." Well, that sounded awfully dismissive. Batman's eyes hadn't so much as flickered toward his busted lip. Something was off.
What case? Why was Batman basically blocking Tim from accessing the Batcave? What didn't he want Tim to see?

"Alright," Tim said slowly, a tone meaning 'I know you're hiding something,' "I'll be back soon." The mysteries just kept piling up. Usually, he'd consider that a good thing. Under different circumstances he might even find a murder mystery like this kinda exciting.

So there he stood at the California base, waiting for the results of possibly incriminating evidence. The place was more or less cleared out, as far as he knew. It was quiet aside from the humming of the computer. Focusing on the task at hand, he waited. And waited. At some point it occurred to him to distract himself. 'A watched pot never boils,' wasn't that the saying? But the moment he let his mind wander he began to picture his mother's face... disappointed... angry... cold... yet not surprised in the slightest. He could faintly taste the bleach ice cubes on the tip of his tongue. What if this time she snaps and does something worse? How would he lie his way out of that one?

His mother hugged him to manipulate him... But what if she meant it? Of course she doesn't care about him. She doesn't have the capacity to care. But what if she did? God, Tim hated her. He hated her voice, her face, the steel in her eyes, the eyes Tim himself had inherited. He hated how calmly she spoke when discussing which clients he'd be visiting next, how he only ever annoyed everyone he tried to befriend, how he shouldn't talk, how she'd dispose of him if he couldn't prove useful, how she- she-

He shouldn't want her to hug him again. He shouldn't want her approval. He hated her. He hated her, he hated her, he hated her hehatedher-

I'm so proud of you.

"Robin? Hey, Tim?" What?

"Kon!" Tim whipped around to see his best friend hesitantly reaching out to touch him, concerned. Really concerned. Yikes, Tim should play it cool, "Hey, buddy. How's it going? You look good. Have you cut your hair recently?"

"No... it wouldn't grow back if I did."

"Oh, right. Ha, lucky nothing has lasered all your hair off yet. Though you'd probably look hot bald. Not that you don't look hot now, I'm just saying y'know, it's not like Lex looks terrible bald so- NOT that I think Lex looks hot! I just-"

"I get it. You think I'm hot." Kon said it as a joke but still frowned.

"It must be all that yellow sun." Tim wheezed in a pathetic attempt for a chuckle. Holy complications, Batman. He needed to lead Kon away from the computer before it got its results.

"What's on your mind?" And Kon sort of pouted. Oh no, he's cute.

"I... well, I..." Tim gestured vaguely to the room around him, "Y'know? How about... you grab us a snack and I'll fill you in after-"

"Fine. I get it." Kon sighed, turning away. Was he mad? He seemed upset.

"Wait-" and shit, what was Tim doing? Getting rid of witnesses is what he wanted, "Kon, I didn't mean that as some sort of excuse. I mean, I did, but, I mean-"

"Tim," Kon placed his hand on Tim's shoulder, "We're best friends, right?"
"Yes," Tim grinned despite himself, giddy for second.

"And you know I care about you."

"Yes."

"So, what's wrong? Is it your parents? Is it this Tommy guy? Is it me? Did I do something? You've been giving me weird looks since the incident with Bart and those hell hound things."

"It's not you!" Tim assured, vividly remembering Kon confessing his love under the stars, "Of course it's not you. It's just today with the gala and murder and 'Timothy' Drake and I'm stressed, I guess. I'll finish up here and then we can take a break and relax for once. Okay?" But it wasn't okay. Kon's shoulders sagged as if giving up.

"I thought we could be honest with each other." Huh. How distraught must Tim appear to make Kon so certain of deception? He must really look like hell.

"Kon, I'm- I'm sorry. I'm not- I don't want to lie." Of course, that's all Tim ever does, lie.

"Then don't! You can trust me! Right now, right here, this is your chance. Get whatever is really bothering you off your chest."

"Right now?"

"Don't think too hard about it, just blurt it out."

And what if Tim did tell the truth? Just a little bit. Just this once. Just to Kon. It's better to play it safe... And yet, who safer to tell than the person best friends with him?

The computer was still processing. It could beep with results at any moment. Don't think, just blurt it out-

"He kissed me, Kon. I confronted him for being a creep and he kissed me like he owned me like- like I was eight years old again! Because that's what he does! And he came to my party uninvited and tries to intimidate me, he thought he could intimidate me, but I punched him in the face and knocked him out, but now he's dead. He's dead and I might be the last person who saw him alive, and he kissed me and I knocked him unconscious I was so mad and it's motive, Kon. It's a hell of a lot of motive. If I were anyone else I'd arrest me.

And what am I supposed to say to Batman? I'm gonna waltz right up to Batman and tell him about how Tommy one-upped me even though I knew from experience this is the kinda shit he pulls? I knew better than that! I am better than that! And then there's the whole 'why didn't you tell anyone you two had a history' crap, and, like, I don't know! Because it's none of their business? Because it's embarrassing? Because who the fuck wants to admit something like that has happened to them? Because I'm not that kid anymore? I can handle myself and take action! Except when I took action tonight the guy winds up dead and, god, what if Batman doesn't believe me when I say I didn't do it? What if he thinks I just snapped? Sometimes it feels like he's waiting for me to break, like he expects it. But I can't, I won't let him see me like that. If I can make sure my spit or blood doesn't come up in these samples then he never has to know. He doesn't have to know about this guy like he knows about Ra's or Karl, or- or- or whoever has tied me up this last year and flaunted me around like I'm helpless! I'm not helpless. I don't need protection from scum like Tommy, alright? I'm sick of letting whoever do whatever the fuck they want with me. And I'm not going to apologize for standing up for myself for once!"
Ten seconds of silence. No one moved.

"Okay," Kon nodded, nothing in his eyes reflected pity, disgust, or disappointment, no emotion that Tim had feared. The world didn't suddenly end, and it felt lighter, like he could breathe properly for the first time. Pure, blissful relief.

The computer beeped with recognition. No sign of Tim's DNA anywhere. Thank god.

"Okay," Tim echoed, getting his mind in the game. The results were in and he had a job to do. He needed to concentrate. Detective mode activate.

"So, do you have any leads about who the real killer might be?" Kon stood by his side to get a better look at the screens, "What poison did they use?"

"Nothing I've ever heard of before. Some lone flower that once grew off the coast of Haiti? Apparently, it's extinct now."

"Obviously not."

"Obviously. Maybe I could arrange a chat with Poison Ivy. See what she knows about it?"

"Worth a shot," Kon shrugged, "Do you think it was the Light involved?"

"A poison I've never heard of before, a rich sketchy man showing up after all this time, and all of this right when Queen Bee's little sis comes to join the party to scout for new recruits for meta-trafficking? It's a lot of unusual occurrence all happening at once. Can't be coincidence. But why target Tommy? The most obvious answer would be for money. Let's see... He withdrew all his business from Gotham, and has no immediate family to inherit anything."

"What about his Will?"

"As far as I know he didn't have one, but I guess will have to find out."

"Though," Kon pointed out, "If there's one thing I've learned from fighting against them, The Light doesn't resort to assassinating people in power if they can help it; they prefer to convince others to join their side, and Tommy seems exactly like the kind of person they could convince. Plus, if they were going to kill him- why make it such a mystery? Where's their scapegoat to take the blame? Why murder someone in such a public place and not turn it into a statement?"

"I agree."

"But instead it's a high class murder... And the man who's dead is someone who hurt you specifically, and really the world is probably a better place with him gone."

"Your point?" Tim wasn't sure he liked where this was going.

"What if this was all Ra's? Did Ra's know what Tommy did to you? What if he views this as some kind of gift. Like, kill the person who hurt you and turn it into a fun murder mystery game for the 'Detective'?"

Tim thought for a moment. "His mind is twisted enough to think I'd appreciate such a gesture... but... there's still a lot to figure out. Our best lead is to follow the money. If that doesn't pan out then we'll be forced to search for a more personal motive like revenge. And I'm sure a lot of people wanted this guy dead."
"I want to bring him back to life and kill him again," Kon muttered.

"You know," Tim appraised, "You're pretty good at this. Keep it up and maybe I'll let you be my Robin one day."

"I don't look good in a mask. It hides my eyes, my best feature."

"Oh, trust me, your best feature isn't your eyes, it's your-" Tim cut himself off with a cough.

"My what, exactly?"

"...stunning personality."

"Mhmm."

"I'm going to send this report to Batman, but, um, wanna meet up in the library in a sec? Talk about this some more? Or talk about anything, really. I just haven't- I mean I know I haven't been the best- and you've been super -heh- patient with me- and I mean, I... um..." Tim found it hard to look at anything other than the floor.

"You have to ask? Actually, I found this book that I thought you'd like... It's, well, a mystery novel. It caught my eye, so I figured why not buy it and see what you think?"

Wait. What?

Kon--his beautiful, amazing best friend--bought him a book. And not just any book, a mystery novel! Like, a gift!! A very nice and thoughtful gift!! For no other reason than he thought of Tim and thought he might like it?? Is that- is that even allowed? Like, he doesn't need a reason to get Tim something, just, 'oh yeah I was thinking of you!' That's crazy! Tim froze, trying to process it.

"That's so-" And he swears his body must have a mind of its own because suddenly he's wrapped around Kon in the tightest of bear hugs, almost knocking his poor friend to the ground. "You're the best half-alien clone I've ever met!"

"Yeah, I better be. Now hurry before some world-threatening catastrophe makes us miss library time." With a grin, Kon gave Tim a final squeeze before letting him go.

"Right!" And after watching Kon leave, Tim used the computer and sent this new info and his theories to the Batcave where Bruce would analyze and obsess over them per normal. Whatever reason Batman had about being secretive, eh, Tim would figure it out soon enough. It wasn't important because right now he had a date with Kon. But, like, not a date-date. A get-together. A total platonic, normal, cuddle-and-read thing that friends do... yeah. Friends. Best friends. Nothing more or less. As it should be. Good.

Files sent. Computer logged out. Library time.

On his way out the door, his phone started ringing. Of course. Searching in the wrong pocket, Tim realized the call was coming from his family cellphone. Which meant...

Janet Drake.

She heard. She knew. She was going to warn Tim of all the awful things she planned to do with him. Ugh, why did Tommy have to get murdered at Tim's party? The Light couldn't have waited a week more? The next time his mother sees him in person... Who knows what will happen.
But Janet being upset isn’t a world-threatening catastrophe. And only world-threatening catastrophes were going to interfere with library time.

"Fuck it." Tim turned off the phone. He'd have to call her back, of course. But not now.

Files sent. Computer logged out. Phones off.

Kon was waiting for him.
Kon is stressed

Kon didn't like hiding things from his friends. He didn't like keeping secrets. He also didn't like it when his friends kept secrets from him, but at least he was used to that.

So when Kon left the library and found out he'd been bugged, that Dick had attached a listening device to his jeans, he was a little relieved but a little angry. Moderately angry. Okay, very angry. He stormed off to the Batcave uninvited while poor Tim was still curled up asleep in their favorite chair.

"Aren't we passed all this?" Kon broke the small oval device between his fingers and bits of metal sprinkled to the cave floor.

"Hey, that was expensive-"

"Dick, I'm serious. Tim is going to think I told you about being-" Molested. At age eight. By someone who just got away with hurting kids for who knows how long. ".-He's going to think I tell you all his secrets! That I tell Batman all his secrets!" And Batman wasn't even looking at them, he was still staring at his stupid fancy bat-computer. This is exactly what Superman means when he calls Batman an angsty teen.

"He'll never know-"

"He knows a lot of things he'd 'never know!'" And Kon kept his arms to his sides so he didn't try to punch the nearest object.

"Okay, well I'll tell you what we know," Dick snapped, "We know Janet and Jack have abused Tim in multiple ways, and we know Tim has spent years hiding this abuse from everyone, especially us! And now we know Tommy was involved and that might just be the lead we need to find substantial evidence-"

"Tim spent years keeping secrets because he can't trust anyone, and going behind his back isn't helping." *Urge to punch Dick intensifies*

"Confronting him puts him on the defensive!" *Urge to punch Dick intensifies*

"He's opening up! Telling us things! We can't lose that!"

"He's barely telling us anything! You saw how he acted tonight. And not because of the Light-- you know literal murderers who traffic children--he's terrified of his parents. You know he's hiding a lot more, and he's not going to cooperate with us. We need all the help we can get. Until then while we can do our best to keep Janet and Jack away physically, we can't save him from the emotional abuse. They're still in control of his life. They don't have to be in the same country to torture him. And there are so many more questions- Did Janet and Jack know about Tommy? Were there others? The sooner we find out the sooner we can get Tim safe-"
"If you were really that concerned about Tim then you'd take his parents into custody right now, evidence or not!"

"Don't you think that's what I want to do?"

"Then why don't you?"

"Because," Batman interrupted, suddenly within ten feet of them, "Conner, you're right. Tim's trust is important. We're not taking his parents into custody without his consent, without telling him. There are a lot of people right now fighting for Tim's attention, waiting until he's vulnerable and alone. The Light has taken him before and I'm sure Ra's would jump at the opportunity to do that again.

"Tim wouldn't betray us," Kon protested.

"Maybe not," Batman agreed, "But if he views us as his enemy? He'll go off into the world alone with assassins following him everywhere he goes. I'm not going to lose another son, Superboy. We do this the right way. We won't go against the law... Not yet." And damn. How is Kon supposed to react to that?

"Fine." Superboy met Batman's classic bat-glare, "But I'm telling him you bugged me without my permission. I'm not lying about that."

"Conner," Dick warned.

"No. You used me. I didn't agree to spy on him like that. It's not right. He trusted me."

"Do you what you have to." Batman continued to glare.

"I will." And Kon turned to leave before stopping, "I would've convinced Tim to tell you about Tommy. I would've convinced him it was the right thing to do, that it was something you should know. If we're going to help him, you have to trust me."

"..."

And with that, Kon left.

...........................................................................

"He's right. We shouldn't have done that," Dick sighed. Besides the buzzing of the machines, the cave was quiet without Conner. Maybe Dick should put on some music. But from the expression of Bruce's face, eh, it might not be the time for it.

"Hnn." Batman grunted.

"Old habits die hard I guess." In their defense, Superboy was really easy to bug, and Dick honestly thought he wouldn't notice... And maybe Dick wanted to make sure Conner wasn't flirting. Plus, Tim had been totally distraught! Heavy on the dis... And maybe Dick was starting to wonder if growing up with The World's Greatest Detective taught him to have a few trust issues. Hmm.

Not telling anyone about Aqualad going undercover... faking Artemis's death... Planning on erasing Kon's memory... Dick really didn't trust his Team, did he? No, it's not that. He just didn't want everyone to get hurt, and knowing the truth? God did that hurt. Great, now he's thinking about the philosophy of ethics and that never ends well. He'll save that for therapy with Dinah.
Dick sighed again, louder, more dramatically, "At least tell me it was worth it."

"That's a no then? Fantastic. Wonderful."

"I'm being sarcastic if you couldn't tell."

"Bruce-

"Everyone on Tim's list is wealthy, but I can't find any real connections to do with the Elliots or the Drakes other than the usual distant business transactions. Why did he choose to steal from these specific people? What's the correlation?"

"Well," Tim's voice came from behind them, stern, but not wrathful, "You could ask him."

"Tim..." And was it just Dick or did Batman actually sound sheepish? A hint of regret echoed off the cave walls. Still, as usual it would be up to Dick to outright apologize on Bruce's behalf.

"Conner told you?" Dick asked.

"Yeah. He's pretty upset. I think he's taking it out on some punching bags right now."

"Timmy, we are so sorry..."

"It's okay. I put bugs on people all the time."

"You do?"

"Not lately, but yeah. I should've noticed. So... what's the verdict? Are you going to yell at me? Bench me? I lost my temper after all. I hurt Tommy. I was planning on hiding evidence, compromise the case. I was being selfish and letting my emotions get the better of me. You heard me confess."

"Robin." Bruce pulled back his cowl and then pinched the bridge of his nose as if getting a headache. "Tim... I am not going to punish you."

""

"I am, however, disappointed. If you had told me-

"Oh my god," Dick cut in. This was unbearable. "Bruce, just, shut up. You are not helping this situation stay aster." He took a deep breath before continuing. "Tim, after hearing about Tommy, we thought that maybe there were other people who hurt you, and that maybe that's why you sent Catwoman to steal from them when you two were working together." And then Tim sort of gave a relieved smile and his shoulders relaxed,

"Oh, is that it? I just picked whoever I saw at parties or whoever kinda annoyed me. Like, if they had bad smelling perfume or they pinched my cheeks or they called me a 'bright young lad.' You're not going to find some pattern because there is none. I mean, sometimes I guess I heard rumors that
certain people were doing certain bad things, but they were just rumors everyone knew about. There was no special process."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Geez, you should've just asked."

"Open communication works!" Dick shot Bruce a dirty look, "Who would've guessed!"

"Cool, welp, I gotta fly, so-"

"Wait." Bruce stopped him. "I... Tim, I..." C'mon, Bruce, don't ruin this. Please, don't make this worse. 'I wish you felt comfortable telling me about what you went through. I'm disappointed you didn't. But I understand. And I... would like it if you spoke to someone about it since it's clearly something no one should have to go through."

"Right!" Tim gave a clearly forced smile. 'I'll get another appointment with Black Canary asap. Glad everything has been settled. It's all good now, right? No benching. No interrogation. Hopefully no more secret listening devices. Let's *please* go back to normal."

"Absolutely."

"Awesome. I'm going now. Bye."

"That went well," Bruce said after Tim left, genuinely impressed.

"For you, yeah, it did." Dick was almost proud. "It's too bad he's still hiding something."

"That's how you know he's a Bat."

..................................................................

"Well, it was as awful as I suspected," Tim complained to Kon the next day. It was about noon and they decided to get lunch together at the CA base. As friends do. Because they're rebels they even chose to eat their sandwiches while sitting on the couch and not at the table. Will no one stop their heinous crimes?

"I am so-"

"Kon, I love you, but if you apologize one more time I'm going to beat you with my bo staff." Tim took a sip of orange juice. "You're really beating yourself up about this."

"And you're not?"

"It's Batman. It's what he does. Literally all the time. It's actually trained me to scan a room for listening devices or cameras automatically. Being aware of my environment like that is important."

"Privacy is important."

"And so is keeping people safe. And sometimes you have to sacrifice privacy in order to do that."

"You sound like him."

"I'm explaining his point of view."

"Okay, fine, but what about Dick?"
"He's more like Batman than he wants to admit."

"You shouldn't be okay with this!"

"I'm not!" He took an aggressive bite from his turkey sandwich. What was it about turkey that makes a sandwich taste so disappointing? "But they know, and I can't change that. I just have to be more careful in the future."

"They should be careful, not you." Kon slumped a little in defeat though, possibly tired.

"Cheer up!" Tim patted him on the back. "Why don't we do something fun? What about sparring? I'll even go easy on you."

Kon gave a little smile but grunted, "The sparring room is taken."

"No, it's not! Cassie scheduled to use it but she has a date tonight. Not sure with who, but I do know they're going to a food place fancier than Batburger and that the woman in question has short brown hair and is approximately five foot."

"How..?" Doing laundry early to get wear her favorite outfit, the string of texts she'd been getting all morning, and Tim was 99% certain Cassie met this girl sometime during the soiree, and he's 89% sure he knows specifically which girl. There were a lot of other things, too, but-

"I just know things."

"Right, right. But what I meant- I saw M'gann putting up decorations for Garfield's surprise birthday party for tomorrow night. She told everyone about it?"

"Tomorrow isn't his birthday--*cough*" Tim's throat felt scratchy like he was about to sneeze. And no, M'gann didn't tell him about any birthday party. Maybe she forgot? Or maybe she didn't want him to come. Why wouldn't she want him to come? Tim didn't think M'gann hated him especially... Though he wouldn't be surprised. He never put in real effort to make Miss Martian like him, and if someone didn't like him they kinda wound up hating him instead. No middle ground. And then there's the hunky statue of muscle that's Superboy.

"That's why it's a surprise."

"Eh. I'm done with surprises for the year--*cough*--I mean-" Tim cleared his throat. "I'd prefer to plan ahea--*cough*--d, and--*cough*--What?" At first he thought he must be choking on his sandwich, but no, something was moving inside his throat. The next time he tried to cough no air got through. Then no air got in. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe.

He got to his feet in a sudden burst of panic, clamping his hands to his neck. Kon leaped up, too.

"Tim? Robin? What's wrong?" Kon raised his arms like he wanted to touch Tim but was too afraid, "Are you choking? Should I-" Tim frantically waved Kon away because he'd rather do the Heimlich on himself before letting his distressed super friend break his ribs.

"Nghh!" A sharp pain cut through the inside of his mouth before he managed another cough. And out came... feathers? Small brown and white feathers, delicately drifting through the air. Tim automatically gave another hack so violent he fell to his knees, and in a puff of a few orange feathers, he felt the thing in his throat climbing. With a retch, the object plopped out and he caught it.

"I don't remember eating this," Tim said, staring at the little robin in his hands. The bird hopped to
its feet and chirped, no care in the world. Perfectly normal and healthy and-

And the robin took off to the air, flying! Very quickly. Head-first into the wall. With its brain and gut splattered everywhere.

"What the hell..." Kon whispered as he helped Tim up. But no. That wasn't all. The blood that now decorated the stone walls began to expand into some kind of pattern... Words. The blood on the wall crawled along to form a message. By this point, Tim had taken out his bo staff, expecting to be attacked by something.

"What language is that?" Kon asked, also posed defensively.

"It's..." And the writing looked so familiar... "It's olden homo magi text! A dead language."

"Like Zatanna?"

"No, this is dark magic stuff." Tim blinked and stared for a good minute when the message completed. "Oh."

"What? Do you know what it says?" Kon took a step forward. What was his plan? Punch the wall? C'mon, Superboy.

"Yeah, um, the translation is essentially... 'Will you go out with me? Check yes or no.' Klarion is officially asking me out on a date for next Saturday! 'Join me for dinner.' Hmm. He said dress formal, so this place better be nice... Looks like it takes blood to answer, so..."

"So? So what? Tell him no!"

"Kon, I told you--"

"I don't care! He's a murderer! You're not going to 'dinner' with him!"

"Shh. I'm reading."

"Robin! I'm serious. This isn't- you can't just- Not now-"

But Tim took off his glove, and with the sharp edge of a birdarang he cut open the palm of his hand. He took the blood from the wound and smeared it over the 'yes' box.

"The. It's done. No backing out now. It's bonded with blood so I'll literally die if I don't go." And the blood sorta soaked into the wall and disappeared.

"You agreed when you barely even looked at it?" Kon's voice was reaching hysterical.

"I re-read it, like, a dozen times! You have a point, though. You think I responded too fast? Do you think he thinks I'm desperate now?"

"Tim!"

"God, I have less than a week to prepare! I have to buy a suit and everything! Hmm, would an outfit that matched his puritan aesthetic end up looking tacky?"

"Tim!"

"I could reuse my suit from the soiree... Ugh, no. I'm not that trashy."
"Tim!"

"Why are you two screaming?" M'gann interrupted, confused and maybe annoyed.

"I'm going on a date with Klarion!" Tim chirped.

"He's going on a date with Klarion!" Kon growled, "And apparently he'll die if he doesn't!"

"I'm..." M'gann glanced back and forth between the two of them, "I'm calling Zatanna."
Tim brooded up in the rafters of the library while everyone celebrated Garfield's birthday. He'd dropped off his gift for Gar, of course. But Tim didn't quite feel... welcome at the party. Kon, Zatanna, Kaldur, Nightwing... The news of his date with Klarion traveled fast, and many were upset with Tim for being "reckless."

But he knew what he was doing. He had a plan. Klarion's life was on the line, too. If either of them stood the other up, both would die. And if it wasn't Klarion's blood in sealing the contract, well, then the contract was moot. Explaining this didn't make anyone feel any better. It's alright, though. Tim knew the risks of fornicating with the enemy. And all will be forgiven once he gets the Book of Azarath to translate the Apocalypse Trinity. He's only using Klarion, after all. That's all it is. Just good ole manipulation. It was just dinner, sex, and he gets the book. Easy.

Zatanna was currently working on a bracelet of sorts for Tim to wear, like an escape button if things went sour. It would automatically transport him back to safety. To complete the agreement, technically all Tim had to do was go to dinner. Not complete dinner. He only needed to show up. After that, he could leave whenever. Though like heck he would leave before getting what he came for.

They just needed to trust him. He knows how to deal with Klarion. He's ready for this.

As for Superboy... Kon El... his Clone Boy... his best friend... Surely, in the end Kon would understand why he has to do this. Everyone is just overreacting. He can handle himself.

The click-clack of his keyboard didn't drown out the music in his head, the music Tim imagined everyone was enjoying while wishing Garfield happy birthday. And missing out on birthday parties was fine with Tim, too. He'd only pollute the care-free atmosphere. Plus, Tim had cases to work on for Batman. So it was fine. He wasn't lonely. He liked being alone, surrounded by these shelves filled with books. Books filled with stories of people who had friends, who went to parties, who had fun.

"Party of one?"

Hmm? He blinked and saw Dick sitting on a shelf across from him.

"Hey," Tim said flatly. Just what he needed, Dick Grayson visiting to scold him on the dangers of going out with a Lord of Chaos, because Klarion "killed their teammate" and was a "murderer" and the date was no doubt "a trap," and all of these things Tim already knew. He was frickin' there when Aquagirl died! He knows. He's not an idiot.

"We're about to open presents." Dick gave him a small smile. Oh. Well then.
"I didn't get Garfield anything."

"Yes you did. You have everyone's presents picked out for the next ten years."

"..."

"C'mon, get out of this dusty library and eat some cake."

"I don't think I'm wanted right now."

Dick groaned in exasperation, "Conner is angrily standing in a corner alone, and it's reallyyyyy awkward. At least go for him? You know how bad he is at socializing. M'gann tried to talk to him and it just made things worse. I think he's waiting for you."

"I think he's upset with me."

"I think he's worried."

"He doesn't want to talk." They hadn't spoken to each other all day.

"Or maybe he thinks you don't want to talk to him."

"...Fine." Tim closed his laptop. "I hate it when you're right."

"Then you must hate me 24/7, huh?" Tim couldn't help but grin at that, and he jumped down from his perch.

It turns out Dick wasn't exaggerating when he said Kon was standing alone in a corner. Poor Superboy looked like a cornered animal who would attack anyone who got close. And no one dared to get close. Tim decided he better move before he chickened out and slipped passed the presents and chattering super teens.

He sidled up next to his Clone-Boy. "Hey."

"Don't do that." Kon huffed, apparently startled. Oops, guess Tim snuck up on him.

"Do what?" Tim batted his eyes innocently. He tried to go for a cheeky demeanor, but Superboy didn't seem amused.

"I- nevermind." Did Kon sound angry?. Was he angry? Of course he was. He didn't want to talk to Tim. This was a mistake. Abort mission- abort mission-

"Would you-" Kon coughed. "Would you, um... uh..." Awkward silence.

"Want me to leave?"

"Wh- no! No, I wouldn't..." Kon took a deep breath. "Would you like some cake?"

"Cake?"

"Yeah, you know... With icing and... stuff."

"What kind?"

"What?"


"Did you just make some of those up?"

"Why would I make them up?"

"It's just, I don't know. Birthday cake."

"My favorite."

"Okay. Then I'll go and-"

"Wait!" Tim's voice was louder than expected

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry." Tim blurted, "I'm sorry for... I'm sorry."

Kon frowned. "It's okay. It's just cake. You don't have to eat it if you don't want to."

"That's not..." Ohhh, maybe Kon is speaking in metaphor. "I do have to eat the cake, though. I know it's not good for me. But I'm doing it because I have to, not because I like the cake. In fact, I hate the cake. Frosting is disgusting. I'm positively repulsed."

"But... The frosting is the best part."

Oh, nope. Not a metaphor. And Kon wasn't catching on.

"Uh, nevermind. Forget what I said. I love cake."

"How can you not like frosting?"

"No, Kon, that's not-"

"It's basically just sugar and milk. I literally watched you eat a bowl of sugar before. It was horrifying. But now you tell me you don't like frosting?"

"Well, I mean, the cake part is better, but I do like-"

"What do you mean the cake part is better?"

"Well, the- the frosting is just too much sometimes! Too rich!"

"How can anything be 'too rich'?!"

"I don't have to explain myself to you-"

"It's like I don't even know who you are anymore!"

"Well! If you like frosting so much then I'll give you mine!"

"I don't want your frosting!"

"Fine! You know what? If you're too good for my frosting then maybe we shouldn't be friends!"

"Maybe we shouldn't Mr. The-Cake-Part-Is-Better!!"
"Fine!"

"FINE!"

"FINE!!!!!"

They both glared at each other for about a minute. Tim wasn't sure who broke first but there was a
snort, then a giggle, and then they were both laughing like total idiots as everyone around them sat
around trying not to stare. But Tim didn't care because Kon didn't hate him. They weren't fighting.
They were good. Everything was fine. As long as he had Kon by his side, it would all work out in
the end.

"I'll be right back," Superboy promised. His eyes were bright and cheeks a little pink from
laughing. God, he was beautiful. As soon as Kon turned the corner M'gann made an
announcement.

"Alright, everyone!" M'gann clapped her hands together. "It's time for birthday boy to open his
birthday presents!"

"Again, it's not my birthday!" Garfield replied. "You guys really didn't hafta-"

"Oh, shut up and open your gifts! Feel the mode." Bart zipped around and forced a brightly colored
box into Gar's hands, "You know you want to." Garfield grinned and immediately climbed onto the
arm rest of the couch. Turning into a monkey he began ripping off the paper.

"No way! A new video camera!"

Tim glanced at the small mountain of presents in the corner. This could be a while. At least Gar
knew he was loved, right?

Kon wound up trapped on the other side of the room while the birthday boy opened what looked
like a box of breakfast vegan recipes. It seemed to be heavily tofu related.

Tshirts for Gar's favorite concert. Socks. A cool figurine of a green tiger. A gift card to some local
coffee shop in Star City. Gar thanked everyone and hugged everyone. And then-

"Last one! It's pretty big." Dick dragged along Tim's present. Now, of course Tim didn't sign it or
leave a card. The gift was supposed to be anonymous.

The present in question was a large and rather flat rectangle.

"Oh, who's this from?" A voice said.

"Robin!" Dick chirped back.

"Nightwing!" Tim snapped and regretted it because now he'd drawn the attention of the room.

Garfield ripped off the wrapping paper and-

"A picture frame. Thanks, Robin!"

"An antique. I figure if your acting career doesn't pan out, you can sell it for half a million or so," Tim explained, "Getting into showbiz isn't easy." Now he just needed a distraction so he could slip
away from the room without anyone noticing.

"Noted. But, c'mon, I have green skin! I'm bound to get some contract-" The Beast Boy cut off
mid-sentence. He'd turned the picture frame around to see the photo it contained.

It was the sunrise over the grassy plains of the animal sanctuary on the outskirts of Bialya. Garfield's previous home. In the distance, orange and pinks swirled over the barn Garfield and his mother kept to shelter the injured animals. The viewpoint was from the porch of their house. Tim himself took this picture years ago during his fanboy stalker phase, before he was Robin, before Queen Bee enthralled Gar's mom to drive off of a cliff.

And, well, that's the real reason M'gann set Garfield's birthday for today. His mom was killed on January sixteenth five years ago. Miss Martian was trying to bring a little joy during a time of painful reminders.

"It's beautiful." Garfield whispered. And everyone was silent. Sometimes memories are so heavy it's hard to breathe, let alone talk. Maybe they all were remembering loved ones they lost as well. Tim couldn't fathom a loss of a loved one so vital to his life or his heart.

"Thank you, Robin." Gar stood up and smiled at him. For a terrifying second it looked like he was going in for a hug. Thankfully he transformed into a green puppy at the last moment. And hugging a puppy is much more pleasant than hugging a human. Everyone cooed at them and Tim felt himself blushing. Too much attention. Luckily, Miss Martian sensed his distressed.

"Who's up for some party games? It's your birthday, Gar. Anything you wanted to try?" Clearly, M'gann knew Garfield had some ideas.

The green puppy jumped out of Tim's lap and transformed back into a boy. "Oh! Oh! I have one! I got an app called 'Would you rather.'"

"Classic." Dick grinned.

"Okay, Megan! You first! Would you rather-" Garfield read the question off his phone, "Lose the ability to read, or lose the ability to speak?"

"Hmm, speak because I can always use telepathy."

"Yeah, that one's too easy for you."

"Oh, I'd pick reading for sure!" Bart claimed loudly, "No more boring text books for me."

"Not to mention you'd die if you couldn't talk." Jaime muttered.

"Rude."

"Alright, moving on." Gar snorted. "Tigress, would you rather fight 100 duck sized horses, or fight one horse sized duck."

"Do I have my arrows in this situation?"

"Sure."

"Fight one horse sized duck."

"Really?" Mal whistled, impressed, "I don't think I could fight one normal sized duck."

"That's because you're not a monster, honey." Karen gently patted him on the back.

"Do me next, Gar!" Cassie requested.
"Okay... Here's a good one! Would you rather eat a bowl of dirt or a bowl of worms?"

"Wow. Okay. Umm... Worms. More protein."

Everyone groaned in disgust and started debating on which one would be better. (Lagoon Boy passionately defended eating worms.) The discussion got pretty heated at one point.

"Alright, everyone! Calm down!" Garfield soothed the room. "Robin, would you rather never go trick-or-treating or never have a birthday party?"

Tim smiled a little, thankful he got an easy one. "Oh, well, I've never had a birthday party before so..." And apparently that was the wrong thing to say.

"You've never had a birthday party??" Gar wailed. "Ever??"

"What about last year? We didn't celebrate?" Dick looked heartbroken. Tim shrugged, "There was kind of an alien invasion. We were all a bit busy."

"Robin, I'm so sorry-"

"If you've never had a birthday party then today will be your birthday!" Gar declared, "This is officially your birthday party, too!"

"No, no, no. This is your day. Besides, I- Well, actually-" Tim remembered. "Yes! I have had a birthday party! Balloons and everything."

"I don't believe you." Cassie crossed her arms.

"I'm serious!"

"Oh yeah? How old were you?"

"Eight." He had begged his mother all summer for a party, to be like the other kids. He wanted the party hats, the dumb party games, candles, confetti, everything.

"What kind of cake did you have?"

"Well, actually we didn't have cake. My mom didn't buy any because she thought no one would show. Which, I mean, no one did." Crap they were going to think he's a loser- "Not that I was a social pariah! People liked me! Found out ages later she told everyone it had been canceled so she could punish me for 'socially embarrassing' her. One of those be careful who you trust lessons y'know? Heh."

"Hang on," Cassie waved her hands to cut Tim off. "Your mom told everyone your birthday had been canceled and then grounded you when no one showed up?"

"Well, yeah, but-"

"Robin!" Cassie stood up, bristling. "That's fucked up! She just made up an excuse to punish you! For no reason! She set you up to starve on your birthday!"

"It wasn't that bad-"

"They're abusive assholes that should be in jail!"
"Hey!" Tim squared himself against her. "They are not abusive! They've only ever done what they thought was best for me!" Then he said, more quietly, "Let's not do this right now. I know you're upset because your date yesterday went badly."

"Don't turn this back on me."

"You really liked her and she turned you down, it happens."

"Shut up!"

"She went in for a kiss, you backed out, and she accused you of misleading her."

"I- wait, were you spying on me?" And if Cassie was mad before, she was raging now. But at least the conversation was off of his parents.

"She wasn't good enough for you anyway. You're way out of her league."

"You were! You were stalking me! What the Hades is wrong with you?"

Of course Tim hadn't stalked her. All this information was practically written on her face. But if it's a fight that she wants- "For future reference, if you want a girlfriend, try not to sound so desperate next time."

Without hesitation, Cassie lunged forward and threw a punch, aimed at his face. He would've let her hit him (he did deserve it) but he needed to look good for his date. Tim took a step to the right at the last second to dodge the attack.

"Time out! Both of you!" Barbara shoved her way between them. "This is a party, not a brawl."

Everyone stood up but no one said anything, watching to see if things would escalate and looking to Babs for a signal to intervene. Dick held out an arm to stop Kon from getting involved. M'gann put a comforting hand on Garfield's shoulder. Bart stole some birthday candy while everyone was distracted.

"You want me to hurt you, so you have an excuse to shut me out." Cassie whispered. "But you're going to wake up one day and realize you've pushed away everyone who's cared about you." And... ouch. That actually hurt.

"Tell you what," Tim smiled politely. "From now on you stay out of my personal life, and I'll stay out of yours. Sound fair?"

"I don't care if you don't want my help. I don't care if you hate me for it. Next time I see your parents, I'm throwing their asses behind bars and you can't stop me. I'd rather you hate me than wind up dead." Tim took a breath in, about to protest, to yell, to get offended, say 'how dare you' and throw a tantrum. But then he heard-

ring ring

Oh no. His phone... It was Janet. No, not now...

ring ring

He couldn't ignore it. Not again. He had to answer. But what if it proved Cassie right? What if they threatened him? Cassie could tell... She knew it was Janet. Everyone here staring at him, they all knew.
He'd have to risk it.

"Hey, Mom." Tim answered in a cheery someone-is-listening-to-us voice. A pause. Even Bart stopped chewing his candy to listen.

"Darling, we called to congratulate you on the winter gala! Oh, we heard it was simply divine. I heard royalty from around the globe attended! When I saw your face on the front of the Gotham Gazette, your father and I were so proud."

"You weren't disappointed with how the night... ended?"

"Disappointed? Honey, you've captured the audience of all of Gotham. A tragedy for that poor man of course, but the only thing people love more than a scandal is a mystery. You played your part perfectly. Jack, anything you'd like to tell your son while I have him on the line?"

"Hey, sport! Good job! We love ya!"

"Oh, our car is here. Timothy, do your best to shine while you have the spotlight, don't get into trouble, and stay safe. We love you, darling."

"I love you, too." And they hung up.

Good news! They weren't mad at him! Bad news. They 100% killed Tommy.

"If you excuse me," Tim smirked at Cassie, walking around her. He refused to meet Kon's eyes as he made his way to the exit. He wasn't in the mood for birthday cake anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next chapter- Date with Klarion the Witch Boy! Lord of Chaos!

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