Summary

Bruce Wayne is used to one of his family or co-workers occasionally getting de-aged. What he doesn’t expect is all five of his children reverted to the age of ten. Keeping them all safe is difficult, but he’s Batman, so he’ll handle it.

(He lasts less than twenty-four hours before calling Barbara for help)

Notes

My first batfamily fic. I know this trope has been used a lot but I couldn't resist. Set when Damian is Robin but Bruce has returned to being Batman, and the New-52 didn't happen.
Looking back on it, the only reason Bruce didn’t completely beat himself up over not noticing immediately that his children had been de-aged, was the fact that Damian was the only one living at the manor when it happened. Being ten years old already, the spell had no effect on the boy, and Batman and Robin went about their business as usual.

Dick was in Bludhaven, Cassandra was in Hong Kong. Jason rarely made contact and Tim was busy working on a case for the Titans. Bruce hadn’t been expecting any contact from them, therefore he had no way of knowing that something was wrong until Barbara called him.

“Heavily you heard from Dick? Kori tried to ring him but he won’t pick up, and none of their friends can get through to him either.”

The first thought in Bruce’s mind was that he was probably busy working a difficult case as Nightwing, but he didn’t bother voicing that thought. Barbara would have already considered that, and if she was still trying to get in touch with him then that meant trouble.

“I haven’t heard from him since his last visit. He was supposed to come over in a few weeks. He made plans with Damian.”

“Well he’s completely dropped off the radar.” There was the sound of computer keys clicking in the background. “No reports of Nightwing or Officer Grayson, his colleagues don’t know what happened to him either. Wally went to check his apartment and he wasn’t there. No sign of a struggle or any indication that he was planning to leave. It looks like he just went out and didn’t come back.”

Bruce’s mind raced through all the various contingency plans he had prepared. Dick would hate it if Batman showed up to rescue him, especially if he was just stuck in a tricky situation and not near death. So while part of Bruce wanted to rush over and comb every inch of Bludhaven, the rational part of him knew that the situation wasn’t that dire yet.

“I’ll send Tim to investigate.” Was what he said at last.

“Let me know if he finds anything.”

She hung up then, and Bruce immediately dialled Tim’s number. He tried it three times, and each time it went to voicemail.

That’s when Bruce’s instincts told him something was very, very wrong.

For a second he considered changing into Batman, but it was only a little past noon and he had no concrete proof that anything was seriously amiss. Instead, he got the BMW out of the garage and let Alfred know that he was paying Tim a visit.

“Should I send over some of my cooking? I’m worried the boy isn’t eating well, and he always did like my lasagne.”

Half an hour later, Bruce was standing outside Tim’s apartment with a Tupperware of warm lasagne. He knocked on the door, and knocked a little louder when there was no answer.

“Tim? Are you in there? It’s Bruce.”

For a second, he thought he would have to break in, but after a minute or so the door creaked open,
and a small head poked out. Bruce’s eyes widened, because he had never met this child before, and yet he was very familiar.

It was Tim, the boy was undoubtedly his son, and yet Tim had been thirteen when he had properly begun training with Batman and the boy in front of him was no older than eleven. He’d seen photos of a young Tim, but it was still very disconcerting to see him in person.

Of course, part of that was because Tim was meant to be seventeen, and the fact that he was much younger proved to Bruce that something had gone very wrong when he hadn’t been paying close enough attention. This wasn’t the first time someone he knew got temporarily de-aged, but he never let it lull him into a false sense of security. Just how bad this situation was had yet to be determined, but any hint of magic left a sour taste in Bruce’s mouth, especially magic used on his son. He’d take action if Tim showed signs of harm and distress, but he seemed quite calm, and right now that meant he was Bruce’s main lead in this investigation.

Tim had the same pale blue eyes and dark hair, but they were guarded and filled with suspicion. It was clear that he recognized him, or at least he recognized Bruce Wayne, but he also didn’t trust him. Bruce’s chest ached just a little at that, but logically there was no reason for it to bother him. Of course Tim was suspicious of him, he was ten years old and didn’t realize that the man standing in front of him had become his father. That was all Bruce could gather from Tim’s guarded stare, but it was enough to make him cautious as he crouched down to meet Tim’s eyes.

“Tim, do you know who I am?”

“Bruce Wayne, billionaire industrialist and main shareholder of Wayne Enterprises.”

His voice was high pitched and squeaky, the words sounding recited and unfamiliar. He was careful pronouncing each syllable, as if messing up a big word would cause Bruce to dismiss him as a child trying to act grown up. In reality, Bruce was fully aware of just how intelligent Tim had been as a child, and the fact that Tim was talking to him like that was more proof that it wasn’t just Tim’s body that had regressed.

“How much do you remember?”

Tim squinted at him, an adorable version of his usual assessing gaze. Bruce couldn’t quite tell what Tim picked up from analysing him, but he didn’t slam the door in his face so at least he didn’t view Bruce as an immediate threat.

“I fell asleep two nights ago happy because my parents were finally home and I was going to spend all weekend with them. I woke up seven years in the future with an apartment under my name, two dead parents, and bunch of people I don’t know texting me for updates regarding some supervillain with a dumb alias.”

“I see.”

Bruce considered his options, and deduced that the easiest thing to do would be to tell Tim the truth. If it were Dick or Jason he would try and be gentler, maybe get Alfred to explain, but Tim was different. He examined information similarly to Bruce himself, and he’d had a full day to gather intel on this foreign world. Therefore, it was reasonable to assume he would accept any explanation Bruce gave him as long as it was the most logical scenario.

“The truth is Tim, you haven’t travelled forward in time, you’ve travelled backwards.” He held out Alfred’s lasagne and Tim took it, listening intently. “The Tim Drake I know was seventeen two days
ago, and now he’s gone and you’re here. I don’t know why yet, but it seems you’ve been transformed into the version of you that existed seven years ago.”

“If you want me to believe that, you’re going to need to show me more proof.”

Bruce hid a smile at that. Ten years old in an apartment filled with items belonging to an older version of himself, and he still refused to trust Bruce’s explanation. He reminded Bruce of when Tim had first become Robin, precocious and brimming with potential.

“I know that you know who I am.”

“And who’s that?” He had a good poker face for a kid, but Bruce could see right through his bluff.

“We both know who I’m talking about. The partner to who most of those texts are probably addressed to.”

Tim’s eyes widened and he took a step back. Bruce used that opportunity to move past him into the apartment. Nowhere outside the batcave was truly safe enough to reveal his identity, but since the situation called for it, Tim’s home was probably more secure than the open corridor.

“I have a secret identity Tim, but you already know that. You discovered my identity when you were nine years old, and then when you were thirteen you tracked me down and convinced me to make you Robin. Now you’re seventeen and operating under the alias of Red Robin, but again you already know that. You’ve had a full day to research these unfamiliar surroundings, and access to the internet and your older self’s phone. I’d wager you expected me to come knocking at some point, and this only confirms what you’ve already figured out.”

Tim looked overwhelmed, but Bruce wouldn’t have laid all the facts out like that if he didn’t think Tim could handle it. He waited patiently while the boy processed everything he’d said, likely looking for loopholes or proof that this was all an elaborate prank. No one wanted to believe that they would lose their parents so young, and Bruce could sympathise with him, but coddling was pointless when Tim could potentially be in danger.

“But if I became Robin what happened to the original? Did he die too?”

Tim sounded so genuinely frightened, so horrified by this new future, that Bruce’s heart ached a little for him. He wasn’t sure how much Tim had managed to learn, but for a young boy with a fairly ordinary life (Neglectful parents and night-time photography aside), this new reality must seem incredibly grim.

“No, he’s fine. He just grew up and became a different hero. You’re quite close with him actually, like brothers. He’s glad he chose you to be Robin, because you did the legacy proud.”

This was of course the very abridged version of events, deliberately excluding Jason, Damian, and Tim’s adoption. It was possible, probable even, that Tim already knew the parts that Bruce had left out from reading about them on the internet, but if he wasn’t going to bring them up then neither was Bruce. When he started his explanation, he had been prepared to give Tim all the facts and let him process them, but Tim looked so young and vulnerable learning about his future that Bruce found he didn’t have the heart. Besides, there was still a possibility that this Tim had actually switched places with the future him, and until Bruce could get confirmation that this wouldn’t affect the timeline, the less Tim knew the better.

Of course, keeping secrets from Tim was easier said than done. He had to be straightforward enough with Tim so that his son wouldn’t go digging too deep, while also being careful to shelter him from
too much emotional trauma and knowledge that could change the future.

He really hoped that this was an isolated incident, because dealing with ten-year-old Tim was clearly going to be hard enough. Dick and Jason at that age were more emotionally driven, so if they had been caught by whatever magic this was…

He strode over to the door, and instinctively Tim followed, still clutching Alfred’s cooking.

“We’re going back to the manor. I’ll call in some specialists and make sure no one else got hit by this age reversal spell.”

“You think it’s a spell?” It was surreal, the inquisitive tone so familiar yet the voice so much higher and more nasal.

“It’s most likely magic that turned you, whether from a spell or an artefact or something else entirely I can’t be certain. But don’t worry, I’ll get the best magicians in the world looking into this. You’ll be alright Tim.”

He saw Tim shoot him a look as they reached the car, but he didn’t say anything until they were both in the BMW.

“So, what’s the original Robin up to nowadays?”

Tim was careful with his words, but Bruce caught the intention behind them. He could tell Bruce was worried, and not just for him. This was Tim probing to see if Bruce thought the spell might deliberately be targeting past Robins, but without trying to let on that he knew Bruce was worrying.

Bruce was a genius too, yet for the most part he had behaved like an ordinary child until the death of his parents. He wondered how far back he’d have to go to find a Tim that acted in a typically blunt childlike manner, instead of always being overly cautious with his words and knowledge. Probably under nine, possibly under seven, or maybe Tim had been like this since he learnt how to talk and read.

“I’m not sure, but the current Robin is back at the manor and he’s unharmed. I’ll check in with the rest of us to make sure no one else is affected.”

“I guess it’ll be strange for him, being an older Robin instead of the youngest one.”

“Mm.”

Tim shot him another glance, and Bruce knew what he’d gleaned from that non-answer. Damian wouldn’t be the older Robin, they would be of equal age.

Sighing, Bruce gave up trying to play mind games with a young child. There was really no need to hide his concerns from Tim, since the boy seemed capable of reading between the lines anyway.

“His name is Damian and he’s the same age as you. You don’t have the greatest relationship with him but I’m sure he’ll be understanding to your predicament. Dick is currently working in Bludhaven, and his friends reported him missing a few hours ago, which is why I contacted you. As soon as I’ve informed my most competent magic experts of this situation I plan to track down Dick and see if he’s been de-aged as well.”

Tim was silent for a minute as Bruce navigated the Gotham city traffic. As they drew closer to the manor, he spoke up again.
“You don’t want me to come with you.”

“Ideally, I’d like to keep you with me at all times in case your situation changes.” Bruce turned onto the manor driveway. “Unfortunately, that would mean exposing you to potential danger while I track down Dick, so I’m choosing the lesser of two evils.”

He expected Tim’s next question to be an inquiry about his babysitter, so he was surprised when instead he pointed out the window.

“Why is there a cow over there?”

It was the first trivial question Tim had asked since Bruce found him. Apparently, some things were just too strange for any child’s curiosity to ignore.

“Damian likes animals.” Bruce smiled at Tim’s genuine bafflement. “Her name is Bat-cow.”

Tim shot him a suspicious look, and Bruce almost laughed.

“I’m not trying to trick you. I fought Damian on the name but he insisted and with Dick’s help they overruled me. Not the most creative name, but what can you do?”

“Damian sounds fun.” said Tim. “Will he be babysitting me while you find big brother?”

Bruce wasn’t sure what part of that sentence surprised him most, but he shook his head as they exited the car.

“No, Damian’s a competent Robin in many aspects but this is much too delicate a situation for me to leave in his hands. I’m sure he’ll be around, but Alfred will be taking care of you while I find Dick.”

“Alfred? Is he a superhero too?”

“The very best. He’ll keep you safer than even I can.”

“You don’t have to lie to me. I can tell you’re scared about this spell.”

“That’s true, but I’m not lying about Alfred. There’s no one I look up to and trust more than him.”

Tim still seemed to think Bruce was exaggerating Alfred’s capabilities, and Bruce was happy to let him think that. Honestly while part of him felt guilty for essentially abandoning Tim just after gaining his trust, Bruce knew he wasn’t as emotionally equipped to deal with a de-aged ten-year-old the way Alfred was. He could give Tim all the facts, logic and solutions the boy needed, but Tim would need some comfort in this strange new world and Alfred would be much better in that department.

Bruce loved Tim. He appreciated the fact that out of all his kids Tim was the best option for this to happen to, due to being the easiest child for Bruce to gain his cooperation. If he had the time, he would gladly sit with Tim and let his son vent all his frustrations and fears about this future. But others could be in danger, and Bruce couldn’t afford to be selfish and put his desire to be a good father to Tim above the safety of his other children.

Alfred would probably disapprove of how Bruce planned to deal with the situation, but that’s what Alfred was for. He kept Bruce from getting too lost in the bigger picture, at the cost of being unable to agree with all of Bruce’s decisions. Bruce could deal with the repercussions of foisting Tim off on Alfred once he was certain Tim was the only one in danger.

Alfred wasn’t waiting for them when they arrived, most likely busy in the kitchen. Bruce unlocked
the main door, allowing Tim to walk in below his arm.

“Welcome to Wayne Manor.”

He hadn’t expected Tim to be as awed as Dick or Jason had been, but he hadn’t expected Tim to ignore the lavish hallway entirely in favour of tapping on his phone.

“What’s the wi-fi password?”

Typical.

“WaynesOnly1013. I’ll write it out for you in a minute.” He gestured down the left hallway. “But right now, it’s time for you to meet the family.”
The Baby Brother

Chapter Summary

In which Damian meets younger Tim, broods, and is an unreliable narrator.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When his father introduced him to a de-aged Tim Drake, Damian was… not enthused.

First of all, the boy looked completely ridiculous. He was wearing a crop top that said ‘hoes take off your clothes’, likely a gag gift from Brown, or possibly a genuine gift from Cassandra, he could never be certain with her. It was clearly too big on him, as were the baggy jeans that were practically falling off his hips and the adult sized shoes. Father seemed content to ignore the state of Drake’s clothing, but Damian wondered what Drake would have done if he hadn’t kept some of his old clothes tucked away in a drawer. It would have been more amusing if Father was forced to pick him up naked.

After being introduced, Damian had mixed feelings towards the child himself. There were certain pros to Drake’s situation. This boy was a blank slate, which meant his feelings towards Damian had not been soured as they had with his older counterpart. The younger version of Drake lacked that condescending air and mild contempt he always carried towards Damian. This boy accepted that he was the outsider in Damian’s life, and he made no attempt at insisting they were brothers. When they were introduced he seemed in awe of Damian’s position as Robin, and his wide-eyed respect for Damian’s title and status as a hero was actually quite pleasant. Damian found himself wishing the older Drake had the same attitude.

But none of those benefits could outweigh the awful reality of Drake’s presence at the manor. His current condition was all the excuse Father and Pennyworth needed to ignore Damian in favour of a son they preferred, a Robin they had chosen. Drake had been here less than ten minutes and already Damian was feeling more unwanted than he had in months. Perhaps he should patrol with Nightwing until this situation was resolved.

That idea was cut short when Father explained his plans to go to Bludhaven in search of Grayson. Damian listened quietly from the kitchen corner as Father asked Pennyworth to keep an eye on Drake.

“I’ll contact Zatanna on the drive over, to see if she knows why this happened. If anything goes wrong, ring me straight away. If Dick really is missing then Batman will most likely be combing the streets of Bludhaven, so use that line first.”

This was of course, all directed at Alfred. Because clearly the civilian butler was a far better choice at protecting a victim of magic than a Robin trained by the League of Assassins.

Father left without saying goodbye, not that Damian had expected one. When Pennyworth turned to Drake with a smile and asked if he would like to help make cookies, Damian took that as his cue to leave.
He slipped out of the kitchen and made his way down to the Batcave. He’d left his completed homework on the dining room table, which meant that Pennyworth wouldn’t come down to bother him. Especially not when he had a normal, well-adjusted child to dote on.

He wondered why the butler had never asked Damian to make cookies with him. Not that Damian would want to, that would be stupid, but asking Drake and not him was the kind of blatant favouritism Pennyworth tried to avoid. Perhaps he had finally realised it was pointless trying to trick Damian into thinking he loved them all equally. Regardless of what his incompetent school counsellor insisted, it was natural for people to love some children more than others. Besides, Pennyworth’s opinion stopped mattering to Damian once Grayson chose him to be his Robin, chose Damian over Drake.

Damian hoped this de-aging was an isolated incident. It would be nice if the only family member who favoured Damian over his ‘brothers’ actually remembered who he was.

(Since Drake utterly ruined their relationship and Todd was an ass, it was possible that Brown also liked him more than his brothers. But she was like Alfred, too good at pretending to like everyone for Damian to be certain.)

Entering the cave, he took a deep breath to calm his mind, and made his way over to change. He pressed his Robin mask on, and let all his insignificant insecurities slip away. He was Robin now. Robin knew his place, knew his role in Batman’s operations. Robin was needed and appreciated, not constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, anticipating being fired every time Batman shot him a disapproving glare. Robin had been working with Batman long enough to get over his initial feelings of inadequacy. Robin had earned his title, and understood that Batman loved and valued him.

Once he was fully suited, he sat down in front of the main computer, and waited. It wasn’t very likely that Zatanna would try and contact the cave when she knew Batman was out, but with unknown magic at hand Damian needed to stay vigilant. Robin would do everything he could to protect an innocent child from harm, even if that meant constantly monitoring the communication channels until Batman returned.

The thought of Drake as an innocent child made him snort, but it was the truth. Ten-year-old Tim Drake hadn’t pressured Father into making him Robin yet, willingly signing himself up to be Batman’s newest amateur soldier. He hadn’t forced his way into Bruce Wayne’s life and stolen part of Damian’s birth right. The boy upstairs understood that he was a civilian and that Damian was far more competent than him, and young Drake didn’t seem to have any desire to become part of the family.

Perhaps if Damian had met Drake before the death of his parents he could have been more tolerable. Or perhaps Drake had been planning on worming his way in since the second he discovered Grayson’s identity, and the boy upstairs was merely trying to butter Damian up so he wouldn’t see it coming when he stabbed him in the back and took Robin like Damian did to him.

A noise from behind him made Damian sigh. Really, Father placed far too much trust in his butler.

“You’re not supposed to be down here.”

The boy didn’t look surprised at being caught. He stood in the entrance Damian had come down less than five minutes ago, still wearing the incredibly baggy clothes he’d come here in.

“Sorry.” Drake said, not looking very sorry at all. “I just- I mean, you’re Robin.”
“Yes.” Damian said calmly. “So were you.”

_Not a very good one_, was what he didn’t add.

“I know I just, I don’t remember any of it, and now I’m actually inside the freaking Batcave and to me it’s the first time.”

“Tt.” Child Drake was easily impressed it seemed. “That brings us back to my original point. You’re not supposed to be down here.”

“The cookies were almost ready anyway and Alfred said I could look around. I wasn’t actually planning on getting down here but it just kind of happened.”

Damian doubted that very much, but if Drake wanted to play the curious fanboy then Damian would play the egotistical celebrity. Upsetting the child would just give Alfred and Father more reason to coddle Drake and shun Damian.

“You were a fan of the original Robin, weren’t you?”

“Oh, uh yeah- yes I was. Dick Grayson is kind of my idol.”

“We’re all well aware of that.” Damian smirked. “I imagine it must be thrilling for you, waking up in the future and realising that you became your childhood hero.”

“Well, I mean, it would be a lot cooler if everyone was a lot less… dead. But yeah, me, Robin, is just- wow! You know?”

Damian had heard Drake speak with Bruce. Either he felt a lot more comfortable around Robin or he was playing up his nervous speech patterns in an attempt to make Damian underestimate him. The latter seemed far more likely, since Damian wasn’t exactly the most approachable Robin.

“I imagine you have a lot of questions.”

“Well, yes.” Drake lingered near the entrance to the cave. “But Mr Wayne- Batman, I mean, seems to think it’s better if I’m kept in the dark.”

“We’ve had a few age regression incidents, and as far as we know it hasn’t affected our timeline. Still, we’re dealing with unknown magic, so he’s right to be cautious.” Damian narrowed his eyes at Drake. “Tell me, how do you feel?”

“How do I feel?” Drake gulped at the glare Damian shot him. “Well, I think I’m mostly in shock. I feel kind of dizzy because this is all really disorientating, and I’m pretty sure I’m trying to grieve the loss of my parents but the whole situation is too bizarre for me to-”

“I didn’t mean _emotionally._” Damian rolled his eyes. “We don’t know if this spell has any dangerous side effects, so your physical health must be constantly monitored. Are you in pain, do you feel sick, is your memory still aligned with your physical age?”

“Uh… no, no and yes?”

“Tt.” Damian turned back to the computer and opened up his last saved game of solitaire. “Let me know immediately if something is wrong. Your safety is my top priority.”

And didn’t that feel strange to say.

“Thanks, I guess.” Drake said, still hovering by the elevator. “I can leave if you want. I don’t want
you to get in trouble.”

How touching. Young Tim was almost polar opposite to his older self in terms of personality. Naturally, Damian liked him much more.

“It’s fine.” He flicked his hand dismissively. “You’ve clearly proven yourself to be far too difficult for a mere butler to handle, kind as he may be. You’re safer with me, and if Father and Pennyworth are angry at your disappearance then they only have themselves to blame.”

“Really? You’re ok with me staying?”

“Tt. I just said that didn’t I?”

Tim took a step back, and Damian forced himself to relax, appear friendlier. Robin didn’t scare the victims who were in danger, he helped them to relax and stopped them from becoming too traumatised.

Initially, Damian hadn’t seen the point in that. But Father always smiled at him on those rare occasions when he got a scared child to stop crying, so he’d learnt how to apply the gentle mannerisms that had been a part of his deception training in the League. It was utterly false of course, but if made Batman go “Nice work Robin.” and Damian hoarded his father’s praise every way he knew how.

“Mr Wayne told me that we don’t get along.” Tim spoke up softly. “I don’t know why, and I don’t want to bother you so if there’s a particular reason, like if you find my voice irritating, I’ll do my best to avoid annoying you.”

How strange.

He wasn’t wrong. In terms of favourite family members Drake ranked second last, just above Todd. It was tempting to tell Drake that it was due to his voice, because sitting in silence sounded ideal, but the child would probably see through him. Damian couldn’t deny it was also tempting to use Drake’s lack of memory to his advantage. He could give Tim his side of their story without Drake dismissing him and arguing back. Even if older Drake didn’t remember any of this Damian would still have the satisfying memories of winning their usual argument over who was a bigger nuisance.

And if this did end up changing the future, a Tim who understood Damian a little better could only be a good thing.

“There was a… misunderstanding when I first arrived.” Damian began. “I imagine you’ve already googled me, so you know I didn’t meet my father until I turned ten years old. Before then I was raised by the League of Assassins, and they do things very differently to Batman.”

Tim was listening to him with adorably wide eyes. Clearly, his research hadn’t led him to find out about Damian’s assassin background.

“When I came to live with my father, I didn’t understand what he wanted from me. I wanted to help him in his mission, and I wanted to do that by being Robin. Unfortunately, you were already his Robin, and it was clear he didn’t need another one.”

“I’m sorry.” Tim said, genuine sadness in his eyes. “That must have hurt.”

Damian paused his story then, because Tim Drake apologising to him for something that wasn’t even his fault was a surreal experience. Part of Damian wanted to ask Tim to say it again so that Damian could record it, but that was definitely Grayson and Brown’s bad influence so he ignored it.
“It’s fine.” He said, wondering why he was bothering attempting to comfort young Drake by lying to him. “Neither you or my father knew I existed when you became Robin, and Grayson became Robin before I was even born so I would never have been his first choice for a partner even if he’d raised me.”

“Oh.” Tim relaxed a little once he realised that Damian didn’t hate him just for existing.

Well, not anymore at least.

Damian used to hate him for having everything Damian had ever wanted, despite Damian perceiving him as an inferior partner for his father. Becoming Robin had curbed his jealousy somewhat, and now he looked back on his early days with mild embarrassment. He and Drake would never be civil to each other, but the mutual loathing had eased with time. Damian understood his father’s world a lot better now, and in turn he understood Tim better too. Now, while Damian would never be able to fully let go of his jealousy until Father trusted him the way he trusted Drake, they were mostly just petty to each other out of habit more than anything.

“As I was saying, the League works a certain way, and Batman works differently.” Damian explained. “In the League, if I wanted to be Robin I had to kill my competitors. So that’s what I tried to do.”

“Oh.” Tim said again.

“As you can imagine, that didn’t go down well with Father, and it took me a while to understand why. Neither of us really got over our initial disgust with each other. You hated me for the attempted murder, I hated you because I thought I deserved Robin more than you did.”

“Why?” Tim didn’t sound offended, just genuinely curious.

Damian felt it was a sign of personal growth that he didn’t spit out the first six insulting comments that came to mind.

“Because I was more skilled at ten then you were at fourteen, and that’s when you first became Robin. You were seventeen when I arrived, a year older than the original Robin had been when he quit. I saw you as a phony who was desperately hogging the title because you knew that it was all you had.”

“Were you wrong?” Tim asked quietly. “When I woke up in this future the texts on my phone were addressed to Red Robin. It seems to me like I still clung to the Robin name even after you got the job.”

“Well I’m not quite sure why you picked a name used by a chain of burger joints, but yes I believe that I was… partly wrong. Initially, you were not pleased at all with being replaced, which is rather ironic considering you were the third Robin. There was certainly some bitterness behind the name choice, but after… certain events, I believe you began to accept your new role in the family.”

“So, we are family then? I wasn’t sure, because according to Wikipedia we’re both Waynes, but you’re like his biological son and all, and I’m still a Drake.”

This was incredible. Tim was bringing up all the digs and insults Damian used to get under Drake’s skin, and admitting that Damian could be right about them. It would be immensely satisfying if Damian could agree with him, but Tim wasn’t the Drake he knew, and he was looking at Damian with big sad eyes that reminded him of Titus.

Damian shouldn’t feel guilty about telling the boy the truth, and it was the truth that Damian was the
better Robin, but for some reason he couldn’t bring himself to disown his ‘brother’ completely. Agreeing with the child’s rather self-deprecating assessment of himself would feel cruel, like kicking a puppy. Having a Drake that couldn’t fight back against Damian’s criticism was less fun than he had expected.

“Father signed all the necessary documents. It’s true that we are legally brothers.”

Tim didn’t seem impressed, but Damian couldn’t think of a nicer way to phrase it without it sounding fake.

Don’t worry Timmy, you’re my cool older brother who I love and I won’t let you stay like this because we’re family and… friendship, love, unity blah blah blah.

How did Grayson make this seem so easy?

“Do you… want to see a trick?” he said at last.

Tim’s face brightened up, and Damian was relieved that he seemed to be distracted by the same bells and whistles as most simpleton children. Just another thing he could hold over Drake once he was back to normal.

“You’re asking me if I want to see Robin in action? Heck yeah I do!”

Damian wanted to inform him that the only time he would see Robin in action is if he was in danger, which was precisely what they were trying to avoid. But Tim was looking at him the way young children were supposed to look at Robin, and as Robin the mission came first. Even if that mission was merely entertaining your de-aged brother.

Standing up from the chair he strode over to the cave wall. He may not be the acrobat Grayson was, but Damian had enough agility to pull off something that would put the stars back in little Tim’s eyes. If his father could see him now, well honestly, he would probably check to make sure Damian’s mind hadn’t been tampered with, but after that he would be astonished and after that he would be proud. Not only was he being courteous and pleasant to their current victim, but he was being nice to Drake.

Damian took a running start at the wall, let his momentum carry him up, then kicked off and flipped twice before landing on his hands and springing to his feet. His acrobatics were rather average by his family’s standards, but it wasn’t like he could pull out his sword and demonstrate how to properly eviscerate a man. Besides, even that paltry display should be enough for a civilian child.

Sure enough, Tim looked like he was rethinking his choice of favourite Robin. Damian felt a little smug at that. He hadn’t put nearly as much effort as Grayson usually did into being friendly and sociable, yet here he was producing results anyway.

“That was amazing! I never thought I’d see Robin in action from this close!” Damian could practically see the cogs turning in Tim’s brain “You know, if I was Robin too do you think I could still do that now?”

He was nowhere near as sly and deceptive as Drake, but there were moments like this when Damian could see that potential for manipulation shine through. Really, was it any wonder Damian had assumed he was out to destroy the family when they’d first met?

Nonetheless, Father would want him to indulge the boy, so that’s what Robin did.
“You mean from muscle memory?” Damian frowned thoughtfully. “I doubt it. You seem to have your ten-year-old body and unlike mine your physique resembles a wet noodle more than anything else. There’s no indication that you’re actually in a miniature sized version of the older Drake’s body. Why, are you remembering something?”

“I’m not sure.” Tim had look of intense concentration on his face.

Then, still dressed in his laughably baggy jeans, he took a running leap at the wall like Damian had. Unlike Damian, he barely managed to kick off it before skidding back onto the ground, ripping the knees of his jeans in the process.

“Oh.” He said. “Guess my skills didn’t come back with me after all. Dang it, I was really hoping I’d be a ninja like you.”

He stood up, revealing his skinned and bloodied knees.

“Ow.”

“Tt.” Damian muttered. “Let’s get you up to Pennyworth. I’m sure he’ll be delighted to clean your cuts once again. You’ll probably have to borrow some of my clothes too.”

“Sorry.”

“Tt.” Damian said again, because he wasn’t quite sure what to make of Tim’s constant stream of apologies.

He still thought it was partly an act, but another part of him felt like Tim really was just very eager to please and nervous about upsetting Robin. How had this scrawny anxious child grown up into the arrogant, slightly less scrawny Robin who had dared patronize Damian when they first met?

Once Damian was out of his suit, they made their way back to the manor. Alfred was on the staircase to the first floor, dusting the railings. He smiled when he saw Tim, then raised an eyebrow when he noticed the blood.

“Back to fighting already? I would have thought Master Damian knew better than to attack a civilian.”

So, Pennyworth assumed Tim’s scrapes were Damian’s fault. What a surprise.

“I just tripped in the cave.” Tim explained sheepishly. “Damian did something really cool and I wanted to try it.”

“Did he now?” Alfred was smiling at him as if he hadn’t just accused him of trying to hurt his defenceless brother. “Well while I don’t approve of you being down there, I’m happy you two are actually getting along for once. Come along now Master Tim and I’ll disinfect those scrapes for you.”

Damian prepared to slink off back to the cave, but froze when he heard Tim’s question.

“You know how Dick’s the first Robin and I’m the third? What happened to the second?”

Alfred gripped the railing tight, and Damian cursed himself for underestimating Tim. He should have known better than to trust Drake, he had played on Damian’s ego and used him for information. He’d suspected as much when the child had arrived in the Batcave, so when had he let his guard down? How had Drake managed to ease him into mentioning how many Robins there had been?
Thankfully, Alfred’s phone rang before he had to give Drake an answer, and both he and Damian breathed a sigh of relief. Picking up the phone, he listened for a few seconds, then handed the phone to Damian.

“Father?”

“Damian, Dick’s in trouble. I need you to suit up and get over here as soon as possible.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Dick’s a ten year old too, but when it happens he’s not as lucky as Tim to just wake up in his bed.
The Original

Chapter Summary

Dick’s in a bit of trouble, but he’s sure Batman will come and save him. Any minute now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If this was one of Batman’s tests, Dick was seriously going to tell Alfred on him.

He knew Batman worked in mysterious ways, but Dick was supposed to have finished his training. He had been Robin for a few months now, and Batman had given no indication that he wasn’t doing good enough. Heck, just two days ago he’d taken down a bank robber on his own! Batman had smiled at him and told him that he’d done well, so why suddenly throw in a surprise kidnapping?

Part of Dick really hoped this was all an elaborate test, even if it did seem unnecessarily cruel. He’d gone to sleep in his bed and woken up a few hours later trapped in some huge Kevlar suit. After clawing his way out, red faced and struggling for air, he’d found himself naked in front of two very confused men wearing ski masks and carrying guns.

Maybe Batman was trying to teach him to always keep his guard up, in which case Dick had failed miserably. Before he had fully wiggled free one of the guys had knocked him over the head and he’d woken up trapped in some cage that was probably meant for dogs. On the bright side, they’d given him some clothes, so while they were most likely criminals at least they probably weren’t paedophiles or in the sex-slavery business. Robin had yet to fight anyone like that, but Batman had warned him that his young age and flashy costume made it a high possibility that he would be targeted in the future.

Maybe this was Batman trying to prove a point about Robin’s exposed legs, but again it was a bit extreme even for Batman. The room he was being held in was dark and windowless, so he couldn’t accurately tell the time, but it felt like at least twenty-four hours had passed since he had been kidnapped. He’d been here so long that the men gave him a bowl of water and an unwrapped chocolate bar that looked kind of dirty but Dick had still eaten it. If this was a test it should have ended by now, and if it wasn’t then surely Bruce would have realised that something was wrong, right? Dick was his ward, and Robin was his partner. He’d come rescue him sooner or later once it became clear that Robin couldn’t rescue himself.

Not that Dick wasn’t trying. The cage was on a floor made of hard concrete, with no spare materials lying around that could be fashioned into a lock pick. He’d tried sticking bits of cloth into the keyhole but none of them were strong enough to push the pins. He’d also tried rattling all of the bars and squeezing through them, but the cage was solid with no weak points. Out of ideas, he’d spent the past few hours hanging from the cage bars and was currently hitting and shaking the lock with his metal water bowl, much to the annoyance of the men guarding him.

“Jesus Christ can we please just let him go?”

“He came crawling out of a Nightwing suit Joe. This shitty city finally gave us an opportunity on a
“Opportunity for what? Why would anyone believe that this kid is Nightwing?”

“He’s right.” Dick chimed in, still rattling the lock. “I don’t know who Nightwing is. Never heard of him actually.”

“Shut up.” The first goon snapped. “Joe, you dumbass, we have the suit! That’s all the proof we need. I heard Deathstroke the Terminator would kill to capture Nightwing!”

“And what’s to stop him from just killing us and taking the kid, huh Jeff?”

“Joe’s got a point.”

“Shut it kid!” Jeff snapped. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

Dick fell quiet, although he did keep jimmying the lock. The men had yet to hurt him and seemed fairly incompetent, but they were still carrying guns and he was currently at their mercy. Angering them was only useful if Batman was there to take advantage of their distraction. Right now, Robin was all alone.

And Dick Grayson missed his parents very, very much.

They told him it was supposed to get easier, and that every day the pain would hurt a just a little bit less. Frankly, Dick thought that was bull. Bruce at least, never said anything stupid like that. He just offered Dick the only thing that could make him forget about the pain, even temporarily: Distractions.

He lived in a manor, had enough pocket money to buy every game and toy he wanted, and spent the nights fighting crime under the nickname his mother gave him. Most of the time, that was enough for him to be able to breathe, to keep going and smiling and pretending like he felt himself healing.

But he’d been stuck in this cage for what felt like days, and since he had no idea how it happened he had no idea what Batman was up to. Rattling the cage and taunting the criminals could only distract him for so long, and with his hope slowly dwindling away in the darkness he felt the grief come flooding forward to the front of his brain. Tears filled his eyes and let them fall as he curled in on himself in a futile attempt to escape the physical pain of his loss.

“Ah jeez Jeff look what you did! You scared the kid.”

Jeff hadn’t. Not really. But the more innocent he appeared the more they would underestimate him. Since it was really starting to seem like Batman might not be coming for him, Dick decided that he could throw away the stiff-upper lip shtick as it wasn’t doing him much good right now.

“I want to go home!” He wailed. “I want my parents and my bed and my hooomme! I don’t know who Nightwing is or why I was in his suit, and I didn’t ask for any of this! I don’t even know where I am right now.”

Both men looked more uncertain now as he sniffled. It was almost amusing how nervous they were at the sight of a crying child. He wanted to laugh, but instead they filled Dick with anger, because Robin was supposed to be better than this.

He’d become Robin with the purpose of making sure no other child in Gotham had to experience the unfairness he had. Robin couldn’t stop fatal diseases or accidental traffic collisions, but he could stop low life criminals from tearing families apart with their callous cruelty. Or at least, he was supposed
to. But here he was, captured by two idiotic wannabe gangsters and he couldn’t do a damn thing against them. All that training Batman had given him, all that talk of making a difference, and he’d been beaten by two low level goons.

More tears filled his eyes, but this time they were tears of anger.

“Who are you people?” He snarled, watching with vicious satisfaction as they took a step back from the cage. “Where am I? Why are you kidnapping an innocent child?”

“You really have no idea?”

“I don’t even know why I woke up inside that suit! Why would I know who you two are?”

“Alright brat, cool it with the attitude.” Jeff was clearly the bravest of the two, but Dick had a feeling he was also the more reckless. “We don’t know much either. You won’t tell us your name, or where you’re from, or anyone we can contact for ransom money so honestly, we don’t have a damn clue who you are. One second Nightwing was about to fight us, the next he disappeared and you crawled out of his suit, and that’s all that matters to us. Regardless of who you are, you were inside the suit of Bludhaven’s most notorious vigilante, and that means you’re worth a lot of money if we alert the right people.”

They had mentioned Deathstroke before, but Dick had never met him. Bruce had told Dick a bit about the assassin during his training, but Nightwing had never been brought up. Until today Dick had no idea he existed, so he had no idea why Deathstroke would be interested in him.

“Who are you going to sell me to?”

“We don’t know yet. A few people have a pretty nice bounty on your head, Deathstroke, Red Hood, even some of Blockbuster’s old men want a shot at you.”

“You mean at Nightwing.” Dick said coldly. “Who I am not, because while I have heard of Bludhaven I had no idea there was even one vigilante running around here.”

“We have the suit and we have you.” Jeff shrugged dismissively. “As far as I’m concerned that’s enough proof. If they want more they can pay us and then interrogate you properly.”

Dick wanted to say something, some quip or a brave, cool statement like ‘Never going to happen.’ But the problem was he currently had no way to stop it from happening. It didn’t look like they were planning on unlocking the cage until after whatever fearsome villain they were trying to contact arrived and took Dick off their hands.

“So, how’s it coming along anyway?” His tears had mostly dried up, and he tried for a friendlier tone to keep with his harmless appearance. “Any of those bad guys called you back yet?”

“Nothing from the big ones.” Joe admitted sadly. “But a few of Blockbuster’s former men are bidding on you right now. Going price is currently five thousand dollars.”

“Ok, wow, I’m worth way more than that.” Dick pouted. “I don’t know if Nightwing is worth less but I still feel offended right now. I should at least go for ten thousand.”

“Nice try kid.” Jeff chuckled. “But we’re selling you as soon as possible, so don’t hold your breath.”

And then the door was smashed open.

Dick’s heart leaped with delight as the men started yelling, and the familiar figure of Batman entered
the room. He took Jeff down easily, and Joe only had time to point his gun before Batman knocked it out of his hand and punched him unconscious.

“Hey Batman!” Dick grinned. “I think you’re getting a little sloppy. I know it’s a different city but I’ve been stuck here-”

The words died in his throat as another child entered the room. A child wearing a green mask and green boots with a yellow cape and a red shirt with an R on it. A child who was clearly dressed as Robin, but was also very clearly not Dick.

All of the joy Batman’s entrance had given him was gone now, replaced by the sting of betrayal. Dick knew that he had screwed up by letting himself get kidnapped, but for Batman to replace him after one mistake was just wrong. The worst part was that this new kid was dressed in his costume, even if it wasn’t an exact replica. Did Batman think a few stylistic differences would change the fact that he’d given Dick’s name and colors away without even asking? Robin had never belonged to Bruce, and even if Dick had failed him he had no right to do that.

Below all that shock and anger was hurt. Dick thought he had meant more than this to Batman, but his foster father hadn’t even waited until he was rescued before moving on to the next child. For all Bruce knew Dick could have been dead, and the move was so horrible and disrespectful that Dick had a hard time believing there wasn’t another reason.

“Dick, thank God!”

Batman sounded so relieved that it made Dick relax a little. Of course, there was another reason this boy was dressed as him. Maybe Batman had just ran into a fanboy on his way here and had been forced to bring him along.

“Robin, check that no one else is in the house.”

And just like that Dick’s hope died. When the boy nodded and went to leave the room, Dick felt himself snap.

“I’m Robin!” He yelled. “Why is there an imposter in my clothes! How could you let him wear my costume! Do I really mean that little to you? I can’t believe…”

He waited for Batman to say something, to prove to Dick that this was all a silly misunderstanding, but Batman just stared down at him looking vaguely sad and uncertain about what to say. Dick wanted to yell at him again, but something made him hesitate. Something about Batman looked different.

He looked worried, more worn out and grim than Dick had ever seen him. He looked… old.

It was the new kid who broke the silence. Dick had ignored the way the boy flinched when he had called him an imposter, because it was true and the boy had no right to be Robin. As the boy moved closer, rolling his eyes at Batman, Dick glared at him, hoping he was letting the boy know how much he hated him.

“You’re in the future.” The boy said calmly. “The Dick Grayson I know was an adult last time I saw him. You made me Robin when you became Batman, and then once Father returned to Gotham you went back to being Nightwing.”

He said it all so matter of fact, but Dick still sat back, stunned. Was the boy telling the truth? It made more sense than Bruce just giving his costume away without telling him, but time travel? If Nightwing was his older self’s persona it would explain why he had woken up in the suit, but the
other Robin had said something else that made no sense at all.

“I… became Batman?”

“Yes.” The boy began picking the lock of the cage. “As the son of Batman and your younger brother, I was the natural choice to be your Robin. Rest assured, I would not have assumed your former mantle without your approval. When it comes to being Robin, your opinion is worth more than even our father’s.”

Bruce winced a little at that, but Dick ignored him, still desperately trying to process everything this kid was telling him.

“But… but I never wanted to be Batman.”

“You didn’t.” Robin agreed, opening the cage. “But when Father went missing there was chaos in the family as our siblings fought over the cowl. Father believed that our sister wasn’t ready yet and she respected his decision, but our brothers weren’t as simple. As the oldest you understood that none of them were worthy of being Batman, and you made it your responsibility to end the fighting between us, even if it meant taking up a mantle you didn’t want.”

The part about a sister and brothers nearly broke Dick’s brain, so he ignored it and focused on the one thing that did make sense.

“I didn’t want to be Batman.” He sighed in relief. “And I got to be my own hero once Batman, my Batman I mean, came back?”

“You did.” The boy, his brother, pretended to whisper as he helped Dick out of the cage. “Just between us, even though you didn’t want the cowl, to me you were the better Batman. But don’t tell Father I said that.”

“Robin.” Batman growled.

“Yes?” Dick replied, laughing at the unimpressed stare Bruce gave him.

Robin smirked at that, and even though his legs were stiff and wobbly Dick’s heart felt lighter than it had in days. Sure, he was in the future, but it didn’t seem like a bad one at all. Batman still respected him and didn’t consider him a failure, and he’d grown up to be his own hero and also a pretty good big brother if this Robin’s words were anything to go by.

“Let’s go home.” Batman said, and Dick was once again struck by how tired he looked. “We’ll explain the full situation once we’re safe and out of costume.”

“If this is the future can the Batmobile fly now? Are we going to drive home in a flying car?”

 Batman didn’t dignify that with a response, and Robin simply shook his head in a way that was supposed to be disgusted, but Dick could see the fondness he was trying to hide.

“Well at least now I can prove to your older self that you really haven’t grown up. Years apart yet you’re exactly the same, Grayson.”

“I am?” Dick smiled. “Good. That’s a good thing.”

Batman clearly wasn’t the same. Dick watched him as they left the basement, and noticed that everything from the way he walked to his tone of voice was heavier than the Batman Dick knew. Bruce had never been the lightest of guys, but Dick had never seen him with such a dark aura.
surrounding him. Something had happened, and while part of Dick was scared to find out, he was still planning on asking the new Robin about it when they got back to the manor.

Thankfully whatever traumas had affected Batman and this serious, straight faced Robin seemed to have skipped Dick completely. He felt slightly guilty about his relief at that, but he rationalised it that at least one of them had to have kept a grip on the joys of life or the whole family would just be a suicide pact waiting to happen. Maybe his presence here was a blessing in disguise, to help remind Bruce of the good old days, and to show him how to get that happiness back.

When they reached the car, Dick was disappointed to see that it didn’t fly. It wasn’t even the Batmobile, just a normal fancy car. By the time he had finished inspecting it, Batman and Robin had finished changing into Bruce Wayne and apparently his son.

Dick’s little brother. He still couldn’t wrap his head around that, or the part where the boy had casually referred to Bruce as their father. Dick didn’t even consider Bruce his father right now, more like a benevolent uncle really. For the future him to accept Bruce as his father, did that mean the grief of losing his parents really had eased?

Dick wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

He pushed those thoughts away and focused on calling shotgun and laughing at the sour expression on his little brother’s face. Soon they were on the road Dick assumed lead to Gotham, and he couldn’t help but gawk out the window at how different this future world was. It wasn’t as in-your-face different as robots and flying cars, but at the same time it all felt very alien and unfamiliar. People walked by staring at strange devices that Dick didn’t recognise, nor did he recognise most of the shops they passed.

“Is Alfred still…”

“Yes.” Bruce said immediately. “He’ll be waiting for us as soon as we leave this godforsaken city and go home.”

His words were harsh and he’d looked vaguely guilty. Dick wondered what Bludhaven had done to Batman to make him hate it so much.

Or maybe it did something to you. A voice in the back of his head whispered. Something little Robin back there doesn’t know about.

Dick pushed away his anxieties. His brother thought he acted the same as his future self, so really, how badly could Nightwing have suffered in the future if he was still as cheerful and goofy as he was in his Robin days?

Nonetheless, Dick couldn’t help an instinctual sigh of relief as they drove onto the motorway, leaving Bludhaven behind them. A small part of him wanted to ask Bruce to drive him to the circus, but realistically he knew that there was nothing but melancholic memories there for him in the future just like in his usual time.

But the Manor, the place that Dick was just barely starting to consider home, apparently had a lot more in store for him in the future than it did in the past. And Dick couldn’t help but laugh in excitement at the thought of getting a sneak peek at his future family.

Batman would find a way to fix this and send Dick back to the right time. But until then, this was going to be fun.
Next chapter: Bruce starts to piece things together, and Jason has absolutely no idea what's going on
Alfred was waiting for them at the entrance to the manor. As they drove towards the garage Bruce saw Tim peeking out from behind Alfred’s legs, and despite how worried he was a small smile still made its way onto his face. He’d forgotten how adorable kids could be at this age, largely due to Damian being… difficult.

Not that he blamed his son for that. In fact, he was glad Robin had come along today, as Dick was happily chattering away to his new brother, finding it far easier to talk to a new friend than to a Bruce that wasn’t his own. Bruce didn’t mind, as it gave him time on the drive over to contact Lucius Fox and explain that Bruce Wayne would be unavailable for the next few days.

“You have a dog and a cow now? That’s so cool! My Bruce hasn’t given me any pets.”

“You get a dog of your own eventually.” Damian informed him, far less bored of Dick’s excitement than he was pretending.

“Really? What’s his name? Or is it a her? Wait! Don’t tell me, I don’t want to risk being spoiled. Oh, hey Alfred!”

Bruce and Damian heaved identical sighs of relief as Dick took off towards the butler, leaping up the steps to hug his midsection. Tim stumbled back in shock at Dick’s exuberance, clearly expecting his other siblings to be similar to Damian.

“Good to see you Master Dick. Master Bruce, Miss Zatanna is waiting downstairs for you.”

“Thank you, Alfred.” With Dick safe and possible answers on the way, Bruce allowed himself to relax a fraction. “Damian, find a fresh suit and bring the boys down to the cave. And don’t bother with masks for them, she already knows who I am and there’s no point hiding their identities when she’ll need all the information we have.”

“Yes Father.”

Bruce hesitated in the doorway, before giving Tim and Dick slightly awkward pats on the head. Then he gracefully fled upstairs to change into his spare Batman suit.

One ten-year-old boy was hard enough for Bruce to parent, he was going to have his work cut out for him looking after three.

Zatanna was calmly waiting for them when Batman and Robin entered the cave, Dick and Tim in tow. Dick’s eyes were as round as saucers as he took in all the changes made to the cave over the years. Tim looked just the tiniest bit smug, although Bruce imagined he’d been just as awestruck as
Dick when he’d first sneaked in.

“I’m guessing these are the boys?”

“Correct.”

Batman’s voice seemed to echo off the cave walls. Damian and Zatanna were used to it, but Dick and Tim both shivered a little. Tim, he expected, but Dick’s reaction was strange.

“So, to get the obvious out of the way,” Zatanna smiled comfortingly at the boys. “Batman, do you have any ideas as to why this happened?”

“They’re both related to me.” Bruce admitted. “But the last encounter I had with magic was months ago, on an assignment in Japan for Batman Incorporated. I defeated the magician in question without any indication that they’d hit me with something.”

“And is there any way that they could have gotten revenge on you after they’d been defeated?”

“Impossible.”

Zatanna waited five seconds, then when it became clear Bruce wouldn’t elaborate further he saw her subtly roll her eyes.

“Alright then. At a glance it looks like an age-regression glamour, but let me see if I can trace the source. _Leaver eht esuae fo siht cigam!_”

There was silence for a few seconds, then a shout of surprise as a red mist began surrounding Dick and Tim.

“Don’t panic, it’s just trying to see why you’re like this.”

Another few seconds of tense silence passed, and then part of the mist broke off and drifted towards Damian, turning from red to blue as it enveloped him.

“Well, looks like you were right Batman. It wasn’t your magician that did this.”

“Robin?” Through the haze of the mist, Bruce could see his son’s eyes narrowed in concentration.

“There was an incident a few weeks ago.” Damian began slowly. “I was assisting Ravager in tracking down a person of interest, a worshiper of Mordru with plans to bring chaos to the world. She turned out to be far more of an amateur than we anticipated, but while chasing her across the rooftops she threw a glass bottle at me. At the time I assumed it was a crude smoke bomb since all the blue gas did was distract me, but now it seems that it may have been more dangerous than it looked.”

Bruce looked over at Zatanna, who was still staring at the mist speculatively.

“I think I’ve heard of this kind of magic before.” She waved a hand gently over the mist. “It looks to me like what hit Robin was a crude attempt at a de-aging spell. The good news is that they’re fairly rare mostly due to how harmless they are, no effects on the universe or the timeline whatsoever. The effects of the spell aren’t fatal either, and normally wear off in a few weeks.”

“So why didn’t it work on me?”

“You said she seemed like an amateur, right? Probably boiled the potion over a hearth fire or stirred it counter clockwise. I’m guessing when it hit you it was supposed to turn you into a baby, making it
“They’re former Robins.” Bruce said immediately. “If that’s the case, what can we do to reverse it?”

“Honestly?” Zatanna said reluctantly. “My advice would be to do nothing. The spell was already unstable to begin with, but it should wear off. It might take quicker or longer since it was already a failed attempt, but the best thing you can do is find all the people linked to Robin and make sure they haven’t been affected too. Keep them safe and away from all magic until they’re back to their usual selves.”

“Thank you.” Batman took a second to digest all the information, and then another second to indulge in the fear he felt. “Now if you excuse me I need to find my fourth son. If what you’re saying is true then he could be in incredible danger right now.”

Zatanna nodded, said some incantation that Bruce only paid half attention to, and disappeared. There was silence in the cave, other than Batman pressing numbers on his phone.

“Woah.” Dick whispered. “She’s so cool.”

“Tt.” Damian ignored his brothers’ gaping mouths in favour of glaring at his father. “So how do we find Todd then?”

“Oracle.” Batman spoke into the phone. “I need you to tell me Jason’s last known location. I know he hates me prying into his business, but I have proof that he could be in over his head.”

*Or possibly dead already.*

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He could hear Barbara typing through the phone, likely in the middle of another case. “If there’s nothing wrong he’ll hate you even more for invading his privacy.”

“I don’t have time to explain, but come over to the manor as soon as possible and Alfred will fill you in. Right now, I just need that location.”

“Old Gotham Subway underneath Burnley.”

“Thank you.”

He ended the call, turning to face Damian’s raised eyebrow.

“What?”

“You didn’t know where Todd was?”

“He hates me spying on him.” Bruce tried not to sound defensive. “If I kept trying to track his every move it would have angered him in a way I’m hoping to avoid. I chose to loosen my grip on him to prevent losing him entirely, it was the best possible option at the time.”

“I’m sure you know best.”

When Damian had first arrived, that tone would have carried reluctant respect. Now it was blatantly sarcastic, which Bruce was both glad and irritated about.

“I’ll head out to find him. You stay here and guard the boys. Alfred is in charge.”

“Understood.”
He still didn’t know what to say to Tim or Dick, or even how to address them. The way his first Robin looked at him, it was clear that he wasn’t the Bruce Dick wanted him to be. There was no way to explain why he was like this other than “Life happened. I made many mistakes and failed many times.” and Bruce was fairly certain Alfred would strongly disapprove of him being so grim with the children. But the truth was that both young Dick and Tim existing right now was a mistake that shouldn’t have happened, and there was no point getting close to two kids that would essentially have to be erased in order to bring their real selves back.

“Stay safe.” He said at last, before heading towards the Batmobile.

He had failed many times, and Jason’s death was one of the mistakes that haunted him the most. He’d be damned if he let his son die a second time.

28 hours earlier.

When Jason woke up in an unfamiliar, empty room, his first reaction was confusion, closely followed by shock, panic and fear. He’d fallen asleep crying because he’d found heroin in his mother’s handbag after she’d promised him she was going clean, and waking up in a dark, derelict building that was definitely not his home had done nothing to lighten his mood. Especially since the clothes he was wearing were far too big for him.

What the heck happened to me?

His first guess was that there had been an attack, by the Joker or Scarecrow or some other villain, and Jason had been caught in the crossfire. Probably breathed in some gas that had caused him to hallucinate, and ended up in a completely different part of the city. His old neighbour Bertha used to insist that she’d once inhaled some fear toxin and woken up hours later on a train with no memory of getting there.

Jason didn’t remember having nightmares, which ruled fear toxin out, but drugs were the most likely explanation for his weird memory loss. Or so he’d thought.

Then he’d left the apartment and made his way towards the East End. Running through the streets of Burnley only added to the sense of unease that had plagued him since he’d woken up. A few people shot him odd looks, but that was understandable considering he was barefoot and wearing a huge tshirt as a tunic and a leather jacket as a coat. But even his unusual outfit didn’t explain why the people, the buildings, and the cars all looked different from the Gotham Jason was used to.

He pushed aside the weirdness and chalked it up to his nerves getting the best of him. Waking up after a night he had no recollection of may have shaken him, but all he needed to do was get home to his mother and he’d be safe. Whatever happened, whatever he needed to figure out, as long as his mother was still alright then he would be too.

Except when he reached his apartment, it became very clear that everything was very, very wrong.

The first sign something was off was the fact that the door was unlocked. It was the golden rule between Jason and his mother, the only promise both of them managed to keep: Always keep the door locked. The fact that it looked like someone had forced it open only added to the thumping fear he could practically hear inside his head.

He almost didn’t want to open the door, but at this point he had no other option. Even if the door was broken, his mother would surely still be inside, right? She must know Jason would make his way back to her, so all he had to do was open the door and everything would be fine.
But when he stepped into his apartment, the mantra he was using to hold himself together was smashed to pieces.

The front room was as bare and empty as the building he’d woken up in. Not only was his mother not there, but every single possession they owned was gone. Jason felt himself struggle to breathe, something he didn’t really understand bubbling up inside him.

“Mom? Mom? CATHERINE TODD! MOMMY! Where are you?”

After sprinting from room to room screaming his mother’s name, Jason realised that the only things left in the apartment were a few cardboard boxes and the mirror that had always hung above the fireplace. Something about his reflection seemed off, but Jason could hardly pay attention to that when his mother was clearly missing.

No. nonononononono.

Racing out the front door, Jason fled to the next apartment. He raised his hand to knock, then paused. Mr Price was a mean old drunk and his mother had always told him never to talk to the man. Taking a step back, he moved two doors down and then knocked. David was teenager a little older than Jason, but he seemed nice and understood what Jason was going through. His mom was dead and his dad was an alcoholic, so sometimes he and Jason would help each other out when it came to feeding their families.

But when the door swung open, it was to a grown man Jason had never seen before. The man took one look at the boy in front of him wearing a t-shirt as a dress, and Jason could see him considering slamming the door in his face.

“Can I help you?”

Jason hesitated, but every second without knowing where his mother was made the panic clawing at his throat harder to ignore.

“I’m looking for Catherine Todd. She lives three doors to your right, but her house has been emptied out. Do you know why?”

The man squinted down at him like he thought Jason was playing a prank, and Jason got ready to jump backwards in case he tried to swing at him.

“Catherine Todd overdosed years ago. So beat it, brat.”

For a second Jason froze, and the panic inside him surged up. But he pushed it back down, replacing the cold sinking feeling with fire.

“You’re lying!” he yelled. “She was here just yesterday, so tell me what’s going on!”

The man glared at him, but Jason was prepared to dodge when his foot lashed out.

“I don’t know what kind of prank you’re pulling but I’m not interested in playing along. Get out of here before I teach you a lesson boy.”

Jason wanted to shake the man, to force him to admit that he was the one messing with Jason, not the other way around. But years of experience with his father taught him that losing his temper with men bigger and stronger than him would only end painfully.

Instead he turned and ran back into his home that was no longer his home. Slamming the broken
door shut, he curled up in a ball and finally allowed the panic to overwhelm him. He shook and
shivered, his heart pounding and tears dripping down his cheeks. He wanted to call out for his mama
again, but between his rapid breathing and feeling like he was choking on nothing the words
wouldn’t come out.

He wasn’t sure exactly how long he lay there on the bare wooden floor, but eventually his breathing
started to even out, and he found that he could think again.

This had to be a hallucination, Jason decided. It was probably some advanced form of fear toxin.
From what he heard fear toxin bombarded people with everything they were scared of, but maybe
this new version focused on your one worst fear and made everything else creepily realistic. Either
way, all he had to do was wait it out, and sooner or later he’d wake up in his real home with his
mother by his side.

So he waited, and waited, and waited some more.

With every hour that passed Jason’s unease grew. Was this how the new fear toxin worked? Would
it trap him forever feeling nervous and paranoid unless he interacted more with this nightmare world
and properly embraced his fear?

His stomach growled, and Jason pressed his hands into it as the familiar hunger pangs hit him. This
hallucination was far too realistic for Jason’s liking. Would he die of dehydration in here even if it
was just a dream? How long did the fear toxin even last?

With slow, trembling steps, Jason made his way over to the front door. Hesitating, he debated
whether this was really the right thing to do, but the hollow pain in his belly was growing worse, so
with his heart starting to pick up its pace again, he pushed open the door and stepped outside.

Nothing happened immediately. He made his way down into the street, tense and ready for an attack.
It was still the strange new not-Gotham, with the sounds and smells and colours all different from the
home Jason knew, but no one payed him any attention either. Even with the way he was dressed, the
citizens of the East End district had better things to do than talk to a poor street-rat. Some of them
probably thought he was insane or homeless, which was just fine. Jason didn’t want to talk to any
figments of his imagination either.

He was kind of impressed by how detailed his fake world was. Jason’s mother had always told him
that he had a wonderful creative mind, but he never thought he’d be capable of coming up with all
these new shops and brand names. Maybe they were just part of the drug’s effect on him.

He ducked into the local newsagent, snatching the first paper and piece of fruit that he saw and
legging it before the man behind the counter could even yell at him to stop. He turned left into the
nearest alley, and ducked and wove through the small side roads until he was certain no one was
following him.

Jason took his time strolling back to his apartment, pausing a few times to look at the cars passing or
the metal devices people were holding in their hands. Were those phones? Or some new piece of
tech that Jason hadn’t heard of yet?

He found a broken piece of pipe and picked it up. Once again, no one bothered him about it, other
than a few wary looks.

Maybe this wasn’t fear toxin after all. Sure this new world was different, but other than his mother
and belongings being gone it wasn’t too scary. He still wondered which villain had made this
hallucination happen, but figured that he’d find out once Batman defeated them and he woke up.
Once he arrived home, he opened the paper curiously and started to read it, happily munching on the apple he’d stolen. The first thing that caught his eye was the date. According to the newspaper, Jason had fallen asleep and woken up exactly nine years into the future. Why had the drug chosen this particular setting for his hallucination?

Could he be actually seeing the future? Jason brushed that thought away immediately, because there was no way his mother was dead, especially not from an overdose. She may have drugs on her, but she’d still promised him that she wouldn’t start using again. Jason was earning enough money stealing car parts for them to get by, and with the lack of dealers sniffing around they were even starting to save up a little. Just two days ago she had told him she was proud of him, so why would she go and betray his trust like that? She’d been clean for months now, relapsing would ruin their future and she knew that.

So, no. This world had to be a lie.

Jason read the paper from cover to cover, marvelling at this fantasy world he had created. There was such meticulous detail put into everything that it almost seemed real. It was kind of cruel of him to kill off one of Gotham’s legendary basketball players, even if the current team did suck. Some of the main news consisted of a Gotham musician sexually assaulting someone and a father accused of murdering his two-year-old daughter. Jason felt sick as he read those articles, because even though that was the type of thing that happened regularly in Gotham, he would have thought his imagination could have come up with nicer news. Why wasn’t there any article about puppies being rescued from a river or something?

Jason fell asleep that night on the hard, rough floor with a cardboard box for a pillow. When he woke up the next morning still in the same empty apartment, he felt the fear he’d suppressed come roaring back. Just how long would he be stuck in this dream world?

He stole himself some breakfast from a different newsagent, annoyed at how easy it was. What was the point of trapping him in a hallucination if it wasn’t completely horrible? What kind of third rate villain had come up with this plan? All this hallucination did was make him jumpy the entire walk home. When were they going to attack? What was the end goal of keeping him trapped in his own mind?

It was almost a relief when he noticed a shadowy figure in a white mask. But when Jason blinked the figure was gone, which just added to his paranoia. Was he seeing things now? How could he be seeing things if this was all inside his head? Was he going insane?

When he reached his apartment, Jason shut the broken door as firmly as he could, and then positioned himself behind it with the broken pipe clutched tightly in his hands. He still had no idea what was happening or what was going to happen, but he’d be damned if he went down without a fight.

He stayed like that for hours, slowly sliding down the wall until he found himself sitting next to the door instead of standing tensely. Footsteps pounding down the corridor made him jump back up, fingers squeezing the pipe as the noise got closer. His heartbeat seemed as loud as the footsteps, so he held his breath and tried to stay silent as the person came closer.

Jason muffled a scream as the door burst open. When a shadowy figure stepped into the room he swung as hard as he could with the pipe. To his horror, the figure turned around and caught the end of the pipe before it could hit him.

“Jason?” It was a deep voice, belonging to an unfamiliar man.
Except that wasn’t entirely true. Jason had never met this man before, but every Gotham citizen knew the name of the man who wore the costume in front of him. The fear Jason felt turned to a different kind of sinking feeling when he realised what was happening.

He had just tried to knock out the goddamn Batman.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bruce tries to explain things to Jason with his usual tact and understanding. Meanwhile Alfred and Babs realise that the spell may not be targeting the Robins after all.
The Skeptic

Chapter Summary

Jason is still confused. Batman isn't super helpful.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jason remained frozen, still clutching the pipe, staring straight into the eyes of the Batman. The cowl made it impossible to tell how the man felt after Jason’s attempted attack. Was he angry? Annoyed? Amused by how pathetic Jason was? And how did he know Jason’s name?

As if this day couldn’t get any weirder, Batman didn’t respond by lashing out at Jason. Instead he dropped the pipe, his mouth curling into a soft smile that looked completely out of place on such an intimidating face.

“It’s really you, isn’t it?” he said. “You’re so skinny I almost didn’t recognize you. I didn’t know, I thought- God I can’t believe… Jason-”

This really wasn’t normal at all. Batman seemed totally fine with Jason almost bludgeoning him with a pipe, and the way his voice cracked just there, it was as if he knew Jason personally. Why did this dream just keep getting weirder?

“You’re the Batman, right?” Jason said cautiously.

That seemed to change something. Batman’s jaw tightened and he straightened up, all signs of distress gone from his pose. He looked down at Jason like the Batman the rumours spoke of, with comforting professionalism and a feeling of both intimidation and safety. Still, Jason wondered why this distance hadn’t been there from the start. Batman had spoken like he knew Jason personally, and why had he thought Jason wouldn’t be skinny?

“How?” Jason snapped. “If you can’t help me save my mom then what’s your role in this hallucination?”
Batman stared at him as if trying to understand what he meant, which just made Jason angrier. This obviously wasn’t the real Batman, and he wasn’t answering Jason’s question, so maybe he needed to fight him to wake up? At this point Jason was willing to try anything, mostly because he was sick of waiting around for something to happen.

He swung his pipe at Batman again, and once again Batman caught it. This time, he twisted the pipe from Jason’s hand and blocked Jason’s follow up punch. When Jason swung at him with his other fist he caught Jason’s wrist and tugged him up until his feet were no longer touching the ground. Jason struggled, kicking futilely at Batman’s waist.

It seemed hallucination Batman was just as much of a badass as the real Batman.

“Jason.” Batman held him calmly despite his wriggling. “What do you think has happened to you?”

Jason still didn’t understand why Batman said his name with so much emotion, because they had literally only met two minutes ago. He gave one last angry kick and then huffed in surrender.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Jason rolled his eyes. “I got hit with some kind of toxin and now I’m stuck in this fantasy world where the city is weirdly futuristic and my mom is dead. You wouldn’t happen to know what villain did this would you? Or even better, O great Batman, could you tell me how to get out?”

Batman placed him carefully back on the floor, and Jason could tell he was expecting him to bolt. Jason didn’t, standing his ground and glaring up into the eyes hidden behind the cowl. Batman’s lips twitched slightly, but before Jason could read into that he spoke.

“Would you like me to tell you what actually happened?”

Ew. Imaginary Batman was one of those patronizing adults who always thought they knew best. Jason felt embarrassed for the real Batman’s sake, because from the stories he’d heard the guy was much, much cooler than this.

“You mean what you think happened? Sure, go ahead.”

He thought he saw Batman frown a little, which just made Jason smirk.

“Jason, I know this is hard to believe, but you’re in the future. The Jason Todd I know is twice your age, and two nights ago you were put under a spell that reverted you back to the age of ten.”

Huh. Whoever was behind this really wanted him to think that this was the future. Too bad for them Jason wasn’t fooled so easily.

“You’re right.” Jason replied. “That is hard to believe. So if you don’t mind I think I’m going to stick to my theory that makes much more sense.”

He couldn’t see Batman’s eyes behind the lenses of the cowl, but Jason saw how the man hesitated and then nodded at the mirror behind them.

“Have you looked at yourself yet?”

“I can’t reach the mirror.” Jason admitted sourly. “I’m guessing I don’t look great?”

“See for yourself.”

Before Jason could protest Batman swooped down and picked him up by the waist. Jason was going
to snap at him, but then he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

He had been expecting to see blue irises, but instead bright green eyes stared back at him, and while his hair was mostly a familiar black there was a streak of white that had definitely not been there before.

“What the hell?”

Batman placed him down again, but kept a steadying hand on his shoulder.

“I want you to think rationally Jason. I know you have an inventive mind, but I can see that you’ve been reading the newspaper, and some part of you has to know that this world is far too detailed to just be a dream. I can tell you why your eyes and hair are like that, but first I need you to ask yourself if you really think your imagination could have come up with all this.”

“Hmm.” Jason pretended to think it over before shrugging. “Yep. Sorry old man, but I still think my theory makes more sense than some stupid future where everything sucks.”

“Fine.” Batman’s voice was tight, like Jason had actually gotten under his skin. “Think what you want, it doesn’t change the fact that we both have the same objective.”

Which reminded Jason, what exactly was Batman doing here? And why was he so invested in what happened to a random street rat? He claimed to know Jason in the future, which was kind of cool, but when he first saw Jason for a second it felt like he was going to start crying or something. Jason just didn’t get it. So Batman thought he was meant to be older, why was that a reason to get all choked up at the sight of his younger self? Was it because he was going to be stuck like this forever?

“By objective you mean fixing this, right?’”

“Precisely. You want to get back to your life and I want to get the older Jason back, so if you let me keep you safe until this spell wears off we’ll both get what we want.”

Jason wasn’t sure if Batman was lying, but he’d learnt to trust his instincts and something about the man’s words seemed shady. Maybe he wasn’t lying, but he wasn’t telling the full truth either. That could be because Jason’s mind hadn’t invented a full story and was just bullshitting as it went on, or maybe his version of Batman was trying to keep some of the mystery that the real one had.

Boy was this was getting confusing to think about.

“Will you come with me?” Batman asked him.

I can’t. I have to wait for my mother. Was what Jason wanted to say, because that’s what his instincts were still screaming at him to do despite two people telling him she was dead.

“Do I have a choice?” Was what Jason actually said.

Batman just stared at him in reply, and Jason sighed, before reluctantly allowing the man to steer him out of the apartment.

“You know, I’m pretty sure the real Batman doesn’t just steal kids like this.” Jason informed him. “I’ve heard he’s a real stickler for following the law, which is kind of dumb since he’s a vigilante. But still, child kidnapping should be a no.”

“Is that right?”
“Yep.” Jason shook his head, feigning disappointment even if his heart was racing because he just caught sight of the Batmobile. “I bet the real Batman would kick your ass for this.”

“Language.” Batman reprimanded him, gently pushing him into the passenger seat of the Batmobile. “And try not to steal any of the tires.”

“Oh because I’m from East End? Real funny, I sure hope the real Batman doesn’t stereotype like you do.”

Batman didn’t reply, and Jason focused on memorizing the route they were driving. When he got out of this dream he was going to follow it in the real world, even though it probably wouldn’t lead anywhere.

Damian didn’t want to admit he was relieved when Oracle showed up, but it certainly took some of the pressure off him.

Dick and Tim were absolutely fascinated with this new Robin, and after Dick showed no hesitation in bombarding him with questions, Tim quickly followed suit. Damian only answered the most trivial questions, like how they got a cow or where Dick’s stuffed toys were, but neither of the boys seemed deterred by his abrasive attitude. Tim was still a little jumpy and more hesitant than Dick, but they both looked at Damian like he was their trusted guide to this family. It was utterly bizarre.

“Where did the dinosaur come from?”

“What suit is that?”

“What does this thing do?”

He was giving Grayson and Drake a tour of the Batcave, and they were listening respectfully as he explained everything. Grayson did still cut across him occasionally and he picked up on the way Drake casually probed for more sensitive information, but the similarities to their adult selves just made it even stranger when they waited for him to lead them.

So when Gordon showed up and stole the attention, Damian may have breathed a small sigh of relief. He was just not cut out for babysitting, regardless of how much the boys seemed to like him.

“Oh hey! Who are you?” Dick was the first one to notice her, leaving Damian’s side to run across to the new person in the cave.

Tim was more hesitant, staring inquisitively at the woman from behind Damian’s legs. Damian noticed how he didn’t cling to Damian like he did to Alfred, but that was to be expected. Damian hadn’t given off the impression that he was comfortable with physical contact, and it was good that Tim respected that.

Barbara looked stunned at seeing Dick run up to her in Damian’s clothes. Damian assumed Alfred had explained the situation to her, but he understood that it would still be a shock to see your on-again off-again lover as a child. Dick was staring curiously at her, unaware of the awkwardness she felt towards him.

“You can call me Babs.” Gordon said at last. “I’m a friend of the family.”

“Oh.” Dick smiled at her. “Cool. Are you here to help Alfred and Dami babysit?”

“Damain’s babysitting?” Gordon smirked at him and he held back a growl. “That’s adorable.”
“Robin is guarding the victims of the spell, Oracle.”

“Right. Of course.” She didn’t even try to hide her patronizing tone. “So, I assume Batman is trying to find Jason. Any idea of when he’ll be back?”

Right on cue, the Batmobile sped into the cave and then braked smoothly. Batman stepped out of the driver’s side and went to open the passenger door, only for it to be flung open roughly and for a small boy to clamber out, almost tripping over the t-shirt he was using as a dress.

Realistically, Damian knew that this boy was Todd. The white tuft of hair and the grumpy glower on his face should have been dead giveaways, yet Damian still found himself unsure at first. He was used to Todd towering over him, a wall of muscle built far stockier than his other brothers. This boy was much skinnier, and almost as scrawny as Tim. Damian had heard stories of Todd’s childhood, but knowing that he grew up hungry and seeing him look so malnourished were two very different things.

Jason stomped over to them, one eyebrow raised.

“Who are you?”

Well, Damian thought, at least his attitude was the same.

“These two boys got hit by the same spell you did.” Bruce explained. “And Robin and Barbara are here to help me keep you safe until the spell wears off.”

“Hm.” Jason squinted suspiciously at Dick. “Do I know any of you in real life? Or are you all original characters this dream just made up?”

“Jason thinks none of this is real.” Bruce informed them.

“Correction: I know none of this is real.” Jason snapped. “Because there’s no way my mom overdosed when she promised me she was going clean!”

Damian found it interesting that young Jason had the same bite in his voice when speaking to his father that the older Jason did. He might have even found it funny, if the boy’s denial of his mother’s death wasn’t pathetically sad. From what Damian knew Catherine Todd had been a flawed, weak human, so why young Jason naively idolised her was beyond him. Surely a child from the roughest neighbourhood in Gotham was smarter than this?

But then Damian noticed the way Jason’s fists were clenched, and the glassy sheen to his eyes. Something uncomfortable settled in his stomach as he was reminded of a time where he had stood in Jason’s exact position, insisting to Batman that **Mother loves you why won’t stop fighting with her?** or **She raised me to be strong why can’t you see that?**

He closed his eyes and took a breath, banishing those uncomfortable memories. He and Todd were nothing alike, but perhaps it was unreasonable to judge the young boy for putting his mother on a pedestal.

“Like I said, you can think whatever you want.” Father sounded displeased, which was his usual reaction to Todd. “But right now, you’re stuck in this reality, which means that right now we’re all equally as real.”

Father stepped past a scowling Jason and sat down in front of the computer. It didn’t escape Damian’s notice that he had yet to greet any of them, and while Tim seemed fine with that Dick looked very disappointed.
“Now that all of you are together we can work on hiding you from anyone with a grudge. Barbara, have you contacted Stephanie at all? I assume she’s safe with her mother, but I’d like to keep her here with the others until the spell wears off.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that.” The concern in Barbara’s voice made both Damian and his father turn to look at her. “I called her house as soon as Alfred explained to me what happened, but she was the one who answered, not her mom. She’s fine Bruce, the spell hasn’t affected her at all.”

“Your name is Bruce?” Jason piped up.

No one answered him. The adults were staring at each other and the other children had begun examining Barbara’s wheelchair curiously. Damian slapped Dick’s hand away from a red button, and the boy grinned up at him unrepentantly.

“That doesn’t make sense.” Bruce growled. “Other than being former Robins what link do the boys have to Dami-”

Damian stopped trying to get Dick and Tim away from Gordon’s wheelchair, turning his full attention to his father. Something curled in his stomach when he saw how white Batman’s face had turned. Father never looked scared, Batman was never supposed to be afraid, yet right now Bruce looked terribly shaken, and that usually meant something catastrophic was about to happen.

“Cassandra.” Bruce whispered.

Oh.

Oh.

It was like a bomb had been set off. Batman shot up out of his seat and Barbara immediately wheeled over to the computer. Damian stepped aside as Father brushed past the confused boys, headed directly for the elevator.

“I’m sorry but I have to-”

“Go.” Damian agreed. “We can take care of the children until you get back.”

“I’ll ask Stephanie to come over for backup.” Barbara added. “I’m sending you Cass’s last known location. Should I book you the quickest flight too?”

“No time for that.” Bruce pressed a button on his phone as he stepped into the elevator. “Clark? There’s an emergency. I need-”

The elevator doors closed, leaving Damian with three confused children staring at him and Oracle still frantically typing on the computer.

Wonderful.

“I suppose you would like to know what that was all about?”

There was silence from the three boys, the only sound in the cave being the humming of the computers as Gordon flung herself into researching all of Black Bat’s most recent escapades.

Then Jason shuffled forward.

“So Batman’s real name is Bruce?”
Damian sighed, and steeled himself for several more hours of babysitting.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bruce tracks down his daughter, and Damian tries to keep his brothers under control.
The Daughter

Chapter Summary

Bruce finds Cass. Clark is uncomfortable, but not as uncomfortable as Damian.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took Superman less than two seconds to reach Wayne Manor, and one second to agree to help once Bruce explained his predicament to both Clark and Alfred.

The trip to Hong Kong was a little slower, since Clark couldn’t just fly at top speed while carrying Bruce. And even though Bruce knew that Clark was only flying slower than usual so that Bruce’s body could handle the journey, he found himself getting irrationally impatient up until they landed on the rooftop of Cassandra’s apartment building.

His phone pinged and he opened it, quickly scanning through the documents Barbara sent him while Clark watched quietly. The last sighting of Black Bat had been three nights ago, when she’d baffled police by single-handedly busting up a smuggling ring they hadn’t known existed. Bruce let himself feel a little pride at that, although the lack of sightings since then ensured that worry remained his most prominent emotion.

Cassandra Wayne hadn’t been sighted either, although that was less unusual. Apparently, the main theory the media was running with was that his reclusive daughter had moved to Hong Kong in order to hide her secret relationship with Superboy from her father. Bruce frowned at the picture taken a few weeks ago, in which Kon-El hovered in front of the balcony of her apartment, speaking to a blurry figure that was most likely Cass herself. Cass had told Bruce they were just friends and Bruce had believed her (honestly, he’d become more suspicious of the boy’s relationship with Tim), but even just the thought of Conner Kent secretly having a relationship with Cass was unpleasant.

“When was the last time you spoke to Superboy?” he growled out.

“Two days ago.” Clark replied calmly. “He’s been busy at the farm for the past few weeks.”

“Anything dangerous?”

“Harvest season is starting.”

Bruce glared at him. Clark smiled back cheerfully.

“Let me go first, in case she’s spooked. If I need you I’ll call.”

Clark nodded, and Bruce slowly crept over to the rooftop door. The security on it was unsurprisingly lax, seeing as Black Bat probably used it every night to get in and out of the apartment. He did wish Cassandra would be a little more cautious about burglars, but she wasn’t the type to care about any of the rich furniture he’d bought for her. Black Bat’s tools and technology, on the other hand, were much more tightly guarded.

As he quietly pushed open the door, Bruce tried to prepare himself for what he would find.
Logically, if four of his children were ten years old then the fifth one should probably be de-aged as well. But some part of Bruce truly believed that Cassandra would be fine. A de-aging spell might affect the others, but surely not Cassie. The small irrational part of his mind was convinced that she was strong enough to somehow resist the witch’s spell.

He’d made that mistake too many times, seen too much of himself in his daughter and allowed her more unmonitored freedom than his other children, believing she could handle herself. Those assumptions had cost him dearly in the past, and he still hadn’t forgiven himself for not saving her from Deathstroke and the horrors he put her through. Cassandra may be a better fighter than Batman, but this sentimental delusion that that made her invulnerable was the reason he had failed her over and over again.

He took a breath and focused himself, before stepping inside the apartment.

Cassandra didn’t appear in front of him, which meant that either she wasn’t home or she was hiding from him. It was the middle of the night in Hong Kong so it would be reasonable to assume that Black Bat was out on patrol, but something was off. The penthouse was lit up with the soft glow of lamps, the leather couch was crinkled like someone had been sitting on it, and there was a cup of tea on the glass coffee table that was still warm. There were no signs of a struggle, and under normal circumstances Cassandra was the least likely out of all his kids to hide from him.

As he slowly moved into the kitchen, Bruce’s heart sank as he noticed the photographs on the table. It looked like every picture in the house had been dug up and lain out, and he found himself picturing a young, scared Cassandra trying to understand what had happened to her. Was she watching him right now? Would she recognize him from the pictures of Bruce Wayne? Could ten-year-old Cass be sneaky enough to hide from Batman?

He closed his eyes. At first the only sounds were the ticking of the kitchen clock and his own breathing. But then he heard air, wind coming from an open window. Whirling around he looked at the huge floor to ceiling window that made up one wall of the living area. For a second all he could see were the twinkling lights of the city below him, but then he spotted it.

This, Bruce thought, was what a heart attack felt like.

Dangling from one hand off the edge of the penthouse roof, peering in as he combed through her apartment, was his ten-year-old daughter. Her eyes widened when she realised he’d noticed her, and he opened his mouth, without knowing what he was going to say. Stop, maybe. It’s ok! I’m not going to hurt you. Whatever it was, he never got the chance.

As soon as their eyes met, she let go of the rooftop and fell.

“Clark!”

A blur of red and blue swooped past the glass, and once again Bruce cursed his human limitations as he threw himself out the window, casting a grappling hook and diving after his daughter.

Clark had already caught her by the time he reached the ground, and he looked mildly uncomfortable as Cass thrashed like a wild animal in his arms. Bruce tried to make eye contact with her, to make her understand in some way that he was here to help, but just like Jason and Tim she looked right through him.

Unlike Jason and Tim, she was terrified of him. There was nothing but fear and anger in her eyes as she fiercely struggled against Superman’s ironclad grip. Bruce’s heart sank as he realised why she was so scared. The only people who would hunt down Cassandra at this age were David Cain and
his associates. He couldn’t imagine what it had been like to wake up in such a fancy apartment with no recollection of getting there, especially since he had no idea where Cass had been living at this age. She’d been homeless, but where exactly she’d never told him, always shrugging and making a circling gesture.

“Around.” She would say, and later. “Here, there and everywhere.”, a phrase he was fairly sure she’d picked up from a TV show.

What did she think had happened to her? How could he explain the truth? Cassandra at this age couldn’t understand any explanation he gave her, and he didn’t have time to create a diagram elaborate enough to provide an adequate understanding of the situation. Something stuck in his throat as Cass began to scream, a helplessness that angered him as he realised that there was nothing he could do to soothe his own daughter’s terror.

“Batman?” Clark was growing steadily more uncomfortable, as their costumes and Cass’s screams were attracting a lot of unwanted attention.

“Bring her up to the roof.” Bruce said.

If Clark noticed how tired he sounded, he didn’t mention it. He flew up without another word, and Bruce followed a few seconds behind. Once they were away from prying eyes, he flexed his arms and got into a fighting stance.

“Let her go.”

“What?” Clark looked stunned. “But she’ll bolt. Why don’t you just talk to-”

“She won’t understand me, that’s why.” Bruce growled. “And you don’t understand Cassie, so just put her down and let me handle this.”

Clark gave him a look, but he let the girl go. Cass kicked off his chest and flipped right over to Bruce, moving so fast he barely got his hand up to deflect her punch. He saw her eyes widen when he managed to block her kick as well, but after all the sparring he’d done with her older self he could usually block her first few attacks before she cranked it up a notch.

She launched a barrage of kicks at him, trying to push him closer to the edge of the roof. He did his best to get a grip on her, but even at this age Cass was almost too quick for the human eye to see, moving from one side to the other before he’d fully finished countering her first attack.

If this was Batman against Black Bat, the chance of him winning without Superman’s intervention would be low. But Cass was younger, less experienced, and her skills were rusty from two years of running without meeting any challenging opponent. The one big advantage Bruce had was that unlike the older Cass, this girl wasn’t used to holding back. She could take down lesser trained fighters easily, but with someone of Batman’s skill level the instinct David Cain had drilled into her was to go for the kill, and he could tell that she wasn’t fully trusting herself not to make a mistake like she had when she was eight.

He could see the split-second hesitation when she aimed a fatal strike, before she quickly transitioned into a non-lethal move. Those small mistakes were all Bruce needed, and after a few minutes of back and forth, he deliberately left his neck open. He saw her go for it, then hesitate when she realised the technique she was using would kill him. Right before she could adjust he grabbed her arm, tugging her close and wrapping one arm around her neck.

“Batman-”
“Shut up.” He snarled at Clark, struggling to keep his grip on Cass as she bucked and clawed at his arm.

He had never had to subdue a child with such difficulty. Cass kicked and scratched and bit and tried to hit a few nerve points through his armour. He held on firmly though, and she couldn’t fight forever. Her felt her body go slack as she slipped into unconsciousness, and he carefully manoeuvred her out of the chokehold and cradled her in his arms.

Clark watched him silently as he stood up, careful not to let her head roll into an uncomfortable position.

“I can’t communicate with her, not right now.” He said quietly. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand, but she is my responsibility, so I had to do it.”

Clark nodded, and thankfully didn’t comment, choosing instead to fly over and pick him up. Bruce kept a tight grip on Cass as they flew higher over the lights of Hong Kong.

As started their journey across the Pacific Ocean, Bruce wrapped his as much of his body as he could around his tiny daughter. Until she was healed from this spell, he vowed that nothing in the world would get the chance to harm her. Cassandra, and all his de-aged children, this time he could not afford to fail them.

He would protect them, no matter what it took.

Damian, grudgingly out of his Robin uniform, came back down to the cave with some of his fresh clothes for Jason to borrow, just to see Gordon trying to usher all of the kids out.

“What’s going on?”

“Message from Bruce.” Gordon explained, firmly pushing all the children closer to the elevator. “He’s on his way back, and he told us to clear out the Cave. You and Alfred watch the kiddos upstairs until we deal with whatever problem Cass has.”

Damian’s first instinct was to snap at her for daring to order him out of the cave, but he bit his tongue. Despite the fact that a recovering child assassin like Damian would probably be better at handling another recovering child assassin than Gordon, it was Father’s call. If Robin had to guard the victims then that’s what Robin would do, even if it meant his skills were being wasted.

“Alright. Everyone upstairs.” He snapped his fingers briskly, and tried not to seem to surprised when the boys actually listened to him, crowding into the elevator together.

Gordon shot him another one of her knowing smirks, which Damian pointedly ignored because Oracle was just a codename thank you very much, she didn’t know him half as well as she thought she did.

The elevator ride up was… awkward.

They all kept staring at him, with these wide expectant doe eyes. Grayson, he could understand, but Drake and especially Todd should never be looking at him with such innocent expressions. He avoided their gaze and considered foisting them all off on Alfred, but that would end with both the butler and his father glaring disappointedly at him for not wanting to hang out with a bunch of children. Plus, Brown was apparently coming over, and therefore Damian’s presence was necessary in case she tried to corrupt any of the boys with untruths about Damian’s character.
He could practically picture the glee in her eyes as she told his naïve brothers some fabricated tale about how she once brought him hot chocolate on patrol and he’d told her he liked the small marshmallows. Of course, that was just his hypothetical assumption into the depravity of Brown’s mind. The real lie she told them would undoubtedly be much, much worse.

“Jason, get changed into proper clothes and then follow the rest of us to the lounge. I’m only going to explain everything once so listen well, because I won’t answer any stupid questions about the future after this.”

Jason opened his mouth and Damian rolled his eyes.

“Regardless of whether this universe is real or not you’re all stuck here for the time being, so it would be foolish not to educate yourselves on the history we share together.”

Jason closed his mouth, then opened it again.

“Where’s the nearest bathroom?”

Damian pointed down the hallway and Jason took off, a bundle of Damian’s least favourite clothes clutched in his arms. Damian was rather dismayed to realise that after sharing with his three brothers he was running out of clothes he didn’t like. Hopefully Cassandra wouldn’t also be borrowing from him.

Jason came back out quickly, dressed in a plain black and white tracksuit. Just like with Tim the clothes hung off him, which was something Damian still wasn’t used to. Todd with a skinny underweight body just didn’t look right, and part of Damian felt like calling the hospital in case the boy collapsed.

Instead he led them all into the library. Dick flung himself down on a leather sofa and Tim sat next to him with a bit more grace. Damian sat opposite them and waited for Jason to sit, but the boy was staring with a dropped jaw at the bookshelves lining the walls.

“Wow.” He breathed.

“Yes, yes my father is rich and it’s all very impressive. You can read them later.” Damian clicked his fingers impatiently. “But the knowledge I’m about to give you is more valuable than any found in those books.”

Jason looked scandalised at that, but he sat down next to Tim without complaining.

“Now then.” Damian straightened his posture. “I assume you all know how our story begins, when Bruce Wayne watched his parents get shot right in front of him.”

They all nodded.

“Well this prompted him to spend the rest of his adolescence strengthening his body and mind until he became strong enough to single-handedly fight crime in Gotham city. For whatever reason he decides to do this dressed as a bat, although I will admit that it is quite good at physiologically terrorizing simple minded thugs. But anyway,” Damian waved a hand dismissively. “He becomes Batman and claims to work alone despite cooperating with the GCPD and having Alfred at his beck and call, until one day he meets a boy named Richard Grayson.”

Jason and Tim turned to stare at Dick, who was looking a lot less laid back than he had been. Damian met his gaze evenly.
“After the tragic death of Grayson’s parents Bruce Wayne adopts the boy as his ward, seeing a kindred spirit. Naturally, it doesn’t take long for Dick to realise that his new guardian is Batman, and honestly, I don’t think Father thought any of this through at all because letting a child live in the house that hides your secret base seems incredibly sloppy. But apparently, he was slightly more sentimental and emotionally driven back then, so what do I know?”

He kept his eyes on Dick, breathing a small sigh of relief when his eldest brother relaxed back into his seat. The nod he gave Damian was barely noticeable, but both were aware of the potential minefield they had just avoided. Damian had been careful not to go into detail about the death of Grayson’s parents, knowing that callously sharing anything too personal could anger Dick and ruin the trust they were attempting to build.

Honestly, it was a relief that Dick didn’t know anything past his first few months as Robin, because Damian was definitely going to have to tell them the abridged PG version of their story.

“So they become Batman and Robin, a crime fighting duo that you’re all familiar with. Grayson grows up, makes friends and starts becoming more independent. Along the way he meets Batgirl, who you all met down in the cave. She will eventually become Oracle due to some personal events that I have no desire to share with you. If you want you can ask her yourself. But eventually Grayson stops going by Robin and becomes Nightwing, and Batman works alone again. Enter Jason Todd.”

Now this part of the story, Damian really didn’t want to tell. Despite claiming none of this was real, the Jason in front of him was hanging onto Damain’s every word, and Damain found that his usual scathing comments on Todd’s pathetic life didn’t seem appropriate.

“Batman meets Todd, a homeless orphan. He gets Todd into a home that turns out to be corrupt, and when Todd helps him capture the criminals he sees potential in the boy. He adopts Jason and after a few months of training the boy becomes the new Robin. He gets on well with Batman and does a good job living up to Dick’s legacy.”

Damian tried not to seem nervous, but the more Jason listened to his story the brighter he seemed to get, and Damian realised there and then that he could not tell this boy the real ending of his time as Robin.

“Jason does well up until the Joker lures him into a trap. He gets seriously injured attempting to protect innocent people, and this leaves Batman wracked with guilt. He decides that he will no longer take random orphans into his house and encourage them to endanger their lives via vigilante activities. A sensible suggestion if you ask me, but it’s one he doesn’t stick with, because along comes-.”

“Wait!” Jason interrupted. “What happened to me? After I was seriously injured?”

Damian hesitated. Three pairs of eyes stared expectantly up at him.

He put on his best poker face. There was no right answer he could give that would make Father and Alfred happy, so he just went with his instinct.

“You spent a long time recovering from the physical and mental trauma you endured. However, you did eventually get back on your feet, and nowadays you fight crime under the alias of Red Hood.”

“Oh.” Jason grinned. “Cool! For a second there I was scared I died or something.”

“That would have been terrible.” Damian said calmly. “However, the main point I was getting to is that the Robin mantle is once again vacant, and that’s where number three comes in.”
Dick had relaxed after his backstory had been told, and Jason seemed caught up in the amazement of him becoming Robin, but Tim had been eyeing Damian with a hint of his familiar shrewdness. Damian had a feeling Tim wasn’t quite sold on the story he was spinning, but thankfully he seemed content not to ruin it for the others.

“Tim convinces Batman to let him be Robin. Just like his predecessors he makes many friends in the superhero community, but the only one currently relevant is Stephanie Brown who will be arriving here shortly. I believe she became Robin for a short while when Tim was unavailable but like Gordon that’s a touchy subject and I honestly don’t care enough to tell you why. Ask her yourself. The important thing is that she’s Batgirl now. She took the mantle from our sister the way I took Robin from Timothy, and that’s the end of the Robin story so far.”

“Our sister?” Dick said curiously. “What’s she like?”

“She’s… an incredibly competent and capable ally.” Damian said slowly. “In my opinion she was the best Batgirl, although I suppose Brown’s… adequate. Don’t tell her I said that, just quote me on the first part.”

He was met with three bemused stares.

Damian rolled his eyes.

“You’ll see for yourself. Father should be back any second.”

Right on cue, a ding sounded from the hallway behind them, and all four heads swivelled around to stare down it. Damian frowned when Gordon wheeled herself out of his father’s study, looking pale and tight-lipped.

“Bruce wants you all to know that the Batcave is off limits.” She said tersely. “He wants you all to take this warning seriously, because there is someone down there who could badly injure you, and apparently he thinks keeping her locked up below is the best course of action.”

It was blatantly clear to all of them that Gordon disagreed with Bruce on that.

“Is he coming up to see us?” Dick sounded hopeful, and both Damian and Gordon winced minutely at that.

“At some point he will.” Gordon said, with the type of false reassurance Damian was far too used to. “But his priority is keeping you all safe, and right now Cassandra needs him the most. Hopefully we can figure something out soon.”

She wheeled back inside the room, and Damian didn’t miss how her expression darkened when she thought the children couldn’t see. All was not well down there, and he felt annoyed that he was being kept out of the loop.

A sigh drew his attention, and he noticed that Dick’s face had also grown clouded. Jason was staring at the coffee table intently and Tim was picking up on the negative atmosphere that was starting to seep into the room.

“Jason.” Damian said suddenly. “Why don’t you pick a book?”

Jason perked up at that, bright eyes restrained by suspicious body language.

“Really? I can touch them?”
“Touch them, read them, build a fort with them.” Damian shrugged. “I’ve said my piece, now we just need to pass the time. So, pick something fun to do.”

“Let’s build a pillow fort!” Dick grinned.

“Wait,” Jason pouted. “but I want to read!”

“Do you have any cards?” Tim chimed in.

Damian stared at them. Undeterred by his lack of reaction they continued to talk over each other, and it dawned on Damian that he may have just unleashed something he was ill equipped to handle.

“Alfred!” He tried not to sound too desperate. “I require your immediate assistance!”

“Pil-low fort! Pil-low fort!”

“Make it by yourself!”

“Damian, you’ll help me, right?”

“No! Damian said he’d help me pick a book!’

“Actually, he didn’t. But Damian, I can’t see any cards anywhere do you know where I can get them?”

“Damian why are you just sitting there? Damian?”

Damian pressed his lips together, and prayed that Alfred would rescue him soon.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: All the children are secure, but things aren’t going too great. Bruce’s method of dealing with Cass doesn’t go over well with Babs and Steph. Meanwhile Damian is still trying to shelter his brothers, with varying degrees of success.
The Spoiler

Chapter Summary

Damian has Opinions. So do the adults. Meanwhile, Dick goes exploring.

Chapter Notes

For Damian, undercover personas were terribly embarrassing. The role he was most commonly forced to play was that of a simple happy-go-lucky child, and that was unfortunately the persona he currently had to use. The most grating part was that despite the effort and dignity he was sacrificing, his act didn’t seem to be convincing anyone.

“Damian, I feel like you should smile more.” Dick chirped, placing another cushion from the couch onto the fort they were building.

“Yeah you’re kind of grumpy.” Tim commented as he carefully placed three cards on top of one another.

Jason hummed an agreement as he turned a page in his book, causing Damian to grit his teeth and slam his cushion down with more force than was probably necessary.

“Can’t we just… enjoy building this architecturally flawed shelter that you insist on calling a fort?”

“See that’s what we mean! You’re so-”

Whatever Tim thought Damian was he never got the chance to say, because as Jason turned a page in his book his elbow knocked into Tim’s house of cards, causing it to collapse. Everyone froze, watching in horror as Tim’s face crumpled. Damian frantically tried to remember what Father and Grayson had taught him about handling crying children, but thankfully the crisis was averted when Alfred swooped in.

“How do the young sirs feel about cookies? Master Tim helped me with them earlier.”

The three boys immediately swarmed over to Alfred with loud cries of enthusiasm. Dick and Tim grabbed a cookie, but Jason hesitated, only taking one when Alfred nodded at him. Damian watched them all eat, glaring at the butler.

“You certainly took your time, Pennyworth.” He grumbled.

“My apologies Master Damian.” Alfred said, not looking too guilty at all. “I was delayed by the arrival of Mistress Stephanie.”

“Oh wow! Babs wasn’t kidding about them being adorable.”

Just the sound of Brown’s voice caused Damian’s frown to deepen, and the grin on her face as she entered the room did nothing to help his mood.

“Which one is Jason and which one is Tim? I honestly can’t tell.”
“I’m Tim.” Tim stepped forward hesitantly.

“And I’m Jason!” Jason walked straight up to her, an excited grin on his face. “Damian says that you’re Batgirl, and even though this isn’t real I think that’s super cool. Maybe, once we figure out the problem with this Cassandra girl, you could show me a few moves?”

“Aw.” Steph ruffled his hair. “Nice to see you too little Jason. Where is Cass anyway? It would be fun to finally get all of us who died together in one… place…”

She winced at the twin glares on Alfred and Damian’s faces. The room had gone completely silent, and Damian was rapidly trying to come up with ways to control the damage from Brown’s careless error. He always knew that all the distasteful gallows humour this family was fond of would come back to bite them one day.

“Us who died?” Dick said quietly. “What does that mean? Who died?”

“I did.” Stephanie said quickly. “Got in over my head fighting bad guys and ended up flatlining for a little bit. I did pull through though, unlike Cass. She’s died twice, and I’m pretty sure at least once she had to be revived unnaturally. Sorry, it’s just something we like to joke about from time to time, helps us cope. I didn’t realise that you kids weren’t aware it happened.”

She chuckled, a desperate attempt to bring some levity to her words.

"Man, two seconds in and I already fu- messed up. That has to be a record.”

“But the way you said ‘all of us’ implied that more than the two of you died. Who else were you talking about?”

Of course, it was Tim who kept pushing, Damian thought bitterly. He watched as Alfred’s face got stonier, and Stephanie squirmed under the scrutiny of the three children in front of her.

“Uh…”

“‘I did.’ Damian spoke up, and all three pairs of eyes swivelled over to look at him.

Wonderful.

Brown was staring at him with wide panicked eyes, but Damian ignored her and focused on the lie he would have to tell. If he made his death too similar to what he’d already told Jason then the boys might piece it together. It had to be original but not interesting enough to demand further information.

“I was impaled fighting my grandfather, and later revived via the Lazarus Pit. The entire experience was unpleasant and I’d rather not speak of it. If you want more information you can ask Cassandra once she’s allowed out of the cave, since I believe she has also been revived via Lazarus Pit at one point.”

He sat down to show he was finished, observing the reactions around him. Dick looked horrified, Brown and Alfred looked relieved, Jason seemed confused, and Tim… Tim was staring at Damian.

Damian glared back, making Tim quickly look down at his feet. Damian kept his eyes narrowed, not buying the boy’s skittish innocent act for one second. This was Drake, and even as a child he was shaping up to be just as much of a thorn in Damian’s side as his adult counterpart.

“You know what? I think I’m going to go see Babs now. She’s probably got her hands full dealing with Bruce and his golden child.” Steph made a hasty retreat from the room, Alfred following behind
her after leaving the cookies down on the table.

The room was plunged into yet another uncomfortable silence. Once again Dick was the one to break it.

“Why did she call our sister the ‘golden child’? Is that another inside joke that we’re not getting?”

Once again, Damian was left with the task of handling his scared and confused brothers. Quite honestly, he was getting sick of it. Why did everyone seem to think that leaving all the emotional comfort and reassurance in his hands was a good idea?

“Have another cookie.” He said, standing up abruptly. “I’ll be back shortly. Stay in this room so you don’t get kidnapped.”

“Wait, where are you going?”

He ignored Jason and walked straight towards the study which lead to the elevator. If Batman was letting Stephanie Brown assist him but not Damian, the only one who actually had any experience with the sort of lifestyle Cassandra had grown up with, then he was ready to go down and argue about his value. Babysitting the civilians should be Alfred’s job, and Damian’s skillset was being wasted constructing shoddy defensive forts out of couch cushions.

He paused outside the study, hearing the sound of words being hissed and growled.

“She’s my daughter and I understand her in a way neither of you do. When this is all over she’ll be glad I kept her down there.”

“She was my daughter first!” That was Gordon. “You and Cass have always had this problem of, of enabling and encouraging each other’s behaviour, regardless of whether it’s good or bad for you. It’s not healthy to keep a terrified and confused kid locked up in a cage!”

Father attempted to say something, but Gordon cut across him.

“I don’t give a damn about her older self right now Bruce, not when there’s a ten-year-old girl down there who doesn’t deserve to be treated like a dangerous criminal!”

“If you can help her calm down and understand the situation better, I’d be happy to release her.” Father sounded tired. “But until I can be sure that she’s not a threat to anyone in this manor then she stays in the cage.”

There was a silence so icy Damian could practically feel the chill.

“Barbara, I’m trying my best.” Batman almost sounded vulnerable. “Neither of us wanted this, and both of us want Cassie to be safe and happy, but that means making sure she doesn’t hurt anyone while she’s like this. Please just… work with me here.”

Gordon sighed.

“Fine. Let’s go back down and I’ll try to convince her that the big scary man in the Batsuit didn’t kidnap her for evil reasons. Should be easy considering how friendly and nonthreatening you look.”

“If you think it would help, I’d be happy to change.”

“I’m coming too.” Damian recognized Brown’s voice for the first time in the whole conversation.

“No.” Father shut her down instantly. “If you want to help you can mind the boys with Damian, but
you’re not going near Cassandra until I say so.”

“Like hell I’m not.” Stephanie snarled. “That’s my best friend down there, and you’re telling me she’s scared and alone. You want me to trust that you can help her feel safe?”

“Barbara will be there to provide emotional comfort. Until we can communicate effectively with Cassandra your presence would only hinder our efforts.”

“Barbara.” He could hear the desperation in Brown’s voice. “Please. You know I’ve always been good at comforting scared victims. Let me help, for Cass’s sake if nothing else.”

“Stephanie… I’m sorry.” Damian heard the sound of someone taking a step back. “I know you love Cass, but I agree with Bruce. When it comes to her you can’t separate your personal feelings even when it’s necessary. You know I love her too, so I need you to trust me. Bruce and I will tackle this alone until the situation is less delicate.”

“That’s bullshit.” Stephanie spat, and Damian couldn’t help but agree with her.

He barely had time to scuttle backwards before Steph stormed out into the hallway. She took one look at him and her anger faded into sympathy.

“They’re keeping you out of the loop too, huh?”

“Don’t associate yourself with me.” Damian shot back. “They were right you know; your empathy means nothing until communication with Cassandra is possible. I, on the other hand, could provide them with invaluable knowledge and assistance if Father…”

“…wasn’t so afraid of contaminating his pure and innocent daughter with our tainted history?”

Damian glared at her. She shrugged.

“I could be wrong, but that’s kind of the vibe I’m getting. You and I have been through too much and even though we survived we carry a lot of damage. These kids offer him a fresh start where he is yet to make any mistakes with them, why would he want us to muddy that up?”

“Then why let me look after the boys?” he snapped, hating how much her words made his stomach churn. “Wouldn’t I just be ‘tainting’ them?”

Damian’s hands clenched into fists as Stephanie shrugged again.

“Look, I’m not saying Bruce is doing this deliberately. I just think that right now you and I are the biggest reminders of all the mistakes he made in the past, so when he’s trying to figure out the best way to help Cass, he instinctively wants us as far away from him as possible. That way he can avoid acknowledging everything he’s done wrong and focus on everything he can do right.”

“That’s stupid.”

“It is.” Stephanie agreed. “Which is why I’m going to ignore everything he and Barbara just told me to do. Want to help me break into the Batcave?”

“Tt.” Damian turned around and stared down the hall.

Jason was sitting on the sofa, babbling excitedly to Dick about the book in front of him. Dick seemed confused, but whatever questions he asked just made Jason’s enthusiasm grow. Damian watched as Jason turned the page and pointed, and then he and Dick suddenly started giggling at whatever was
on that page. Watching them made Damian’s chest ache, but when he thought about it he found that
he couldn’t pinpoint why.

“By all means, feel free to provoke Father into kicking you out again. But as Robin I have children
to protect, and I’m not willing to shirk my duties to lash out in teenage rebellion.”

“Suit yourself.” Stephanie sounded amused, which meant that he needed to find better insults. “I’ll
tell Cass you said hi.”

“That would be appreciated.”

They separated, Stephanie headed outside to one of the secret entrances, Damian headed back
towards his brothers.

At least, that was his intention. As usual, Tim Drake ruined the moment for him.

“We need to talk.”

Damian glared at Tim, who was hiding in an open doorway with a serious look on his face.

“I told you to stay in the lounge.”

“I needed to talk to you alone.” Tim seemed nervous, and Damian had a good guess as to why.
“Before Mr Wayne found me I was alone in my apartment for a day. I did some research in that time,
googled myself, then googled the Waynes, then googled Batman gossip. Basically, what I’m trying
to say is that I know.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific. ‘I know’ is a very vague term and I’m not a mind-
reader.”

“About Jason’s death.”

There it was. What Damian had feared but expected. Typical of Tim Drake to always poke his nose
in somewhere it didn’t belong.

“Well then here’s what we’re going to do.” Damian let his voice drop into the low growl he used to
intimidate criminals. “You’re going to take all that knowledge you found and you’re going to keep it
to yourself. As far as those two boys know, my version of events is the truth, and unless you are
prepared to deal with the emotional fallout of revealing your Wikipedia knowledge to them, then I
expect you to keep quiet. Understood?”

“I only want to help.” Tim protested. “I get why you wouldn’t want them to know, so I just thought I
should tell you that you don’t need to worry about me. I’ll help you keep them blind, steer them
away from the internet and everything. Jason’s not even coping with his mom’s death and Dick is
kind of growing more appalled by how grim and dark everything is, so I’ll help you pretend, ok?”

Ah of course. Damian had forgotten how much Drake needed to be in control. Well fine, he could
play into Tim’s ego, let the boy think that he and Damian were partners protecting these ignorant
kids, instead of a professional indulging a child to pacify him.

“Very well.” He held out his hand for Tim to shake. “We have a deal. Now let’s go back inside and
remember…”

“…none of this ever happened. Got it.” Tim shook his hand, and even threw in a wink.
Damian tried his best not to sneer at that.

With the reassurance of knowing he wasn’t the only one being excluded from the Batcave, and the Drake problem temporarily resolved, Damian felt a lot more relaxed walking back into the lounge. That lasted all of three seconds, until he noticed that while Jason was still reading his book, Dick was missing.

“Jason! Where did Dick go?”

Jason blinked up at him, baffled by Damian’s agitation.

“He said he was going to the bathroom. He should be back soon.”

“Damn it.” Damian hissed. "Tim, stay here with Jason and wait for Alfred. I’ll be back soon.”

He took off, his mind already racing with possibilities. This was his favourite brother, the one he knew best, and he was confident that there was no way Dick could hide from him for long. Still, the question remained:

Why had Dick left?

This is your home too. Dick told himself, creeping through the long corridors of the manor. If you want to walk around and explore, some little brother you don’t know shouldn’t be allowed to tell you no.

He'd managed to sneak upstairs, slowly walking down the corridor towards his bedroom. It was comforting in a way, that the creepy portraits and sculptures that Bruce didn’t care about were still in the correct places. Even if Bruce, Alfred and the residents of the Manor were all different, at least this one trivial thing was the same.

He reached the door to his bedroom, his heart sinking when he noticed that the obnoxiously colourful sign he’d made declaring the room his was no longer on the doorway. It was enough to make him hesitate with his hand on the doorknob, but in the end his stubbornness won out.

This was his house and his room, no matter how much he felt like a stranger.

Fired up and ready Dick pushed open the door and strode in. He made it three steps before his foot landed on a shoe and he stumbled. It took him two seconds to regain his balance and get his bearings, and when he did he felt bile rise in his throat because this wasn’t his room.

It was a stranger’s room, that much he was certain of. It wasn’t just that the floor was messier and all the clothes strewn around were bigger. It wasn’t that the duvet on the bed was blue instead of red, or that all his action figures were gone, as were his football, his trophies, his globe, his boomerang and his Led Zeppelin poster. It wasn’t even that the floor to ceiling bookcase was neat and orderly or that the bed was on the wrong side of the room. All that Dick could have chalked up to his older self having grown out of Dick’s hobbies and preferences, but there was one thing that above all else should have been in the room.

Frantically, Dick began throwing open the drawers next to the bedside table. Maybe the poster just got a little damaged so he decided to put it away for safe-keeping? But it wasn’t anywhere to be found in the room, not in the wardrobe or the desk drawer or even under the bed.

His Flying Graysons poster was gone.
Earlier he’d thought Jason was a little strange for being so stubbornly in denial, but now Dick fully understood. This couldn’t be the future. A future where Bruce barely said five words to him before dumping him off on his little brother, a future where three kids under Batman’s care had died, including a boy who was no older than Dick. A future where he was Bruce Wayne’s son and had completely forgotten about his real parents.

A future where, despite what his little brother said, he didn’t recognize Dick Grayson at all.

Dick jumped on the bed and angrily kicked some stupid comic he didn’t even read off the end of it. He buried his face in the pillow and found himself getting even more upset at the unfamiliar smell. Why did everything have to be so different? He rolled off the bed, tears starting to stream down his face, and tucked himself under the desk he didn’t buy.

This stupid world was all fake, and Dick had been a fool to buy into it. Jason had the right idea, no reality so cold and harsh could ever be the real future.

A knock at the door distracted him from his misery, and he looked up, red faced and crying, to see Damian standing in the doorway.

"Mind if I come in?"

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Dick’s not doing too great. Neither is Bruce, even though he refuses to admit it.
The Legacy

Chapter Summary

Damian and Steph both try to help. One of them succeeds better than the other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dick glared at the boy who was supposed to be his youngest brother. He knew that his face was red and tears were still dripping down his cheeks, but Damian didn’t seem too concerned by that. The boy’s face was completely impassive, and whatever he was thinking when he saw Dick curled under the desk, he was careful not to let it show. Dick appreciated that, because he didn’t think he could stand pity from any of these fake people right now.

Out of all of them, Damian was probably Dick’s favourite so far. He was definitely better than fake Bruce, and he didn’t look at Dick with the weird, sad expression that fake Alfred did. So if Dick was going to be honest with anyone from this messed up alternate reality, Damian was a good choice.

He nodded permission for Damian to come inside, and waited while his ‘little brother’ made his way over and crouched down next to Dick.

“What’s wrong?”

Another reason Damian was Dick’s current favourite: Even though the kid was overly serious about everything, it was also really obvious that he genuinely cared about Dick. Unlike the Bruce of this world, who seemed to view Dick as nothing more than a burden he needed to protect.

Not that Dick was bitter about it.

“Everything’s wrong!” he snapped. “My room’s all wrong, this house is all wrong, the people are all wrong, and even Batman and Robin are wrong!”

Damian did that thing again where he almost flinched but caught himself halfway through the motion. Dick saw it anyway, and while he knew that he wasn’t being a good big brother right now, truthfully, he didn’t feel like a big brother. They were just two kids of the same age who belonged in different worlds, and whatever bond his older self had to Damian wasn’t his problem.

“I think I can help with some of that.” Damian’s voice was as carefully flat as the first time he’d spoken to Dick. “For starters this is your old room, and Drake’s currently using it. If you want I can take you to your adult bedroom, and perhaps it might seem more familiar.”

Drake? Who’s…

Tim. This is Tim’s room.

Dick took a second to process that, but slowly and steadily relief crept through him. This wasn’t his room, it was Tim Drake’s! Tim Drake kept the floor of the room messier and the bookcase neater than Dick did. Grown up Dick wasn’t a completely different person, and there was a reason that everything was wrong!
It still hurt a little, looking around and knowing that Bruce had given this room to another boy once Dick grew too old. What was Nightwing’s relationship with Batman anyway? Older Dick was working in a different city, so they definitely weren’t partners anymore.

That thought made his chest ache, but he refused to dwell on it. Damian had given him hope, so he’d hold off on the bad thoughts until he saw his actual room. This world still wasn’t great, but maybe it wasn’t the terrible, evil timeline Jason seemed to think it was.

He crawled out from under the desk and gave Damian his best attempt at a sunny smile. Damian didn’t seem too convinced, but he led Dick out of the room and down the hallway. Dick’s smile became a little more genuine when he saw his old sign saying *Dick’s Room!* hanging from the door in front of them.

Damian hesitated before opening the door.

“Just keep in mind that while this is your bedroom at the manor and you do use it semi-regularly, you’re currently based in Bludhaven. If there’s anything important missing it’s probably in your apartment or the penthouse, and I’ll send Stephanie or Alfred to get it as soon as possible.”

“Oh.” Dick said. “Thank you.”

“Tt.” Damian opened the door. “No need to thank me. Sending Brown to Bludhaven would probably be best for both her and Father.”

Dick still didn’t know how to respond when Damian pretended that he wasn’t nice, so he just shrugged and stepped into the room that was apparently his.

He looked around it. The room was neater than his real one, but that made sense since he was supposed to be an adult here. Even though the sheets were still blue, the bedframe and headboard were ones he could tell were from his bed back home. The bookcase was smaller, but he recognized all his favourite books on the shelves, including the Superman biography Bruce always pretended to hate. His telescope that he hadn’t even remembered was missing was over by the window, and while the Led Zeppelin poster was still gone there was one of Robin Hood that made him smile. It felt like a Dick Grayson thing to have on his bedroom wall.

And most importantly, right above the bed was his Flying Graysons poster. The ache in his heart lessened as he absorbed the sight of his parents smiling down at him, with his younger self standing between them and gripping their legs. He reached out and brushed his fingers over the poster, a nightly ritual he always did before heading out with Batman. The poster was older, more faded and the edges curled slightly, but it was so clearly *his* poster that Dick finally felt at home in this unfamiliar manor.

“You have a copy of the poster in your apartment, but you decided to leave the original here.”

Dick turned slowly to face his blank faced brother. Now that his anger and fear had been appeased, Dick felt a little ashamed at how he’d snapped at Damian. The kid had done nothing but try to help, and just because Dick didn’t remember them being brothers (or want any siblings in the first place, but that was a thought he couldn’t truly acknowledge right now) didn’t mean that the love Damian had for him would go away.

“I’m sorry for running.” Dick lied. “I know it probably didn’t make it easier for you to protect us.”

“Tt.” Damian shrugged gruffly, causing Dick to break out into a proper genuine smile.

Damian was so bad at pretending that he didn’t care, Dick couldn’t help but find it endearing.
He took one last look at the poster on the wall, before turning and leaving the room. Damian followed behind him, and something about his silence felt heavy to Dick. He slowed his pace a little, giving Damian time to think over whatever he wanted to say. They were nearing the study when the boy finally cracked.

“I wasn’t worried about you, you know. I am aware that you’ve been trained to protect yourself.” Damian blurted out at last. “But I was… hurt, I suppose. I had hoped that we Robins would work together to protect Jason and Tim.”

Robins. The plural was still something Dick wasn’t used to, and he had a feeling it showed.

“I can’t help feeling like I want to go home.” Dick admitted softly. “I know you seem pretty gung-ho about this whole Robin thing, but I can’t just push aside my feelings to be a super vigilant babysitter for two civilians I don’t even know. Sorry if that makes me a bad Robin or whatever.”

“What are you talking about?” Damian frowned. “You’re the original Robin, and the best one, other than myself of course.”

Dick laughed at that, ignoring the scowl he received in response. Damian spoke with a strange sort of arrogance Dick had never come across before, and something about it was unintentionally funny.

“Other than you, huh?” he smirked.

“I’d like to think so.” Damian muttered. “However, I must admit that despite my superior training, without your guidance I would never have become worthy of the Robin mantle.”

“Really?” Dick stopped walking. “But you’re so good! You move like a baby ninja, so I can tell you’re a good fighter, and you’re also doing a great job of taking care of us for Batman. You helped me make a blanket fort and you showed Tim how a Batarang worked and you offered Jason the whole library when you saw he liked books!”

“And who do you think taught me how to be that way?” Damian raised an eyebrow. “Because it certainly wasn’t either of my parents. I was raised by the League of Assassins Dick; blanket forts were never something I could indulge in.”

Dick stared at him, unsure of what to say. He’d known from the minute they met that Damian was a weird kid, but now he was saying that not only had he died and come back to life, but he was actually a real baby ninja? Dick wanted to accuse Damian of messing with him, but something made him hesitate. Despite all the information Damian had dumped on his brothers earlier, he hadn’t said a word about his mother. In fact, the only thing Dick could remember Damian saying about the other side of his family was that he had died fighting his grandfather.

Yikes.

But now that it was just the two of them, Damian seemed comfortable opening up a little bit more. It made Dick kind of happy and kind of scared, that he had a little brother who looked up to him and trusted him like this, even when he’d been reduced to the same age.

“Father and I may be Batman and Robin now, but there’s no denying that you were the best partner both of us ever had.” Damian said quietly. “The reason I’m indulging all your childish whims, the reason I’m trying so hard to keep you all happy as well as safe, it’s because that’s what you showed me being Robin was all about.”

“It’s not about the skill.” Dick murmured. “It’s about the heart.”
“A concept which took you a long time to make me understand, due to the fact that I thought it was stupid.” Damian said dryly. “The truth is, I was trained to be a warrior, but you showed me how to be a hero.”

Dick didn’t know what to say in response to that. He hadn’t been expecting any of that from Damian. He had thought that the boy was a bit too tightly wound and closed off, but apparently older Dick had done a pretty good job in gaining this kid’s trust. In a way, it convinced Dick to trust Damian too. His older self clearly loved this kid a lot, and after seeing his real adult bedroom, Dick trusted his own judgement now.

The thought of there being more than one Robin was still freaky, but Damian seemed so sincere about how much Dick had mentored him that he couldn’t quite bring himself to hate the thought of sharing it with this kid. If he had to grow out of Robin, he was glad Damian had inherited it.

He purposely avoided thinking about the two other kids who’d apparently also been Robin. They hadn’t exactly done anything to make him dislike them, but he still couldn’t figure out how he felt about them being Robin. Robin was inspired by his mother, and Dick couldn’t help but feel that the mantle should be a family thing. While Damian had convinced him that they truly were brothers, the other two were still strangers to him.

But he could fix that.

He started walking again, a spring in his step that hadn’t been there since he woke up in the Nightwing suit. Damian followed suit, but with much more restraint in his footsteps. Dick figured that was part of his ninja training.

“You know, I’m really glad that you’re Robin.” Dick looked over at Damian’s tense posture, and then slung an arm around his brother’s shoulders. “And honestly, I think my mom would be happy too, knowing that the family legacy is in good hands.”

Damian didn’t respond, looking overwhelmed by both the one-armed hug and Dick’s words.

Dick didn’t push it, and instead pointed out the crack in a swirly painting that he’d made with his football years ago. Damian shook his head and smirked, and Dick felt the warm glow of hope burn brighter inside him.

Now if only he could fix whatever the heck Bruce’s problem with him was, then Dick felt like he could accept this future as a nice one.

The elevator was too slow. He’d have to get it upgraded once this whole mess was over.

“Are you sure this is good enough?”

Clutching a bunch of flashcards, Barbara gave him her best deadpan stare.

“The drawings are basic Bruce, it’s not like I had the time or resources to draw anything other than stick figures. But they should get the point across, which is all we need them to do.”

“Hm.”

The elevator doors finally opened, and Bruce stepped into the cave with great relief.

That relief vanished quickly once he saw who was also in the cave. Stephanie was standing far too close to the bars Cassandra was locked behind, attempting to converse with the small girl. The
earnest expression on Stephanie’s face as she chatted away enthusiastically did nothing but anger Bruce. After all this time, she was still so foolishly impulsive, and he regretted ever allowing Barbara to enlist her help.

“Stephanie get away from her right now!”

It all went downhill very fast after that.

Cassandra looked up, and the mix of anger and fear in her eyes as she glared at Bruce immediately made him feel like there was a needle digging into his heart. That pain soon turned to shock as she slipped out from between the bars of her cell and grabbed Stephanie. In less than two seconds she had a sharp rock pressed against the older girl’s neck, and everyone froze.

Stupid. A voice inside Bruce’s head was saying, Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Part of his anger was still directed at Stephanie, but Bruce couldn’t help but feel like he was primarily to blame for this. Why had he thought that a prison built for an adult would hold a small child of Cass’s skill? It had been idiotic of him to assume that she couldn’t escape based solely on the fact that she hadn’t tried yet. Clearly, she had noticed that she could squeeze between the bars, and had simply been biding her time until an opportunity to escape presented itself.

And Stephanie just handed her one on a silver platter.

Cass glared furiously at him, and he stared stoically back from beneath his cowl. He had to keep his emotions under control, what she could already see probably confused her enough. Explaining things to her with reason and logic was the best option, rather than trying to use an emotional bond that to Cass didn’t exist yet. Ideally, he’d planned to have this conversation when she had no other choice but to listen, however now it seemed that the stakes had been raised much higher.

Cass dug her sharp rock further into Stephanie’s neck, tugging her down until the older girl was on her knees. Bruce put his hands up, as a sign of peace and compliance that he hoped she would understand.

Cass jerked her head towards the elevator, glared pointedly at him and Barbara, then pressed the rock hard enough that it drew blood. Stephanie gritted her teeth, but remained calm in Cass’s grip.

“Bruce.” Barbara’s voice was level, but he could hear the undertone of frustration. “We have to go. She’s too scared, if we push her it’ll only end badly.”

Bruce remained where he was, staring straight into Cass’s eyes. When she first became Batgirl, her ability to communicate had been as bad as it was now, but it still hadn’t taken her long to respect him and trust him. He had always felt like she’d seen right through to his heart from the first time they fought together, so why was it that young Cass only felt fear towards him? Could she really not see that he meant her no harm?

He looked at her, and she glared back without hesitation. His heart sank as he accepted that there was no softness in her eyes. Cassie hated him right now, plain and simple, and it was clear that she would not give him a chance to explain why he’d captured her.

“Just go.” Stephanie spoke up, calm despite the rock pressed into her throat. “We all know she won’t kill me. Let me try and talk to her alone.”

Bruce gritted his teeth, but allowed Barbara to take his hand and pull him back into the elevator. He kept his eyes locked on Cassandra up until the doors closed, and only then did he allow his frustrations to boil over.
“Damn it!” He pounded his fists against the metal wall. “Why did you think it was a good idea to bring her in on this? She never listens, and now look what’s happened!”

“Look what’s happened? You mean how you choked a scared girl unconscious, locked her up in a cage underground, and left her there for so long without explaining anything that she decided to break out? Because if we’re placing blame I don’t think Stephanie and I are more at fault than you are.”

Bruce took a breath, his mind whirling through all their options, piecing together what their next move should be. The elevator opened and he immediately strode over to the desk. Pushing open a compartment in his desk drawer and entering a code gave him access to a tablet, with the screen showing various camera feeds from inside the cave. He turned up the volume just as Cass dragged Stephanie across the cave and pushed her into the elevator.

“Cass wait please don’t do this! Hear me out or read my body or something, I’m not trying to hurt you!”

The doors closed, and Stephanie’s voice was abruptly cut off. Bruce frowned as Cass turned around, squinting into the darkness. It took her three seconds to find the camera, and Bruce gripped the tablet tighter as she threw the rock at it. If it was any other situation he’d be proud of her for using her time in the cage to memorize important details about the cave, but right now it was incredibly inconvenient. He heard the elevator doors open behind him, but he kept his eyes on the screen as Cass found and destroyed another camera.

“She wasn’t willing to listen at all.” Stephanie said dejectedly. “She’s running on pure fear and anger here, I don’t think any of us could have gotten her to give them a chance.”

“We had a plan.” Bruce said, watching as Cass destroyed the third camera. “And you ruined it. I want you to leave right now, and I don’t want you coming back until this is over.”

“I don’t take orders from you.” There was a familiar cold anger in Stephanie’s voice, but Bruce honestly didn’t have the time to deal with that. “Your plan sucked from the very beginning, because despite you acting like I can’t think rationally, you were the one who projected all your issues onto Cass and couldn’t treat her like an ordinary scared kid.”

Bruce made a conscious effort not to damage the tablet as he gripped it with white hands. On the steadily darkening screen, Cass smashed another camera.

“I have to go back down there.” he said.

He heard Stephanie sigh, and the sound of Barbara’s wheelchair moving.

“I’ll go help Damian with the other kids.” Stephanie said. “If you can capture her again, maybe this time don’t treat her like she belongs in Arkham.”

He refused to take his eyes of the tablet as she left, only looking up when Barbara cursed.

“Cass broke the elevator.” Barbara groaned. “Most likely just smashed it up until enough wires weren’t working. It’s going to be harder for us to get down now.”

Bruce glanced back down at the tablet, just in time to catch the final camera going black.

“She doesn’t know where she is and she doesn’t know the other exits.” He walked over to the elevator, pressing his hands against the doors. “Chances are she’ll try to explore the cave before bolting. If I can get down there fast enough I can catch her before she gets lost in the tunnels.”
“I’ll get you a crowbar.” Barbara wheeled herself to the study door before pausing. “And Bruce? I think some of what Stephanie said is worth considering. I know you see a lot of yourself in Cass, but none of us knew her when she was this young. I’ve seen you with scared children before, so I know you’re good at comforting them. Maybe try that approach this time.”

She’s not a civilian child. He thought to himself. She’s not even like Dick. I’d give anything to hug her and tell her that everything’s alright but she wouldn’t understand what I was doing and it would only make things worse. Why don’t any of you realise that?

He glared down at the tablet. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Barbara shake her head, but then she wheeled herself down the corridor, and he was left alone.

Bruce ignored how tight his chest felt. He’d fix this, get Cass safely secured again, and then use those ridiculous stick figures Barbara drew to explain to her what was going on. After that, he’d deal with Stephanie and his other children. As long as he kept a level head, it would all work out fine in the end.

It had to.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Tim tries to bond with Jason, and Jason learns more about who his older self is.
Tim sat quietly and tried not to feel awkward. On the couch next to him, Jason was completely engrossed in the book he was reading, and Tim alternated between watching him read and fiddling with a deck of cards. There had been a lot of noise coming from the study, but it stopped once the woman called Babs left to get something. After that, it was like the whole huge house fell silent. Currently the only sound in the room was the ticking of a clock on the mantlepiece, and the lack of noise made Tim feel nervous about every sound he made. He didn’t miss Dick or Damian, they made him just as nervous as Jason, but he did miss Alfred. The butler was kind and friendly and he reminded Tim of Michal.

Michal had been the Drake family housekeeper for three years when Tim was younger. More often than not Tim’s boarding school closed for the holidays before his parents managed to get back to Gotham, so Michal had been his unofficial babysitter too. At first Tim had felt apprehensive about living with a stranger, but Michal hadn’t pushed Tim to have a bedtime or eat green beans, so little by little Tim had relaxed around him. By the end of the third summer he considered Michal to be his friend, which made it hurt that much more when he came home at Christmas to find that his parents had replaced Michal with someone who would work longer hours for less pay.

It had been nice, having someone to come home to who actually knew the names of his teachers and classmates. His parents tried to be interested in his life whenever they were around, but they always seemed to forget most of the details by the time Tim saw them again.

And now they were dead.

He didn’t like to think about that. Technically, this wasn’t his world so his parents weren’t dead, just his older self’s parents. Plus, there was always the possibility that this was the future of an alternate timeline, so maybe they didn’t die at all? And honestly, the more he thought about it, the more he realised that none of it really mattered, because Tim didn’t actually exist. He was just the product of a spell gone wrong, and soon he’d disappear into the nothingness he came from so that the real, older Tim could live again.

He didn’t like to think about that either.

His thoughts were getting too loud, so he took a deep breath to steel himself, and then opened his mouth.

“What are you reading?”

Jason looked up, and Tim was surprised at how guarded his expression was. Tim had seen him laugh earlier as he tossed a pillow at Damian, so why would Tim, of all people, make him look so wary?
“The Lord of the Rings.” Jason showed him the cover, with a picture of a blue misty mountain.

“Wow.” Tim said, glancing down at a page. “You can read that?”

Any friendliness in Jason’s expression vanished, and Tim was left confused as the boy turned his head back down to his book. Was he embarrassed that Tim was impressed? There was nothing wrong with liking to read, Tim loved reading. But most of his classmates weren’t interested in reading a book with as many words as the Lord of the Rings and he doubted Jason’s school was any different, so why was Jason so upset at Tim’s surprise?

He let the silence grow, deciding to observe Jason before making another attempt at conversation. As he watched Jason read, Tim noticed that every now and then Jason’s face would scrunch up, and he would mouth a certain word twice or three times, before shrugging and continuing to read.

After the fifth time it happened, Tim worked up the courage to say something.

“I can help if you want.” He offered, trying to sound confident and not scared. “If there are bits you don’t understand I can tell you what the words mean.”

He knew he’d somehow said the wrong thing again when Jason’s face scrunched up in anger. He snapped the book closed and stood up, causing Tim to scuttle back until he was pressed up against the arm of the sofa. It was only now that he remembered everything he’d read about Jason on the internet, and suddenly the quiet bookworm seemed a lot more intimidating. Was he going to beat Tim up? Tim had never been beat up before, but he supposed it had to happen at least once in his life.

“Master Tim, would you care to assist me with dusting the good china?”

It was official, Alfred was Tim’s favourite. Now he understood why Batman had called him the very best superhero, the man just had a knack of swooping in at the right moment.

Tim leapt up and tried to walk calmly out of the room. He had a feeling it still looked like he was running away. Jason glared at him as he left, but when Tim made it to the end of the corridor and looked back, Jason had sat back down and was reading again.

“Thanks for that, Alfred.” Tim sighed in relief. “I think he was about to hit me.”

“I doubt that, Master Tim.” Alfred handed him a feather duster. “Regardless of how it might seem, at his heart young Master Jason is not a violent boy.”

Interesting. It sounded like Alfred actually believed that, which went against everything Tim had learnt from researching Jason Todd online. Speaking of which…

“Is the Wi-Fi still on?”

Alfred raised an eyebrow, continuing to dust a particularly hideous vase.

“It is, but I would prefer if all of you would stay away from researching your older counterparts.”

“No, no, I’m on the same page.” Tim hastily explained himself. “I was alone in my apartment for a while before Mr Wayne found me, so I already know most of the history you’re trying to hide. I just wanted to make sure there was no way Jason could find out about his… you-know-what.”

Alfred grew pale, dropping the cloth he was using and turning away from Tim.
“It slipped my mind, but you’re right of course, Master Tim. I’ll disconnect the router immediately.”

“Cool.” Tim couldn’t help the small grin that spread across his face.

He could kind of understand why he became Robin. The thrill of secrets and conspiracies combined with having a team on your side was something he could get used to. It felt nice to be in on a plan like this.

“I’ll keep an eye on Jason until you or Damian come back.” he said. "I don’t think he’s interested in doing anything except reading right now, but I’ll let you know if he starts trying to snoop around.”

“Thank you, Master Tim.” The warmth in Alfred’s voice surprised him. “As always, we are lucky to have you.”

Alfred left to turn off the internet, but Tim remained standing there for a few seconds longer. The words *lucky to have you* kept replaying themselves in his mind.

Was it true? Did Alfred really mean that? His parents always said they were lucky to have such a wonderful son, but even though he smiled at their praise it had been a long time since he believed them. He knew that they loved him, but he also knew that they would rather spend all their time working instead of having to come home for Christmas and take him with them during summer. Tim had weighed all the pros and cons of him being born (Pro number one: a son who they love and can be proud of. Con number one: Less time for the work that they’re more passionate about) and the end result had shown that they would have been better off without him.

But Alfred had sounded so genuine, like having Tim around was something amazing. Tim honestly didn’t know what to make of that.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts, then focused back in on his mission. Whether this world was his or not, the older Tim had built something good here, and he would not ruin it for his future self by being a burden on this family.

When Damian and Dick returned, the room was silent. Jason sat on one couch reading, and Tim sat on the other shuffling cards. Both of them looked up and smiled when the other boys entered, and Damian was once again struck by how much light there was in Jason’s expression. There was no darkness behind his eyes, no scowl or moody glare. He looked as innocent and carefree as Tim did, which is to say, not quite as innocent and carefree as the average ten-year-old, but a whole lot better than their future selves.

“Sorry I took so long.” Dick said sheepishly. “Got lost on my way to the bathroom.”

No one called him out on his blatant lie, and Damian allowed himself to relax fractionally. He sat down on the couch next to Tim, and watched as Dick flopped down next to Jason and poked his cheek.

“Where are you now?”

“They’re finally leaving the Shire.”

“Ha! Took them long enough.”

Jason smiled in agreement, and Damian noticed Tim’s confused expression. He wondered what that was about, then promptly decided that he didn’t care. Group dynamics between children were of no interest to him, and if Tim had a problem then Damian would let him open up about it when he was
The sound of voices and footsteps came from down the hall, but to Damian’s surprise it was Stephanie, not Alfred, who walked in. He could see the tension in the way she walked, which meant that there had probably been yet another conflict between her and Batman.

“Brown, why hasn’t Father kicked you out yet? Judging by your angry expression I assume your half-baked plan failed.”

“Love you too Dami.” She rolled her eyes. “And he tried, but as long as Alfred doesn’t tell me to leave then he can go fuuuu…ind a better personality.”

“Excellent save.” Damian snarked. “I’m sure none of these impressionable children understood what you were going to say.”

“Yeah yeah.” She held up a phone that Damian knew wasn’t hers due to all the times she tormented him with ‘selfies’. “Hey Jason, smile.”


“Bruce snagged your phone from your apartment before he found you, and apparently your little sidekick has been blowing it up trying to find out what happened to you. Alfred asked me to text her an explanation, but I figure a photo will go a long way in helping her understand.”

“I have a sidekick?” Jason whispered in awe.

“You go by Scarlet. Now smile.”

He gave her a big grin, and she snapped a picture.

“Great. Now hopefully she won’t storm the manor demanding custody of you.”

“What’s she like?” Jason asked curiously. “And why did I take her on as my sidekick?”

Damian’s grip on the sofa arm tightened. Brown ignored his warning glare.

“Well I don’t know her that well, but I think you saved her from some villain, and she decided that she wanted to be your protégé. And I think you kind of have your own Batman and Robin dynamic going on, except obviously you’re called Red Hood and Scarlet. I’ve actually never met her, but the others tell me that she looks up to you a lot.”

“Wow.” Jason sat back against the couch, and Damian could practically see his head spinning. “So, I… I kind of have a kid now?”

“Something like that, yeah. You’re definitely her mentor.” Stephanie smiled.

“Then why can’t she see me?” Jason looked agitated now. “She’s probably really worried and I don’t want her to be alone! Is she ok?”

And now Brown was looking at Damian for help. He rolled his eyes, but responded.

“She’s fine. Your older self had many safehouses and hidey holes for the both of you. I have no doubt that she’s keeping herself out of danger.”

“But wouldn’t she be safer here?”
“Well yes, but the thing is…” Damian looked at Brown, who shrugged helplessly. “Father… doesn’t know her that well, and he is ridiculously paranoid. Brown’s been around for years and you heard us talk about him kicking her out today.”

“Well with you all so vulnerable like this, he’d probably blow a gasket if anyone he didn’t call for got within ten feet of the manor.” Stephanie agreed. “Best thing to do is to let her know you’re safe and that you’ll be staying here until the whole thing blows over. You’ll see her soon enough once you’re no longer tiny.”

“Well can I at least text her?”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.” Stephanie said reluctantly. “I know it’s hard to accept, but the less you interact with this world the better, just in case.”

“When Father finishes dealing with our sister we’ll revisit the topic.” Damian offered.

Dick glared down at his feet at the mention of Bruce, but honestly Damian could only deal with one thing at a time, and Jason was looking more and more upset with every excuse they gave him.

“I don’t get it!” he cried. “Why is this dream world so weird? Why is my mom dead? Why was I Robin? Why is my hair white and why are my eyes green? Why do I have…”

He trailed off as Damian stood up. Damian ignored the stares he was receiving, his eyes focused intently on Jason’s hair.

“Jason, do you have a scar on your shoulder?”

“Uh…” Jason tugged at the jumper he was wearing, peeked down, and shook his head. “No?”

“Tim, do you have a scar on your chest?”

Tim stuck his face down his shirt, then popped back up and shook his head.

“Damian what-”

“Think Brown.” He snapped. “All marks made by weapons or sharp objects are gone, but do you remember any marks they got that were inflicted by magic?”

“What are you- Oh! His hair!”

“Exactly. Now help me figure this out.”

“Right, right, ok.” Stephanie stared at Tim, who looked incredibly confused.

After a few seconds she punched her hand, making all the kids jump.

“Got it! When I was Spoiler we fought some wannabe magician. Tim took a hit from an energy bolt that left him with a scar on his left shoulder.”

All eyes turned to Tim, who hesitantly pushed his shirt off his shoulder. Damian’s eyes zeroed in on the small yet visible mark.

“Tim.” He tried to keep his voice level. “Do you remember having a scar on your left shoulder before today?”

“No.” Tim shook his head. “But what-”
“I have to get down to the cave.” Damian looked at Stephanie, who was already walking towards the door. “But I need you to stay here with the children.”

“Hell no.” She shot back instantly.

“Batgirl.” That made her pause. “I promise that I won’t hurt Cassandra, but someone needs to distract Father before he makes everything worse.”

She hesitated, but it was clear to him that she understood why he was the better choice.

“Fine.” She sighed. “Go.”

“Wait!” Jason yelled. “What’s going on? Why is there a white streak in my hair? What does it mean?”

“When you were recovering from the Joker’s attack you were placed in magic healing water.” Stephanie explained. “That’s what gave you the hair and the eyes. We’ve just realised that while all your normal injuries are gone, the effects magic had on your older selves have been carried back with you.”

“Oh.” Jason sat back, taking in the latest revelation about his future.

“So why is Damian going down to the cave?” Dick asked.

“Because we’ve been looking at the Cass problem all wrong.”

Damian took that as his cue to leave, but he couldn’t help but smirk at the last bit of conversation he heard.

“So you guys have a lot of questions right? Well why don’t we just go into the study and Batman can answer them right now?”

“Really? But I thought he was busy?”

“Nah, Damian’s on top of it now. C’mon Jason, we can ask about your sidekick. And Dick I bet you have a ton of stuff you want to ask him, don’t you?”

Damian almost felt sorry for his father. But honestly Batman couldn’t keep avoiding his former Robins curiosity, and it did provide Damian with the perfect distraction. He would have to trust that Oracle and Batgirl would be enough to stop the situation from exploding.

Because right now, Damian needed to have a talk with his sister.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bruce is confronted by the former Robins, and Damian tests his theory.
The Honest

Chapter Summary

(Just want to give a quick thanks to everyone who comments on this story. Reading your thoughts on this is the most amazing feeling and it really makes my day.)
In this chapter: Bruce does some reluctant introspection, while Damian talks with two former Batgirls.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce didn’t regret the high security he put on the batcave. Prying open the reinforced steel doors with his hands was proving impossible, which meant they were working just as he had designed them to. It just so happened that in this specific case he needed them to let him down without authorised access, since the control panel had been completely smashed by Cass. If Barbara didn’t return shortly, he’d have to use one of the hidden entrances set up around the manor.

He heard footsteps behind him, and as much as he wanted it to be someone sent by Barbara with a crowbar, he had a feeling that his visitors were not here to help.

Sure enough, he turned around to see Stephanie Brown grinning with vindictive cheerfulness at him, three boys trailing behind her. He glared at her, pushing his cowl off and letting some of his anger seep out into his expression.

“What is this?” he growled. “First you give Cassandra an opportunity to force us all out of the cave, now not only are you distracting me from getting down to her, but you’ve dragged these innocent children into it? Is hurting me really that important to you? More important than Cassandra?”

Her grin had remained smug up until that last sentence, then it turned into a familiar angry scowl.

“What is this?” he growled. “First you give Cassandra an opportunity to force us all out of the cave, now not only are you distracting me from getting down to her, but you’ve dragged these innocent children into it? Is hurting me really that important to you? More important than Cassandra?”

Her grin had remained smug up until that last sentence, then it turned into a familiar angry scowl.

“Bruce you moron, I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m trying to force you into communicating with your kids before you ruin everything!” She stepped forward, and the boys followed her. “I’m pretty sure two of them already think you hate them so for God’s sake would you please talk to these boys for a minute or two? You just referred to them as innocent children but they’re more than that! They’re your sons!”

He took a deep breath. Much as he wanted to dismiss Stephanie’s words, the rage in her voice was the kind he’d seen her use right before she slammed a mob boss through a wall. It was the same brand of justice-fuelled righteous anger that he himself used while fighting crime, and if she was yelling at him like that it meant she was serious.

He knew that while his own relationship with Stephanie was complicated and strained by the weight of his past mistakes, she did love Cassandra. She wouldn’t be forcing this conversation unless she somehow thought that Cass was safe, which meant that she currently knew something that he did not. Bruce needed that information, but he had a feeling she wouldn’t give it up easily.

“Boys can you step outside for a second? I’d like to talk to Stephanie alone.”
The fact that they all looked to Stephanie for permission before leaving was the first sign that perhaps she had a point. Even once she nodded, Dick still hesitated, squinting suspiciously at Bruce.

“And then you’ll talk to us, won’t you?”

“Yes Dick.” For the first time since he’d rescued Dick from Bludhaven he stared straight into the eyes of his eldest son. “I promise that I’ll talk to you.”

Dick nodded, and let Jason tug him out of the room. The door closed, leaving him alone with Stephanie.

He really did not want to have this conversation right now. But Stephanie had long since stopped caring about what he wanted, and he had to admit that she had every right to do so. If he wanted to know why she was distracting him from Cassie, he had to play along.

“All right then Bruce.” He was surprised at how soft her voice was. “What’s going on with you? Putting Cass in a cage, shoving your sons off onto Damian, why are you shutting all your kids out? What good does distancing yourself do, other than hurt them?”

“It does the opposite of hurting them. It keeps them safe!” he snapped.

She raised an eyebrow, and sat back into his office chair.

“Boy, I can’t wait to hear your reasoning for this one.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Believe me, if your cold attitude wasn’t hurting these kids I would gladly let you stew, but it is. And sadly, Alfred is busy making food for the kids and Babs will probably wait until later to confront you.” Her gaze hardened. “So, you’re stuck with me.”

He sighed, glancing at the door in the faint hope that Barbara would arrive with the crowbar.

She didn’t.

“I love my kids.” He began reluctantly. “I love them so very much. But right now, they are all young and vulnerable, and that terrifies me.”

He looked at her hopefully, but her flat stare was a clear indication that she expected more. He frowned, but continued.

“It can’t. I can’t allow myself to be terrified, because then I’ll let my emotions cloud my judgement and make a mistake that could get them all seriously injured or worse. I won’t lose another child, not like this.”

“So, what’s your solution? Shutting down all your emotions? Because that’s not working out real well for you.”

Her sarcasm made him want to snap back, but he controlled himself. Lashing out was beneath him, and getting angry again wouldn’t be constructive in the slightest.

“I have to suppress my emotions. If I think with my heart instead of my head, then I leave myself open to more mistakes, and that puts the children in danger. The truth is that I’m too attached to this situation, and if I don’t shut down then I run the risk of letting my emotions rule me.”

Stephanie hummed thoughtfully, swinging her feet up onto his desk. He gritted his teeth, but allowed
“I get it. Sort of. I mean, your logic is twisted but I can see how it would make sense in your mind. There’s just one small problem, B-man.” Her smile was shockingly sympathetic. “You’re not actually suppressing your emotions. You just think you are.”

Out of all the things he expected her to say, that was not one of them. He couldn’t help but scoff, an instinctive reaction to someone trying to tell him how his mind worked.

“I didn’t realise you were a trained psychologist, Stephanie. How exactly did you arrive at that conclusion? Because I’m fairly certain that if I was following my heart my daughter wouldn’t have been locked in a cage and I would have taken time off guarding her to talk with my sons, however impractical both those scenarios would be.”

“That’s the thing!” Stephanie exclaimed, standing up so that she was face to face with him. “All you’re doing is the exact opposite of what your heart tells you! If you were really thinking with only pure logic then you would have included a lot of factors you ignored, say for example: your de-aged kids’ feelings. But instead you’re scared your own feelings might be impractical so when they tell you to go left you swerve right! You tell me you’re not letting fear rule you but all I see is you doing exactly that!”

Bruce opened his mouth to debunk her theory, then closed it again.

He mulled it over. His heart had hurt locking Cass up, and so that had reassured him that he was doing the right thing. But she had escaped easily, and if he had really thought with a clear head he should have realized early on that he would need more than a cage to stop her. He avoided the boys because his heart hurt seeing their scared and confused faces, and while his instinct was to comfort them, logic said otherwise.

But did it really?

He took a breath, trying to force himself into an objective frame of mind. Maybe Stephanie was right. Maybe he was compromised, and had only been deluding himself into thinking otherwise. He should talk to Alfred, get a neutral opinion on the whole thing, but with Cass still running free did he even have time for that?

“What do you suggest I do?” he said stiffly.

“Talk to the boys.” She replied instantly. “Let Damian handle Cass.”

“Damian.” Bruce’s eyes widened. “Why wasn’t he with the other boys? What-”

“Trust us.” Stephanie insisted. “For once, just step back and allow yourself to believe in him. We have a theory.”

“A theory.” Bruce repeated flatly. “I don’t suppose you’ll let me in on your scheme?”

“If we do will you immediately rush off to stop it without giving our idea the consideration it deserves?”

“Possibly.”

“Then no.”

“So you want me to blindly trust that Damian can handle Cassie, and that you know what’s best for
“Well on the first point he is a former child assassin, just like her. And for the second point, I’m pretty sure everyone in this manor has a better idea about what’s best for you than you do.”

“I’ll acknowledge your first point but you’re wrong about the second.”

“I’ll take it.” Steph strode over to the door. “Kids get in here! Your dad is finally ready to admit he’s not a robot!”

The sound of eager feet stomping along the carpet sent a shiver down Bruce’s spine, but it was too late to back out now. The boys, no, his boys deserved an honest conversation with their father at a time when they weren’t immediately in danger. He still felt uncomfortable leaving Cass in Damian’s hands, but he was willing to admit that he no longer trusted himself to choose the best course of action.

So instead he was listening to Stephanie Brown. He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that, but he did know that it would make his daughter happy once she got her memories back, and maybe that was enough for now.

They walked in, Dick first and Tim last. His mind was still down in the cave worrying about Cassandra, but he forced himself to look at all of them directly and smile. None of them looked scared, so he assumed that with the cowl off, it was far less unsettling.

“Stephanie tells me that you have some questions.”

There was silence for a few seconds. He expected Dick to be the one to break it, but instead Jason stepped forward.

“Uh, Mr Wayne? Mr Batman?”

“Please kiddo,” he smiled softly down at the boy “Just call me Bruce.”

“Ok, Bruce.” Jason took a breath. “Damian tells us that we were all Robins, which is one of the strangest things about this dream but it’s also one of the coolest, and I couldn’t stop wondering: Which of us was your favourite Robin?”

Well. This was starting off easy.

Damian almost made it out of the manor without getting caught. He was right at the main entrance when he heard the sound of a throat clearing behind him.

He whirled around, and relaxed a little when he saw it wasn’t Alfred.

“Gordon.”

“Damian.” Barbara smiled knowingly at him. “Off to look at the old well?”

He weighed his options for all of two seconds before deciding on the truth. She had a crowbar resting on her lap, and he was in civilian clothes. Regardless of whether he won, a fight would be foolish when he could just explain himself.

“Brown and I discovered something important. We have reason to believe that Cassandra’s ability to understand spoken language has not been reduced to the level it was at nine years ago. I’m not saying she’s fluent in English, just that she understands more than we thought.”
“Interesting.” He could tell Barbara was analysing him, looking for any indication that he was lying. “And how exactly did you come to this conclusion?”

“I thought Oracle was supposed to be one of the world’s greatest minds? Surely you can figure it out yourself.”

Her eyes narrowed, but Damian could see that she was thinking back. It took less than five seconds for her eidetic memory to give her an answer.

“Jason.”

Damian tried not to seem impressed. He had a feeling it showed anyway.

“Correct. We checked with Tim to be certain. His physical wounds were gone, but the scar he got from a magician’s energy bolt is still there.”

“It’s a solid hypothesis.” Barbara admitted. “Cass’s ability to understand words was given to her by magical means. But when that psychic altered Cass’s mind, she had already been living in Gotham and working with us for quite a while. Who’s to say that the effect was carried back exactly the same? What if this version of Cass can only understand Cantonese?”

“I read through Father’s files before I met Cassandra for the first time. No one can explain how exactly that psychic altered her mind.” Damian admitted. “But I’m willing to bet that I can communicate with her in words, be it English, Cantonese, Mandarin or even Arabic.”

“And if those languages fail you?”

“Then I still have French, Russian and Urdu, as well as a multitude of other languages I can communicate in despite not being completely fluent.”

Barbara smirked, twirling the crowbar back and forth in her hands.

“You know, it’s been a while since I took a proper look around the manor. Maybe I’ll take the scenic route back to Bruce’s study.”

“Good idea, take your time.” Damian mirrored her smirk. “I’m sure Father is currently being thoroughly distracted by the former Robins.”

“All four of them?” Barbara laughed. “I almost feel bad for him. I saw how Dick and Tim were dragging you around the cave earlier.”

“Yes well, Batman can handle them. Probably.” Damian shrugged.

“Are you sure you don’t want to just explain this to him?”

“If I told him about this he’d insist on going down himself, despite already souring Cassandra’s opinion of him by kidnapping her. Unlike the both of you, I’m a new face, which means I have a better chance of gaining her trust.”

“Fair enough.”

Damian gave a quiet sigh of relief as Barbara waved him off, wheeling herself in the opposite direction to the study. He sprinted out the front door before anyone else saw him, running through the manor grounds until he reached the dry well. Hauling open the lid, he quickly jumped in. The drop was long, so he kicked off the walls to reduce his own speed on the way down. Once he
reached the bottom, Damian typed in the passcode to the keypad disguised as bricks, and the floor opened up.

This time he landed almost immediately, absorbing most of the impact with his knees. The passage was damp, dark, and silent, the only sound being a faint whirr as the floor above him closed up again. Damian walked carefully to the cave. His footsteps sounded silent to his own ears, but he couldn’t rule out the possibility that his sister could hear him coming.

He reached the steps leading down to the cave without any resistance. Stepping out into the dim light of the cave immediately exposed him, but he had to remind himself that he wasn’t trying to hide from her. If his body language wasn’t open and honest, she would likely knock him unconscious without giving him a chance to explain.

Damian walked calmly into the centre of the cave’s top floor. His eyes were inadvertently drawn to the weapons locker, which looked untouched. He resisted the temptation to raid it.

Damian missed his sword.

When he was a few steps away from the batmobile, he stopped walking, and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. A snarling blur slammed into him, knocking him onto his back. If he hadn’t forced himself not to tense up, Damian would have been very winded. As it was, he could still talk, and raised his hands above his head to show he wasn’t a threat.

Cassandra glared down at him and grabbed his hands, pinning them to the ground with her left hand. In her right hand she had a rock that had been sharpened into a functional shiv. She shifted her weight in a way that was barely noticeable, but enough that Damian understood. He was not to get up unless she let him.

“Hello.” he said. “My name is Damian. You’re Cassandra, correct?”

She frowned down at him. He swallowed and tried to ignore the sharp rock in her hand that was pointing at his left eye.

“My apologies. I forgot that Gordon has yet to name you. This must be very confusing for you.”

Her expression didn’t change. He forced himself to keep his own face blank.

*Less words. Keep it simple.*

“Sorry. I should have used easier words. Is this ok?”

Her frown turned into a glare. For the first time ever, Damian wished his tone while speaking English wasn’t so naturally sarcastic. He thought of how Father or Brown comforted traumatized children, and tried to channel their attitude.

“I know that this is all very scary. And I know that you have no reason to trust me. But I want to help. Will you let me help?”

She shook her head, and for a second Damian felt frustrated, but then it hit him.

“You can understand me.”

She hesitated, then nodded.

“That’s good.” He said, as softly as he could. “It must be hard, waking up with all those words in
your head. Very loud.”

She nodded again.

“I know you’re confused. If you want I can explain. You don’t have to trust me, or believe me, but it’ll give you a reason as to why this happened.”

She squinted down at him, and he couldn’t tell if she was reading his body language or trying to decipher what his words meant. Either way, in the end she shifted her weight again, moving barely an inch, but easing the pressure a little on Damian’s chest. Even if he couldn’t see her face, he would have been able to understand what she was trying to say:

Go on. I’m listening.

Damian smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bruce starts opening up to his three oldest sons. Damian continues his attempt to convince Cass he doesn’t deserve to be knocked unconscious.
The Doubtful

Chapter Summary

Bruce isn’t great at emotional talks, but he’ll try anyway. Meanwhile Damian continues to gain Cass’s trust.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Which of us was your favourite Robin?”

The first thing Bruce noticed was the different reactions each of his sons had to that question. Jason, the instigator, held nothing but detached curiosity in his eyes. It was starting to worry Bruce how little he seemed to care about any of this, but he didn’t know how to make the boy understand that this was all real.

Tim looked calm, but Bruce could see the way he curled in on himself a little, preparing for rejection. It was obvious that he didn’t think the answer would be him. Bruce wasn’t quite sure how to deal with that reaction either, but at least low self-esteem was something he could research in the parenting books he had, unlike Jason’s denial of reality.

As for Dick, Bruce could tell that he was scared. The young Robin was nowhere near as adept at concealing his emotions as his older counterpart, and the dread was plain to see on his face. He was scared that the answer was going to be one of his brothers, and unlike Tim that was not an answer he was willing to accept. Bruce could understand why Dick would feel that way, but he also knew that he couldn’t say Dick was his favourite. The boy had too good a heart to be satisfied with favouritism, nor would he be comfortable with a bland ‘I love you all equally’ response. It was a lose-lose situation for Bruce.

He sighed, and went for the one answer none of them would expect.

“Stephanie.”

Three sets of wide eyes stared up at him, while behind them Stephanie gave a bitter laugh. Dick whirled around to glare at her suspiciously.

“Why are you laughing? Is this another one of your inside jokes?”

“Yep. Sure is.” She laughed again, but when Jason turned to look at her too she sobered up and explained. “I’m Bruce’s least favourite Robin. That’s the joke. Out of all the choices he could have answered with it’s the only one where I can say for sure that he’s lying.”

“What?” Dick whirled around again to face Bruce. “Why would she say that? Why do you have a least favourite Robin? That’s not ok!”

“I never said I had a least favourite.” Bruce replied calmly “In fact, I said the opposite, although I will admit that was a lie. The truth is that you all have your flaws and your virtues, and I can’t pick one as my favourite because I love you all.”
“Except for Steph apparently.” Jason chimed in.

“I love Stephanie too. I said her name because she was the one answer you weren’t going to predict.”

He stared imploringly at her as he spoke, and she rolled her eyes but didn’t protest, which was all he could have hoped for, really.

“Now, I think that rather than throwing out big questions that only create conflict and hurt feelings, I’ll talk to you all individually. I’m sure you all have your own questions and fears, and I’d be happy to address them now that Damian is apparently going to handle your sister.”

That actually made Stephanie give him a genuine smile. She nodded at him and held out her hands for Jason and Tim to hold.

“That sounds like a good idea. How about we do this alphabetically?” She suggested. “You guys ok with Dick going first?”

They both nodded, and let her pull them out of the study and towards the lounge.

That left Bruce alone with his eldest son, and now he was able to give his full attention to how unhappy Dick looked. It wasn’t just anger and hurt, there were more emotions flickering across his face than Bruce could recognize.

He gestured to the sofa that was right next to the door, and dragged his office chair over so that he would be sitting directly in front of Dick.

“Is this alright? Or would you prefer to sit somewhere else?”

Dick just shrugged, sullenly flopping down onto the couch.

Silence filled the room. Bruce wanted to wait until Dick decided to speak, but with two other boys to look after he didn’t have time for that.

“What’s on your mind Robin?”

He sat patiently, watching as Dick struggled to find a place to start.

“Robin.” Dick said at last. “About that. I talked to Damian and I see why he became Robin, but the others, are they… Do they really deserve to be Robin? Five Robins seems kind of, I dunno, too much? Why couldn’t they pick a different name or something?”

Of all the people to discuss the number of Robins with, Damian would have been tied last with Jason on Bruce’s list. It shouldn’t have surprised him that Damian would jump at the chance to plant doubt in Dick’s mind about the worthiness of the other Robins, but somehow Bruce still found himself disappointed. Still, he couldn’t focus on that right now. This was about reassuring Dick.

“I promise you Dick, it’s not what you think. I didn’t randomly pick Jason to replace you once you grew up. I didn’t even plan to have another Robin after you.”

He tried to make eye contact with Dick as he spoke, but the boy deliberately ducked his head and gave a half-hearted shrug of acceptance. That was nowhere near good enough, so Bruce continued talking.

“I know it’s hard for you to see it that way, because you’ve only been living with me for a few
months, but the truth is that I would have been happy keeping you as Robin forever. But you grew up and you chose to move on, as hard as that is to imagine right now. Thanks to you Robin is an inspiration to every child in Gotham, but Nightwing? Nightwing is everything I ever wanted Batman to be, everything I couldn’t achieve because of my own faults. Believe me Dick, you were not replaced or thrown away. You just grew up, and you grew up well.”

Bruce had never been comfortable giving emotional speeches, but when Dick visibly relaxed once Bruce finished, he knew he’d done the right thing.

“That’s… that’s good to hear.” Dick admitted. “I guess I was kind of scared that I failed you somehow, so you just threw me out and found a new kid. I mean, you barely even looked at me after we got back from Bludhaven, so I just… I didn’t know. I didn’t know if you still cared about me.”

His voice cracked as he finished talking. Dick was shaking a little now, and Bruce instinctively opened his arms, letting his son fling himself into a tight hug.

“I’m sorry I made you feel that way Dick.” He said, hugging the crying boy as warmly as he could. “I have always been so very proud of you, and that has never changed. I know this is all very unsettling for you, and I’m sorry that I ever made you doubt my love for you.”

Dick sat back, still sniffling a little. There was a smile on his face that eased the heaviness in Bruce’s heart.

“S’ok.” Dick mumbled. “It was dumb of me to think that you hated me just because one of the other kids needed you more. It’s just… I don’t know how to deal with the fact that I have all these siblings now.”

“That’s completely understandable. It’s not your fault that you felt the way you do. But if it helps, I know that in the future they all agree that you are the best big brother. In fact, I’m fairly certain that they come to you with their problems more often than they come to me.”

“Really?” Dick grinned at that. “I guess that’s pretty cool.”

“It’s one of the many reasons we’re all so lucky to have you.” Bruce said, smiling a little as Dick blushed. “And believe me, if my younger self came into the future like you did I would be just as shocked at the number of children living here. Not once did I ever think that I needed more than you, but life has a strange way of challenging my expectations.”

“Damian told me that Jason was the second kid you took in.” There barely any tension left in Dick’s words. “How did that happen? Damian said something about him being a homeless orphan, and that you tried to put him in a home but it turned out to be evil.”

“That’s… the short version.” Bruce admitted. “The home I put him in was corrupt, and once he helped me bring those running it to justice, I offered to adopt him. Even then I didn’t exactly plan on making him Robin, but in hindsight our first meeting involved him robbing the tires off the Batmobile, so I suppose I may have been subconsciously considering the possibility.”

“Jason tried to steal the tires off the Batmobile?” Dick gave a delighted laugh. “Forget what I said earlier, I see why he deserved to be Robin now. That takes a lot of guts.”

Bruce tried to hide his grimace, but when Dick’s face fell it was clear he hadn’t hidden it well enough.

“What? What’s wrong?”
Bruce hesitated. So far, being open and honest with Dick had worked well. His eldest son had always been the type to value those traits, but admitting some of his worst mistakes to a boy who had been terrified that Bruce hated him not five minutes ago… He wasn’t sure that was the best idea. On the other hand, Dick was too perceptive, always had been, so unless Bruce could spin an amazing lie, perhaps his best option was just to admit to Dick how much he’d failed his siblings. Dick might be furious with him, but he’d be even angrier if he caught Bruce lying.

“The truth is…” Bruce sighed. “The truth is that you weren’t wrong earlier. I meant what I said when I told you that I didn’t randomly pick the second Robin, nor did I carelessly hand the costume to your other brothers. But the truth is that while at the time I was convinced I had evaluated and trained them thoroughly enough, looking back on it it’s impossible for me not to acknowledge that I was wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

Dick was back to looking scared, and while Bruce wanted to hug him again he steeled himself to finish what he started. He couldn’t back out of the truth now, not if he wanted Dick to trust him.

“The truth is that while I never once regretted adopting Jason, I should have never allowed him or Stephanie to be Robin.”

“This is going to sound very strange, and I understand if you think I’m lying. But it is the truth and you deserve to hear it.”

Cass stared down at Damian, one eyebrow raised. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes in retaliation. This wasn’t the older sister he knew. She wouldn’t be amused at his attempt to out-sarcasm her.

“The truth is that you are in the future. The you that I know was almost twenty. You came to Gotham city when you were seventeen and made friends with my father and his associat- his team. You became a hero who helped others and fought bad people. You were working in Hong Kong when this spell hit you, turning you from nineteen years old to ten.”

Cass’s brows furrowed, and Damian watched silently as she struggled to speak.

“Hhhh… Hhhh…”

“Hero?”

Cass nodded.

“Someone who risks their life to save others. A good person.”

He didn’t flinch when the rock was stabbed down inches from his face, but it was close. Cass snarled at him and shook her head. Damian stared calmly back at her.

“You are good.” he said firmly. “You’re a hero, and everyone else but you could see it from the moment they met you. They never shut up about it to be honest, it made meeting you for the first time quite intimidating.”

She shook her head again, whipping it frantically back and forth. Damian decided it was best to move onto a different topic. He hadn’t been around for the worst of his sister’s self-hatred and death wish, and convincing people they shouldn’t hate themselves wasn’t really his forte anyway. In Damian’s opinion, most people were far too full of themselves considering how mediocre they truly were. Cassandra wasn’t one of those people, but that didn’t mean Damian knew how to explain her
worth to her.

“You were alone in Hong Kong for at least a day.” he said instead. “I know you have photos. I’m in at least one, yes?”

He was fairly certain Alfred or Brown had forced him to pose for a family photo at some point. Cassandra was the kind of person who would treasure her copy despite the large matching scowls on his and Drake’s faces.

“You saw your older self, and you’re reading my body language right now. You know I’m telling the truth.”

He could see how uncertain she felt. She knew he was right, but it was a lot for anyone to believe.

“If you want proof then check my phone.”

He tapped on the pocket of his brown slacks. Cassandra glared at him suspiciously, but in the end, she stuck her hand in and fished out his phone. She then proceeded to shake it vigorously and mash all the buttons, which almost made him smirk.

“You need to unlock it.” Damian explained. “If you let me I can do it. I swear this isn’t a trap, and there’s proof on there.”

Cass made a ‘puh’ sound with her mouth.

“Proof? Proof is how you know I’m telling the truth.”

Cautiously, she handed him the phone.

He unlocked it, then before she could stop him he tapped into his photos and then on the folder titled Cassandra. He quickly handed the phone back before she could snatch it.

Her eyes widened as she scrolled through the pictures. From where he was lying he couldn't see what she was looking at, but he knew what the first few pictures would be. There was one of the two of them hunched over a table working on a case with Dick. There was one that Stephanie had taken of the three of them after she stole his phone. He’d kicked her in the shins for that, but kept the picture. There was one of her on her own, and one of her and Damian making eye contact during a very boring gala. Tim had been proud of himself for getting their matching unimpressed faces on camera.

There were probably more that Damian was forgetting, but none of them were the proof he was talking about. When Cassandra paused her scrolling, and tapped on the screen, he allowed himself to smirk openly.

Music began blaring, as well as the sound of people talking. He could hear Brown, louder than the rest, cheering for Cass. She had taken the video months ago, and sent it to all the other Robins. It had somehow ended up on the internet, and even made the Gotham news as well as a few other celebrity rags.

The video in question was one taken outside a nightclub in Gotham. In it, Cass was singlehandedly taking on an entire street crew in a dance off. Both sides were just having fun, but you could hardly hear their laughter over Stephanie’s loud cheers.

“Go best friend that’s my best friend! Fuck it up Cass!”

The video came to an end, but Cass continued to stare at the screen, stunned. Clearly, she recognised
her own body language, belonging to a much older girl. Damian was relieved. Part of him had been worried that the way she moved had changed, but the video had obviously been enough to convince her.

“Your name is Cassandra,” he said calmly. “The woman you consider a mother gave you that name as well as her old mantle of Batgirl, and years later you gave that mantle to the girl screaming loudly in that video and became Black Bat. Your surname used to be Cain, after your father who raised you as a weapon. Thanks to you he went to jail. You were adopted by Bruce Wayne, also known as Batman. I’m his son, Damian Wayne.”

She stood up, and for a second Damian thought he’d messed it all up, but then she extended a hand down to him. He took it and let her pull him up.

“I know this is all a lot to take in. We can stay down here as long as you like and I can explain everything to you with these computers. I’m sure our father won’t be barging in here for a while.”

She pointed at him, and did a specific set of punches and kicks and chops that he recognized as a form uniquely taught by the League of Assassins. He was wondering when she would notice that.

“Yes.” he said. “I was raised by the League. But I changed, just like you did.”

He didn’t want to say why he’d changed. From what he’d been told Cassandra ran away the first time she ever killed someone. Damian killed plenty of people, and it was only because of Grayson that he ever chose to defy his mother. He wasn’t sure what Cassandra would think of him if she knew that.

He was fairly certain his family usually didn’t compare his past to his sister’s. It was better for them to ignore it, so they didn’t have to acknowledge what kind of person Damian truly was.

Thankfully, Cass seemed to understand that it was a sensitive topic. She just nodded, and made another set of gestures. Four fingers to the chest, a fist over the heart, and then all fingers laced together. A signal that League members used if they wanted to confirm that the person they were talking too was also from the League. But Damian could tell that wasn’t the context Cassandra was using it in. The code’s meaning didn’t have a direct English translation, however for a tourist phrasebook it could be simplified down to a single word.

_Brother._

He placed his left index finger against his right thumb, then tapped his middle finger against it, then wrapped his whole hand around his right thumb. The appropriate response to prove that you were indeed who you claimed to be.

_Sister._

Cassandra smiled, and then before Damian could blink she leapt towards him again. This time he stood his ground and caught her as she wrapped her arms around him. Damian hugged her back firmly, trying to make his body as comforting and reassuring as possible. He wasn’t sure that he was doing a good job until she let go and kissed his cheek.

“Um.” he said. “Right then. What else would you like to know?”

She pointed at herself.

“More about yourself? Like what?”
She pointed at herself again.

“Why you got de-aged?”

She nodded.

“Magic.”

She gave him a look, and this time he rolled his eyes.

“Fine, I'll explain it in more detail. But don’t complain if you can’t keep up.”

She rolled her eyes back at him, and stuck out her tounge.

Damian couldn’t even pretend to be annoyed about it.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bruce is prepared for Dick to be angry at him for his mistakes. He's not prepared for what Dick actually gets angry about.
Dick’s not a fan of victim-blaming. Bruce insists that’s not what he’s doing.

The room was silent for two seconds before Dick exploded.

“What are you talking about?” Dick leaned away from him. “Just five minutes ago you were telling me that you didn’t hand the Robin mantle around to any random kid and now you’re saying that two of them shouldn’t have been Robin? Why?”

“I meant what I said. I promise you that.” Bruce sighed. “But the truth is that while at the time, I believed that I had made the right decision, looking back it’s clear that I was wrong. Jason was a good kid, and we both loved him very much. I don’t regret adopting him and giving you a little brother, but I should have never let him fight crime with me.”

“Is it because Steph died and Jason got badly hurt?” Dick’s voice trembled. “Is that when you started thinking like this?”

Jason got badly hurt, was one way of putting it. Bruce wondered how exactly Damian and Stephanie had explained their history. He could have done without them knowing about Stephanie’s death but that wasn’t his call to make. Telling Jason about his death, on the other hand, was a responsibility that lay firmly in Bruce’s hands. He was relieved to hear that they’d kept it a secret.

“Yes.” Bruce admitted. “There were signs before that. Signs that they weren’t like you or Tim, that I should have told them to go home and stay out of the cave. But I ignored my own doubts, and they suffered because of my mistakes.”

“What about Damian and Cassandra?” Dick didn’t sound angry, just confused. “They died too! Why don’t you regret letting them fight?”

Damian died? Bruce didn’t understand why they had added that to the narrative, but luckily it fit in perfectly with his explanation on Cassandra.

“Damian and Cassandra were raised by assassins. I regret not being able to find them sooner, but the reality is that by the time they came to me they were too far gone into this world. Neither of them ever had a chance at an ordinary life, and unlike Jason and Stephanie there was nothing I could have done to change their path.”

“So, let me get this straight.” Now Dick sounded angry, and although Bruce’s heart sank he knew he deserved it. “How did Jason get hurt by the Joker? What exactly did he do that made him a bad Robin? Damian told me that the Joker lured him into a trap and he got hurt protecting innocent people. I don’t get why you’re blaming him for that?”

Bruce blinked, and slowly tried to follow his son’s logic. Where in any of his explanation did he blame Jason?
“I don’t blame Jason for getting hurt.” he said. “I blame myself for letting him go up against the Joker. The Joker should have never wanted to hurt Jason in the first place, and it was because of me that he considered the boy a target.”

“Because he was Robin, right?” Dick said slowly. “But then you went and got a new Robin, and that’s what I don’t get. If you really think Jason getting hurt was your fault, then why put another kid in the line of fire? Why are Tim and I ‘different’ from Jason and Steph? We were civilians too!”

Ah. Now he understood where Dick’s confusion was coming from.

“I didn’t want another Robin, Dick. That’s the truth. After Jason I was convinced that I was better off working alone, and when Tim came along it took a long time for me to accept him. You were part of the reason I agreed to let him be Robin, actually.”

“I still don’t get it.” Dick frowned. “Why did you agree to let Tim be Robin? Why did you know that he would be different from Jason? That he wouldn’t get hurt the same way?”

That… was a good question. Bruce was conscious of the time, but he couldn’t let Dick go without giving him as much of a full explanation as possible, even if it was hard to condense.

“I didn’t.” he admitted. “But the two of you agreed that Batman needed a Robin, and deep down I knew you were right. The training I gave Tim was much more difficult than the one I used for you and Jason, but eventually he proved himself capable. Even so, it was a long time before I stopped being terrified that I was going to lose another child.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Tim.” Bruce smiled. “He proved himself, time and time again. He showed me that he wasn’t Jason, that he wasn’t as reckless or as impulsive. Eventually I had to accept that it hadn’t been a mistake to make him Robin. This time, I’d made the right choice.”

He expected Dick to show some understanding, but instead the boy seemed more horrified than before. Bruce’s smile disappeared as quickly as it came.

“How did Jason get hurt?” Dick spoke calmly, but there was something hidden underneath his calm that Bruce couldn’t quite grasp. “Joker set a trap for him, right? What kind of trap was it?”

Bruce swallowed a sigh. He didn’t want to talk about it, but Dick’s eyes bored into him, bright blue light making Bruce feel as if his bare soul was on display.

“He went to Ethiopia looking for his birth mother. It turned out that the Joker was blackmailing her to fill supply trucks with lethal laughing gas. When Jason found out he tried to protect her, but she turned him over to the Joker, and he killed her and hurt him badly.”

“How bad?”

“He was in a coma.”

Dick seemed to buy the lie, but he didn’t look any less troubled.

“I still don’t understand. How does that make him a bad Robin? He was trying to protect someone, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, he was. His actions were noble, but what I’m trying to say is that he never should have been forced to take those actions in the first place. He should have been home safe at the manor, not
traipsing around Africa looking for a woman he didn’t even remember. Jason did the best he could, and what happened wasn’t his fault. It was mine for encouraging him to take the risks that he did.”

Bruce repressed a sigh when Dick shook his head.

“It doesn’t add up.” Dick said. “You’re saying that it’s not Jason’s fault that he got hurt, but in the next sentence you’re saying that he never should have been Robin, and that Tim was better than him. How is that not blaming him for what happened?”

This conversation was spiralling out of control. Bruce could see how he’d given Dick the wrong impression, but he struggled how to explain the truth to Dick without sounding insensitive.

“Because it’s the truth Dick. Jason has always been more reckless and headstrong than you or Tim. It’s who he is as a person, and that’s not his fault. It was my fault for ignoring how his personality endangered him, and letting him get into situations that he couldn’t handle.”

“Because Tim and I could?” Dick’s words were venomous now. “You’re telling me that if my mother turned out to be alive, I wouldn’t have done the exact same thing as Jason?”

Bruce looked straight into his son’s eyes.

“Yes.”

“You’re wrong!” Dick stood up, glaring down at Bruce. “I would have done exactly the same thing Jason did! Remember my very first outing as Robin? I went after the Joker on my own!”

“And you won!” Bruce snapped back. “Jason didn’t!”

“Because I got lucky! You said it yourself! I can’t… I can’t believe this is you.”

“Dick…” Bruce struggled to understand how this conversation got so out of hand. “Dick, you have to believe that every day I regret what happened to Jason and Stephanie. I love all these kids and what happened to them has haunted me for years.”

“But you still made Tim Robin.” Dick hissed. “You needed a Robin even though you knew it was wrong, so you convinced yourself that Tim was different. That he was better than Jason. Did you say it to Jason’s face when he woke up? That you made a mistake, that he didn’t deserve to be Robin and that you found someone better who wouldn’t mess up like he did? Did you tell him all that? Did he believe it, or did he realise that it was all lies that you were using to ease your guilty conscience? Did I believe you too?”

“Dick…”

“Is that why Stephanie hates you? Did you try to convince her that her death was her fault?”

“Stephanie was different.” Bruce said tiredly. “I didn’t give the decision to make her Robin the weight it deserved. In fact, unlike the others you didn’t even know she was Robin until after I fired her, because I know you would have disagreed with me. The truth is that Stephanie and I both made mistakes, and there were consequences for our actions. The majority of the blame lies on me, and you have every right to be angry at me for it.”

“No, it doesn’t!” Dick yelled. “The blame lies on whoever killed her! Just like the blame for Jason’s coma lies on the Joker! Why are you acting like it was Robin’s fault instead?”

“I’m not. You’re right of course that the obvious one to blame is the villain who hurt them, but you
have to look beyond that. There’s a reason the villain decided to go after them.”

“Yeah, because they’re evil! And we fight bad guys, that’s what we do! But instead of saying to Jason and Steph well done, I’m glad you’re ok, you’re telling me that you acted like it was their fault? Sorry you got hurt but you were just too impulsive. I never should have made you Robin but that’s ok because I found someone better.”

“I know it sounds bad.” Bruce struggled to keep his voice even. “But you have to understand that both Jason and Stephanie disobeyed my orders. I understand why they did what they did, but if they’d listened to me they wouldn’t have gotten hurt. But Dick, I’m not saying it’s their fault, I’m saying it’s mine for not anticipating their defiance.”

“That’s a lie.” Dick growled. “I disobeyed plenty of your orders, yet you keep harping on about how Tim and I are better than them. That’s the only way you can rationalize letting us be your sidekicks, isn’t it? What happened to Jason and Steph can’t just be because of the bad guys, because that would mean that any of us can get hurt the same way. If it’s not their fault that they got hurt, then you’re being selfish by putting Tim in the same danger just because you need a Robin. You have to blame them because otherwise you can’t justify Tim, and the worst part is you don’t even realise it!”

“That’s not…” Bruce felt like the ground had been swept out from beneath him. “Dick, please, you have to understand…”

“No!” Dick strode over to the door and tugged it open. “I can’t believe I actually trusted you! I knew there was something off about you from the moment we met, but you still managed to convince me that this was my future. I know better now. You’re not my Batman.”

Bruce’s hands clenched into fists, but he forced himself to keep his voice level.

“You haven’t been living with me for very long Dick. The things that happen in the future, the person I become… I’m not your Batman, but one day I will be.”

“You won’t!” Dick shook his head violently. “Once I get back home, I’ll do everything I can to stop Batman from becoming you. Even if Jason still gets hurt and Stephanie still dies, I won’t let you blame them! If they really are future Robins, then I’ll make sure you don’t hurt them like you did in this timeline!”

Bruce let him leave, angry footsteps stomping down the hall, making noise even on the carpet. He stood up and peeked his head out the door just in time to catch Dick flinging his arms around Stephanie.

“Don’t listen to him.” The boy muttered fiercely. “You were a great Robin!”

“Uh…” Steph patted his head. “Thank you?”

A noise behind him made Bruce turn. Barbara stood in the hallway, crowbar in hand and one eyebrow raised.

“You took your time.” Bruce grumbled.

“I see that went well.” She nodded to where Dick was slumped on the couch, glaring at the coffee table. “Want to try and do better with Jason or head down to Cass?”

Bruce narrowed his eyes at her. Barbara stared back calmly.

“What do you know about Cass?”
“Damian texted Steph two minutes ago.” She replied. “A thumbs-up emoji. She’s secure for now.”

“Good.” Bruce let himself relax a little. “I don’t know how he did it but if you’re all so certain that he’s safe with her, I’ll talk to Jason now.”

“Fine.” Barbara went to wheel past him.

“One last thing.” She paused and he let his voice get deeper. “I talked to Stephanie and I understand why she believes I’m not thinking clearly, but I still don’t appreciate being kept in the dark. When this is over I expect a full explanation as to why you, Stephanie and Damian felt the need to keep me out of the loop regarding your plan to help Cassie.”

“Bruce.” Barbara rolled her eyes. “I only know about this because I ran into Damian on his way down to the cave. He was perfectly comfortable explaining his plan to me, but asked me to keep it a secret from you. Maybe you should think about why he felt the need to do that, then get back to me about an explanation.”

She wheeled herself down the hall to the kids, and Bruce fought down the temptation to rest his head against the wall. This wasn’t the first time his kids had gotten de-aged, but with so many of them at once he’d never felt so off balance and overwhelmed by it. It was like he was juggling eggs, only the eggs kept defying physics and jumping off course, and so he dropped them.

Even his analogies were all over the place today.

“Jason.” He called down the hall. “Whenever you’re ready come in.”

He lingered at the door to his study, hidden from view but still within hearing range.

“Are you sure you’re ok with me going?” Jason said. “You seem like you were in the middle of something big.”

“It’s ok, you can go if you want.” That was Dick. “I wouldn’t bother though. He’s not the real Batman.”

“Not you too.” Stephanie groaned.

“I already knew that.” Jason said at the same time. “But what made you realise this was fake?”

“I don’t think this is fake, just the future of an alternate reality. A bad one.”

“Well I guess that’s better than complete denial.” Barbara muttered.

“Hey! I’m open to alternate reality theories!” Jason protested. “You know what? I’m gonna go talk to him and figure out for myself if this is all a dream or a different reality or whatever.”

“Suit yourself.” Dick said. “Just remember, whatever he tells you about your future isn’t real ok? And he’s not the real Batman, in fact he might be evil. I’m still not sure about that.”

“He’s not evil.” Stephanie sighed. “Would be nice if everyone could be sorted into good and evil boxes, but sadly he’s just a regular a-”

“Language.” Barbara cut across her smoothly. “I think what Stephanie is trying to say is that while Batman is a larger than life myth, Bruce is very human, so don’t consider what he tells you to be the absolute truth, because he’s just as biased as the rest of us.”

“That’s a nicer way than I would have put it, but yeah basically what she said.”
Bruce huffed out a frustrated breath. What was the point of insisting he talk to the kids if they were just going to tell them that his words were worthless?

He could admit that he dealt with Dick badly. He should have lied better, not brought up Jason and Stephanie at all. It had been too easy to forget that this wasn’t his Dick Grayson. The boy was young, innocent and naïve, and had yet to experience all of the traumas that had shaped both his and Batman’s future. Of course he wouldn’t understand why Bruce regretted making Jason and Stephanie Robin, he was barely coming to terms with the idea of having more than one Robin.

As Jason knocked timidly at the door, Bruce forced himself to push his feelings on Dick to the side. Right now, he had to try and figure out how to handle his second son.

“Come in.” he called.

Bruce couldn’t help but stare when Jason entered. There was a worrying mixture of wonder and apathy in the boy’s eyes as he stared at the various decorations and books scattered around the study. Part of Bruce filed that away to worry about later, but the majority of his brain was busy drinking in the sight of his son, alive and well and as scrappy and hopeful as the day they met.

When Jason sat down in front of him, with the same nervous posture he’d had the first time Bruce had brought him back to the manor, Bruce made his decision there and then.

He would do everything in his power to ensure that Jason would not find out about his death.

“So,” the soft smile appeared easily on his face. “Tell me lad, what’s on your mind?”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bruce and Jason talk. One is determined to lie, the other is determined not to believe him anyway.
The Unstable

Chapter Summary

Bruce talks to Jason. Cass tries to talk to Damian.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The way Jason perched on the couch was heartbreakingly familiar to Bruce. He was more defensive now, his face harder, but it still reminded him of the boy’s early Robin days, when he tiptoed around the manor, scared to touch anything in case he broke it.

Bruce remembered the day he’d found Jason curled up in a ball crying, an antique vase worth millions of dollars lying broken at his feet. The poor boy had been convinced Bruce would kick him back out onto the streets, but Bruce just sat next to him and held him tightly while he cried. He had reassured Jason over and over again that he wasn’t angry, that accidents happen, and that he never really liked that vase anyway. Jason hadn’t stopped crying until Bruce had carried him to bed, and when Jason woke up in the manor the next day with Alfred handing him a tray of pancakes, it finally seemed to click in the child’s mind that Bruce had no intention of disowning him.

Jason had relaxed a little after that, less afraid of running through the halls or practicing his acrobatics on the banisters. Despite the stress it gave Alfred, Bruce had secretly been delighted. Jason was never as eager to swing from the chandeliers as Dick had been, but it was clear that he had started to consider the manor his home.

Years later, and now the same boy sat nervously in front of him, younger than he’d been when Bruce adopted him. They were back to square one, and Bruce shouldn’t be so happy about that. After everything that happened he didn’t deserve the joy of seeing a young Jason so innocent and alive.

_It’s not really him. It’s just a spell. He has temporary amnesia, that’s all._

None of that changed the fact that Bruce hadn’t stopped smiling since Jason sat down.

Even though Jason wasn’t smiling back.

“So, Bruce Wayne is Batman and I’m his Robin in the future huh? Pretty cool dream, except for my mom being dead.”

Ah. This again. Bruce’s smile faltered.

“Jason.” Bruce said gently. “Why won’t you try and treat this like it’s real? I know it hurts, but I’m worried that your denial could hurt you more.”

“How?” Jason snapped. “How could it possibly hurt me _less_ to believe that my mom overdosed, that she didn’t love me enough to stay clean? Why should I accept any of this?”

“Because regardless of whether you believe or not, right now you’re living in this reality. And if something dangerous happens to you, I’m scared that you won’t take the risk seriously.”
Jason stared at him. Bruce had a feeling that he was being analysed, but what Jason was learning he couldn’t tell.

“What the Joker did to me…” Jason asked quietly. “How bad was it?”

Clever child. Bruce should have expected this question to come up so early.

“You were in a coma.” The prepared lie fell easily off Bruce’s tongue. “And I was terrified that you weren’t going to wake up. For a while I truly believed that… that I’d lost you forever.”

Jason was looking at him wide-eyed, and Bruce felt the words rush out of his mouth before he could think them through.

“I need you to take this seriously Jason. I can’t lose you again, I can’t. Please don’t think you’re invincible, because regardless of whether this is all a dream it’s real to me, and I won’t be able to… to survive losing you again.”

The room was silent, after that.

Jason shifted forward on the couch, looking more uncomfortable than he had in the beginning. At this point, the Bruce’s smile was completely gone.

“Look I…” he sighed. “I’m taking this seriously ok? Even though this is all a dream I don’t want to risk it being the work of some superpowered Arkham escapee. I know that if I die in the dream there’s a chance I won’t wake up, so don’t worry about me. It’s just, I don’t know, it’s all too weird to be my actual future.”

Bruce studied Jason closely. He noted the way he nervously tapped the seat and chewed on his lip, the way his nose twitched and his eyes stared into the middle distance. He didn’t like it.

“Jason, why are you so sure this is a dream? Why not an alternate reality or some elaborate set with actors? Why are you so certain that none of this is real?”

Jason gave a little shrug, shrinking back against the couch. His eyes never fully focused on Bruce.

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t feel real.”

There was a sinking feeling in Bruce’s stomach again, but he kept his outward appearance calm and supportive.


Dammit. Nicknames weren’t appropriate right now, and would only confuse the boy further.

“It just doesn’t.” Jason repeated.

And then everything came spilling out.

“Nothing’s normal.” Jason said angrily. “I know how I’m meant to feel, but after waking up here it’s like I’m seeing everything through a lens, or a foggy glass or something. My eyes feel different, I’m not hungry, I banged my elbow yesterday and barely felt it. It kind of feels like I’m floating, and then sometimes it’s like my body remembers that it’s supposed to be feeling things, so suddenly everything hits me. I smell the air, hear the clocks ticking like they’re right next to me, taste the dryness in my mouth. And then it’s gone, and I’m back to feeling like I’ve taken a dip into my mom’s medicine cabinet again. It feels like I’m in a really vivid and long drug induced hallucination,
not that I’m actually awake. Sometimes…”

He hesitated. Bruce leant forward, and placed his hand comfortingly on Jason’s knee.

“Go on.” he said, trying not to sound as worried as he felt.

“Sometimes I forget to breathe, and it feels right?”

The sinking feeling worsened. Bruce struggled to keep his horror off his face.

“And I don’t get it, because I’ve spent my whole life fighting to stay alive but now it’s like there’s this voice whispering in the back of my head, telling me that I’d be better off dead and it makes no sense! It’s not like I’m suffering in this dream so why is my brain trying to tempt me into jumping out the second-floor window? It has to be an evil dream, and that means that even though you’re being nice, you’re a part of it too!”

Jason had gone from angry to confused then back to angry by the time he finished talking, and he glared up at Bruce with the same suspicion he’d had back in the apartment. Bruce didn’t let it get to him. Right now, Jason’s mental wellbeing came before Bruce’s feelings.

“That’s fair enough.”

“It is?” And now Jason was back to confusion.

“It is.” Bruce agreed. “However, I have an explanation for why you feel this way. When you were recovering from your coma, you were placed in special healing waters called a Lazarus Pit.”

“The same thing that brought Cassandra and Damian back from the dead?”

“Yes.” Bruce said, once again hoping that he hadn’t made a mistake and changed the story Damian had told. “And that water has some nasty side effects. I’m glad you told me how you’re feeling, because the safety of you and your siblings is my number one priority, and it’s good that I now know your mind isn’t completely stable.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Confusion turned to fear. “Did this water make me crazy or something? Am I insane right now?”

“The Lazarus Pits do tend to cause insanity, but it is temporary and can be fought. I won’t lie, the trauma you endured did affect you greatly, but you were in the process of recovery before you got turned into a child. I believe that what you’re experiencing is some lingering effects of the mental trauma you endured, but you’re not insane right now Jason. You’re just a little compromised.”

“Compromised?”

“Yes. And can I let you in on a secret?” Bruce leaned forward. “I’m emotionally compromised too.”

“What?” Jason gasped.

Bruce nodded calmly.

“I didn’t want to admit it, but having you all turned into young, vulnerable children has left me terrified.”

“But you’re-”

“Batman? I know, and that’s why I didn’t want to believe it. I’m supposed to be calm and controlled,
always two steps ahead, but looking back at my actions over the past few days it’s clear that I’m spiralling. All of you scattered in different cities, defenceless and clueless against all the evil that would love to take advantage of your condition, I didn’t handle the pressure very well. I’m not sure I’m doing better today either, and that scares me. I hate not knowing things, especially when it comes to my own mind.”

“Oh.” Jason said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault lad.”

Bruce reached out, relieved when Jason let him put his hand on his shoulder. He considered his next words carefully, determined not to ruin things like he had with Dick. He knew from experience that his two eldest sons had nasty tempers, and both of them raging at the same time could be a big problem.

“I understand your denial, but I’m glad you’re taking this seriously and that you’re willing to talk to me. All I want is to keep you safe Jason, so if things get too much and these bad thoughts seem too loud, please come talk to me or Barbara. I don’t want you to suffer alone.”

“You mean you want to keep an eye on me, make sure I don’t grab and axe and start hacking at the other kids.”

“That’s part of it yes. But I also want you to be happy. I hate seeing you hurt Jason. I hate it.”

His heart jumped when he noticed that tears were starting to trickle down Jason’s face, but Bruce didn’t feel like he’d said the wrong thing. He squeezed Jason’s shoulder tighter, feeling a slight twinge of sadness as he accepted that the boy wouldn’t be comfortable yet with a hug.

“So if there’s anything at all that’s upsetting you, I’m here for you.”

Jason sniffed and nodded. Bruce once again squashed the urge to pull the child into a tight hug. It frustrated Bruce that he had to fumble with words instead of expressing himself the way he knew best: through action. Jason was still too tense to accept a hug, but hopefully he’d leave the room with some progress made.

“There’s one other thing.” Jason admitted.

“What is it?”

Jason squirmed a little, surprisingly shy. Bruce deliberately leaned back, making himself look as open and casual as possible.

“It’s dumb.” Jason admitted. “But before I fell into this dream I was saving up all the spare change I could. The way it was going, in a few more days I could have taken the day off work and gone to school. Mom would have still had enough money to buy us food, even if the meal was a little smaller than usual. But now, if the time I’m spending in this dream is the same as the time I’m unconscious, mom’s probably spent the spare cash already to keep us both alive. Like I said it’s stupid, but I dunno, I haven’t been to school in ages and I was really looking forward to it.”

Bruce had two instinctive responses, and he stopped them both from leaving his mouth. The first was to ask what exactly Jason meant by work, and the second was to reassure Jason that his past self shouldn’t be affected by this at all, since he was merely his older self suffering from amnesia while in his younger self’s body. Both of those responses would likely not be well received.

Instead, he smiled.
“I’m certain that Alfred is in the kitchen right now cooking us all dinner. But if you ask Stephanie, she can take you to him, and I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to show you my old study. I was home schooled for a while as a child, and I know for a fact that there are books in that room that you’ll love.”

“Really?” Jason stared up at him, amazed.

The pure joy in his eyes turned Bruce’s smile to plastic, but he managed a nod.

“Try Wuthering Heights or Pride and Prejudice. You were a big fan of Jane Austen when you were younger.”

“Thank you!” Jason made to leave, then hesitated at the door.

“You know, any world where my mom died isn’t one I want to live in. But… I’m kind of sad you’re not really my dad. You seem nice.”

Bruce forced his smile to appear extra gentle, regardless of how Jason’s words churned the storm inside his heart.

“Thank you, Jason.”

Jason left then, and Bruce waited until he heard two sets of footsteps headed towards the kitchen before placing his head in his hands.

What a fool he’d been. How could he have possibly thought he could convince Dick that Jason was wild and reckless, when the boy he just talked to had been nervous and shy? This Dick didn’t know Jason the way Bruce did. The only Jason young Dick knew was this version, a ten-year-old boy who just wanted to take care of his mother and go to school. He’d only left them with Damian for a few hours, why would Dick assume that Jason was anything but the quiet, well-mannered bookworm he appeared to be?

Not that Jason wasn’t all those things. It’s just that he was more, and Bruce didn’t know how to convince Dick that he’d been telling the truth.

(Had he been telling the truth? Was he really so emotionally compromised that even his grief and regret over Jason’s death should be questioned?)

He sighed, rubbing the tips of his fingers over his eyelids.

“Tim! I’m ready for you.”

Tim. Lovely, lovely Tim, who should be nowhere near as difficult to deal with as his two older brothers.

Bruce really hoped he hadn’t just tempted fate with that assumption.

_________________________

She had a name now.


It was strange. Almost as strange as her having a family now.

She thought about the boy she met a few weeks ago. She’d scared him, when he found her rooting through the bins in his back garden. He’d yelled for his mother, and Cass had run.
She didn’t mind too much that he’d interrupted her. He was right to be scared, and she’d stolen a heel of bread that was only a little stale before he caught her, so she hadn’t been too hungry that night.

But now, in the future, she had people like that. People she could call on, and they would come running to help her. Family.


All these new words rattling around inside her head, and she couldn’t say a single one out loud.

“Can you talk at all?” Damian asked her, after showing her footage of her reading aloud.

Judging from her body language in the video, she hadn’t done a good job. The people watching her had clapped anyway. Another thing families did, apparently.

Cain wouldn’t have clapped. She didn’t know how he’d react to her being able to talk, but he never liked when she only did something half right. He might have shot her, or just broken a few fingers, and then she would learn to do it better, because she didn’t want to get shot again.

Why didn’t the people in the video break her fingers? Why were they saying *well done* and *good job*, when her own body language told Cass that she hadn’t done a good job at all? Do families pretend that everything you do is great, even when it’s wrong? What good was that?

Damian was still watching her, and she could see he was growing impatient. He was strange too, her new little brother. He moved like a killer, but his face and voice were like a child. He was well trained in fighting, but he wore his emotions in a way that Cain never would have let her.

Right now, he was trying not to glare at her. Her silence was bothering him, and he wasn’t able to hide it well. He was smart, he had to be to get her to listen to him, but he lacked control.

“Duuh.” she frowned, trying to make the words in her brain come out of her mouth. “Dayyyy. Muuh.”

She tried to force his name past her lips, but in the end she just choked on air. Spinning around to hide her face, she punched the nearest wall as hard as she could. It cracked a little, but her anger stayed.

She couldn’t do it.

Why couldn’t she do this? Why couldn’t she talk?

“It’s ok.” Damian said behind her. “It’s fine if you can’t speak.”

She whirled around to show him her anger. He didn’t even flinch. Damian was family, wasn’t he? Of course he would say that everything she did was fine, even when it was bad. That was stupid. Why did families do that?

“I mean it.” Damian said. “Everyone in this family talks too much. I’m glad that at least one of you knows how to shut up. You’ll understand what I mean when you meet the others, they’re all very loud and annoying.”

She studied him. He was joking, but he was also telling the truth. Why?

He was trying to make her feel better.
It was working. She wasn’t so angry anymore, and she could feel the tension in her fists loosen a little.

Damian turned back to the big screens and tapped a few more keys. A new photo was shown, one of her with the blonde girl and the red-haired woman. Stephanie and Barbara. Loud girl and… mother? Friend? She wasn’t sure yet.

“Should I tell you more about them?”

She smiled and nodded.

He was strange, her little brother. But for some reason, even in this confusing older world, she felt safe with him.

Maybe that was why they were family.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Tim and Bruce talk. Bruce may have jinxed it.
The Guilty

Chapter Summary

Tim has issues and Bruce tries to help. Damian gets an offer from Cass he wasn't expecting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When the door opened again, Bruce was far more relaxed. After dealing with Dick and Jason, he couldn’t think of how Tim could be any more difficult. The boy seemed nervous as he sat down, but he wasn’t scared like the other two had been.

“So, Tim, what’s on your mind?”

A generic opening line, but it had worked with Jason.

Tim reached into his pocket and pulled out a list.

“So, uh, I made a list of topics that I probably shouldn’t talk about, but I thought I should run them by you first just in case?”

Bruce really should have anticipated this.

“Well, sure. If that would make you happy. I just think we should talk about how you’re feeling before that.”

“I get that, but I’d feel better with this off my chest.” Tim looked down at his list. “So, I know not to talk about how Dick’s parents died, Jason’s death, Barbara getting paralyzed, Damian’s mom and that side of his family, Stephanie’s time as Robin, Blockbuster, Red Hood being a violent antihero, and uh… well I couldn’t find much on my sister to be honest. Are there any other subjects that I should keep quiet about?”

Bruce struggled to form a good reply to that.

Fantastic. An untrained, ten-year-old child knew a large portion of the major secrets that could cause dangerous amounts of drama for the whole family. Exactly how much of each story did Tim know, other than the most general and important words and sentences? Bruce needed to be very careful here. He could not upset Tim like he had Dick.

“Yes Tim, there are other subjects. It’s been seven years, and a lot has happened, both good and bad. There are plenty of things that you don’t know, but for now I’d appreciate it if you just kept quiet about that list of yours. Did anyone see you write it?”

“No one looked at it. I made sure. Here, I can destroy it!”

Tim ripped the list up into tiny pieces, then stuck his hands out. Bruce slowly took the scraps of paper from him.
“That’s great Timbo. Thank you. Now, why don’t we talk about how you’re feeling?”

Tim eyed him critically. In his clothes that were too big for him, and with a smaller, chubbier face, it was an adorable attempt at his usual analysing gaze.

“You’re not too comfortable with this are you?”

Bruce sighed.

“No.” he admitted. “I’m not good at talking, or talking honestly at least. But I care about you Tim, and your feelings matter to me.”

“Why?” Tim shrugged. “I’m not real. I just don’t remember who I really am, and once I do remember, everything that makes up me will be absorbed into my older self. So why does it matter how I’m feeling now?”

Damn it. There was logic behind Tim’s words, and while Bruce could argue logic all day, he somehow needed to make Tim understand the emotional connection they had in the process. Still, starting with more logic was his best option.

“Because it’s important for me to understand your emotional and mental stability, because I care about you and I don’t want you putting yourself in danger. Regardless of whether or not this conversation has any impact on you when you grow back up, how you are feeling is important now because I need to know that you’re not a risk.”

“Oh.” Tim said, sitting back. “I didn’t think of it like that.”

Tim fell quiet. Bruce waited.

It was always better to wait Tim out, and so far, it seemed like ten-year-old Tim had a lot of his older self’s personality. A bit less jaded, and a bit less confident, but still very much a Tim Bruce recognized.

“I really wish you’d stop doing that.” Tim muttered at last. “I know- I mean, I get that you care about me. But I don’t know you, and my parents are dead and it’s making how I feel all really confusing. I wake up and Bruce Wayne suddenly considers me his son? How crazy is that?”

“I’m sorry.” Bruce replied. “I know this is difficult for you, but I also know you understand that my feelings for you won’t just regress because you got younger.”

Tim sighed, slouching down onto the couch.

“I know.” he whispered. “I know, and it’s not your fault. Really, I’m just trying to cope, but I’m doing ok.”

With each word the boy got quieter, shrinking back onto the couch more and more.

“No. You’re not.” Bruce said gently. “Talk to me Tim.”

Tim shook his head, his eyes on his shoes. Bruce crouched down so that he was face to face with Tim.

“I know that I’m not your father Tim. But please don’t shut everyone out. If you don’t want to talk to me, I can get Alfred or Barbara or-”

“It’s not that!” Tim burst out. “It’s just… you should have never made me Robin, and if my older self
doesn’t know why he’ll understand once he gets these memories back.”

“What do you mean by that?” Bruce asked calmly.

On the inside, he was running back over every memory he had of young Tim since he found them, trying to understand why Tim would think that. Did Damian say something? Because if he did, then Bruce was going to have a long talk with his youngest, and end this ‘superior robin’ nonsense once and for all.

“I’m not a good person.” Tim said, his voice hoarse with unshed tears. “I’m just… not.”

“Why?”

“Because my parents are dead, and I’m happy. Every time I think of them, I feel guilty, but I’m still happy.”

Ah. Bruce felt a small amount of relief that Tim’s problem wasn’t related to one of his brothers. This was a lot less complicated than an inferiority complex.

“Survivor’s guilt is—”

“It’s not that.” Tim insisted. “I tried, at first, to pretend it was, because that would make it understandable and sympathetic. But it’s not. I’m not suffering from survivor’s guilt. The truth is that I’m sad they died, but this life I have, as a vigilante working with Batman? It’s amazing. What kind of sick, selfish kid does that make me, that I like the world more when my parents are dead?”

“Tim—”

“And it’s not like we didn’t love each other, because we did!” Tim stood up, pacing from one side of the study to the other. “I love them and I miss them and it hurts so much thinking that they’re gone, like I’m all hollow inside. They were my parents! And look, I’ve seen the tv shows, I know we weren’t as close as regular families, but they loved me, and they were proud of me, and they gave me a good life! So why is Jason out there insisting that this world can’t be right because his mom is dead, and I’ve just… accepted it? My parents are dead, aw that sucks but hey I got to be Robin, that’s so cool! Just saying it sounds wrong, I hate it! But it’s the truth! That guilt I feel is because of it! What sort of good person am I if I’m mourning my parents’ death like a sociopath? I’m a bad person, and I can’t pretend anymore.”

Tim stopped, panting heavily. His eyes were still on the ground, and Bruce could see the tears dripping down. That made three out of three kids that had cried, and now Bruce was grateful that Stephanie had prompted him to talk to them.

Crossing the room, he wrapped Tim firmly in his arms. He hadn’t been able to hug Jason, but Tim needed this now, and wouldn’t take it the wrong way.

Sure enough, Tim buried his head in Bruce’s shoulder, and began to sob openly.

“If you were a sociopath, you wouldn’t feel this guilt. You wouldn’t be crying right now.” Bruce said, his voice soft and low as sobs wracked Tim’s tiny body. “Tim, these are extraordinary circumstances, and even in normal situations there’s no guidebook on how to grieve properly. Please don’t hate yourself just because you aren’t spending every moment thinking about your loss. People aren’t built like that.”

“Even so.” Tim sniffed, his voice muffled from the cloth of Bruce’s suit. “I’m still excited for my future where my parents die, all because I get to be part of Batman’s team. There’s no excuse for
“And if there was a world where your parents lived and you became a superhero, would you choose that one over this?”

“Of course. But—”

“But your parents died in this one.” Bruce finished. “And the fact that you are so torn up about that proves that you don’t feel excited for this future. You are allowed to be happy with what you have, despite the loss you have suffered. That doesn’t make you a bad person Tim. Believe me.”

He held Tim tighter as the child slowly stopped sobbing. Gently running his hand through Tim’s hair, he let the boy pull back, until he was out of his arms.

“Sorry,” Tim rubbed at his eyes. “You’re right, of course. It was dumb of me to be thinking like that.”

“No, it’s not.” Bruce said immediately. “Tim, accepting happiness into your life after a tragedy is something I still struggle severely with. Considering that you lost everything you knew in an instant, and travelled seven years into the future, you are handling this very well. Don’t put yourself down. What you feel is valid, and it’s important that you remember that, and allow yourself all these emotions without hating yourself because of them.”

“…Ok.”

“Ok?”

“Yeah. I understand. Thanks.”

“Good. I’m glad.” Bruce gave him a gentle pat on the back. “I hope you know that I’m not just saying this because it’s important for everyone’s safety that all of you are as mentally and emotionally stable as possible. It’s important to me personally, that you aren’t suffering alone.”

“…I get that.” Tim nodded, walking shakily towards the door. “And I’ll be ok. I just hope older Tim remembers this too, whoever he is. You give some pretty good advice for someone who seems completely uncomfortable with emotions.”

“Thank you.” Bruce said, because what else could he say to that?

Tim shut the door as he left, and once again Bruce was alone. He wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about that conversation. It hadn’t gone as terribly as Dick, but he didn’t leave the room smiling like Jason had. In fact, Tim had seemed quite eager to leave, although Bruce could chalk that up to the child feeling vulnerable after crying in the arms of a man he barely knew. All Bruce could do was hope that his son understood what he had been trying to say.

Which reminded him, there were two other children he needed to check on.

“Get this camera out of my face! Who do you think you are? You’re not going to get a clear shot of me this way, and if you keep shoving that microphone in my face I’m going to bludgeon you with it! Hopefully a knock on the head will jolt some of your remaining braincells back to life, and you’ll accept that you’re never getting an interview with me!”

Damian pressed pause on the video, his own angry face front and centre, seconds before Dick scooped him up and away to the limo Alfred had waiting for them.
“And that concludes my first encounter with the Gotham paparazzi.”

Cass smirked at him, making a blah blah motion with her hand.

“You think I talk to much? Just wait until these babbling buffoons surround you like gossip sucking leeches. You’ll regret not having as assertive a voice as I do.”

He doubted Cass understood the word assertive, but she rolled her eyes anyway.

“That’s the last thing I can think to show you. Is there anything else you might be interested in?”

Cass frowned thoughtfully, and after a moment she shook her head. Damian was silently relieved. He’d covered everything starting with Father: ‘Yes he is the one who locked you up. No, he doesn’t hate you, it’s actually become a meme in this family about how much he loves you.’

(This had led to a two-minute side discussion where Damian attempted to explain memes to Cass. He wasn’t very successful, but honestly, they really weren’t his forte. He left that to Drake and Brown and the others who enjoyed indulging in ridiculous internet fads.)

He’d given Cass a basic explanation on the entire family upstairs, from Gordon: ‘Oracle. She gets into a lot of parenting arguments with Father over you. No, she’s not legally your mother, although I’m fairly certain she would have adopted you had Father not beat her to the punch.’ to Brown: ‘Batgirl. Your best friend. You have terrible taste by the way. I will admit that she does love you a great deal and she’s loyal, so that’s something I suppose.’

And now, it was time to put their hard work to the test.

“Do you think you’re ready to meet the others? Without combat this time?”

At this point, if Cass said no Damian was just going to point her to the computers and let her mess around. Thankfully, she didn’t shake her head. Instead, she stepped forward, her right hand in a fist. Damian mirrored her instinctively, and she placed her arm against his.

“You want to spar?”

She put one finger up.

“One round? Before we meet the others? I suppose we have the time.”

He tried to sound nonchalant, but he couldn’t deny the curiosity and competitiveness her offer had triggered inside him. Normally, he hated sparring with Cassandra. It was humiliating, and served as nothing more than a reminder that even if one day he surpassed Grayson, he would never be Father’s chosen successor. His sister would always be the better fighter, and the better option.

Except now they were the same age, and Father must have been able to beat her in order to capture her. Maybe just this once, Damian could win. And if he won when they were exactly the same age, then wouldn’t that mean Damian had the potential to one day be better than her?

He wasn’t sure if he could win, but judging by the smirk on Cass’s face he wasn’t the only one curious. He knew his sister had a competitive streak, and for as long as he’d known her she’d been undefeated at every challenge, from fighting Shiva to trivial nonsense like eating more hot dogs than her brothers and not throwing up.

Only this time, she might finally lose. And as long as all his siblings were stuck like this, Damian might as well get some enjoyment out of it.
He slipped into a fighting stance, and she did the same, her eyes dancing.

“Hand to hand combat only. First to draw blood wins?”

She nodded.

“Good.”

He lunged, she dodged, and it began.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bruce and Babs discuss the kids, while Steph and Jason explore.
Barbara talks to Bruce and hopes that he's listening. Steph struggles to deal with how adorable Jason Todd is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There were two mugs of hot black coffee already waiting on Bruce’s desk when Barbara entered the room. She made a beeline for the nearest one, chugging half the mug in one go. Bruce drank his in sips. Barbara had a feeling he’d long ago figured out the best way to drink coffee so that the caffeine would stay in his system for as long as possible, but she’d never actually asked if her theory was correct.

“Bad night?” Bruce said, with something that could almost be considered concern.

“Crisis in the south of France. Spent hours trying to stop various political assassinations.” She noticed Bruce’s face and shook her head. “No need for Batman. I sent Nightrunner down from Paris, and he got everything under control. Looks like the work of the League of Assassins, or possibly a splinter group. I was planning on sleeping in and then spending the rest of the day tracing the source of the attacks, but then I got a call from Starfire and well…”

Simultaneously, they sat back and sighed.

“It’s been a long day.” Barbara said softly.

“It’s not over yet.”

“No.” she agreed. “But things do seem to be calming down, now that you talked to the boys.”

Neither of them mentioned the elephant in the batcave. Barbara wasn’t sure how Steph had convinced Bruce to let Damian handle Cass, but she wasn’t about to ruin the calm by bringing it up.

“The conversations could have been better.” Bruce admitted. “Honestly, I’m surprised Tim was willing to open up to me. Jason too.”

“It’s because they don’t know you.” Barbara offered. “They’re in a scary new world and you’re offering them a hug and a shoulder to cry on. Neither of them are intimidated by you or realise just how terrible you are at emotions. So right now, you’re just their comforting new therapist and future dad, which is a lot better than the truth.”

“Thank you.” Bruce grunted.

“Dick on the other hand…” She sipped her coffee, and let Bruce’s frown grow deeper.

“He talked to you.”

“Honestly he mostly ranted to Jason. I happened to be in the room at the time.”
“And you didn’t stop him?”

“I didn’t disagree with what he was saying. Besides, they don’t know me either, so it’s not like my opinion would have meant anything to them.”

She was well versed in reading Bruce’s frowns and silences. His current one told her that he was annoyed, but not certain enough that he was in the right to argue with her about it.

“You disagree with what I told him.”

“I’ve never agreed with you on your opinion of Jason.” She took another gulp of her coffee. “You asked me to assess him when he was Robin and I did. I told you he was good and you told me he was reckless and impetuous.”

“So, you agree with Dick.”

“That Jason was not the only reckless Robin? Absolutely. I don’t see recklessness as the evil personality trait that caused Jason to die, and neither does Dick. Not this young version, anyway.”

“I was a fool to tell him that.” Bruce sighed. “I shouldn’t have expected him to understand, he hasn’t lived through it yet. But something about the way he looked at me, it just made me want to be honest with him. Even at such a young age he’s still so…”

“…Dick Grayson.” Barbara finished.

Bruce grunted, which was as close to an agreement as she was going to get.

“You know, part of his anger at you might be because the Dick Grayson out there seems to be convinced that he was super close to his little siblings. From what I’ve seen anyway.”

“What does that mean?” Bruce sat forward, suddenly focused.

“He keeps reassuring Jason every time the kid almost knocks into things. He’s asked Tim if he’s ok at least five times since I got here. He seems to like Damian a lot, but that at least matches up to his older self.”

“Dick was always a good big brother.” Bruce’s frown was now half confused half offended. “He wasn’t around as often for the middle three as he is now with Damian, but all things considered he had a smoother relationship with them than I did.”

“Well I seem to remember a fair few fights, but I do agree with you about the smoother relationships.” Barbara smiled sadly. “But like you said, he wasn’t around very often. I don’t think young Dick understands that.”

Bruce’s frown turned thoughtful.

“You think that’s a bad thing?”

“I just don’t want him to be disappointed. If he finds out that he and Jason aren’t on good terms, or that he spent most of Cass and Tim’s time as Batgirl and Robin working outside of Gotham.”

“It’s not a bad thing that he has a life of his own.”

“It’s not.” Barbara agreed calmly. “But I can see how he’s acting now. He cares about these kids, because it’s in his nature, and also because he’s under the impression that we’re all one big happy family in the future. Sooner or later cracks are going to show in this façade that I’m assuming has
been accidentally constructed, and I’m worried that he’ll be even more upset than he is now.”

“Hm.” Bruce closed his eyes for a second. “You may have a point. But since he didn’t take well to the portion of the truth I shared with him, I doubt exposing him to the unpleasant reality of the future right now will help.”

“The truth you’re talking about is subjective, but fair enough. I’m just warning you that it’s something you should watch out for.”

“Thank you.”

Bruce’s face was unreadable now, but what struck Barbara was how old he looked. With the cowl off, she could see that his face was wrinkled with frown lines, scars, and stress lines that most people never got even when they were eighty. It was almost funny that despite all this, his hair remained free of any hint of grey. Barbara could only hope that she’d retain her natural colour by the time she reached his age.

He sat further back into his office chair, his face solemn. She assumed a poker face was better than a frown, although to her it seemed slightly more concerning. He looked tired.

That, combined with Stephanie’s earlier success, was what prompted her to speak her mind.

“We should probably head down to Cass soon. But before we go, I want to talk to you about her.”

His gaze hardened. She braced herself, sensing the beginning of a familiar argument brewing.

“The boys are your responsibility and I fully understand that, but Cass is as much mine as she is yours, regardless of what any adoption papers say.”

“What’s your point?”

Bruce’s voice was calm, but there was something unreadable about it that Barbara didn’t like.

“I want you to let me handle her until she’s back to normal.”

She spoke clearly and calmly, but her hands tightened on the grips of her wheelchair as Bruce’s expression got darker.

“Why?” he growled.

“Why?” she bit back a laugh. “Because look how well you’ve handled it so far! I don’t know how much Damian’s gotten through to her but if you don’t want to alienate her completely I suggest you back off a little.”

“So, you want me just ignore my daughter completely? Let her continue to hate me instead of trying to make amends, is that it?”

“That’s not what I said at all.” Barbara snapped. “Dammit Bruce all I said was back off a little! Let me decide what’s best for her right now, instead of demanding that you control everything.”

“They’re my children.”

“And look how well you’ve done.”

It was a low blow, and Barbara knew it. But it stunned Bruce enough that his anger lessened, just for a second.
“I know you think that Cassandra is basically the closest thing to perfect a person could be, but that girl down there doesn’t respect and idolise you the way our Cass does. I hate to break it to you but the special ‘understanding’ that you’re so certain you both share? It doesn’t exist anymore. All the mistakes and failures you made that she forgave you for, there’s no guarantee that this Cass will be as willing to give you another chance. You can’t assume she’ll trust you just because you’re Batman. So, stop projecting onto her and start treating her like a normal traumatised child.”

“I know that she’s not the same.” Bruce said, his voice still barely above a growl. “Despite my errors today, I’m not as deluded as you and Stephanie seem to think. I’m aware that I haven’t been a good father, and I’m aware that the Cassandra downstairs is not the same as my daughter. But we both know that you’re just as guilty of projecting as I am, and that’s exactly what you’re doing right now!”

“Not this again.” Barbara groaned. “We’ve had this argument ten different ways already. Yes, we’ve both been guilty in the past of projecting our own issues onto Cass. That still doesn’t make what happened today right.”

“But at least I’m projecting something that she actually wants!” She could tell that Bruce was two seconds away from getting out of his chair. “Don’t come in here insisting that you know what’s best for her, because Cassie has never wanted to be treated like a normal child. Yet you’ve always insisted that it’s not healthy for her to devote so much of herself to the mission, regardless of her objections.”

“And I stand by that opinion but it’s irrelevant right now. We’re not talking about normal Cass, we’re talking about a young Cass who doesn’t want anything to do with Batman!”

Bruce stared at her, the stubborn glare when he knew she had a point but wasn’t willing to accept any compromise.

Barbara sighed, worn out. They both reached for their coffee, and tension in the room seemed to ease, just a little. Bruce’s anger seemed a bit more constrained, so she tried again.

“I’m not trying to say that she should be treated like Tim or Jason or a regular civilian. I just think that given your history of projecting your feelings onto Cass at the expense of her own health and happiness, you shouldn’t have the final say in how we should look after her.”

“I understand.” Bruce ground out slowly. “But I don’t think you should either.”

“Then how about you, me and Stephanie? No more locking Cass in a cage unless all three of us agree.”

She held her breath, watching the wheels work behind Bruce’s eyes. Throwing Stephanie in meant a random variable that neither of them could control or predict, but right now that seemed to be exactly what Bruce needed, and she hoped he understood that.

“I can accept that.” he said at last.

She sighed in relief. Every argument with Bruce always left her more exhausted than wheeling herself up the steepest hill in Gotham.

“In that case, once Steph and Jason get back from the study, should we go back down to the batcave?”

“Hm.”
“Great.” She smiled cheerily.

He glared at her. She rolled her eyes, but indulged him, since there was no one else currently free to do so.

“Fine I’ll bite. What’s the *hm* for?”

“Damian. I still don’t understand how he was able to get through to Cass. Stephanie said they had a theory, and I assume it worked out, but I don’t… I don’t trust him with her.”

“Do you trust him with any of them?”

He looked at her, the answer clear. He almost seemed ashamed of himself, which was promising. Maybe that meant he’d listen to her.

“I was in the cave with the boys when you went off to get Jason. He was good with them Bruce, really good. Dick and Tim were asking him a million questions but he indulged them all and never insulted them or said anything hurtful. I mean, he was still very Damian about it all, but he wasn’t cruel.”

Bruce was silent. Either he was considering her words, or he hadn’t heard a single one.

“Has he given you any reason not to trust him?” she asked.

“With the boys? No. I have no proof, anyway.” he shook his head. “But in general, I’ve been back in Gotham for a few months now, and he’s been by my side as Robin and yet… I feel like I don’t know him. If Dick was here, I’d ask his opinion, and if he told me Damian can be trusted with the kids then I’d believe him. But he’s not here, and it’s just me, and I don’t know my son well enough to have faith in him with something this delicate.”

“Well if he’s being doing alright this far, maybe giving him a chance is the best thing you could do right now.”

There was silence. She could tell Bruce was thinking hard, but about what she wasn't entirely sure.

“Perhaps.” Bruce said at last. “I suppose he’s earned that much.”

When it became clear that he had nothing more to say, she nodded, and began wheeling herself out of the room. Conversations with Bruce normally ended with Barbara feeling one of two ways: frustration that nothing had been resolved or relief that it was over. Relief was the main emotion right now, which was always a good sign.

But there was something bothering her as she left the study. As experienced as Barbara had gotten over the years at reading the mysterious Batman, she had absolutely no idea if his last sentence had been genuine.

When Stephanie had woken up this morning, taking a tour of Wayne Manor with Jason Todd had been nowhere on her to-do-list.

Yet here she was, following Alfred’s directions to Bruce’s old study. It was almost twilight, and the shadows made all the ornaments and quiet hallways seem that much creepier. The whole house was weird, but not as weird as the boy currently clutching her hand.

Because the thing is? Stephanie actually liked this version of Jason Todd.
His older self could choke for all she cared. He’d attacked Tim unprovoked on more than one occasion, not to mention shooting Damian. The brat could be annoying sure, but hurting a kid was the kind of scumbag move that made Stephanie’s blood boil. Damian was a tough cookie and all, so she could usually forgive some random street thugs trying to fight back by throwing a few punches as Robin beat them up. But she drew the line at shooting Damian in the chest, even if it hadn’t been fatal.

Basically, Jason Todd was the kind of person she would fight on sight, regardless of whether she would win or lose.

Except this kid was nothing like the notorious Red Hood. He was super nervous around all the fancy china, preferred reading while Dick and Tim chatted away, and he thought the concept of Batgirl was ‘super cool’ and had politely asked Steph if she could teach him a few moves.

So yeah, Steph was more than a little weirded out.

Even right now, she was taking him to the study so he could find schoolbooks to read. Not just regular books, but *schoolbooks*. The kid was clearly a huge nerd, so how did he become the kind of guy with a shoot-first policy?

Obviously dying probably had something to do with it, but now with this kid in front of her bouncing up and down at the entrance to the study like he was about to enter a candy shop, Steph wanted details.

“Go ahead.” She said. “Take whatever you want, and don’t worry about ruining anything. I know all this stuff looks fancy, but Bruce loves you way too much to care. One time Tim and Cass had a skateboard race around the manor, and they ended up smashing like ten antique dinner plates. When Bruce found out all he did was glare and tell them not to be so irresponsible. He didn’t even ground them.”

“No way.” Jason laughed.

“Yep.” Steph grinned. “I get it though. The first time I broke something valuable I freaked out big time. It was some vase from India I think. I just bumped into it trying to find Tim, and I panicked when it smashed. I ran away from the manor and didn’t show my face for two weeks.”

“What happened?” Jason asked curiously.

“Nothing.” Stephanie smiled. “I mean, Alfred gave me the stink eye next them he saw me, but the big bad Bat didn’t say a word. I’m not sure he even noticed it was gone to be honest.”

“Wow.”

Jason looked like he was going to say something else, but then his eyes lit up, and he grabbed two books from the middle row of the nearest bookshelf. *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Again, two books she would have never associated with Jason Todd before today.

“You a fan of the classics?”

“Bruce recommended them.” he said shyly. “I know you hate him and everything, but so far he’s been kind of cool. I was really scared when he kidnapped me, but this is actually kind of nice.”

“I don’t hate him. It’s just… complicated.” she sighed. “But I’m glad you’re happy. You deserve it after dealing with all this back to the future bull- nonsense.”
“You can say bullshit you know.” Jason said with a cheeky grin. “It’s not the worst curse I’ve heard.”

“I’d rather not get kicked out of the manor again, thank you very much.”

She leant forward and ruffled Jason’s hair. He laughed, batting her hand away, and she found herself smiling at his happiness.

“C’mon. Let’s head back, and you can read your book with the others until Babs wears Bruce down into agreeing to whatever she’s planning.”

“Will that take a while?”

“Hoo boy. Ol’ Batdad is a stubborn one, let me tell you. But hey, he actually listened to me today, so crazier things have happened.”

“Good.” Jason practically skipped out of the study, his books clutched tightly to his chest. “I really want to talk to this sister I’ve been hearing so much about.”

The smile dropped off Stephanie’s face, and she struggled to plaster it back on before he turned around to look at her.

“You and me both kiddo.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Cass and Damian spar. Bruce decides it's time to head back down to the batcave.
Chapter Summary

Bruce takes everyone down to the cave, while Damian teaches Cass a technique or two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Alright.” Bruce said. “Before we go down there, repeat everything I just said.”

“Stay behind you until you say it’s safe.” Jason said.

“Do everything you say without arguing.” Tim added.

“And if you tell us to run then we run and don’t look back.” Jason finished.

Dick said nothing, choosing to focus his attention on glaring at the carpet.

Bruce sighed, but right now he didn’t want to pick another fight with his eldest. Dick understood the rules, and that would do for now until Bruce had confirmed the safety of his two missing children.

“Let’s go.” he said, ushering them out into the corridor. “Stick together and if you see her, try not to spook her.”

“Spook her? She’s not a rabid dog.” Stephanie hissed, standing next to Barbara in the doorway. “Damian’s got it covered so maybe cool it on the ‘she’s a wild animal’ shtick.”

“Of course she’s not a wild animal! I would never be foolish enough to compare her to a rabid dog!” Bruce snapped. “She’s far more dangerous than an ignorant beast, and I won’t endanger my sons by encouraging them to let their guard down.”

Stephanie threw her hands in the air, and with a muttered “I give up” to Barbara, followed after the boys.

Bruce paused for a second, sharing a look with Barbara.

“I assume that Damian can effectively communicate with Cassandra because she can understand language?”

“Correct.” Barbara began wheeling herself to the front entrance. “When did you figure it out?”

“I considered the possibility that I had misjudged her communication abilities back when Stephanie told me that Damian had a theory. After my conversation with Jason it became the most logical assumption.”

“Ah. What did you talk about?”

Bruce swallowed, remembering the fear in Jason’s voice as he talked about the effects of the Lazarus pit.
“Nothing that you need to worry about.”

Barbara rolled her eyes, but didn’t push it. Bruce was grateful. There were a lot of things they’d never see eye to eye on, but she was one of the few people he knew he could trust.

And with over half of those people currently regressed to the age of ten, he needed every loyal friend he had.

She had been right in assuming that her new little brother was a good fighter. With every blow, his training shone through, and she noticed that he had become a lot more emotionally disciplined now that they were no longer talking. She watched as he used a combination of punches and backhands that one of her old instructors had used, followed by an aerial attack that she’d seen Nightwing do on a video Damian had shown her earlier. She blocked and dodged, content to observe his attempts for now.

She was impressed at the speed of his punches. Some of techniques he used were ones she recognised from her fight with Batman. Damian was a little slower than his father had been, and she was able to cut him off halfway through a combination of jabs, crosses and hooks. He just barely dodged her uppercut, and scowled at her smug grin. It was fun to tease him; however, she could acknowledge that he was better than most of the people she had fought. It was clear that he had been very well trained by many different masters.

But his training didn’t hide everything. She could tell that he really, really wanted to win.

Unfortunately for Damian, so did she.

She knew she would too. Damian was strong and fast, incredibly so for his age, and he was doing his best to make his moves as unpredictable as possible, but she could still read him as easily as he could read those letters on the computer keys.

It was a relief to know that she could still do that. Her fight with the Batman (who she was still struggling to accept as her new father) had worried her. Even knowing what move he was going to make, she still hadn’t been able to beat him. He’d overpowered her with both speed and strength, and she’d seen how he recognized most of her moves. Someone skilled enough to beat her was a strange thought.

Cassandra didn’t like it.

She wanted a rematch. And she wanted to win. But to do so, she needed to get rid of the weakness that had cost her their first fight. He’d seen how she hesitated to kill him, and he’d used that against her.

Damian carried the same hesitation, but he telegraphed it a lot less obviously than she did. She let him hit her, two times, just to watch how his face flickered at the last second, and a fist meant to kill turned into one only meant to injure.

He was very good at making the transition appear natural. Practice, she assumed. Something he could teach her.

It made her smile again, and in response he bared his teeth. She ducked under the kick he aimed at her head and tried to grab his foot, but he swung it out of the way at the last second.

She laughed in delight, and went for his throat.
Damian blocked, and his snarl turned even more ferocious when he realised that she had him on the defensive. She stuck out her tongue at him, unable to resist copying his competitive attitude.

She would win this, that much was clear to her. The words for each punch, kick and block kept buzzing in her head, but she was ignoring them to focus only on the movements, and it was working. Whatever this magic had done to her brain, somehow her ability to read people remained.

Damian had mentioned something about fighting a woman named Shiva and dying in order to undo the magic’s effect on her body reading skills. She honestly felt like she didn’t need to know anymore about that just yet.

What caught her attention right now was the strike she could see Damian was going to make at her heart.

She let him do it, watching carefully as his fingers drew closer. He was aiming at a specific place, a League technique that would stop her heart and kill her. She kept her eyes on his hand as it got closer, and closer, and-

There.

She reached out and caught his hand. The stunned look on his face made her want to tease him again, but she didn’t want him sulking right when she needed him to teach her.

She could see how he would attempt to break free, so quick as a flash she tugged him forward and scratched her nail across his cheek. A thin line of blood appeared on his skin, and she smiled, triumphant.

“That doesn’t count!” Damian snapped. “It’s only a scratch! It’s not like I’m actually bleeding.”

She reached forward with her finger and poked his cheek. It came back red, and she smugly waved her finger towards his face.

“Fine, whatever, you win.” he grumbled. “Just know that I have no respect for such a pathetic copout.”

It seemed that he was sulking despite her attempts not to gloat too hard. Oh well, she was confident that he would still help her.

She reached forward and grabbed his hand again, moving it towards her heart.

“What? That move? It’s a League technique. Don’t you know it?”

She nodded, moving his hand closer. An inch away, she pushed it to the side, tapping it against her chest in a move that, if done at a fast-enough speed, would stun her, but not kill her.

“Oh. That.”

She looked at him expectantly.

“Grayson and my father helped me alter my techniques. They have a lot of experience with non-lethal combat, and while neither of them were completely familiar with my style, they helped provide a template that I then used to alter my most deadly attacks. When it comes to fighting I haven’t incorporated my nonlethal options as successfully and fluidly as your older self has, but that’s to be expected I suppose.”
She stared at his hand, fascinated at his control. As she examined his technique, she noticed that her curiosity seemed to be perking Damian up a bit after his defeat. She was apparently his big sister after all, so she assumed he was enjoying being the more knowledgeable one.

A few months ago, she’d seen a boy out walking with his little sister. The sister had talked a lot, pointing at the flowers and the statues and the towers, and Cass hadn’t understood a word, but the boy had smiled. He had found her babbling funny, and Cass hadn’t been able to tell if he had been laughing at his sister or with her. To Cassandra it had looked like both, which had confused her.

Now, she understood it a little better. Maybe Damian would make fun of her for this when she got older again, but she didn’t think she’d mind. He was being helpful right now, and that was all that mattered.

She grabbed his wrist and pushed his hand towards her heart again. He nodded, and pulled his hand back. Slowly, he brought it towards her heart, and she observed the exact distance that he changed direction.

“Got it?”

She mimicked him, her fingers touching the exact same place on his chest that he had touched on hers.

“Yes, that’s it. Would you like me to show you another one?”

She nodded.

He pressed the palm of his hand against her nose. She squinted, going cross eyed in her attempt to watch him.

“Originally, I learnt how to push the bones of someone’s nose into their brain. I had to modify it into this.”

He changed, so that the edge of his hand was against the bridge of her nose.

“If I hit someone hard here, it knocks them out of the fight, but unless I go overboard it won’t kill them.”

Once again, she mimicked his two moves.

“How surprising. You’ve mastered them already.”

His voice said bored, but his body told her proud. Damian did that a lot, she noticed; contradicted his body with his words.

“Is there any move in particular that you want my help to change?”

She hesitated, then reached forward, placing her fingers at specific points on his neck.

“Ah. A nerve pinch. The trick with these is finding the pressure points that stun instead of killing. I think that for the neck, if you place your fingers here, that will numb everything below the neck temporarily.”

She copied his move again, but this time he frowned.

“Hm. Actually hang on, I may be missing something. The original technique went like this, yes?”
He placed her fingers on her neck and she nodded. Then they both tensed up.

A batarang flew right through the space Damian’s hand had been seconds ago. Both of them had separated enough that it flew by harmlessly, but now Cass was tensed up as she noticed the familiar figure approaching them.

“Damian, get away from her!”

“Father.” Damian’s hands were up and open, a sign of peace. “I assure you, I was not hurting her. She wanted me to show her how to make that technique usable without killing.”


She watched as Damian’s body spoke of anger, but more than that there was something else. It wasn’t quite fear, or at least not a fear Cassandra was familiar with.

He turned to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. Comfort and reassurance. She smiled at him in response.

He made his way over to stand by his father’s side, and now Cassandra was facing Batman alone.

Damian trusted this man. He respected this man. Apparently in the future, she did too, because they both considered this man their father.

Then again, she didn’t have a great experience with fathers so far. This man wasn’t a killer, so in that sense he was better than Cain. But he looked at her with a body full of anger and fear, and that other emotion Damian had worn that she couldn’t quite recognise. Cain had never feared her, not even after she ran.

There were others with him, she noticed. Barbara the red-haired woman from earlier, Stephanie the girl who tried talking to her without Batman’s permission, and three little boys that she only recognised because Damian had explained what happened to them. They were her other brothers, the ones that had also been caught by this spell.

“Cassandra.”

Batman’s voice was soft. He was like Damian, his voice contradicting what his body told her.

“Cassie, sweetie, I know you can understand me. I’m sorry about earlier but please tell me, how much do you know?”

She stared at him.

“She can’t talk, Father.” Damian said at last. “But I told her everything, and she understands.”

“What?”

“Everything about her own life and her future.”

Now Batman’s anger was taking over, pushing the other emotions down. She could tell that it came easily to him, and she didn’t like it.

“You had no right to do that Damian.”

“I got her to trust me!” Damian protested. “She deserved to know and she’s not upset by it.”
“You couldn’t have known she’d react so well. Did you tell her about Shiva? About Deathstroke? About Mad Dog?”

“Not Deathstroke.” Damian said quietly.

“So you just told her that she died twice. Did you go into all the details or leave it ambiguous enough that she had to fill in the blanks herself?”

“Father, I just wanted to help.” Damian sounded angry now, which Cass found relieving. “It worked out in the end, I swear. She trusts us now, don’t you?”

She wanted to shake her head and continue glaring at Batman, but she could see Damian growing more and more upset.

Reluctantly, she nodded.

Batman narrowed his eyes. She glared back, refusing to be intimidated. He was the one who kidnapped her and locked her in a cage. There was no way she was going to look nervous or apologetic in front of him.

Apologetic. That was a new word. It suited both Batman and Damian right now. She didn’t fully understand why Damian was being apologetic to their father, but she was glad that Batman felt apologetic for what he’d done to her, even if it was hard to tell behind all that tension he was carrying.

“I won’t ask how your cheek got scratched, but we’ll talk about your recklessness later Damian.” Batman said. “There’s nothing to be done about it now.”

“Hey don’t blame Damian! Sneaking down here was my idea!”

“Shut up Brown!” Damian snarled. “I’m not some guilty child who needs you to cover for me!”

In that moment, she could see Damian’s resemblance to his father, using pride and anger to cover shame and hurt. She didn’t like it anymore than she had when Batman did it, but she didn’t know how to make it better.

Damian may have taught her all about these people, but this was still her first time meeting most of them, and the first time having a conversations with any of them outside of Damian. She was willing to give them a chance, but as she continued to glare at the man standing closest to her, there was one thing she knew for certain.

At some point, she was going to have a rematch with Batman. And this time, she would win.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Introductions are made. It doesn't go as smoothly as Damian hoped.
The Bitter

Chapter Summary

Damian didn't expect the reunion to go smoothly. But he didn't expect it all to go so wrong so quickly.

(Trigger warning for discussions of child abuse.)

Chapter Notes

Well the gang was all together, and really, Damian had been foolish to expect it to go well.

How naïve of him to think that Father would be in anyway proud of him for fixing the Cass issue. No of course not, his father could only have two feelings when it came to Damian, neutral or disappointed. In this case it was definitely the latter.

(There had been a couple of flukes since Damian arrived in Gotham; moments where his father had smiled at him or ruffled his hair or that one time he’d scooped Damian up into his arms for a hug that had left him utterly baffled and slightly indignant. But the moments never lasted, and all that lingered was a sense of mutual discomfort at the attempt to be a normal father and son.)

Some part of him acknowledged that disobeying Batman’s instructions and sneaking off to the cave was not the sort of behaviour that would prompt his father into giving him praise, but the rest of him was too bitter to care. The end result was that he had his sister’s trust, and if Father couldn’t accept that Damian was capable of handling situations without his guidance well then…

…it stung.

Only a little, really. Damian was angrier at himself for not anticipating this. He’d gotten caught up in the thrill of victory, of accomplishing something Batman had been struggling with. He had forgotten that his father tended to see things in a very different way to Damian. Really, it was his own fault for not understanding Batman better. He should have seen this coming.

And yet, telling himself that didn’t make the petty satisfaction he got as Cassandra glared at their father any less existent.

“Cassie sweetie, are you alright now?”

The way Batman switched from his deep, harsh voice to his lighter, comforting voice made Damian clench his fists. Now of all times was not the best for his favouritism issues to start needling him, but oh well, since his father clearly considered him an unworthy Robin why should he care?

Maybe that was it. Maybe that was why Batman was treating him this way. Father was intelligent, so what if he could tell that Damian’s motives weren’t as pure as he wanted them to be? Helping his sister not because it was the right thing to do, but to prove a point to their father?

That was it. Despite Damian’s best efforts, he still wasn’t a good person, and his father could obviously see that. After all, his motivation for being ‘good’ was selfish, wasn’t it? Gaining the
approval of his family was not a motive noble enough for Batman to respect, but it was the only one
Damian had. So how could he ever hope to gain Batman’s approval if his father could see right
through to his selfish intentions every time?

He was drawn from his thoughts when he noticed Cassandra looking at him. The petty smugness he
felt increased as he realised what she wanted from him. He nodded at her, and only then did she turn
back to Batman and nod a reply to him.

Father had seen the whole interaction of course. He could probably see the spite in Damian’s smile,
but right now Damian was still struggling to care.

“That’s good.” Batman said, his voice still gratingly soft. “Damian told you about the rest of your
family, didn’t he? Would you like to meet them?”

She hesitated, then nodded again.

“Good.” Batman smiled.

Damian focused on keeping his body relaxed. After all the progress he made with Cassandra, he
refused to let his childish jealousy ruin everything. He liked his sister, more than he liked half of his
family, even before she’d gotten de-aged. He didn’t enjoy being jealous. Such an immature emotion
was supposed to be beneath him.

Barbara came forward. She was as tense as Batman, but her eyes were softer. Damian didn’t feel
anywhere near as jealous as he had with Father. He respected Oracle, but he had never felt the desire
to have as strong a bond with her as Cass did.

“Hi.” Barbara stuck her hand out. “I’m Barbara, Babs for short, also known as Oracle. I’m sorry
about earlier. I swear I tried to talk him out of it, and I promise it won’t happen again.”

Cass studied her for three long seconds, and Damian thought that this was the first time he’d ever
seen Oracle look so nervous. He’d seen her coordinate missions where entire countries were at stake,
but while there had always been plenty of stress, there was a level of vulnerability in her gaze now
that had never been present then.

It was a smart decision, to be open with Cass when it came to both facts and emotions. But Damian
could tell that it wasn’t just that. He knew from experience how badly it could hurt when personal
feelings interfered with work. He hoped this wouldn’t be the case here.

Cass reached forward, and placed her fist against Barbara’s hand.

The gesture meant nothing to Damian, but judging by the look of joy on Barbara’s face, there was a
history there that he was unaware of. She smiled at Cass, and Damian could see her emotional desire
to hug Cassandra warring with her rational thought that it would be best not to spring something like
that on a girl who still looked ready to bolt at one loud sound.

“So, you’ve met Steph already.”

Damian breathed a sigh of relief as Barbara waved Stephanie forward. He agreed with her decision.
That had not been the right time for a hug.

“Hey.” Steph waved awkwardly. “For the record I wasn’t on board with the cage idea either. I’m
glad you got out, even if my neck still hurts.”

Cass tilted her head curiously, her eyes blank, and Steph’s face fell. Damian had imagined their
reunion would go something like this, Stephanie had always been too much of an optimist in his opinion. Still, he didn’t find it pleasant to watch her close off all her Cassandra-related hopes and fears. Her face finally settled on a generic cheerful smile, and Cassandra seemed even more confused as Stephanie began babbling away at her.

Damian’s attention turned towards his brothers as Steph continued talking. It was clear she was determined to fill any awkward silences with words, no matter how trivial.

None of them looked injured, which was good. Tim seemed mostly the same, if a little paler. Jason looked happier, Damian noted with surprise. Dick however, seemed to have reverted back to the angry child he’d found in Tim’s bedroom. Judging by the glares he frequently shot in Batman’s direction, they’d had a conversation that hadn’t ended well.

Damian shouldn’t feel pleased by that. His brother suffering shouldn’t fill him with a bitter sort of joy, but he couldn’t help feeling vindictively pleased that Father had messed up once again. Not only were there two of his siblings that now preferred Damian to Batman, but they were Father’s two favourites, his most loyal partners. He hoped Batman realised soon that Damian was the one they trusted most now. He wanted to see the look of anger on Father’s face, and feel superior instead of ashamed.

His motives may not be clean, but right now his spite felt justified.

“So, uh, you want to meet your brothers now, right?”

Stephanie stepped back, and Damian ignored the storm flickering behind her eyes. He was fairly certain that he was not the one best equipped to deal with the emotions she carried. He hadn’t been around for the era of Batgirl and Spoiler, so however this young Cassandra was affecting her, Gordon would probably be the best one to have that conversation with.

“This is Dick, and this is Tim.”

They both gave Cass tense smiles and friendly nods. Tim seemed wary, whereas Dick just looked distracted to Damian.

It was clear that once they got out of the cave, Damian needed to have another talk with his favourite brother.

“And this is—”

With confidence and enthusiasm that was almost aggressive, Jason bounded forward and stuck out his hand.

Damian could pinpoint the exact second he realised that it was all going to go wrong. This was followed almost immediately by the realisation that he wasn’t going to be fast enough to stop it. Father clearly had the same realisation, but despite the hand he stuck out, he too wasn’t quick enough.

Cass grabbed Jason’s hand, and flipped him over her shoulder. She slammed him onto the ground and pinned him there, a grin on her face.

Then she looked up, and seeing everyone’s horrified expressions her own smile faded away. She looked to Damian, and he tried to make his smile sympathetic, while also shaking his head.

She got off Jason as quickly as she’d thrown him. Jason remained lying on his back. Damian could see his face, and he looked conscious but badly winded. Batman immediately went over to him,
“Cassie.” Father said again, his soft voice strained. “That’s not how we do things here.”

“Jason wasn’t looking for a fight.” Barbara explained, her tone also rigidly soft. “I know he may have looked like he was offering to spar, but we don’t consider it an invitation unless they use words to confirm it. Understand?”

Cass nodded. She turned and looked at Batman, still cradling Jason. For one second Damian hoped that this would all blow over.

Then she held out her arm. Batman blinked, and Damian once again realised too late what was about to happen.

“No!” he yelled.

With a sickening snap, Cass broke her own wrist.

There was a deathly silence in the cave. Dick and Tim were gaping with open jaws, Stephanie’s eyes were wide and her hands over her mouth, and Gordon and Father looked incredibly pale.

Cass stared around her in confusion, then turned to Damian for reassurance. This time, he felt too stunned to even nod his head, and her face grew even more fearful. She hadn’t even flinched before breaking her bones, and even now she showed no outward signs of being in pain. But she was scared of their reactions, and this time Damian didn’t know how to make it better.

“Barbara.” Father’s voice sounded like he was being strangled. “I’m going to talk to Cass alone. Could you please…”

“Of course.” Barbara murmured, her eyes still locked on Cass’s wrist.

Batman gently let Jason down, and Stephanie immediately ran over to help him up. Damian watched, still frozen, as his father carefully placed his hand on Cassandra’s shoulder.

“Cassie, is it alright if I speak to you over by the cars? You’re not in trouble, I just want to explain how punishments work differently here than they did with Cain.”

She looked at Damian, and he gathered himself enough to smile and nod again. Cassandra still seemed tense under Batman’s grip, but she let him lead her to a part of the cave where they could be neither seen nor heard by the rest of them.

If he focused, Damian could hear the low words his Father was whispering to her, but found that he didn’t want to. For one thing, there was no way their conversation would be anything other than uncomfortable for Damian to eavesdrop on. For another, it seemed like there was drama brewing with his brothers now that Father had gone.

“What the hell is wrong with her?” Jason had recovered from being winded it seemed. “Why did she do all that? I thought we were meeting my sister not some freak who throws people around and breaks her own bones for no reason!”

Damian noticed Barbara’s grip tighten on her armrests, and he prepared himself to intervene, despite not really knowing what he should say. However, someone else beat him to the punch.

“You have a dad, right Jason?”
Everyone turned to look at Stephanie. She’d let go of Jason and taken a few steps back from him. Whatever turmoil she’d been feeling after Cass’s lacklustre reaction to her, it wasn’t visible anymore. She looked completely calm.

Jason on the other hand, tensed up. Damian could practically see his hackles raising.

“Yeah. He’s dead now. What of it?”

“I have a dad too.” Stephanie said, still eerily calm. “His name is Arthur Brown, but he prefers to call himself Cluemaster. He thought of himself as this big criminal hotshot capable of going toe to toe with Batman. In reality, he’s just a pathetic jerk, and all he managed to do with his life of crime was hurt his family.”

The cave was silent now. Damian didn’t quite understand where Stephanie was going with this, but he didn’t feel like he should stop her.

“I tried to stop him, when I was younger. I confronted him about it a good few times, and he wasn’t very pleased with that. Whenever he was angry at me he ended up locking me in the closet. Sometimes he smacked me around a bit before that. The worst time was when he was drunk, and tried to push me in under the stairs but ended up whacking my head off the top of the door. I still have the scar from that.”

She locked eyes with Jason. Something passed between them, something Damian didn’t understand. He was pretty sure no one else did either, judging by the confused and disturbed looks on Dick, Tim and Barbara’s faces.

Jason’s fists unclenched. Just a fraction, but Damian noticed it.

The silence in the cave grew. No one seemed to feel like interrupting it, and Stephanie was still staring at Jason with that unnerving calm she’d suddenly developed.

“My dad used a belt.”

Everyone seemed to freeze, the surprise at Jason’s outburst almost tangible. Jason didn’t seem to notice, his eyes still locked on Stephanie.

“I don’t remember it too much.” he admitted quietly. “He was in and out of prison most of the time. But sometimes he’d be home and I’d do something to piss him off, and he’d just…”

Damian swallowed, his heart thudding loudly in his chest. This conversation seemed entirely too personal for him to witness.

“It was worse when he was drunk.” Jason continued. “Mom always hated it, and cried, but he usually only punished me like that when she was too drugged out to notice.”

He shrugged softly, as if it was no big deal, and Stephanie gave him a sad smile.

“It’s not like I was the only one.” Jason almost sounded defensive now. “I tried talking about it with my friends, but none of them really got it. The ones who had good parents were too uncomfortable with it all, and they always thought I was weird when I flinched at cracking noises. The ones who had bad parents always turned it into a competition, which just made me feel like I was whining.”

“I get that.” Stephanie said quietly. “There was one kid in my middle school who always had bruises. I tried talking to them, but they just laughed and told me I was lucky.”
“It’s bullshit.” Jason snorted. “Like wow, I’m so grateful my dad only beats me every few weeks instead of every day. How lucky am I.”

“Complete bullshit.” Stephanie echoed. “Abuse is abuse. It’s not a fucking competition. No one deserves to suffer like that.”

Part of Damian wanted to object to the profanity in front of Dick and Tim, but it was very obvious that now was not the time for that.

“Yeah.” Jason shook his head, but there was something fragile and light in his expression. “I mean, I wouldn’t call what my dad did to me ‘abuse’, just harsh, over the top discipline or whatever. Either way, those kids who acted like I had it so easy ‘cus he kept going to jail had no clue.”

“None whatsoever.” Stephanie agreed. “And I would call it abuse but I’ll talk to you about that later. What I’m trying to say Jason, is that I get it. By which I mean, I don’t get it, not entirely, but I can sympathise. All that pain, and anger, and hurt you feel towards your dad is valid, fuck what anyone else tells you.”

Jason seemed almost uncomfortable, giving a little shrug as if to say ‘I guess’.

“And I want you to believe me, because Cass had a father like us too.”

“Really?” Jason’s head shot up, all traces of uncertainty replaced by curiosity.

“Really. Except instead of hands or belts, his favourite method of punishing her was bullets.”

You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone was gaping at Stephanie, the kids with disbelief, Damian and Barbara with horror at her casual reveal.

“Bullets?” Jason hissed. “What the fuck?”

This time, Damian felt like the profanity was quite necessary.

“I know right?” Stephanie shook her head. “And get this, if she so much as flinched or showed any sign that it hurt her, he shot her again.”

“That’s…” Jason gaped, clearly shocked. “Where is her dad? I’ll kill him myself if I have to. What kind of sicko person-”

“We don’t know. Don’t even know if he’s dead or alive. But you know what?” Steph gave Jason another sad smile. “Cass wouldn’t want us to kill him. If she did, I’d be right behind you. But she’d rather he went to jail.”

“Why?” Jason snapped. “He’s clearly a psycho who loves torturing kids, why would she-”

“Remember when you were telling me how you tried explaining you and your dad to these other kids, and they all scoffed at you? I get that, and I’m not telling you this to be like ‘Cass had it worse than you’, I’m telling you this so that you can give Cass the same respect you wanted your friends to give you.”

She sat down next to Jason, and he didn’t flinch like Damian expected.

“Her relationship with her dad is complicated. The effects it had on her was complicated. I don’t get why she wants her dad to live, or why she can snap her own wrist so easily. But I stopped judging her for it a long time ago.”
She reached out and held Jason’s hands in her own.

“Do you understand what I’m trying to tell you?”

Damian found himself holding his breath again. This whole talk was making him jumpy.

“Yeah.” Jason said at last. “Yeah I understand. I won’t call her a freak again.”

“Great!”

Stephanie beamed and jumped up, ignoring the uncomfortable auras emanating from everyone in the room who wasn’t Jason.

“Alfred’s cooking up dinner for us all. That’ll be a nice break from all this tension, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure about that,” Barbara smirked, catching on quickly to the attempt to clear the heaviness from the cave. “Remember that time Tim and Damian got into a fight over the last egg roll? Alfred’s still furious about the holes in the tablecloth.”

“Nah.” Stephanie laughed. “I’m sure this will be much better.”

Despite her smile, Damian noticed that she was still holding on tightly to Jason’s hand.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Dinner, at last. The tension seems to have eased, but Dick’s still not happy.
The Frustrated

Chapter Summary

Dick knows he's being immature. But he's ten and Bruce is mean so he's going to stay upset with him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Cass and Bruce came back, her wrist was in a splint and she looked a little more confused but a little less scared. Dick took that as a sign that Bruce hadn’t said something like “You’re a disgrace and I regret adopting you.”, which was good.

Ok fine, he wasn’t being entirely fair. As far as he could tell this version of Bruce wouldn’t say something like that anymore than Dick’s would, but Dick’s conversation with this Batman still felt like a sucker punch. He never thought that Bruce could ever be the type of guy who passive aggressively told his Robins that they were failures. The weird thing was that their entire talk had been coated in so much grief and self-loathing that Dick couldn’t tell if Bruce had even realised what he had been saying by insisting that Jason and Stephanie had been bad Robins. Bruce had made it pretty clear that they both sacrificed themselves heroically and that he blamed himself for their death and coma. If he blamed himself for not rescuing them fast enough Dick would understand, but blaming himself for ever letting them become heroes just didn’t feel right to Dick. If they really were bad Robins then why hadn’t Bruce actually been able to come up with one legitimate reason why Dick and Tim were better?

The whole thing was so confusing, especially because Dick still didn’t fully understand what exactly had happened, and no one seemed willing to explain. He also found it weird that Bruce didn’t seem to blame Damian for his death, or at least he’d yet to say that he regretted letting Damian become Robin. Dick would have worried that there was some blood-son favouritism thing going on but he’d seen how Bruce had just yelled at his youngest son. Now, he figured that it really was all about Damian’s upbringing.

Amidst all the horror and stomach churning sickness he’d felt at Steph and Jason’s talk, he’d noticed that Damian had grown almost as pale as Tim. He remembered Bruce telling him that both Damian and Cassandra had been raised by assassins, and had never had a chance at a normal life. It made him wonder if Damian could relate to the stories of abuse being shared, but Dick knew better than to ask. He didn’t want to make Damian uncomfortable, especially since he was currently the best part of this future.

(Jason and Tim were cool, but they were just as clueless as Dick was about the future. Steph was fun and Babs was both chill and kind of intimidating, but Dick didn’t feel like he could trust them the way he trusted Damian. Not yet anyway, not after Bruce.)

Cass approached Jason, looking nervous but determined. Dick noticed that Bruce still had his hand on her shoulder. He could tell it was for comfort, not control, but he was still so angry he wanted to tug Bruce’s hand off her and yell at him to only come near Dick’s little siblings once he fixed his attitude.
The protectiveness he felt was so *strange*. He’d gone from being an orphaned, only child to the eldest of a large pack. At first it had been almost too much to deal with, but Dick felt like he had gotten the hang of it pretty quickly. Maybe being Robin was part of it, but the desire he felt to shelter and protect all these kids came almost instinctively to him.

Normally, instinct like that would be a good thing. However, the fact that these kids were his future family turned it into something weird and mind twisting. How much of these instincts were his and how much were remnants of his older self? Just how exactly did this spell work?

Before Dick could get too immersed in detective mode, Cass stuck out her hand. Everyone watched with bated breath as Jason stared at her. He glanced up at Stephanie, still clutching onto her arm. She smiled encouragingly at him and then hesitantly, he reached out and shook Cass’s hand.

Cass beamed at him, and everyone seemed to simultaneously sigh in relief as Jason grinned back.

“**My name’s Jason, by the way.** Didn’t get the chance to say that before.”

Cass nodded, and Stephanie ruffled Jason’s hair. Despite their bad moods, Dick and Damian both smiled at that.

Dick noticed that Bruce was smiling too, and his own face dropped. Bruce shouldn’t get to smile and take credit when Damian and Steph had basically done all the work here. From what Dick had heard when the adults were yelling, Bruce had only made things worse every time he tried to help. It wasn’t fair.

He missed *his* Bruce.

It took this Bruce ten minutes to fix the elevator. Tim watched him curiously the entire time, while Barbara gave helpful commentary and Jason handed him tools. Normally that was the kind of thing Dick would be interested in, but now the thought of watching Batman work his mojo didn’t feel anywhere near as fun as it did in his own reality. He hung back with Damian, wishing he knew what to say to take the scowl off his youngest brother’s face.

“**Everyone in.**” Bruce said, once he was done.

The ride up to the manor was awkward at best, and incredibly tense at worst. Despite the fact that they weren’t fighting anymore, Bruce, Tim and Jason all seemed wary about being trapped in such a close space with Cass. Dick wondered why he wasn’t as tense as them, and then realised it was because Damian was calm next to him. If Damian wasn’t scared of their sister then Dick wouldn’t be either, not unless she gave him a reason.

The tension eased when Alfred greeted them all in the dining room, plates stacked high with various different foods. Dick noticed a bowl of cereal at his favourite spot to sit, and he smiled. This Alfred was different, but he seemed like he was similar in all the ways that mattered most.

Judging from the delighted gasps, Alfred had prepared everyone’s favourite food, not just Dick’s. Jason and Tim sat down immediately, but Dick paused to give Alfred a tight hug, before sitting next to Damian.

“I see Miss Cassandra has decided to join us.” Alfred smiled down at the curious girl. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, young lady.”

Cass held out her hand. Alfred took it and dramatically bowed down to kiss it. Dick laughed, remembering when he’d first came to the manor and asked Alfred for help with English homework. They’d ended up putting on a two man play all by themselves. When Bruce got home he watched
the whole thing, and commended both the actors for their incredible performances.

Bruce had been light then. Not sunshine and rainbows, still with a noticeable aura of darkness and grief when he wasn’t pretending, but a whole lot brighter than the man who currently sat at the head of the table, staring at his children with a look that Dick could only describe as haunted.

Cass giggled in delight at Alfred’s theatrics, and Dick saw a smile flicker across Bruce’s face.

It would be easier to think this man was nothing like the Bruce he knew, but Dick couldn’t lie to himself. It wasn’t just the familiar mannerisms and the gentle look in his eyes when he spoke to Dick. It was the soft, loving, comfort of his hugs, the way he assured Dick over and over again that he was nothing but proud of him, the praise he’d given Jason when the boy had gotten him the correct pliers to fix the elevator. He wasn’t the Bruce Dick knew, but he was still Bruce Wayne.

Bruce was a good man. Dick didn’t want to believe that his Bruce could be capable of the conversation they’d had in his study. He wanted to believe that Bruce wouldn’t let any trauma, no matter how painful, twist him into the man sitting in front of him. The one who saw Tim’s nervous fidgeting, Damian’s unhappiness, the overwhelmed look on Cass’s face, Stephanie’s forced cheery smile and Dick’s anger, and just sat there and ate his food.

Dick felt foolish. He hadn’t known Bruce for that long after all, only a few months. But his Bruce would never have let all his family be so miserable, would he?

Sure, when he and Dick fought they both ate their dinner in sulky silence. But when they were at a gala and Bruce noticed any kids feeling bored or uncomfortable, he’d immediately go over and entertain them with a card trick or a funny story. Part of it was his public persona Dick was sure, but part of it was Bruce himself.

It was a terrible thought, but Dick couldn’t help but wonder where it had all gone wrong. Had it been Jason’s coma? Cassandra’s first death? Her second? Stephanie’s death? Damian’s?

Or had it been a combination of all of them that had changed Batman?

He ate his cereal quietly. Next to him, Damian munched on his salad with an anger that was almost impressive.

The meal was delicious, but the conversation was strained. It made Dick long for the circus and his parents, the memories of warm dinners in their caravan and nights spent laughing around a campfire still fresh in his mind. Stephanie, Alfred and Barbara did their best to keep the banter flowing, with Jason and Tim chiming in on occasion, but this meal lacked the natural, easy warmth of the circus. Heck, right now he’d settle for dinner at his own Wayne Manor, where Bruce asked Dick all about his day and joked with Alfred about the latest gossip surrounding him.

Now, this felt like a desperate imitation of a normal, happy family. So instead of throwing himself into pretending everything was fine, Dick sat back, preferring to watch the table and use the skills his Bruce taught him to assess the room.

Damian was angry and Bruce was sad. It was more complex than that, but if he started trying to unravel his feelings for them and their feelings for him Dick would never move on to the others. And if Bruce wasn’t going to ease the tension between his family, then Dick would have to try.

Jason was happy for the most part. He talked easily to Stephanie and Tim, and tried to include Dick and Damian in every single subject that got brought up. Dick faked a smile and laughed when he needed to, but what really got his attention was the way every few minutes, something would flicker
behind Jason’s eyes and he would zone out for around ten seconds.

Bruce’s voice in his head was telling Dick to make note of that. Jason’s lapses in concentration were something to be concerned about, and he couldn’t trust that anyone else was paying attention.

Other than that, Dick learnt a little bit more about Jason by studying him. Out of all the boys he was the most hesitant to ask for more food, and he seemed very worried that he wasn’t using the right fork. But when his plate was full, he wolfed down the food like he hadn’t eaten in days. It was as if he was scared that at any second they would judge him and deem him unworthy of eating with them. It was ridiculous, but Dick kind of understood. The huge dining table had been very intimidating back when it was just him and Bruce.

He moved on to Tim, and found that the boy seemed to be doing the exact same thing as Dick. Tim seemed much more at ease than Jason was with the eating and talking, but his eyes were sharp and flickered around almost too quickly for Dick to keep up. His middle brother was the most mysterious of the three so far, mostly because he was so good at playing a normal kid that Dick didn’t even think it was an act. Tim was normal, and at the same time he really wasn’t. It was something Dick had never encountered before, and that would have made him nervous except Tim seemed to be a genuine, good kid, and Dick trusted his gut instinct.

Cass caught his attention next, and he smiled as he watched her shovel food into her mouth. Like Jason she was completely unfamiliar with high society table manners, but unlike him she wasn’t making any effort to fit in. She ate with her hands and like Jason she relished every bite with a hunger that spoke of experience with starvation. It almost made Dick sad, picturing her childhood before Wayne Manor, but then she flicked a glob of chocolate ice cream onto Damian’s nose and he found himself laughing instead.

Damian forced himself to give her a tight-lipped smile, but Dick could tell his heart wasn’t in it. Abruptly, Damian stood up from the table and marched off. Dick went to follow him, but paused when Bruce stood up instead.

This was good right? Going after his clearly distraught son was something Dick’s Bruce would do. Except this wasn’t Dick’s Bruce, and he didn’t trust him like that.

Dick gave him a twenty second head start, then slipped after them. He was a bit worried he’d be stopped, but Alfred just gave him a sad smile and a nod, before pouring Barbara another glass of wine.

He crept down the hallway, pausing when he heard voices.

“You’ve made it perfectly clear what you think about my assistance. I’d probably just screw it up anyway, wouldn’t I?”

“Damian please. Just talk to him. My conversation with him went horribly and I don’t think anything I say will be enough. But I can see that he likes you so please, help him.”

“This is killing you isn’t it? Needing my help.”

“Damian, I know you’re angry at me, but I also know you love Dick. After this we can talk, but for now you don’t need to do this for me. Do it for him.”

“What would you have me say? Would you have me lie to him and try to feed him propaganda about how you’re Father of the Year?
“No of course not. Just be honest.”

“How can you be certain I won’t turn him against you? Corrupt your firstborn beyond repair?”

“Because I trust you Damian.”

It was silent after that. Dick wished he could see their faces, but for now all he had to go on was the sound of two people breathing.

“You can come out now Dick.”

Dick jumped, but accepting that he had been busted, he crept around the corner. Damian and Bruce were standing there, face to face.

“I’ll leave you two to it then.” Bruce said softly.

It wasn’t fair that he looked at him like Dick’s Bruce. It wasn’t fair that he gave Dick a sad smile before turning the corner and leaving them be. It wasn’t fair that Dick couldn’t just write him off as a version of Bruce Wayne gone wrong.

Thankfully, he had a distraction. Damian was shaking, and Dick couldn’t tell if it was from anger, sadness, shock, or some mix of unidentifiable emotions.

“Are you ok?” Dick asked hesitantly.

Damian opened his mouth, made a noise that sounded like a cross between a cat hissing and a dog growling, then shook his head.

It was clear that Damian needed his big brother, but for all his determination to help his little siblings, right now Dick felt totally useless. He didn’t know this world, not like Damian and his older self did. He didn’t know enough of their history, and he didn’t know what to say to make it better, so he did the only thing he could.

He reached over and pulled Damian into a hug. For a second Damian instinctively went tense. Then his little brother practically melted against him, going limp in his arms in a way that Dick hadn’t thought possible for someone who held themselves so rigidly. Something about the way Damian clutched at him made tears spring into Dick’s eyes.

Suddenly he found himself being the one getting hugged, and Damian was holding him tightly as he cried and cried.

“It’s not fair.” Dick sobbed. “It’s not fair.”

“It’s not.” Damian agreed dully. “But we take what we can get, and we do the best we can with it.”

Dick gave him one last fierce hug, then stepped back.

“He shouldn’t have treated you the way he did in the cave. It’s because of you that our sister isn’t out roaming the streets of Gotham!”

“No, it was my fault.” Damian shrugged half-heartedly. “I went against his orders. Of course he would be angry and disappointed in me.”

“I’ve gone against his orders from time to time.” Dick admitted. “And he’s angry at first yeah, but he always congratulates me afterwards for taking the bad guy down.”
“That sounds nice.” Damian said, almost wistfully. “Unfortunately, when you lose a Robin after he disobeyed you, even though his intentions were pure, it becomes a lot harder to encourage impulse decisions.”

“Oh.” Dick said. “I didn’t think of it like that.”

Damian gave another bitter smile. Dick really hated it when he did that.

“He’s still mean.” Dick said stubbornly. “He should at least thank us for babysitting the civilians while he was kidnapping our sister.”

Damian’s lips twitched at that. The beginnings of a genuine smile.

“Father is a complicated man.” he said quietly. “It would be nice if we could just say that he is Good or Bad, but alas the more time I spend with him the more foolish that simple dichotomy appears.”

Damian ducked his head while Dick absorbed that silently. When he looked back up, there was a smirk on his face.

“You’re still my favourite Batman of course.”

Dick grinned at that. He was getting better at distinguishing the good weird from the bad weird, and being Batman in the future was a good weird, especially since it hadn’t been permanent.

“Tell me, one Robin to another. Do you think I should give Bruce a second chance?”

“That depends.” Damian studied him carefully. “If you think you can forgive and forget whatever you fought about then certainly.”

“I can’t.” Dick said immediately. “But I… I can’t hate him either.”

The admission seemed to drain the last of Dick’s energy, and suddenly he felt very much like going to bed.

“Then don’t.” Damian said simply. “Hold off on passing judgement until you get to know him better. And if you have another fight I’ll always be here to help. It’s only fair considering the amount I ranted to you when Father and I first became partners.”

“Ok.” Dick took a deep breath, then nodded. “Yeah. Ok. That sounds good.”

“Excellent.”

The silence hung between them, more peaceful than the one they had left behind in the dining hall.

“Race you back?”

Damian smirked.

“I’ll win.” he warned, and then he took off.

Dick laughed, and gave chase.
After a long day the kids finally rest. The next morning, they decide to explore. Splitting up isn't always a great idea.
The Outsider

Chapter Summary

Cass observes, explores, and makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was night-time. Again. The whole thing was very confusing for Cass.

She’d spent the day wandering the city she now knew was called Hong Kong. Then Batman had kidnapped her and she was put in a cave where she had no idea what time it was. Damian had explained to her that due to travelling across the world really fast they were still on the same day, just in a different place which was a lot behind Hong Kong.

So now night had once again come, and this time there would be no exploring of the new city.

It was nice, knowing what was going on. But she missed the freedom of being able to run off and go wherever she wanted. It was strange having people who were worried about her, and she wasn’t sure she liked it. It reminded her of Cain.

Barbara led her to a bedroom and explained to her that Batman and Stephanie would be patrolling Gotham and fighting crime. Cass liked that. It was a good thing to do, and it gave her a little more faith in Damian’s claim that Batman was someone she loved and respected. Cassandra Wayne would be fighting by their side if she hadn’t been shrunken to a ten-year old, and that was one thing Cass could respect about her future self.

Damian wanted to go out with them, but had been told to stay behind and help guard the kids with Alfred and Barbara. Cass had been surprised when he didn’t snarl or snap or use any words to vent the anger she could see rolling off him in waves. Instead he gave Batman a cold nod and left.

She was impressed. Judging by Batman’s face, Damian’s scorn had been expressed much better that way.

She decided to go to bed once it got dark outside. It was clear nothing was going to happen, so she let Barbara take her to Cassandra’s room.

Her room, technically, but it didn’t feel like it.

She looked at the posters on the wall. One, in black and white, was of men playing instruments at a huge concert and screaming. The second poster was of a group of men she didn’t recognize posing for a picture. Another band maybe? They had no instruments, but their clothes were dark and ripped like the men in the first poster and they had a similar attitude in their eyes. Not anger, but something close.

Strangely enough, next to these two posters was one of a woman dressed in pink. She had a serious expression on her face, and her body was poised in a way that Cass found surprising, especially her toes. That level of strength and balance was very difficult for most humans. She wondered if the poster had been edited, but it looked real enough.
Cass didn’t understand what any of the posters meant. Every new thing she learnt about Cassandra Wayne made her more of a mystery to Cass.

She could sense Barbara lingering in the doorway behind her. She kept her eyes on the posters, until after a minute, Barbara left.

Cass was relieved. She didn’t want to talk to anyone right now, even though she was starting to like Barbara. The woman moved in a way that was similar to Damian and Alfred. They were tense, ready to spring into action, and their eyes tracked every move she made. Cass wasn’t offended. She moved the same way in this unfamiliar manor: prepared for something to go wrong, but hoping it wouldn’t.

Batman was different. His body was just as prepared and his eyes were just as sharp, but there was an anger to his movements that the others didn’t have. True, Damian had plenty of anger, but none of it was related to Cass. She couldn’t tell if Batman was angry at her, or for her, or something else entirely. He hid it too well, to the point where she wondered if he even knew himself.

Jason and Tim were pretty simple. They smiled at her, but they were scared. They didn’t want to be, but considering how easily she’d beaten Jason she found it understandable. They spoke nice words to her, and they didn’t want to hurt her, but their bodies betrayed them and showed her their fear.

Dick had been like that too, at first. He’d looked at her with the same wariness as her other two shrunken brothers, but something had changed. She’d noticed him staring as Damian interacted with her, and after that he’d lost all fear entirely. His smiles were genuine, and she was confused by how easily he trusted her now.

And then there was Stephanie. Stephanie was… baffling. Her body was like Dick, she had no fear of Cass. Cass could tell that Steph had been trained, she had the same awareness and tension as Damian and Babs. The lack of fear made no sense. Stephanie was tense around Damian, tense around Batman and then around Cass she was just not.

Except for her eyes.

There was fear in her eyes when she looked at Cass, and Cass didn’t understand it. She wasn’t scared that Cass was going to hurt her, because her body was relaxed and unafraid. So why did she look at Cass with such guarded eyes? What kind of strange fear did she have? It made no sense to Cass, none at all.

She thought about all this as she lay in bed, tossing and turning but unable to sleep. Eventually, she slipped out of her room. She may not be allowed outside the manor, but she could still walk around inside. If she could find Damian, he might be able to help explain about Batman and Dick and Steph.

She crept through the halls, listening for signs of life. After a minute of silence, she came to a stop outside a room, hearing the sounds of heavy breathing inside. She opened it quietly, smiling when she saw Damian’s head asleep in the bed.

Then she noticed the body curled into him, as well as the two asleep on the floor.

Dick was snuggled in next to Damian under the covers. She couldn’t tell for certain, but it looked like he had one hand wrapped around Damian’s chest. On the floor below them, Jason and Tim slept back to back in a nest of blankets and pillows.

It was a cute little family scene. She closed the door behind her on her way out.
Alfred was waiting outside. He looked down at Cass with soft eyes, and she didn’t understand why.

“Master Dick was the first one to sneak in, therefore he got the privilege of sharing the bed. Master Jason and Master Tim went in at around the same time. Neither of them wanted to leave even though it was clear there was no more room in the bed, hence the pile of pillows and blankets on the floor.”

She nodded, unsure of what else he wanted from her.

“You can join them too, if you wish. There are plenty of pillows to spare.”

She thought about it, then shook her head. Those boys were Cassandra’s pack, not hers. True, she had Damian, but she wasn’t going to steal him from his brothers when they clearly needed each other.

Cass had never needed anyone before. She didn’t need them now. If Damian was still there in the morning, she could ask him her questions then.

She could tell Alfred was disappointed, but he just smiled and let her go back to Cassandra’s room.

She stayed awake for a while longer, just in case anyone tried to kidnap her again. Maybe Alfred would try to knock her out so he could force her to sleep in with her brothers.

Alfred didn’t try to knock her out, which was good. When she woke up at dawn the next morning, her room was the same as it had been last night, nothing out of place.

Her hand still went under the pillow, searching for the knife she’d swiped at dinner.

She waited in her room until she heard the sound of footsteps and loud voices. She heard Dick and Jason yelling something enthusiastically, and Damian replying sarcastically. Tim was quiet, but she heard a fourth set of footsteps, as well as wheels rolling along the hard, wooden floor.

She waited another half an hour before emerging. When she did, the first thing she saw almost made her turn around and walk back in.

Stephanie was curled up asleep on the sofa outside her room. Cass continued not to understand a single thing about her future best friend.

She walked passed Steph, wrinkling her nose as the girl continued to sleep peacefully. If she was supposed to be keeping watch on Cass she was doing a bad job. Steph was no trained assassin like Damian, but Cass saw the way she moved. It was almost disappointing that she didn’t wake up as Cass snuck by her.

She followed the noises to a big room filled with comfy chairs. The boys and Barbara were sitting inside, watching something on the television.

“I still don’t understand why we decided on Pirates of the Caribbean.” Damian said grumpily. “The amount of historical inaccuracies and ridiculous plot holes hardly makes it an enjoyable movie to watch.”

“Shush grandpa.” Jason laughed. “Dick and I have never seen these before, and right now Jack Sparrow is plenty entertaining for me.”

“I like Will better.” Dick chimed in. “He’s funny, but not as try-hard as Jack.”

“Just remember that there are two more movies to go, and Elizabeth has the best character
development.” Barbara informed them. “In my opinion she’s the true protagonist of the series.”

“As someone who’s seen all three movies, let me just say that Barbossa is the best, hands down.”

The others started loudly disagreeing with Tim, but Cass was distracted by the sounds of footsteps behind her.

Good. She hadn’t overestimated Stephanie after all.

“If you’re wondering, Alfred’s in the kitchen and Bruce is down in the cave. He says he has work to do but I think he’s trying to come up with the best way to approach all of you without making things worse. I’d bet money that he’s actually writing a pros and cons list right now.”

Cass didn’t respond, listening to the sound of sea splashing and swords clashing. She couldn’t see the screen, but the film sounded fun.

“You can join them you know. No one will mind. I’m pretty sure they’d actually like it better if you did.”

Cass shook her head.

She waited for Stephanie to push the issue some more, but she remained quiet. Cass studied the room a little closer, frowning when she noticed Jason.

The other boys were watching the screen, and he had been too up until a few seconds ago. But now she could tell that he was no longer paying attention. His eyes were distant, and his fingers had stopped fidgeting.

“Lazarus pits have some nasty side effects. You took a dip in one too, back in the future.”

Damian had mentioned that. He hadn’t talked about the side effects.

“Have you had any moments like that? Anything that makes you worry that you’re not fully in control of your mind?”

Cass shook her head again.

“Oh.” Stephanie seemed surprised by that. “Well, I mean your brain doesn’t work exactly like the rest of ours, so I guess that makes sense.”

Cass didn’t know what she meant by that, and she didn’t care.

She watched as Jason came back to himself. His head shook a little, and his eyes darted around in panic in case anyone had noticed. Everyone kept staring at the screen, so after a few seconds he settled down and continued watching the film like nothing had happened.

Cass felt sick at the sight of his falsely cheerful smile. She turned and walked away from the room, huffing a sigh as Stephanie followed behind her. Looks like she was right in assuming she had a monitor. Had Stephanie asked for the job? Cass wasn’t sure, they were supposed to be friends but that strange fear in her eyes was still confusing.

“Where are you going now? Just planning on wandering in circles until you find something fun?”

Cass glanced behind her, shot Stephanie a glare, and burst into a sprint.

“Oh, so you’re trying to lose me? Sorry kiddo, that’s not going to happen.”
She didn’t need to lose Stephanie. She just needed to get to the study. The manor held nothing for her, this much she was sure. But the caves where Batman lived, they seemed much more interesting. Hopefully Batman wouldn’t try to imprison her again. She wasn’t sure she was ready for that rematch just yet.

Something caught her eye and she skidded to a halt. There was another room with another television. This one had a woman talking, saying that she was live from Gotham City. Cass walked closer, fascinated by the footage of this city she apparently lived in, but had yet to see.

“Rich people are wild. Pretty sure there are like six TVs in this manor and two of them have never been used.”

Cass watched as sirens blared in the background, while the woman on screen got more and more frantic, talking about three people dead and a gunman still on the loose.

“We checked with the police. They have it covered, and if they don’t we’ll give them a hand in an hour.”

Cass needed to go there. She needed to be in this city that her older self had been so content to settle down and protect. She needed to see why.

Walking out the front door wouldn’t work, but the caves… that could do it.

She took off again, and she heard Stephanie give one tired sigh before following.

“I was up all night dealing with Arkham nonsense. Would it kill you to walk?”

She heard Stephanie hesitate when they reached Bruce’s study, and she sped up, bursting through the door, leaping over the desk, and running straight for where the elevator was hidden.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea kid. Bruce isn’t going to be happy about this.”

Cass snorted, and pressed the button for the lift.

After a few seconds the doors opened, and Batman stood in front of her, his arms crossed.

“Hello Cassie. Stephanie.”

“Bruce!” Stephanie chuckled nervously. “I can explain we were just-”

“Come on down.”

“-playing… Wait what?”

He stared down at Cass. She stared back.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it? To go down to the cave?”

Cass stepped into the elevator.

“Stephanie? Are you coming too?”

“Oh my God.” She heard Steph groan. “Yeah, sure, why not.”

Cass had felt the awkward tension in her first elevator ride out of the cave. This one was just plain awkward.
The doors opened, and she stepped out. Everything was just the way it was yesterday, except her cage was gone.

“I’m working on a case, but feel free to look around. Let me know if you need anything.”

Judging from how surprised Stephanie looked, none of this was normal Batman behaviour. Perhaps she had been right when she said he was trying not to mess this up any further.

Cass continued to stand in front of the elevator, taking in every inch of the main cave. Which hole was the best escape route? Some of the caves connected with the main one were lit up, but some were dark. Dark would probably have less security to get past, but Batman would probably know them better, and since he was typing away at the computer it didn’t look like he was going anywhere. She eyed all the weapons she could see stashed away in a section of the main cave. She didn’t need a weapon, but if she walked over to them would they stop her? Seated at the computer, Batman was at the centre of the cave. It was the perfect position for him to keep an eye on her; there was no one area she could go to that was any further from him than another.

An alarm started blaring, and both she and Stephanie reached for the nearest weapon.

“The gunman situation seems to have gotten out of hand.” Bruce strode over to the sleek, black car parked on a strange circular platform. “Stephanie can you stay here and look after Cassandra? This shouldn’t take too long, no need to alert the others unless it turns out to be connected to that minor Arkham breakout last night.”

“Uh. Sure.” Stephanie blinked, stunned. “Have you inhaled any dangerous chemicals, by the way?”

Cass saw Batman’s lips give the tiniest twitch.

“You keep assuring me that all you want is what’s best for Cassie. Prove it. Protect her.”

Cass didn’t need protecting, but Stephanie looked like she was about to cry so she let them have this moment.

She almost felt guilty as Batman drove off, but this opportunity was too good not to take. No doubt he’d be very angry at both of them when he got back and realised that Cass had left the manor. But they told her she wasn’t a prisoner anymore, so now she was going to prove it.

She gave Stephanie an apologetic smile, then sprinted towards the caves.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Jason's feeling worse every second, and he really wishes he could talk to Stephanie. Unfortunately she's stuck chasing Cass through a maze of dark tunnels.
The Delusional

Chapter Summary

Jason doesn't know what's real anymore. All he knows is that he wants it to stop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Cassandra Wayne get back here right now!”

There was no response, only the sound of footsteps running even further into the dark.

Stephanie growled angrily, and continued to follow Cass. She hadn’t really expected the Scary Mom Voice to work, since young Cass didn’t have a mother and didn’t understand the terrifying implications of that voice. She didn’t have a clue if the kid actually knew where she was going, especially considering she didn’t have a torch like Stephanie did.

“You know the further in you go the more likely it is we’ll die down here. They’ll never find our bodies! We’ll become a myth, this one girl who ran off into the caves for no reason and her best friend who sacrificed herself in a noble attempt to get her back!”

Still no response. She caught a flash of Cass’s dark hair in the torchlight and changed direction.

“You couldn’t just sit around for one day, could you? All the boys are happy to watch TV and stay safe while under this stupid spell but no, you have to be different!”

This time it was Cass’s face she found with the torch. Cass stuck her tongue out at her, and ran away.

“You little brat!” Stephanie yelled, giving chase. “You know when Batman finds out he’s going to be really disappointed in you! Damian too! They’ll all cry because they want you to be safe and you’re scaring them. How does that make you feel?”

Cass gave no response, which was fair enough considering she couldn’t talk. Steph had sent Barbara a quick text before running into the tunnels, but she knew without a doubt that if she didn’t come back with Cass before Batman finished handling the gunman, Cass wouldn’t be the one they were disappointed in.

“You know this is kind of a big deal for me! Bruce finally trusts me with something, which shouldn’t matter to me because he’s a jerk but for some dumb reason it really does, and you go and screw it all up! Thanks a lot Cass, great friend you’re being. I’m going to be so mad at you when you grow back up.”

Cass deliberately let Stephanie get close enough to see the unimpressed look on her face, then took off.

Stephanie struggled to hold on to her annoyance and not the other negative emotions that look had triggered in her. Of course, Cass didn’t care. Why would she? Steph was a fuck up who couldn’t even handle looking after one ten-year-old. All she did was screw everything up, it was a miracle
she’d gotten Bruce to trust her with Cass and now he’d probably never trust her with anything ever again and why should he? Why should any of them care about stupid Stephanie Brown?

She took a breath.

*Enough of that bullshit,* she told herself.

She was Batgirl, and she didn’t have time for a breakdown all because a fucking *child* didn’t respect her. Cass *did* care about her, she just didn’t know it. Stephanie had earned Cass’s friendship, had proven herself worthy to be Cass’s ally over and over again. She deserved to have one relationship within this twisted Bat-family that she could trust, and younger Cass not seeing Steph’s worth would not send her into a ridiculous spiral of self-doubt.

What did Cass know anyway? She was ten. Her older self was clearly a much better judge of character.

“Have you ever been grounded before?” she called into the darkness. “Silly question, of course you haven’t. Well that’s probably not going to happen because you’ve got the big scary Bat wrapped around your pinky finger, but whatever, a girl can dream.”

Was it just Stephanie’s imagination, or was the darkness getting slightly… less dark?

“Hey Cass, if you come back with me now I’ll stop talking! How does that sound? Pretty good deal, right?”

No, things were definitely getting brighter. Had they circled around and found their way back into the Batcave? There was a light up ahead, but it didn’t look artificial. Where the hell was Cass leading them?

She stepped out into the light, and found herself on a hill overlooking the city. Cass sat calmly on the grass, waiting for Stephanie.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to come back to the manor with me?”

Cass shook her head.

Stephanie chewed on her lip, debating her options. She could try and physically drag Cass back, but the chances of her succeeding were slim, and all she would accomplish would be making Cass hate her. If she indulged Cass, the others wouldn’t be pleased, and probably wouldn’t be understanding, but it was safer for Cass if Stephanie was with her as she roamed Gotham. After a moment of mulling it over, she sighed.

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“Fine. I’ll take you into the city. But listen up! You stay by my side for the entire time. We are going directly to my apartment and waiting there until the rest of the family comes to yell at you. If I tell you to do something do it, understand? Now either you agree to these rules or I will pick you up and drag you back into the cave. I don’t give a damn if you’re a better martial artist, I’m taller than you and I will pick you up, got it?”

Cass nodded, looking more amused than intimidated. Steph decided to take it as a personal victory anyway.

She sent Barbara another text, then began the trek down the hill.

“Hey kid, when Bruce kills me, do me a favour and make sure I get a memorial in the cave this time.”
They took a break after the first movie to get dressed. Jason was careful putting on Damian’s fancy clothes. There were no labels or price tags visible but somehow, they just felt expensive. Once the kids were dressed, they decided to save the second movie for later because Dick was curious about the Wii. There was a brief but intense debate over Super Mario Bros vs Mario Kart vs Super Smash Bros, but eventually Mario Bros won out when Barbara decided to cast a vote too.

So here Jason was, mashing buttons as fast as he could while his blue toad narrowly avoided being attacked by a mole creature. Dick, Barbara and Tim were also playing, but Damian opted out, calling the game ‘juvenile nonsense’. Jason had a feeling Damian just wasn’t good at Mario, especially since he spent most of his time glaring at the screen and insulting their gaming skills. The only one he didn’t insult was Barbara, mostly because her Luigi was basically carrying all of them on her back, with occasional help from Tim’s yellow toad.

He blinked, and suddenly they were underground and his character had just fallen down a hole.

Damn it. He’d blanked again. At least he didn’t remember this one, but they were getting more and more frequent and he didn’t know how to stop them. He cast a quick look around, but no one seemed to have noticed his slip.

They moved on to the next level, and Jason concentrated as hard as he could on dodging the enemies. He only had to bubble once the entire level, and he cheered in delight when Tim beat Barbara to the finish pole by one second. Judging by Barbara’s smile she had let him win, but Tim was practically glowing so no one wanted to call her out on it.

“Nice work Timmy!”

Dick reached out and ruffled Tim’s hair. Tim beamed with happiness and puffed out his chest. It made Jason smile, and he didn’t even like Tim that much.

They were up to the first tower level now, and Jason grinned with excitement as the ominous music began. Weirdly enough, as well as the deep chanting and creepy piano, it sounded like there was deranged clown laughing mixed in between the notes. Had Nintendo somehow gotten the Joker to record a few lines?

Dick paused the game for a bathroom break, and the laughter continued.

Shit. Shit shit shit it was in his head.

Jason looked frantically around him, but everyone else was completely relaxed. He really was the only one who could hear the Joker right now. Why the hell was this happening to him?

Bruce had told him that it was because of something called the Lazarus Pits. Back then Jason still hadn’t been blanking, only feeling strangely numb and detached, like he belonged in the ground. Now, after a sleep filled with confusing nightmares that he could only remember vague flashes of, he wasn’t just blanking anymore. It was getting worse.

Bruce told Jason to talk to him or Barbara if things got too much, but he didn’t want to tell her with Tim and Damian listening. He didn’t want them to think he was crazy.

Dick came back and the game resumed. The Joker’s laughter mixed back in with the background music. Jason pressed 2 to jump, and suddenly his dad was right in front of him, screaming in his face, eyes clouded with alcohol.

Jason actually jumped backwards on the couch. When he blinked his dad was gone.
“You ok Jason?” Dick asked, concerned. “It’s just a game, doesn’t matter if you die.”

“Right.” Jason took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. “Doesn’t matter.”

He focused back onto the screen. His toad narrowly avoided being squashed, and for some reason it felt like Jason’s chest actually got crushed. As he dodged Jason watched as his vision changed, and instead of Dick and Tim in front of him it was the gang of boys who used to bully him for liking school. He remembered this day, where the ringleader had kicked him in the chest and the others had joined in until Jason had been bruised and bleeding. After that day, Jason learnt how to fight back. The next time the boys came for him, he stuck a knife in the ringleader’s thigh and knocked the rest of them out with a baseball bat.

The vision disappeared as quickly as it came, but Jason couldn’t help the shudder that ran through him. He quickly pressed the necessary buttons to stop his toad from dying. The feeling of unreality was heavier than it had been since he’d arrived in this strange dream future. Part of Jason wondered if this meant he was going to wake up soon. The other part of him remembered the haunted look on Bruce’s face, and worried that the growing numbness was actually a sign he was going in the opposite direction.

They entered the boss battle. Jason’s grip tightened on the controller. Instead of whatever cartoonish villain they were meant to be fighting, the guy he saw on the screen was his mom’s local dealer.

This wasn’t normal. He needed to talk to someone. Did no one else notice this?

He looked around, and his stomach dropped at the way the others were carefully staring at the screen. They had noticed, all of them, and they were deliberately ignoring it. Why? Were they worried that he’d lash out if they confronted him? Were they scared of him? Did they just not know what was going on?

I’m not crazy. I’m not I’m not I’m not.

Bruce told him to talk to Barbara, and yes, she seemed cool. She was calm, and good at Mario, and had this really intelligent look to her eyes. Jason liked Barbara, and she seemed like the kind of grown up he could talk to if he got to know her. But right now, he didn’t know her, and he couldn’t trust her with this.

He needed to talk to someone though. He needed… He needed…

He needed his mom.

His vision switched again, this time to a scene Jason had never experienced before. It was set in his own apartment, and it was like something out of his worst nightmares. His mom lay dull eyed in their grimy bathtub, holes in her arms and a needle next to her. Jason felt himself reach out, shaking her frantically. He wasn’t in the manor anymore. This wasn’t just a vision, his mother’s cold skin felt too real for that.

“Mom! Mom! Mommy come on, please.” He could feel himself start to cry. “Mommy please wake up. MOM!”

“Jason!” Someone else was shaking him now, but it felt like a ghost. “Jason talk to me, what’s going on?”

“What’s happening to him?” That was Damian’s voice. “Gordon explain this! What’s the matter with him?”
“It’s the Lazarus pit.” He heard Barbara’s voice, but all he could see was his mother’s dead body. “Bruce was worried about this. It’s the same thing that happened with Cass; the magic came back with him. Right now, it looks like he’s experiencing the madness for the first time all over again. We were hoping that considering the circumstances, the temporary blackouts would be the worst of it. Unfortunately, it looks like the effects are getting more and more unpleasant.”

“What can we do?” That was Dick. “We have to help him!”

“Is there a cure?” Tim sounded scared. “Is there something we can inject him with?”

Jason looked down at the needles littering the ground, smelt the stench coming from the bathtub, and screamed.

“Damn it!” He felt someone else’s hands on him. “Come on Todd, come back to us! Don’t do this now that Father isn’t here.”

Bruce. He needed Bruce. Bruce was Batman, and he was nice, and Bruce cared about him and they trusted each other. Bruce was his dad in this weird future, and somehow that had become the only thing that didn’t feel completely unnatural.

“Bruce!” he whimpered. “Where’s Bruce?”

“Bruce isn’t here!” Damian sounded angrier and more panicked than Jason had ever heard. “Fix this Oracle! Fix this now!”

“It can’t be fixed Damian.” Barbara’s voice was quiet and solemn. “Bruce and I spent every spare second last night researching any possible way to ease his suffering. There’s no cure for this. Sedation won’t work, in fact drugs will make it worse. The only thing we can do is let him ride it out.”

“No, you’re wrong.” Damian sounded frantic. “You’re wrong Gordon! Why are you lying to me?”

“Damian-”

“Father told me to protect them!” Damian’s voice broke. “He told me this morning that he saw how they trusted me and he wanted me to look after them until this all wore off! And now he’s going to come back and see this and-”

Jason could hear the dripping sound of water leaking out of the bathroom tap. It sounded so much more real than the voices arguing in his head.

“Damian calm down. Bruce won’t hate you for this.”

Jason felt like throwing up as he continued shaking his mother and screaming. He could hear their voices, but it was like they were talking inside his head. He wanted Bruce, but Bruce wasn’t here. Who else could help him? Who else understood?

“Stephanie!” he cried out. “Where’s Steph? I need her!”

“Brown! He wants Brown, where is she?”

Bruce wasn’t coming. Maybe he wasn’t even Batman. Did Stephanie even exist in reality? This wasn’t real. None of this was real. Was anything real? Jason didn’t know anymore.

“She sent me a text an hour ago. Cass wanted to explore the caves so she’s gone off chasing her.”
“Well tell her to come up here! Cassandra can handle herself.”

Hot tears kept streaming down Jason’s face. His mother continued staring up at the ceiling, unmoving no matter how much he shook her cold, rigid shoulders.

“I can’t do that Damian.”

“Why not? Jason needs her and Cassandra doesn’t!”

“Cassie does need her. She just doesn’t know it. Plus, I’m fairly sure Bruce gave Steph a similar talk about trust and protection like he gave you. How would you feel if one of the boys was running around beneath the manor?”

The voices stilled, and for a second Jason was back in the room with the Wii. Tim was standing a metre away, looking down at Jason with wide, scared eyes. Dick and Damian were right next to him, looking just as scared as Tim with one hand on each of Jason’s shoulders. Barbara was right behind them, and while he could see she was also scared her gaze was a lot calmer and more analytical. Jason actually liked that, there was a level of competence in the way she looked at him that was reassuring. This sucked, but Barbara wasn’t panicking. She knew he was going to survive this.

On the TV screen, the game of Super Mario Bros continued, although no one was paying attention anymore. The boss that had morphed into the drug dealer had disappeared, and in his place was the Joker. Jason watched dizzily as the Joker ran into Jason’s toad.

His blue toad flailed around on screen, then dramatically fell off and died.

Jason’s world went green.

He screamed as pain erupted from his shoulder. It felt like someone had just hit him with something sharp and metal. He screamed again as he felt another blow, this time to his ribs. His screams turned into choking as the blows continued. This was worse than any beating he’d ever received. It felt like someone was genuinely trying to kill him.

All the voices and music were gone now. All that was left was the Joker’s maniacal cackle.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Tim watches over Jason while the others try to help him, and Cass explores Gotham.
The Burdened

Chapter Summary

Tim gains more stress. Cass finds a way to release some of hers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim had a stomach-ache.

It happened frequently whenever he was in a stressful situation, and these past few hours had been nothing but stressful. He wanted to talk to someone about it, but the only person in the room was Jason, and he was lying in bed, unconscious and with a wet towel on his forehead. Every time Tim started complaining in his head, he would look at Jason and the guilt would immediately make him shove his problems to the back of his mind. It was impossible to care about himself when the boy right next to him was going through so much worse right now.

Alfred had put the towel on Jason to keep his fever down. Tim had been grateful, because he had no idea what to do. It turned out that the internet was not good at giving accurate medical advice.

Technically, Tim wasn’t meant to have internet at all. It had been his suggestion that got Alfred to switch off the Wayne Manor internet. But what the others didn’t realise was that Tim still had his older self’s phone, and that phone came with built in wi-fi. It was pretty cool; how much technology had advanced in the seven years between Tim’s real life and his future.

Next to him, Jason moaned a little, turning frantically in the bed before settling down again.

Tim’s clothes were too big on him. That shouldn’t be a problem, shouldn’t even be something that bothered him right now, but Damian was a much bigger ten-year-old than Tim and the jumper Tim was wearing now felt like it was dragging him down, adding extra pressure to his chest.

His stomach really, really hurt.

There was the sound of angry stomping outside the door, which Tim assumed was Damian. Barbara had gone straight to the cave, ordering them to update her if Jason’s situation worsened. Tim assumed she was going over her research from last night, and probably keeping an eye on everything else that was going on. She was the only adult crime fighter in the house right now, and from what little research Tim had done on Oracle she had a whole lot of responsibilities extending far beyond the manor.

Damian had only stayed in Jason’s bedroom for ten minutes before leaving. Tim understood why, waiting around made you feel useless, but Damian was spiralling badly and it wasn’t helping anyone. Tim and Dick had heard the shouting match between him and Oracle, which mostly consisted of Damian insisting that she wasn’t doing enough and Barbara retorting that all he was doing was slowing her down so he should try and find another way to be helpful.

Alfred had come in after that with fever medicine and a damp towel, which prompted Dick to get up and find Damian. Part of Tim was sad that Dick left him with Jason, but most of him understood that
Dick was the best choice to calm Damian down. Damian tolerated Tim, but Dick was the one he actually liked. It made sense.

So now it was just Tim and Jason. Dick and Alfred both came by every ten minutes or so, Dick to check up and report to Oracle, Alfred to nurse Jason as best he could. In between those visits, Tim just sat on a chair next to Jason’s bed and tried to figure out what he could do to help.

Nothing. The conclusion he came to was that he could do nothing.

Alfred knew the medical stuff, Barbara had the tools and knowledge for better research, Damian was much more familiar with this world than Tim, and Dick was better at soothing people. There was nothing Tim could contribute to their mission of saving Jason other than sitting by Jason’s bedside and constantly monitoring him.

So far, Jason was the same as he’d been since he screamed and collapsed. He jerked around a little every now and then, and his forehead was constantly creased, but he didn’t seize up or vomit or do anything else that would make Tim yell for the others.

Tim wondered why he wasn’t freaking out like Damian or Dick. Had all this had sent him into shock, or maybe he was still in shock from his parents’ death and this was just an extra layer?

He looked down at his phone, and the tab he had opened. Google search results for *Jack and Janet Drake’s death*.

The tab had been open for ten minutes. Tim still hadn’t clicked any of the links. He knew he would eventually, but there was no rush. The information would still be there, and his parents would still be dead. He could take all the time he needed to steel himself.

Jason twitched, and Tim immediately put the phone down. For whatever reason, he always held his breath every time Jason moved, as if Tim breathing too heavily would make his condition worse.

Tim let out his breath, but it still felt like he wasn’t breathing. Jason’s eyes locked onto his, and Tim realised that he was lucid.

Once, a few years ago, Tim had been alone in his house, flicking through TV channels. He’d found a documentary on war veterans, and he’d watched the whole thing. It had been interesting, learning about the aftermath of such traumatic experiences as well as how society treated those who came back different to how they left. But Tim could hardly remember the documentary, because one part had overshadowed the whole thing.

There had been a man, who’d fought in Vietnam and lost his leg. He’d sat on his front porch and given the documentary crew an interview, but Tim couldn’t recall a single word the man said, not even his name. He’d been too struck by the man’s face. ‘Haunted’ was putting it lightly.

The man’s face was sunken and hollow, his skin had an unnatural yellow tinge, and his eyes, his eyes gave Tim nightmares for weeks. His nanny had put parental controls on the TV after Tim woke up screaming, and that had upset him so much that when his parents got back from their dig they’d fired the nanny despite Tim insisting it was fine.

But that wasn’t the point. The point was that the man’s eyes had been tormented in a way Tim had never seen. Throughout the whole interview Tim had been captivated by the grim burden he saw in them. They spoke a truth of the world that Tim had been too young to understand, an emptiness he had yet to encounter from the safe and sheltered life he lived. Tim had been fascinated and terrified
all at once, wanting to know more but at the same time scared of the answers he might find.

Now, with Jason looking at him, all Tim could think of was how much his brother’s eyes reminded him of that documentary. Anything Tim wanted to say to Jason caught in his throat. What could he say? Despite all his research, all his knowledge about the future, Tim now knew for certain that he didn’t have a clue what Jason had been through. The look in his eyes was that of a darkness Tim had never touched, and he had no clue how to respond to it.

“Tim.” Jason whispered.

Tim nodded, his head jerking stiffly up and down.

Jason looked around the room, and then looked at Tim. His eyes shifted again, looking wearier and resigned instead of anguished.

“I died.”

Every muscle in Tim’s body was frozen. Jason looked at him, eyes still clouded with fever, but also frighteningly clear.

“I died, didn’t I?”

Tim had prepared for this. Every moment since he met Jason he’d been planning excuses, lies he could tell, reasons he could give. Just two minutes ago he’d had six different strategies in his head in the event that Jason woke up and started asking him questions.

Now, his mind was blank.

Jason watched calmly as Tim opened his mouth, trying to force his brain to work again, to put the right words in his mouth. But all his planned lines were still being held back by the look in Jason’s eyes, so instead he said the only thing he could think of.

“Oh… no?”

The room fell silent.

Jason nodded sadly, as if Tim had just confirmed his worst fears. Maybe he had, Tim couldn’t tell. His brain was still on pause, his body shaking.

Jason closed his eyes and slipped back into whatever pit induced nightmares he was living. After a few seconds, Tim’s brain kicked back into action and he started hyperventilating, tears rolling uncontrollably down his cheeks.

He was the worst. Why had he said that? Why? Why hadn’t he called for help? Called for the people who were better and smarter and more capable than him? Oh God, oh God he hecked up.

He curled up on the chair, crying silently as Jason slept on beside him. There was no evidence that their conversation had ever happened, but Tim knew. He’d screwed up so bad, and once Jason woke up properly everyone would know.

His older self would surely hate Tim now, and he didn’t blame him one bit.

Gotham was very different from Hong Kong. In fact, Gotham was different from every other city Cass had ever been in.
Part of that was due to the fact that for the first time ever, she could understand what the people were yelling at each other. Those two drivers cursing each other at a crossway, that man trying to sell his food, the woman begging for money on the sidewalk, Cass could understand all of it.

It was loud, and it made her dizzy, but she loved it.

She held Stephanie’s hand as they walked. Steph was on the phone to Barbara, and Cass listened closely to the half of the conversation she could hear.

“How long?” Stephanie frowned. “Is he sure he doesn’t want help? Two hostages dead must have him in a bad mood already. No? Fine, we’ll make sure to stay away from those streets.”

Cass wondered which streets had the people that needed saving. She wanted to help, but she knew that for some reason the others wanted to hide her away and not let her do anything. She could run, but she wouldn’t find those streets without Stephanie.

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll take her home and keep her there until he shows up.”

Barbara said something, and Stephanie laughed in a way that was half angry half sad.

“He’s not going to understand. But look, it’s whatever. Cass is safe and that’s all that matters. I can handle his shit, don’t worry about me.”

Why was that all that mattered? Cass didn’t understand. Why did they think her life was so important? Surely they knew she was a killer? Why not let her fight for the lives of people who were actually good? It wasn’t like she would die, and if she did so what?

Barbara said something loudly and Stephanie rolled her eyes.

“Oh I’m sorry for cursing in front of the child who is technically older than me.” Barbara yelled something else. “Are you serious? What’s so bad about cursing in front of her? It’s not like she can say them back! Hey Cass, what bad word did I use?”

She held the phone out to Cass, clearly expecting her silence to prove the point. Cass glared at her, and focused.

“Shhh… shhh…”

She grinned smugly as Stephanie gasped, and Barbara’s voice got louder.

“Traitor.” Steph hissed.

Cass stuck out her tongue cheekily, and Steph’s face twitched into a smile.

“Gotta go Babs. Talk to you later. I’ll keep things PG I promise.”

She hung up, shaking her head fondly at Cass. Cass stuck out her tongue again, and kicked off a lamppost into a backflip, taking Steph’s arm with her. Steph twisted her hand out of Cass’s grip at the last second, and Cass smirked.

“Show off.” Stephanie said fondly.

Cass smiled. The further they got into the city without Steph suddenly trying to drag her back, the more she relaxed. The city was so full of life, and Cass was happy to soak in it. The man throwing balls up and down on the street corner, the smells coming all the colourful shops, the weird man in the white mask hovering inside the nearest alley, the six taxis all stuck at one light, all these different
people were living their lives, and Cass felt a strange connection to them.

She normally never got to attached to anywhere she stayed. She was on the run from assassins, and most people didn’t understand her or want anything to do with her. She moved from place to place, helping wherever she could. There was that time in a hot, wet, country when she fought a gorilla to rescue a baby. The grateful family had given her food and a place to sleep for a week, and that was the longest she had ever stayed in one place.

But Gotham, something about this city made her think this is it. Home wasn’t a word she ever thought she’d need to use, but walking through the city the word seemed to settle inside her. Maybe that wasn’t so odd, since in the future she lived here and had a family here, but right now it was a very new feeling.

She sighed when Stephanie slowed down in front of a tall building with lots of windows. It was tempting to bolt right now, but she was curious about this future life of hers, and she’d only get to know more if she did what the others told her.

They entered the building and got into the lift. Cass was nervous the whole ride up, despite Steph’s calm. She didn’t like being trapped in this metal box, stairs were always the best way to get up and down. Sure, Stephanie seemed fine with it, but Steph was also not tense around Cass and had this weird fear in her eyes so she didn’t count.

The corridor they stepped out into was simple: brown carpet, walls painted a different shade of brown, and a bunch of different doors, some wooden, some metal. Stephanie let them to a wooden door painted purple, and unlocked it.

Steph threw her coat down on the sofa when they walked in. Cass didn’t have a coat, so she tugged off Damian’s hoodie and threw it down too. That seemed to amuse Steph. She did another one of her fond headshakes, and moved towards the kitchen.

“Feel free to look around. I know you’d just do it behind my back if I told you not to.”

She wasn’t wrong. Cass started looking around the living room, her eyes widening when she noticed the photographs.

There were a few of Steph with people Cass didn’t recognize, and a few that Cass had seen back in Hong Kong. But the majority of the pictures had both Cassandra and Stephanie in them, smiling at the camera or pulling faces.

Cass moved into the bedroom, feeling suspicious. The apartment had two separate bedrooms, and both looked lived in. The first one clearly belonged to Steph, with purple bedsheets and all four walls covered in posters. Cass recognised one of the posters as the same one in her own room at the manor. They both enjoyed screaming bands it seemed.

Poking through the second bedroom was how she knew her theory was right. The bedsheets were dark, there were more creepy band posters, and one of a girl in a pink dress. She picked up a few of the photographs next to the bed. Stephanie was in a few of them, but Cassandra was in all of them.

Footsteps behind her made her turn. Stephanie stood in the doorway, looking at Cass with a strange half curious, half scared face Cass didn’t understand. She held out the photograph with a raised eyebrow, and Steph smiled nervously.

“So, when I said this was my apartment, I should have said our apartment.”

Cass knew this, but hearing it spoken still took her by surprise. Stephanie noticed her shock, and her
smile dropped a little.

“You don’t live in Hong Kong. You used to, but you moved back to Gotham a few months ago. Stayed in the Manor for a little while, but we talked it over and decided to move in together.” She gave a little shrug. “You were only meant to be in Hong Kong for a week, two weeks top. Some old business you had to take care of, a smuggling gang resurfacing or something.”

Cass didn’t understand everything Steph had just said, but she got most of it. What she really didn’t understand was why Steph felt so embarrassed about them living together. Why try to hide it?

“Oh obviously you don’t have to stay here now if you don’t want. Damian lives back in the manor, so I get if you want to stay near to him.”

Steph wasn’t jealous of Damian, that much Cass could tell. But there was something else bothering her, and Cass couldn’t figure it out.

She didn’t like it. She didn’t like not knowing what was wrong, and she didn’t like not knowing how to ask. So, she changed the subject to something she could ask.

She pointed at the poster on the wall of the men playing instruments and yelling. Steph’s face brightened, whatever problem she had with Cass hidden under genuine cheeriness.

“Metallica? Yeah, we’re both fans. Have you heard any songs yet?”

Cass shook her head.

Steph grinned and took her hand, tugging her out into the living room. She skipped over to a set of shelves on the wall and pressed a button in some device Cass didn’t recognize. Music started blaring from the speakers positioned around the apartment. Cass recognized drumming and strange electrical sounds. Why did her older self like this so much?

She looked at Steph. The older girl was jumping around the place, arms shooting everywhere, a smile on her face and her eyes wild with something bright Cass didn’t recognize. Cass watched, amazed at the freedom in her movements. At this moment, she could barely predict how Steph was going to move next.

“Come on!” Steph yelled, laughing. “Just try it! Dance!”

Cass did. She took Steph’s hand and started jumping, letting her body move to the thumping sounds coming from the speakers. At first, she was hesitant, but as her body found the rhythm of the drums she found herself flinging herself around the apartment, matching the wildness of Stephanie’s dancing. She danced and flipped and twirled, she let Stephanie throw her onto the sofa only to bounce up and jump over her head. They moved like they were fighting, except instead of an enemy they were fighting the air, or the very universe itself. Cass had never felt like this before, and as she banged her head up and down while Stephanie cheered, she felt just the tiniest bit more connected to her older self.

When the song ended, both of them were laughing. Stephanie collapsed on the sofa, and Cass settled down next to her. She hadn’t felt this good since her spar with Damian. For the first time since waking up in the future, Cass felt like she might actually like it here.

Then the window smashed, a masked man dressed in all black burst into the room, and everything went to shit.
Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bruce comes home, and a New 52 plot decides that it's time to get started. Sort of.
The Practical

Chapter Summary

Bruce comes home. Babs probably shouldn't be drinking so much coffee.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Barbara took a gulp from her fifth (sixth? No, fifth. The one she drank last night didn’t count) cup of coffee. Her eyes scanned over the many computers of the Batcave. On the main screen, she watched as Batman finally defeated the gunman. Barbara was relieved it was over and that seven out of ten hostages had survived, but she knew Bruce wouldn’t see it that way. Even though there was no way he could have saved their lives, he’d be furious with himself for not somehow working a miracle and ensuring all ten got out alive.

Barbara had spent years trying to convince him that he was being too hard on himself, but Bruce was just as stubborn as she was, so now she mostly focused on making sure his anger at himself didn’t affect those around him.

Right now, Steph and Damian were the ones she was most worried about. They could all handle Bruce lashing out after a case gone wrong, but Steph and Damian took his anger to heart harder than Barbara and Alfred did.

Part of Barbara couldn’t help but feel angry at Bruce for adding more stress to her ever-growing pile, regardless of whether that was his intention. Even though all was relatively quiet on the worldwide crises front, there was still so much work she needed to do. This de-aging fiasco threw everything out of balance, and while she fully agreed that priorities needed to be shifted, it didn’t make all the responsibilities she had to Batman Inc. or the Birds of Prey suddenly go away.

She’d just recently reconnected with most of the Birds, and now just when things were tentatively starting to look up, this happened. Honestly, she was angrier at the universe than at Bruce. For some reason it refused to give any of them a break, which was quite rude considering the amount of trauma it continued to shove out. The past few months had seen Barbara team up with the majority of the world’s superheroes, many of whom still thought she was dead, in order to defeat some evil entity who intended to merge their timeline with two different worlds.

They’d succeeded in stopping the merge, or at least that’s what Barry Allen promised them. Truth be told, most of the work was done by the Flash. The speed force and all its complexity was something neither she nor Batman could admit to being experts on, despite the amount of effort and research put into studying it.

All in all, it was probably the quietest few months Gotham had in a while, so of course it couldn’t last. Obviously, a plot to destroy the whole world was more serious than a few young adults being turned into kids, but somehow this felt worse. The crisis, while nerve wracking, hadn’t given the Bats any more emotional turmoil. This on the other hand, was already shaping up to have plenty of ramifications when they all got back to their true ages.

Zatanna seemed fairly certain that they would all remember their time as kids. After everything
Cassandra had been through, recovering from yet another bout of mind manipulation would surely be tough. Barbara was worried about all of them, of course she was, but Cass and Steph were her responsibility. Jason would be a mess she was sure, and Dick... well she would always be a little more concerned about him than his brothers. It was natural, caring about him. Comforting and familiar, the decade old question of *How will Dick cope with all this?*

Tim and Damian would probably need help too, but Dick was more suited for that than she was. If she could help him deal with whatever complicated feelings his time as a ten-year-old gave him, then he in turn could help his brothers.

Obviously, the current priority was to keep them all safe until they grew back up. But Barbara had never been content not to think ten steps ahead. There were so many ways this could play out, and as she waited for Batman to come back on comms, her mind couldn’t help running through the possible outcomes, both good and bad. This was the sort of event that could either bring the family closer together, or tear them further apart.

She dearly hoped it was the first option.

“Oracle.”

She switched her focus back to the cameras monitoring Gotham. Although she couldn’t find him on the screens, her trackers told her that Bruce was headed home.

“I’m here.” she said.

“Thank you for the blueprints and assistance disabling the alarms. Did anything happen while I was out?”

Hoo boy.

“Jason got worse, and Cass escaped.”

There was silence on the comms. Barbara nervously drummed her fingers against the console, idly wondering if there were any high security evil corporations that needed hacking. Once all this was over she could use a good distraction.

“How bad is it?” Bruce said at last.

“Jason’s unconscious and feverish, but Alfred’s taking care of him and he doesn’t seem to be getting worse. Steph followed Cass and is walking her straight to their apartment, so you can collect them both whenever you’re ready.”

“I’ll be at the manor in five.”

“Bruce, it’s going to be-”

The line went dead. Barbara couldn’t even pretend to be surprised.

“...alright.”

Sighing, she refilled her mug of coffee, and pulled up a magazine article onto the main screen.

‘*MAN CLAIMS HE SURVIVED BEING DUNKED IN GREEN PIT OF EVIL, DOCTORS SAY HE SUFFERS FROM HALLUCINATIONS.*’

It was a translated Chinese news article written ten years ago. The magazine it came from was hardly
known for its honest and accurate journalism, and only about half the article was relevant to the current situation.

She read it anyway. With all other sources exhausted, shady articles like this were all she had left.

The engine was still running when Bruce leapt out of the Batmobile. He sprinted over to the computers, where Barbara was reading three different articles at once.

“Where is he?”

“Upstairs in his room.” Barbara replied calmly.

For two seconds Bruce wanted to yell at her for not being as concerned about this as he was. Then he got a grip and accepted the fact that Barbara was doing more than he had so far to help Jason, and that if she wasn’t worried it was for good reason.

Somehow, that didn’t lessen the panicked jumpiness of his heart.

It had been so long since Bruce had lost control like this, yet as he stood waiting for the elevator, he couldn’t stop his body and mind from shaking. All his usual discipline was shattered by the fact that the son he had lost was once again on the verge of death.

He’d been right next to Barbara researching the Lazarus madness last night. No other case was the same as this, but one thing had stood out to him: The youngest victims had never recovered, either remaining comatose or killing themselves. The youngest survivor they could find was Jason himself. They’d dug up three children ranging between twelve and eight who had gone through the Lazarus Pit insanity and not recovered, and despite Barbara insisting that the sample size was too small to be accurate, the evidence had felt damning to Bruce.

Barbara seemed fairly confident that Jason wouldn’t end up like them. Bruce refused to believe that until he saw his son with his own two eyes.

The elevator finally opened and he ran out into the study. Almost immediately after exiting he ran into Damian, who stopped pacing and stared with an open mouth when he realised who he bumped into.

“Father.” Damian whispered.

“Damian.” His youngest was clearly stressed out, and understandably so, but right now Bruce needed to get to Jason. “How is he?”

“I…” Bruce tried not to show his impatience as Damian struggled to speak. “I don’t know. I haven’t been in there since he collapsed but according to the others there’s been no change. He’s stable.”

“That’s good.”

Bruce went to move past him, but suddenly Damian reached out and grabbed onto his sleeve.

“I wanted to call you as soon as it happened, but Oracle insisted on not bothering you unless it worsened. I promise you Father, I… I didn’t… I tried…”

Damian struggled to speak, his face crumpling more and more. Bruce needed to go see Jason, but he couldn’t leave Damian so distraught either.

“Damian.” Bruce said gently, crouching down on one knee so he was face to face with his son.
“You couldn’t have prevented this. You did well, and I’ll take it from here. So, go get yourself a drink of water, and then if you want to talk I’ll be in Jason’s room.”

Damian gaped at him. Bruce waited until the boy recovered enough to give him the tiniest of nods, before turning and continuing on to Jason’s room. There would be time later to talk with Damian at length. Right now, his second son was the priority.

He burst into Jason’s old bedroom, causing three of the four occupants to jump. Alfred was by Jason’s head, running a hand through his damp curls. Tim and Dick were on either side of him, and while Tim stiffened at Bruce’s arrival, Dick seemed relieved.

One step forward, one step back. Bruce mentally pushed his observations on both of them to the side, focusing in on the boy lying still in the bed.

It was like time had been turned back, and all Bruce could see in that bed was the young Robin who had once been his beloved, precious son. Everything Jason had become after his resurrection didn’t feel relevant anymore, not with the boy in front of him looking so pale and worn out.

“Jason.” he whispered. “Oh Jay, my poor boy.”

Dick quietly stepped back so that Bruce could get in next to the bed. He reached out a hand, then hesitated, looking at Alfred.

“It’s alright Master Bruce. You can touch him.”

Gently, Bruce lowered his hand so that it was on top of Jason’s. The boy’s skin felt hot to the touch, and he let out a soft moan, his hand twitching at the contact. Bruce grasped his hand firmly, giving it a small squeeze.

“I’m here now son. I swear, I’m right here.”

In the back of his mind, he knew there were better things he could be doing to help Jason. He could join Barbara with her research, or try to hunt down the magician who cast the spell. But this was all too familiar, too nostalgic. How many times had he been in this exact position during Jason’s Robin days? Unlike Dick and his acrobatics, Jason’s fighting style had sometimes deliberately let opponents hurt him, just so he had the opportunity to hurt them worse. It had given Bruce more than his fair share of scares, to see the boy take a heavy blow to the face just so he could get the finishing uppercut in against the robber he was fighting.

With all these memories clouding his mind, Bruce clung on tightly to Jason’s hand. He never thought he’d get the opportunity to be by his son’s bedside again. The circumstances were horrific, but right now Bruce couldn’t bring himself to leave Jason’s side. Tim looked confused, but both Alfred and Dick were smiling at him, and that more than anything convinced him that he was right for indulging in such trivial comfort.

“Master Dick, why don’t you give Miss Gordon an update. I’ve changed Jason’s towel, and his fever has gone down by two degrees.”

“Right!” Dick nodded and left, a fire in his eyes.

It made Bruce want to cry, but his body thankfully still had enough discipline not to betray him like that. Young Dick, young Jason, young Cassie and Tim, it was all so much. So many emotions and memories that he’d been struggling to push through, and Jason’s fever was the last straw.

He rested his head on Jason’s chest, and allowed himself to start embracing the feelings swirling
With Bruce up taking care of Jason, Barbara turned her attention to Cass and Steph. She’d kept an eye on them as they made their way to their building, and while out of politeness she didn’t spy into their apartment, she was able to monitor the activity from the apartments beside theirs. So far, the only thing that had triggered a warning from the monitors was an outgoing call from the apartment below them complaining about a noise disturbance.

Barbara had listened to the call, but it turned out Steph was just playing loud music. Barbara had warned them back before all this happened that she and Bruce wouldn’t be able to cover all the complaints their neighbours threw at them, but thinking of it now it made her laugh. What she wouldn’t give to be dealing with a potential eviction over this mess.

She did a sweep of the perimeter, using the security cameras situated outside the apartment block. Most of it was normal: a few teenagers, one grumpy old man who Steph claimed owned six cats, that pastor who lived on the same floor as the girls and was worried that they were going to hell because they lived together, the other pastor who lived in their apartment block and who had given Cass a hug when she was having a really bad day and earned Barbara’s eternal respect, some more people she recognized and others she didn’t, but nothing out of the ordinary.

Then she paused the screen, her eyes narrowing in on a shaded tree. She enhanced the image, frowning as the white mask became more defined. She couldn’t be certain from the grainy security camera footage, but the mask seemed to be in the shape of an owl.

She copied the image into facial recognition, then made it scan all the other cameras around their apartment block. Three matches popped up. All people with slightly different bodies, but all wearing white masks and blending in with the shadows surrounding the building.

Barbara didn’t recognize the masks, and a quick Google search didn’t reveal any known cults or organizations connected to owl masks, not that Barbara expected it would.

Something wasn’t right. Barbara rang the phone in the girls’ apartment, her fingers tapping a more frantic rhythm onto the console as the seconds ticked by with no answer. When it went to voicemail, she tried not to let herself jump to the worst conclusion. It was possible the music had been too loud and they hadn’t heard the phone.

Then three screens flashed red, and she realised that something had, in fact, gone horribly wrong. She listened to the first frantic 911 call, of a woman yelling that there were violent sounds coming from the apartment next to her. The second call said the same thing, with someone complaining about the sound of shattered windows. The third claimed they’d just seen a figure fall past their window, and that the operators should send an ambulance as soon as possible.

Barbara began hacking into the cameras installed in the girls’ apartment. Politeness be damned, the girls would understand why she needed eyes in the room.

But before she could get far, Stephanie’s voice rang into her ear. Barbara’s fingers stilled over the keyboard, every muscle in her body concentrated on listening to her headset.

“Oracle?” Stephanie sounded shaky, like she was on the verge of tears.

“I’m here.” Barbara tried not to seem too alarmed. “What’s going on? What happened?”

“I’ve lost her.” Stephanie whispered.
Barbara felt everything still, like the cave itself had frozen.

It felt like the temperature in the cave dropped to below zero. Barbara’s hands clenched into fists, Stephanie’s words turning her veins to ice. Surely she heard wrong. Surely Stephanie meant someone else. Surely this was all a joke.

“Lost who?” she said, with a calm she did not feel.


Chapter End Notes

Next time: Damian finds out what happened to Cass. He takes the news better than the adults, which isn't saying much.

A/N: Firstly, updates are going to have to be once a week instead of twice until college slows down. Sorry about that. Secondly, let me know if there are any tags I should add to the story. If chapters contain mentions of sensitive subjects like child abuse I add a trigger warning in the chapter summary, but if at any point there's something you think I should add to the story tags please tell me. I'm new to this site so I'm still uncertain about a lot of the etiquette.
The Fearful

Chapter Summary

Damian has too many thoughts. Luckily, his sister's disappearance makes for a good distraction.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Father was different today.

The kitchen was silent as Damian poured himself a glass of water. Alfred had gone up with more water and wet towels for Jason, leaving Damian in peace. Damian was glad he was alone. He didn’t want to talk to Alfred about any of this, and if the butler hadn’t been so worried about Jason he would have probably picked up on Damian’s mood and started asking unwelcome questions.

*Are you feeling alright Master Damian?*

No. He wasn’t.

*What’s wrong?*

He didn’t know. He couldn’t articulate it, and he didn’t need anyone’s clumsy guesses to help him figure it out.

Alfred would probably give a disapproving hum if Damian told him that, and then leave with a sarcastic comment that would force Damian to think about things he’d rather not acknowledge.

Like how ridiculously scared he’d been that his father would hate him for what happened to Jason. Logically, Damian had done nothing wrong. He knew this, so why had he been so convinced that Father wouldn’t? His father was Batman, and Batman was far too logical to hate Damian for this. Damian had been a fool to let his emotions get the better of him like they had. It was a sign of weakness, of incompetence, and although Father hadn’t been there he was fairly certain Oracle was not happy with him considering how he’d hindered her investigation.

He took a long gulp from his drink, relishing the coolness of the water. Back when he lived with the League, Damian had taken great pleasure in drinking ice cold water, due to it being something of a privilege. Obviously the al Ghuls and their favoured companions could have chilled water whenever they pleased, but not everyone in the League had been so lucky. Something about the luxury of it all, combined with how good it felt after a training session in the blistering heat, had given Damian a strange sort of joy every time he drank it. Gotham, with its different climate and its ice water easily accessible to all, had dulled the pleasure somewhat for him.

He took another sip from the glass, letting the chill distract him from the buzzing of his thoughts.

It didn’t last. The shame came rushing back, with the memory of both Batman and Oracle’s impatience at his ineptitude. Damian had mocked Brown many times before for letting her emotions rule out over her common sense, yet here he was doing just that. Thankfully Father had only seen him for a few seconds, but Oracle had put up with him for hours. What would she tell Father about
his behaviour?

Damian slammed the glass down on the counter, hissing out a curse in a language that none of the kids would understand. He was going in circles. He’d worked himself into a panic over what Batman might think of his actions, and now he was working himself up again over what Oracle might tell Father about his actions.

Batman had snapped him out of the first panic by proving Damian’s fears wrong. He had not been upset and disappointed at Damian’s inability to fix Jason, just worried about his son. It made sense in hindsight, so why was Damian still nervous? Why couldn’t he take Batman’s reaction as proof to quiet his current fears?

Why had he been so irrationally scared in the first place?

They’d fought yesterday. Batman had been angry at him, and Damian had understood why but still disagreed with him and been angry with Father in return. Then Father had told Damian that he trusted him, and Damian had gone to bed while Batman and Batgirl patrolled the city. Damian had woken up with four brothers in his room that hadn’t been there last night, and the first thing Father had done that morning was to ask that Damian look after them until the spell wore off because “They trust you more than they trust anyone else, including myself.”

And then Jason had gotten worse and Damian had failed and it wasn’t his fault, there was nothing he could have done, but he couldn’t help but feel like he should have done better and he was so certain that Father would feel that too.

Except he didn’t. And now Damian was left with more confusion and doubt, and still that childish, nagging fear that if he put one-foot wrong Father would never forgive him.

That fear had no solid reasoning behind it. Batman had let Damian stay with him despite his attempt to kill Drake. He’d let Damian stay despite his history as a killer and his lack of faith in Batman’s cause. He’d let Damian stay, and even after he was presumed dead, Damian had stayed. He had learnt to improve himself, to be more like Grayson, a son that his father respected, instead of tolerated. But if Damian failed his vulnerable siblings, if he got them all killed, he couldn’t help but feel like that would be it. That would be the final straw for Batman, the thing that condemned Damian beyond hope of redemption.

He had no proof, but that gut feeling had been enough to send him into an embarrassing juvenile meltdown when Jason fell unconscious, and now that gut feeling was warning him that his meltdown had made Gordon lose respect for him, and once she told Father he would surely lose any tentative trust he’d started having in Damian.

“Damian?”

He spun around, shocked that Dick had been able to sneak up on him. Damian had been trained better than this; how dare his unreasonable emotions distract him to this extent?

“Oracle wants you down in the cave. She says it’s urgent and she seems pretty angry.”

Dick was out of breath, and looked tired from playing messenger boy for the past few hours. Damian ignored the churning in his stomach that Dick’s words created, and rested his hand on his brother’s shoulder to steady him.

“Thank you, Dick. You’ve been far more helpful today than I have. Can you take care of Father and the boys for me while I’m down in the cave? There’s no one I trust more to protect them than
“You got it little brother! No one’s going near them except Alfred, that’s a promise!”

“Even Batman?”

Dick’s grin faded at that, and he looked at Damian with knowing eyes. With his cheerful and childish nature, Damian sometimes forgot that Dick was much smarter than the average ten-year-old. He wasn’t on Damian’s level of course, none of the children were. But he felt it would be interesting to watch a game of chess between Dick and Tim sometime before the spell wore off.

“Bruce hasn’t let go of Jason’s hand since he came into the bedroom. He loves Jason, even if that love is twisted by whatever happened after the Joker hurt him. I don’t get it. I don’t get any of it. But the way he looks at Jason, the way he fusses over him, and then fusses over Tim and I when there’s nothing else to be done, I don’t see the horrible man I spoke to yesterday. I see my Batman.”

Damian was silent, his hand still on Dick’s shoulder. He gave the boy a comforting squeeze, and Dick smiled.

“He’s not my Batman. I still believe that my Bruce wouldn’t say what he said. But he’s got more good in him than I originally thought, so until I can figure out the truth, I’ll protect him too.”

“I’m glad.” Damian said quietly. “I’m not exactly Father’s number one supporter at the moment, but he’s important to all of us.”

“Yeah.” Dick gave a small little shrug. “But really, you best get down there. Oracle sounded really mad.”

Well that wasn’t ominous in the slightest.

Damian made his way to the cave as quickly as he could, wondering why Oracle was summoning him. Was she really going to berate him for his behaviour earlier? He understood that he had been unpleasant, insisting that she was holding back and not helping as much as she should be. But was now really the time to scold him? Logically, there had to be another reason.

And yet all Damian could picture was her shaking her head and telling him that Father would hear about his childish tantrum.

When he reached the cave, Barbara didn’t even look up. She was in the middle of a conversation, speaking clipped tense sentences into her headset.

“And you’re sure you have no idea? No? Well that’s great.”

It was only when he made his way over to the computer that she looked up, and her expression brightened a fraction when she saw him.

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“And you’re sure you have no idea? No? Well that’s great.”

It was only when he made his way over to the computer that she looked up, and her expression brightened a fraction when she saw him.

Interesting. It seemed like she wasn’t angry at him, but she was definitely angry at someone.

“I’m sending Damian over to help you now. Find her, Stephanie, or Bruce won’t be the one you need to worry about.”

Ah. She was angry at Brown. Damian was curious as to why, but he couldn’t find it in him to be sympathetic. Whatever Brown had done turned Oracle’s feelings towards him from negative to
positive, and Damian was selfishly pleased that Brown had messed up somehow.

He couldn’t hear what Brown said in response, but it made Barbara’s jaw tighten.

“Bruce and Cassandra were the ones who decided to give you the Batgirl mantle, not me.” Barbara’s voice was calm, but Damian could feel the anger in every word. “You earned my approval, but let me make this clear: If Cass is injured, or killed, or if anything happens to her that will affect her when the spell wears off, I never want to see you in the Batgirl costume again. Do you understand?”

Damian didn’t feel quite so pleased anymore. Cassandra was missing, and Oracle was clearly very scared and stressed if she was lashing out at Brown like that. While he found it entertaining to watch Brown be berated over a reckless move, it was not pleasant to see her threatened with the loss of the mantle she treasured as much as Damian treasured Robin.

“I take it Cassandra’s missing?” he said cautiously.

“Suit up and get over to their apartment. Stephanie can fill you in on the rest.”

Oracle’s eyes hadn’t left the computer screens, and her fingers were dancing over the keys with a ferocity that surprised him. Damian wisely decided not to protest the lack of a proper explanation and instead stepped over to the changing area.

Fifteen minutes later he was speeding through the streets of Gotham on his Robin motorcycle. It was daytime, so he got a few strange looks and a child or two pointing at him as he flew past, but no one attempted to slow him down.

He screeched to a halt outside their apartment building. Checking that the coast was clear, he stashed his bike in an empty Wayne Enterprises crate specifically set there for the girls to use as a storage unit. Glancing up at the building, his eyes were immediately drawn to a smashed window.

Even if he hadn’t known, he could have guessed which apartment was theirs from that alone.

He took the elevator up, since it was slightly less conspicuous than grappling up a building in broad daylight. The only other person in the lift with him was an old lady, and one glare shut down anything she was going to say to him.

He hesitated outside Brown’s garish purple door, then knocked. Considering Barbara’s words to her earlier, perhaps she would appreciate some time to compose herself.

The door flew open, disproving that theory immediately. Brown was dressed in her Batgirl uniform, and didn’t even say hello before dragging Damian in.

“I can’t find anything!” she exclaimed. “I’ve searched this apartment from top to bottom, but I can’t find a single bit of blood or DNA from our mystery attacker! You should have seen him Damian, Selina’s trap door was the only thing that actually got him.”

Damian looked around the apartment, observing the smashed pottery, burn marks on the walls, hole on the floor near the window and the bruise on Stephanie’s chin.

“I take it this wasn’t all done by Cassandra expressing her distaste of the apartment?”

Stephanie rolled her eyes at that, then slumped down onto the sofa. Damian perched on the armrest, studying her intently. He could tell that she had been crying, but she was far more composed than he had expected.
“How much did Babs tell you?” she asked.

“How much did Babs tell you?” she asked.

“Cassandra is missing. She seems to blame you. I’m to help you find her.”

Steph shot Damian an appraising look of her own. He glared back at her.

“You know, you’re taking this a lot better than I thought you would.”

“Well I’m surprised that both of you were foolish enough to leave the manor, but out of all the children Cassandra is the most capable of looking after herself. I’m assuming she wasn’t kidnapped since everyone is just saying that she’s missing.”

“There was an attempted kidnapping.” Steph admitted. “Some guy burst in here, and I could tell he was after Cass. She wanted to stay and fight, obviously, but after less than a minute I could tell that this guy was no joke. Cass is ten, and neither of us had our suits or our gear. I didn’t like those odds.”

“So, you told her to run.” Damian guessed.

“I knew that I had enough traps and tricks built into the security of the apartment to hold the guy off long enough for Cass to escape. If she stayed we might have taken him down, but she doesn’t know the traps like her older self does. There’s a huge chance she would have ended up hit by a laser or almost falling into the same pit that he did. I know I made the right call, but Babs disagrees and we’re both pretty sure Bruce will too.”

“Father will probably blame you for this.” Damian agreed. “But what happened after that?”

“The guy wasn’t human, that’s for sure. The way he took hits was unnatural. He dodged almost every trap: the lasers, the spikes, two of the trapdoors…”

“But the one Kyle installed got him in the end.”

“But the one Kyle installed got him in the end.”

“But the one Kyle installed got him in the end.”

“Not exactly. He wasn’t prepared for it, but he still managed not to fall in. His distraction gave me the opportunity to kick him out the window though.”

“And then?”

“I tried to follow him, but I lost his trail. It’s like he vanished, I couldn’t track him at all. Cass had done the smart thing and gotten as far away from here as possible, so I came back and called Babs. She got the police to hold off for an hour so that I could search the place for any hint as to who this guy might be. Also, she’s not pleased.”

“She really isn’t.”

There was silence for a moment, both of them thinking about the rage in Barbara's words. Damian understood why many people he knew were more terrified of an angry Oracle than an angry Batman.

“What about you?” Steph said with forced casualness. “Do you blame me for this too? Bruce told me to look after Cass and I failed. I couldn’t even stop her from leaving the manor, and now we don’t know if she’s safe or not.”

“No.” Damian said, equally as casual. “It’s not your fault. It’s Batman’s fault for entrusting you with a responsibility you couldn’t handle. He should have known better. I could have told him that you weren’t capable enough to protect her, but it’s not like he would have listened. This is his fault, not
yours."

“Thanks.” Stephanie said, in a tone that was not at all thankful. “Really glad Babs sent you. You’re great at the whole reassurance thing.”

Damian ignored her, examining the apartment for any evidence she might have overlooked. Finding nothing after a thorough search, he turned around just in time to see Brown slam her fist into the wall.

“Shit.” Stephanie hissed. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Damian considered pointing out that she was just creating more work for the police, but seeing the tears dripping down her face he tried a different approach.

“If I had been in your position, I would have probably told Cassandra to run too.”

Stephanie looked up at him, suspicious. He couldn’t really blame her, but it was inconvenient since he was trying to be sincere.

“Oracle loves Cassandra like a daughter. She would have lashed out at anyone who made the call you did. All you can do now is find Cassandra before she gets herself into trouble.”

Stephanie stared at him, no longer crying. Damian stared back, trying not to come across as sarcastic or lying.

“Right.” Stephanie straightened up. “You’re right. You’re annoying, but you’re right.”

“I resent that.”

“I don’t care.” Stephanie shot back. “I don’t care what you think, or what Bruce thinks, or what Babs thinks. I told Cassandra to run knowing that I’ll have to track her down later and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. If anyone has a problem with that, then you can tell them to bite me.”

“I’d rather not do that, as amusing as it would be. Did you know that there’s a particular shade of red that only you can get Batman’s face to turn?”

Stephanie shot him another look, less suspicious and more contemplative.

“You’re really not angry about Cass?”

“My sister can handle herself. But I’d prefer to track her down as soon as possible so if you’re done motivating yourself…?”

“You go west I’ll go east.” Stephanie ordered. “Focus on finding Cass. Babs will figure out who else is after her.”

“Got it.”

“And Damian?”

He paused, one foot out the window. She was smiling at him, that genuine smile she sometimes gave him when he indulged her and did something juvenile like bouncing on a trampoline.

“Thanks.”

He gave her a short nod, unsure of how to react to such a genuine thank you.
“We’ll find her.” he said at last, and then threw himself out the window.

He was certain at least one teenager filmed him abseiling down the apartment building, but he was away on his bike before anyone could track him down.

The Gotham Gazette was going to have a particularly interesting paper tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Dick watches over his family, and Babs finds out what happened to Cass.
The room was quiet.

Bruce was talking, but his voice was so low that neither Tim nor Dick could understand what he was saying. He sat beside Jason’s bed, clasping Jason’s tiny hand firmly between his own. Tim was huddled in the corner, watching Bruce whisper unintelligible murmurings to his second son. Every minute Tim seemed to shrink smaller into himself, and Dick would worry about that except…

Well. He had his own stress to deal with. Cass was missing, and Oracle told him not to let Bruce know just yet. Dick could see why. Bruce was holding on so tightly to Jason, hearing that another one of his kids was in danger would probably make him snap.

Still, Dick was exhausted from running back and forth. The cave and Jason’s bedroom had their own different types of stress, and it felt like he was carrying the weight of both. He wanted to run down to the cave to check if Damian and Steph had found Cass yet, but he also wanted to stay here in case anything changed.

He was restless, constantly feeling like he was in the wrong place. He was doing too much and yet it felt like he wasn’t doing enough.

He noticed Tim curling himself into an even tighter ball. Something was definitely off with him. His expression was more scared than calculating, and instead of looking around the room he was completely focused on Bruce and Jason.

Maybe Dick couldn’t do enough to help Barbara or Jason, but getting that look off Tim’s face would be an accomplishment, and a good distraction too.

“Tim.” he said softly. “Can I talk to you outside for a second?”

Tim’s head shot up, staring at Dick with surprise. It was as if he’d forgotten Dick was there, which was so unlike the kid Dick had grown to know these past two days, that he felt completely certain now that Tim’s problem was bigger than worry over Jason.

Bruce barely noticed them leave. One of his hands was gently stroking Jason’s curly hair, while the other was still holding onto Jason’s hand as if letting go would kill Jason right there and then. Dick thought he heard a “Jay” and a “Jase I’m so sorry.” as he slipped past, but Bruce’s voice was so quiet that only Jason would be able to hear it.

Out in the hall Tim looked up at him nervously. Dick was relieved to see that although Tim was fidgeting and his eyes were darting everywhere, he didn’t seem scared of Dick. He looked anxious and burdened, but it didn’t feel like Dick was the cause.
“Tim, what’s wrong?” he asked calmly.

At first, he could tell that Tim was waiting for Dick to elaborate. Then when it became clear that he wouldn’t, Dick could see him preparing to shrug it off. He raised an eyebrow, and watched as the Nothing died in Tim’s throat.

“Tell me.” Dick said, quiet but firm.

Tim hesitated, and Dick could see him mulling his options over in his head. After a moment, Dick watched him accept the fact that he wasn’t getting out of this without telling Dick the truth. He may be a smart kid, but Dick was a detective trained by the Batman. He wasn’t sure about their older selves, but right now in a battle of wits he had the upper hand. Tim knew that too, which is why Dick trusted his brother to make the right choice and give him an honest answer.

“It’s Jason.” Tim blurted out. “He woke up!”

That wasn’t what Dick had been expecting, but it made sense. If Tim had been the only one there at the time then of course he’d be freaked once Jason fell back unconscious.

“What happened?” he said, trying to keep that quiet calm in his voice that his Batman always had when questioning witnesses.

“He opened his eyes and he saw me. Then… then he said that he died.”

“What?”

“He said ’I died, didn’t I?’ and I was supposed to tell him no, I had it all planned out, but I froze! I messed it all up and when I said no he didn’t believe me and now they’re all going to be mad at me and they won’t trust me because I told them I could keep a secret and I failed! It should have been you in the room, or Damian, because you would have said the right thing and I just messed it up really, really bad.”

“Tim, slow down.” Dick tried to process everything he’d just heard. “Jason died?”

Tim’s eyes got even wider, and Dick was pretty sure he started hyperventilating.

“Oh god oh god oh god. Oh my god I’m the worst. I’m the worst Robin ever! No wonder you fired me!”

“I fired you? Wait, go back a little. Jason died? Bruce told me he was just in a coma!”

Tim nodded, his eyes starting to well up.

“The Joker killed him; there was a funeral and everything. I’m not entirely sure how he came back to life but obviously the Lazarus pit had something to do with it. I found out via the internet but I promised not to tell you or Jason because he didn’t deserve to know how much his future sucked. But now that’s all ruined and it’s all my fault because I’m a stupid little kid who keeps looking for secrets I can’t handle.”

It made sense. It made more sense than the coma story Bruce told him, and looking back on their conversation Dick felt sicker than before. Jason and Steph had died, and Bruce hadn’t been able to cope and had instead started blaming them for their own deaths. Jason sacrificed his life to protect his mother from the Joker, and Bruce had the nerve to tell Dick that Jason hadn’t been a good enough Robin? He felt like throwing up right there in the hallway.
But then he remembered the man inside whispering words of comfort and regret to his feverish son. He remembered the boy in front of him, who had been Robin until his future self apparently fired him. This future was incredibly messed up, and Dick understood that more and more every minute he spent here. It hurt that he couldn’t make everything better, that he had to adjust and adapt to every awful and disappointing new bit of information he learnt. But even though he couldn’t control the past of this world, he was still Dick Grayson and he could control his own reaction to it.

He stepped forward and tugged Tim into a warm hug. The poor kid was shaking, but the tighter Dick hugged him the more Tim’s trembling lessened.

“It’s ok Timbo.” he whispered, the nickname slipping out almost instinctively. “I’ll take care of everything, I promise. No one’s going to blame you for this.”

He could feel a damp patch growing on his shoulder as Tim started crying, and it only made him hug the smaller boy tighter. After a minute, Tim was breathing evenly again, and Dick felt it was safe to release him.

“I need you to do something for me Tim.” he said. “I need you to keep an eye on Bruce and Jason while I check in with Barbara. If anything changes, come get me straight away, and I’ll handle it.”

“I can do that.” Tim whispered.

Dick gave Tim a comforting pat on the shoulder, and was once again struck by the fact that this was his little brother. He had that moment with Damian and with Jason, but this was the first time his weird, newfound protective instinct had focused in on Tim.

He knew that Tim just lost his parents. Something in his eyes, in the way he moved, it reminded Dick of himself a few months ago, before Bruce took him in. Tim was as lost in this new world as Jason, and Dick felt guilty for not picking up on it sooner. He knew that he wasn’t being fair on himself, that Damian would tell him it wasn’t his responsibility to pick up on every little problem his new brothers had, but he still felt bad about it.

Dick was still uncertain if that was his older self seeping through or not. Considering his older self apparently fired Tim, Dick’s wasn’t sure what to think about the older Dick Grayson anymore. He didn’t know the man, and he couldn’t fully accept that. It felt like he should know him, that he should be able to look around at the life he had in the future and go Yes, this is right. This is me.

But he couldn’t.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” he said.

Tim nodded, and Dick took off to the cave. He had nothing really to report to Barbara, but with Damian gone to help Steph he felt worried if he didn’t check in every few minutes. Damian told him to protect Bruce and the boys, which Dick was determined to do. But at the same time; if Damian got in over his head, Dick planned for the original Robin to be right there to help him out.

When he entered the cave, he noticed that Barbara seemed calmer. She wasn’t typing frantically or chugging coffee, and the scary look in her eyes had faded into something a little less intense.

“Good news?” Dick asked hopefully.

“Sort of.” Barbara replied, flipping through what looked like an address book to Dick.

“Did you find Cass?”
“No. But we know who has her. She rang us a few minutes ago to tell us Cass is with her, but she won’t tell us where. I traced the call and sent Steph over there but I’m pretty sure she’ll be long gone.”

“Oh.” Dick scuffed his foot against the floor of the cave. “Is that... good?”

“No.” Barbara said again. “But it could be a lot worse.”

Dick didn’t understand, but he nodded anyway.

“So, who is it? Who has her?”

Barbara gestured to the screen in front of her. Dick walked over, squinting at a profile he recognised from Batman’s database.

“Oh, her. We’ve yet to meet, but from what I’ve heard she’s a lot better than most of Gotham’s bad guys. Seems to me like Cass got lucky. She could have ended up in way worse trouble.”

Barbara shot him a look that Dick didn’t really understand. He assumed it was just another piece of his history he didn’t know.

“Trust me kid.” she sighed. “This woman is her own unique brand of trouble.”

Cass ran and ran and ran. The men chased her, she could feel them at her back as she raced through the streets, vaulting over walls and shimmying up drainpipes. By the time the sun set she had lost them all, but the feeling of being hunted was still prickling at the back of her neck.

She hated the words in her head now, the way she had when she first woke up in this future. They blocked her mind, making the once easy task of running away much harder. Just a few days ago she’d been on the run from Cain and his men, but now sneaking and skulking wasn’t coming as natural to her.

Sneaking and skulking. What did those words even mean? Why were they in her head?

She tapped the side of her head as she crept through an alley, but the words didn’t fade away. They swarmed her head in the form of questions, questions she had no answers to.

Who were those men? Why were they after her? Was Cain still chasing her, even after all these years? The man in the apartment didn’t seem like one of his men. He’d fought different, and there’d been something about him that made Cass hesitate before jumping in to fight. Whoever that man was, he hadn’t been fully human.

So, Cass had run when Steph told her to. She wanted to go back now, to check if Steph was ok, but if the man was still after her she couldn’t risk going back. Someone bad was chasing her, and that put anyone she talked to in danger.

She wanted to fix this, but she didn’t know how. She didn’t know why those people were after her, just like she didn’t know this city. The weird feeling of home was still there in her chest, but it didn’t come with anything useful like a map of the city.

It was getting cold. No one was following her anymore, she was sure of that. But she needed to find a place to sleep for the night.

Years of experience drew Cass to a set of rubbish bins clustered against the alley wall. There was
enough space behind them for her to curl up, and now she was hidden from anyone who walked through the alley. The only way she would be seen was if someone shone a torch behind these bins, and so far, every time she slept somewhere like this she woke up undisturbed. By humans anyway. The rats and insects sometimes viewed her as a threat to their territory, but she always won those fights.

She rested her head against the side of the brick wall, wondering why this felt so strange. She’d spent years sleeping like this, homeless and scared that if she hid somewhere too public Cain would find her. She’d only spent three nights sleeping on actual beds, and while she didn’t miss the softness, something about the added safety of a home was something she never realised she wanted.

It was stupid. She didn’t need a bed, and she didn’t deserve one either. She was a killer, and someone like her shouldn’t be sleeping in the same house as those boys who Damian called her brothers.

Damian was a killer too, but he was better than she was. He had changed, and those boys knew it. They saw him as safe, someone they could sleep in the same room with and feel like no one would harm them.

Jason and Tim saw Cass as someone to be scared of. Dick did too, until he realised Damian didn’t and lost all fear because of that. It was foolish of him. They were right to be scared of her. Damian may say she was a hero, that she was like him, but she knew she wasn’t. She couldn’t live with the blood on her hands, not the way he could. She didn’t know how to be good like him, to accept her mistakes and hope to do better.

There was a noise from the alley. Cass peeked out from behind the bins, and saw that some woman was being attacked by two men. None of them were trained fighters, but the two men were stronger and the woman was crying.

She leapt out from behind the bins and ran towards the men. The first one turned around just as her foot collided with his face, and one punch dropped the second man to his knees. Another kick to the face knocked the first man out, and a palm to the chin dropped the second one.

The woman looked like she wanted to say something to her, and Cass couldn’t let that happen. She already had to find a new place to sleep, as far away from here as possible.

She took off, running through the alleys and worn-down neighbourhoods. She was careful to stay away from the street lights, so that not even the hunter with the sharpest eyesight would be able to see her as anything more than a flickering shadow.

She came to a row of houses bordering a river. There was a bridge she could cross, but that was too open and exposed. Maybe she could hide under the bridge and swim across?

There was noise on the rooftops above her, and Cass immediately darted against the wall of the house. Someone dropped down in front of her, and Cass relaxed once she got a look at the body language. This wasn’t one of the people after her.

“Hey kid, you ok? It’s too late for someone your age to be wandering this part of town.”

The lamplight nearby gave faint colour to the woman in front of her. Cass recognised her black outfit, with goggles covering her face and two pointy ears coming out of her head. Damian had shown her a picture of this woman yesterday. He hadn’t said much, only that she wasn’t an enemy, but wasn’t exactly a part of the family either.
Cass stepped closer, allowing the street lights to illuminate part of her face. She watched the emotions flicker across Catwoman’s face: surprise, concern, anger, but no recognition.

Good. Damian had been right in saying Catwoman wasn’t that close to the family.

Cass meowed, and watched as the woman smiled. She thought Cass was cute. That was nice.

“Yes, I’m Catwoman. You got a name kiddo? Any family to get back to before these streets start getting mean?"

Cass put two fingers up to either side of her head, trying to make them stick up like the one’s on Batman’s cowl.

It worked. After a few seconds of confusion, Selina got it.

“Batman?”

Cass nodded. Selina stared at her harder, and Cass saw the exact second the realisation hit her.

“Cassandra?”

Cass nodded again.

She was prepared to bolt if this went wrong, but instead of asking more questions Selina just looked at her. Her whole body radiated sympathy, something Cass hadn’t seen since the man Bruce brought with him when he kidnapped her. Unlike him, Selina’s sympathy wasn’t bland. She was reading Cass, not as well as Cass was reading her, but the way normal humans could. Cass knew that her older self wasn’t that close to this woman, but she had been right in assuming that the woman had a decent amount of empathy. Cass watched as she relaxed her stance, and shook her head slightly.

“Oh honey, you’re having a rough time of it, aren’t you?”

Cass nodded, and tried not to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Jason wakes up.

The room was cold. Damp patches covered the walls, and the carpet on the floor looked like it had been there since the apartment was built. The couch was stained and rest of the furniture was bland and wooden. Nothing about this place looked like a home.

Cass felt more at home here than she had anywhere else in Gotham.

She was sitting at a lopsided table in an uncomfortable wooden chair. There was a mug of tea in front of her, as well as some pencils and paper. There was also a woman staring at her, but other than that it was peaceful.

She took another sip of her tea, and saw the woman decide that she’d had enough.

“Look, I’m fine with letting you stay with me until this wears off, but if I’m going to risk the wrath of your family I need to know why. Oracle was not pleased when I told her that you didn’t want to go home, and she’s not the kind of person you want mad at you. So talk kid, or draw if you can’t.”

Cass hesitated. She could just leave, and she doubted Selina would care enough to try and stop her. But those men were probably still hunting her, and if Selina was certain that no one could track them to this safehouse then this was where Cass wanted to be.

She gestured to her throat, and watched as Selina’s eyes softened.

“You really can’t talk huh? That sucks kiddo, I’m sorry.”

“Cuh.” Cass forced out. “Cuh, Cah…”

She slammed her fist against the table in frustration when the word wouldn’t come out of her throat. Selina didn’t even flinch.

“You really can’t talk huh? That sucks kiddo, I’m sorry.”

“Cuh.” Cass forced out. “Cuh, Cah…”

Her studied her, and found that her words were genuine. Catwoman was odd. She didn’t care about Cass as much as her family did, but Cass preferred it that way. The compassion in her eyes wasn’t so… loaded. Selena wasn’t doing this because of their history, and she didn’t look at Cass the way the others did; like Cass should know why she meant so much to them.

Selina understood that Cass was Cass. She wasn’t expecting more from her, which was something Cass had picked up on in everyone else, including Damian. They all looked at her like they were waiting for her to do something, and none of them ever said what that thing was that she was meant to do.
“So, last I heard you were in Hong Kong.” Selina drawled. “What happened to you that you ended up roaming the worst streets of Gotham as a ten-year-old?”

Cass frowned, wondering how best to explain this all. Damian had called the person who turned her back into a child a witch. Cass remembered hearing that word before, always said by children dressed in a costume. The kids only dressed up on one specific night too, which she didn’t understand, but that didn’t matter. The important thing was that she remembered which costume went with the word ‘witch’.

Grabbing a pencil, she began to sketch what that costume looked like. After a minute she held up the drawing and showed it to Selina. It was a stick figure of a woman with a pointy hat and a black triangle for a dress. Next to her was a broom.

“A witch did this to you?”

Cass grinned proudly, then started drawing again. She drew herself as a stick figure, then added three boys next to her.

“It wasn’t just you? I’m guessing those are meant to be your brothers.”

Cass nodded, relieved that Selina was understanding her so well. She pointed at her forehead, then swept her hand across it like she was cleaning it.

“The witch… messed with your mind?”

Cass nodded again. She drew Batman, then put a question mark over him and each of the boys.

“She messed with all of them?”

Cass shook her head. Selina frowned, staring at the picture.

“They don’t remember you? No? That’s not it? Then… you don’t remember who they are?”

Cass cheered and stuck her thumbs up. Selina smiled at her, the smile that said *cute kid* and nothing else. Cass had never experienced that smile before, but she liked it.

She drew a line, then the number 10 and then continued the line. She showed it to Selina, before carefully scribbling the second half of the line out.

“Ten…You can’t remember anything past the age of ten?”

Cass bobbed her head again. Selina got that normal sympathy look in her eyes again, the one that meant she felt sorry for Cass because she was a lost little girl, not because she knew Cass as a daughter or a sister or anything else strange like that.

“Well no wonder you look so scared of everything! The world outside must be overwhelming. Don’t worry honey, you can stay here as long as you want.”

Cass smiled, grateful. She didn’t really want to hide here, but she wasn’t sure what else she could do. She needed to know more about the men after her before she could fight them, and she wasn’t sure how to bring that up. With everything she needed to ask Selina, who was the closest thing to a neutral voice she could probably find, she had a feeling they would run out of paper pretty soon.

“But that still doesn’t explain why you’re not with your family. Why choose my protection over theirs? You guys get in another one of your ridiculous fights or something?”
Cass sighed, reaching for a second piece of paper. She stared down at it, pencil in hand, struggling to figure out how to draw what she was feeling. After a moment she gave up and just pointed to her eyes instead.

“Your eyes? No. Their eyes?”

She gestured between her eyes and Selina’s.

“You don’t like the way they look at you.”

Cass drew a tick sign on the paper.

Selina sighed, taking a sip from her own mug of tea.

“Well knowing you Bats this is all one big dramatic misunderstanding. Maybe if you talk me through it I can help you understand what the problem is.”

Cass considered the idea, then nodded.

“How about we start with Bruce? He can be an incredibly frustrating man, but I know him better than I know the rest of them. What’s wrong with the way he looks at you? Has this de-aging mess made Batman a little grumpy? Grumpier than usual, I mean.”

Batman. Angry father man who kidnapped her and yelled at everyone who tried to help her. Cass screwed up her face and stuck her tongue out.

“Blech.” she said.

Selina grinned, a mischievous look that Cass didn’t quite trust, but liked anyway. She smiled back proudly, and Selina gave a delighted laugh.

“Oh, this is going to be fun.”

Pain. Pain was all he could feel. There was only the pain of the weapon beating him, and the short breaks in between each strike where Jason could breathe.

It hurt to breathe. Everything in him was saying to give up, to let go. But Jason Todd was a fighter, and he’d be damned if he let some hallucination break him.

The pain continued, each blow accompanied by a maniacal cackle. Jason had never met the Joker before, only seen the destruction left in his wake. Yet somehow, he knew beyond a sliver of doubt that the deranged clown was the one hurting him.

He couldn’t tell how long it had been going on for. It could have been minutes, or hours, or days. The last thing he remembered was playing video games in a house that wasn’t his with siblings that didn’t really exist. Had that dream future all been part of this hallucination too?

The beating continued, to the point where Jason began to get used to it, to find peace in the steady rhythm of whack-cackle-breathe. He could still feel the cold metal weapon breaking his bones and ripping his flesh, but his pain threshold was starting to adjust.

That was when things changed.

The Joker stopped hitting him, and Jason was left in a green-tinged limbo, unable to see or feel anything. He struggled to see beyond the murky green nothing surrounding him, but it was hopeless.
Nothing was happening.

Then he heard it.

A beeping sound. A steady high-pitched beep getting louder every second. A timer? A bomb? Was it part of the dream or part of the dream future, like all his siblings yelling had been right when he first got trapped in this nightmare? What was it going to do to him?

There was a sound of an explosion. The world around him shook and Jason braced himself. Whatever was coming was bound to be painful, but he was strong. He could take it.

The explosion hit him.

It turned out that no matter how strong his willpower was, being burnt alive was not something he could handle.

There was pain, pain everywhere. Jason screamed as the fire licked his skin, burning his flesh and charring his bones. It lasted less than a few seconds, but Jason would have taken ten more hours of the Joker rather than a second of this pain.

Then it was over and he felt nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

And then:

Something.

Jason opened his eyes.

He was in a room, lying on a bed. It took him a moment to recognise it as the room he’d been given at Wayne Manor. He hadn’t spent long in here, had he? Instead he’d spent most of the night before in Damian’s room.

Damian. Bruce. Dick. Where were they?

He looked around, and finally noticed Tim staring nervously at him.

Ah. The third Robin. The one who must have replaced him after the Joker… the Joker…

“Tim.” Jason whispered.

Tim nodded, but didn’t speak.

Jason looked around the room again, disappointed. Surely what he’d just experienced had been the worst part of this hallucination. So why wasn’t he back with his mother? Why was he still stuck in this dream future? He looked at Tim again, vaguely curious about why the boy looked so scared. Was Tim still scared of him? Or was he scared for him?

The memories from the dream were still buzzing around inside his head. Tim wasn’t his first choice,
but he was the only one here and Jason needed to tell someone before his head burst.

“I died.” Jason said softly.

He expected Tim to look surprised, but instead he just looked even more scared. Jason watched him, puzzled, before it hit him.

Tim knew.

“I died, didn’t I?” he said, a little more forcefully.

He could see the answer written all over Tim’s face. Tim knew about Jason’s past in this nightmare future world. How? Why? What was the point of all this? Why was it happening to him?

“Uh…no?” Tim replied at last.

Jason was tired.

He was so very tired. He could feel his body again, and every muscle ached. He didn’t want to deal with this, he couldn’t deal with it right now. He was sick of this dream future with all its layers and mind games and nightmares. When he got out he was punching whichever villain had done this to him in the face.

But for now, he was so, so tired.

Jason nodded at Tim, too tired to interact with this fake sibling of his. He closed his eyes and settled back down against the pillow.

After a few seconds, he slipped back into a peaceful state of oblivion.

The dreams came again, different but with the same feel. This time he was roaming the streets of Gotham, except everything was hazy, both too loud and too faded at the same time. Jason wasn’t sure how long he walked around before he tripped and fell, but instead of landing on concrete he landed in a pit of green liquid, and he screamed as he felt his bones start to shift.

Every bruise and bump the Joker gave him was being healed, but to do so he had to relive the pain all over again. At this point Jason could hardly muster the effort to writhe around in agony, but it still hurt just as badly as it did the first time.

There was a light above him, one that hadn’t been there when he’d been trapped in this state of green nothingness before. Frantically, he pushed himself towards it, ignoring how it made every ache in his body cry out. He pushed and pushed and pushed, and even though he had no idea what that actually meant in this strange limbo world where he couldn’t feel his limbs moving, he drifted towards the light.

It felt like he spent hours trapped in the green liquid. New pains bloomed and healed, and he always felt like he was one minute away from drowning. But the light drew steadily closer, and with one last push he managed to break the surface.

Jason sat up with a gasp.

“Jason? Jaylad are you with me?”

“Bruce?” Jason mumbled.

It was then that he became aware of his surroundings. He was still in the bed in Wayne Manor, but
Bruce was where Tim had been, while Tim and Dick where a little further away. They were all staring at him with wide eyes, and pressure to his hand made him realise that Bruce was holding it.

Jason’s legs felt like jelly.

“T’m awake.” he said, his voice hoarse. “T’ink it’s over now. What-”

Bruce pulled him into a hug, squeezing Jason as if he was going to fade away. For a second Jason flinched, but then he realised that all the pain in his body was gone. Only the memory of it remained, each blow fresh in Jason’s mind.

But the memories of pain didn’t last. It couldn’t last, not when he was wrapped in arms that promised safety and love. The only other person who ever hugged him like this was his mother, and the memory of her made him hold on tighter to Bruce.

“Bat-tman.” he mumbled. “Dat. Are you… are you my dad?”

He wasn’t quite sure what he was saying, or even what he was trying to say. The fog of the dreams still clouded his mind, but Bruce seemed to understand. He rested one hand on top of Jason’s head, and for the first time ever Jason wasn’t scared of a grown man. All his life, whenever men bigger than him interacted with him, Jason had always been tense, anticipating violence. But now the goddamn Batman himself was hugging him, and Jason felt so protected that he let tears fall out of his eyes.

“I felt it all.” he whispered into Bruce’s shirt. “Everything the Joker did to me in this future, I felt it.”

“I’m so sorry Jason.” Bruce replied, his voice almost as hoarse as Jason's.

Jason believed him.

He heard the sound of footsteps leaving the room, and someone calling for Alfred. When Bruce finally pulled back to let him breathe, Jason saw that Dick was gone. Tim was still there, hovering near the wall. Seeing him reminded Jason of the most unpleasant part of the nightmare, the part he was still struggling to wrap his mind around.

“Bruce, I know.” His voice cracked a little as he tried to speak. “I know that I died.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop, and the stunned look on Bruce’s face worried him, but Jason continued while he still had the chance.

“I felt it. In the dream I felt myself die. And then when I woke up Tim basically confirmed it.”

Bruce’s head whipped around to look at Tim. Jason couldn’t see Batman’s face, but it was enough to make Tim shrink further against the wall. Jason felt kind of bad, but not really because Tim hadn’t died. Jason had, and Tim had hidden that from him.

When Bruce turned back around, there was no trace of anger in his eyes. Just large amounts of pain. Grief, regret and self-loathing; Jason recognized most of what he could see.

“Jason… I’m so, so sorry. It was my fault that you died, and I understand if you never forgive me, because I know I won’t. So just please-”

“How?”

“What?”
"How is it your fault?"

If he didn’t feel so crappy, Jason might actually have laughed at how he just made Batman stop and think. As it was, he just felt as apathetically curious as he had when he’d first arrived at the manor.

“I should have realised what the Joker was planning.” Bruce said at last. “I should have kept a closer eye on you. I should have gotten to you faster. I should have—”

“So, what I’m hearing is that it’s not your fault at all. It’s the Joker’s.”

“…Jason, I—”

“He was the one who killed me wasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Then there we go.” Jason faked a yawn and snuggled back down into the covers. “It’s fine though. I’ve figured it all out.”

“You have?” Bruce sounded thoroughly lost.

“I have.” Jason smiled. “The part of the hallucination I just went through was clearly meant to kill me. But I survived it, and now I’m back in stage one. It won’t be long now until I wake up from this dream future, and I’ll be back with my mom and my real life. This future is nothing but a hallucination designed by a villain to try and break me. It actually might be the Joker now that I think about it. I mean, not only is my mother dead, but apparently I, Jason Todd the Gotham street rat, became Robin and then sucked so much at it that I died.”

“No.” Bruce said instantly, while behind him Tim gently banged his head against the wall. “No Jason, you’re wrong. You weren’t a bad Robin, and I’m sorry if I ever made you feel that way. Dick was right; I was blinded by my own grief and guilt, and I know that’s no excuse but please don’t—”

“See, you’re supposed to say that.” Jason grinned. “Because this trap wouldn’t work if the future doesn’t keep pretending to give me nice things. You have to give me hope, so that this dream world can crush it later on. But it’s ok, I’ve figured out how this hallucination works. It can’t hurt me anymore.”

Tim was staring at him like he was crazy, which made sense. Jason wasn’t quite sure which role each of his ‘brothers’ was meant to play in this dream, but part of their job was clearly to try and make him believe that this future was real.

Bruce on the other hand, was giving him a really weird look that Jason didn’t understand. Minutes ago the man had been an open book of guilt and shame, but now it was as if he’d rebooted himself. Staring at his future father, Jason got the uncomfortable feeling that he was being thoroughly analysed. It made his nose itch, but he didn’t want to scratch it in case it gave Bruce a clue as to what he was thinking.

After a moment of silence, Bruce spoke.

“That sounds reasonable to me.”

Jason stared at him.

“What?” Tim said incredulously.
Jason was surprised too. He expected Batman to be like his brothers and constantly try to convince him that this future was real, but apparently his role in this hallucination was shifting. More evidence that Jason was getting closer to escaping.

“Why should you believe that any of this is real?” Bruce agreed. “Why would you want to believe that this horrible future of yours is real? I’m not going to try and convince you that your future here isn’t terrible, because it is. If you don’t want to believe it then you have every right to do so Jason.”

Now it was Jason’s turn to be stunned. What game was Batman trying to play here? Was he trying to make Jason curious? Was he agreeing with him now so he could subtly try and push Jason into believing later?

“Uh… Mr Wayne? Bruce? Are you sure this is the best way to ensure his sanity?”

Bruce turned around and shot Tim another glare. Tim looked like he wanted to burrow straight through the wall, and Jason didn't blame him.

Thankfully, the door opened, and the tension eased a little as Dick and Alfred walked in. Jason sat up again, eagerly taking the water Alfred offered him.

“Good to see you’re back with us Jay!” Dick beamed. “You doing alright?”

“I’m doing better.” Jason responded cheerfully.

He watched as Dick’s eyes flickered from him to Bruce to Tim, and the smile on his brother’s face became a little more forced.

“Great!” Dick said, a little too sunnily. “Hey Bruce, can I talk to you? There’s some stuff that’s happened while you were here with Jason, and I think you should hear the basics from me before biting Barbara’s head off.”

Bruce looked torn, so Jason deliberately turned to Alfred and started up a conversation about available ice cream flavours. Batman, ever the detective, took the hint and let Dick lead him out into the hall. After a few seconds Tim slipped out after them.

Jason took another long gulp from his glass of water, settled back against his pillow, and ignored the concerned looks Alfred was shooting him.

He’d just survived hell, but it hadn’t been for nothing. When he got out of this dream, Jason was going to do everything he could to make sure this shitty future never happened. His mother wouldn’t die, he wouldn’t die until he’d lived a good long life, he would never know Batman or any of the people claiming to be his future family.

And he would never be Robin.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Tim eavesdrops on a conversation between Dick and Bruce. Cass comes to understand her family a little better.
Tim lacks self-confidence, and Cass lacks the ability to just slow down for a minute and chill.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tim hid just around the corner, listening to Bruce and Dick. He knew that he should go back into Jason’s room, knew that if he was caught eavesdropping it would only make things worse, but he couldn’t make himself move.

He needed to know what they were saying. There was a very high chance that part of their conversation would be about him, and Tim deserved to know what they thought of him. If he was going to make it in this future world of Batman and his gang of kid sidekicks, then he needed to know what he was up against. How did Batman really feel about him?

Tim knew that he wasn’t physically impressive. He couldn’t really compare himself with Steph since she was an adult but placed against all the ten-year-old male Robins the difference between him and them was stark. He was naturally short and didn’t have a heavy build like Damian to compensate. Jason was as skinny as Tim, but that was clearly from malnutrition. Tim couldn’t claim that excuse. He also couldn’t claim any useful physical background like the other boys. No acrobatics, no street fights, no assassin training. All he had going for him was his brain.

Or so he thought. But now it was beginning to feel more and more like he wasn’t super impressive in that area either. With a day to learn about the future he’d had a huge head-start over Jason and Dick, yet he screwed up and now Dick was having to fix his mistake. The first Robin clearly took after his mentor intelligence wise, and Jason had this obvious passion for education that Tim lacked. He did well at school, sure, but he wasn’t staring at Bruce’s library like it held the key to the universe. Tim just liked the power knowledge gave him, and today he had proven to Batman’s whole family that he couldn’t be trusted with that power.

From their first meeting Tim had known Damian was smart, and now he could tell that Damian had a combination of Dick and Jason’s versions of intelligence. It made sense that Damian was Robin, and the way his younger brother had clearly struggled to reassure Tim that he was useful during their first conversation said more than Damian’s actual words had. There was a respect that Damian had for Dick, Jason and Steph that he just didn’t seem to have for Tim. Even though Damian had tried to claim he had been partly wrong about his initial impression of Tim, he had still clearly meant it when he said Tim hadn’t deserved to be Robin.

But Damian wasn’t Batman. Bruce was. And for some reason he had accepted Tim as his Robin. The way he’d glared at Tim in Jason’s room had been full of anger and disappointment. Tim was used to anger, but the disappointment was fresh. Tim never gave his parents or his teachers any proper need to be disappointed in him. He wasn’t really sure how to react, so right now listening to what Bruce thought of him was worth the risk of being caught.

“What’s this about Dick?”
“A couple of things.”

Dick sounded so calm and confident. Tim didn’t know how he did it. Ever since Batman knocked on his future door Tim had been trying to seem cool and in control, but he had a feeling everyone could tell it was fake. Especially now when his knowledge of the future had just backfired.

“First I want to talk about Tim. He came to me earlier, worried about your reaction once you found out about the Jason incident. I think he’s scared you hate him.”

Well that wasn’t true, but Tim could understand why Dick thought that.

“I don’t hate him.” Bruce said, matching Dick’s calm tone. “Tim made a mistake, and once he grows back up again his older self will remember that mistake and learn from it.”

“Ok.” Dick said slowly. “But if he talks to you about this, is that what you’re going to tell him?”

“Well what else should I tell him? There’s no point saying that he didn’t mess up. He’s ten but he’s not a complete idiot.”

“True, true.” Dick said, still in that slow manner. “But how about saying that you forgive him?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. It’s not Tim’s fault that he was reverted to his younger self before I started training him.”

“That’s also true.” There was a hint of frustration to Dick’s voice now. “But if younger Tim hears you say that, how do you think that will make him feel?”

Actually, Tim felt like he understood where Bruce was coming from. They both seemed to understand that Tim didn’t really exist. His future self, the one that Batman clearly respected, was the version of Tim that mattered.

He could also see where Dick was coming from. With Damian absent Dick seemed to have taken it upon himself to be the protector and leader of the de-aged Robins. It was natural for him to think Tim needed to be handled with kid-gloves. Tim had done nothing so far to show otherwise.

Tim knew that he had been nothing but a screw-up since arriving at the manor. He knew that somehow his older self had gotten involved in this cool vigilante life, and now that he knew Batman wouldn’t blame his older self for any stupid mistakes Tim made, he could relax a little. His future was safe.

“I think Tim would understand what I’m trying to say.” Bruce’s reply drew Tim out of his thoughts. “But I can acknowledge that you have always had better communications skills than me, so if you think I should tell him that I forgive him then I will.”

“Great.” Dick didn’t sound very relieved.

Tim was. Tim was so relieved he could cry. That disappointment earlier was temporary, he was sure of it. He could tell just by Bruce’s words and the tone of his voice, that Tim’s future self was a respectable hero after all. He’d really done it. He’d achieved more than he’d ever known was possible for himself.

Red Robin was still a bad name. But future Tim was someone who Batman could trust to learn from his mistakes, and Tim knew his older self would.

“There’s more.” Bruce said, and Tim pressed himself harder into the wall. “What is it?”
“Barbara told me to just let her explain it. She said I shouldn’t have to deal with your shit. Uh... deal with your stuff, I mean.”

“Right.” Bruce said tightly.

“But there’s been an incident. A few actually, and I thought you’d take the news better coming from me.”

“Go on.” Bruce’s voice was scarily soft.

Tim shivered, not liking the tension that had suddenly filled the hall.

“There was an attempt to kidnap Cass.”

And now that tension was positively frosty. The urge to flee back into Jason’s bedroom was growing.

“It failed, but no one knows where she is. We know that Selina Kyle has her and promised Barbara to keep her safe, but she won’t tell us where she’s hiding. Apparently, Cass doesn’t want us to know.”

“Selina.” Bruce sighed.

It might actually have been a growl. Tim couldn’t tell. Bruce said her name weirdly, like it was both a relief and a curse that she had Cass.

“Steph and Damian are out combing the city for her and Barbara’s trying to find her with the computers. I can see you’re angry but if you’re going down to the cave don’t take it out on her, ok?”

“I’m not angry at Barbara.” Bruce said. “She isn’t the one who I trusted to watch over Cassandra. It’s my fault for listening to her and then being so emotionally muddled that I trusted Stephanie with Cassie.”

Tim didn’t like the way Bruce said Steph’s name, and neither did Dick.

“Don’t be mad at Steph either! Barbara’s already scarily angry at her, so be nice! It’s not her fault that we lost Cass.”

“No.” Bruce said. “It’s not.”

The sound of Bruce’s footsteps heading towards the batcave signalled the end to the conversation, and Tim scurried back to Jason’s room before Dick came back and saw him.

Alfred was gone, and Tim absently wondered if he’d noticed Tim hiding on his way back to the kitchen and had simply chosen to ignore it. Either way, Jason was alone and reading a book. Tim considered just sitting awkwardly in the corner, but then he remembered how Dick had gotten Jason to open up and talk to him about his book yesterday.

Tim wasn’t seventeen yet. But he had to have that potential hidden inside him somewhere. Maybe bonding with Jason would be a good start.

“What are you reading?”

Jason looked up and gave Tim a surprisingly pleasant smile. Tim smiled back and flopped down next to his brother on the bed.
Tim was a mess, right now. That much he could admit. But in the future, Batman seemed to believe he got better.

Freaking *Batman* respected him.

He had dead parents, dead friends, and the medicine cupboard in his apartment contained a suspicious amount of medication. But despite all that it looked like his older self became the cool, in control hero that Tim could only pretend to be right now.

*Fake it ‘til you make it.* Who knew that would actually turn out to be solid life advice?

There were pictures on the table. Photographs. Cass still didn’t understand the difference between those two words, but she didn’t bother trying to ask Selina that. She was too focused on the people in the pictures.

Damian, also known as Robin. Barbara, also known as Oracle. Stephanie, also known as Batgirl. And Batman, also known as Bruce.

“I don’t know you that well kid, but from what I’ve heard you like games. Good at winning them too.”

Cass shrugged, chewing on a mouthful of gummy bears Selina had given her. Beating Damian in the spar had been fun. She liked winning fights, but she wasn’t sure if they counted as ‘games’.

“So, since the only thing you do every time I bring up Bruce is pretend to throw up and then eat more sweets, I’ve got a game we can play. You point to a picture, and then try to explain to me what your problem with them is. If I can resolve that problem for you then we both win.”

Cass raised an eyebrow.

“Yes I know it’s a dumb game but you’re ten so I thought I should keep this simple.”

Cass switched eyebrows.

“My mistake. Should have brought a bomb for you to defuse. You Batkids are something else, let me tell you.”

Batkids. She was a Bat. Bats in this city were good. They helped people. That’s what she’d learnt so far.

She pointed to Bruce, and Selina grinned.

“So now you want to talk huh? If you pretend to throw up again I’m kicking you out. That joke lost its humour after the fifth time you did it.”

Cass pouted. She still thought it was funny.

“Explain what your problem with Bruce is. If I get it right then you get to keep the jellies.”

That didn’t seem fair, but these jellies were very tasty and Cass didn’t want to lose them so she didn’t argue.

Instead, she screwed up her fists and puffed her chest out, making a ‘grr’ sound.

“Yes, he’s a stereotypical macho man. A lot of anger and surliness, but it does have its benefits.”
Selina paused. “By the way there are ten inappropriate jokes that I’m not going to make. I hope you appreciate that.”

Cass tilted her head, and Selina sighed.

“Bruce loves you. He’s got a lot of anger but none of it is towards you, I promise. You’re the apple of his eye, and I’d like to think that I get him better than anyone but I’m secure enough to admit that you probably beat me there. This situation is stressing him out, but I can’t picture him doing something to get a reaction like this from you.”

Why would an apple be in an eye? Never mind, that wasn’t important.

Cass frowned, and reached for the paper. She drew herself, showed it to Selina, then drew the bars of a cage around her in angry black lines. When Selina realised what she’d drawn her eyebrows shot up.

“He imprisoned you? What? Why?”

Cass mimed throwing a few punches. Then she pointed to her throat and opened her mouth.

“You fought and then…. you couldn’t understand each other? That’s surprising. You two normally communicate so well.”

Cass shook her head in frustration. Selina was mostly right about what happened, but there was something that she still didn’t understand.

Cass started drawing again. This time she drew herself bigger and taller. Older. She jabbed a finger at the drawing, and Selina stared down at it.

“That’s you? Your older self I’m guessing.”

Cass nodded.

Then she picked up the paper and tore it into shreds.

“Ah.” Selina said quietly. “That was a little dramatic, but I get your point. You’re not her. That older self that we all must keep going on about; that’s not you.”

Cass nodded so hard it felt like her head was going to snap off.

“Sorry kid.” Selina said softly. “I get it now. What your problem with Bruce is. He looks at you with history that you don’t know or care about.”

Cass stuck her thumb up, hoping it didn’t seem sarcastic. She reached over to flip Damian’s picture over, and then dragged Barbara’s down to Bruce.

“You don’t have a problem with Damian, but Barbara also looks at you like she thinks you’re someone you’re not?”

Cass put her hand out like she was picking up an invisible gummy bear.

“A little bit? Less than Bruce I’m guessing.”

Cass put her hand down and nodded.

“But they both keep assuming things about you. Like how you’ll react or what you will and won’t
understand. Sounds pretty obnoxious to me.”

Cass smiled, acknowledging the extra apology in Selina’s words.

“Well if I see them maybe I can explain that to them, and they can try to treat you differently?”

Cass pouted, and pointed to Stephanie.

“I know we still haven’t gotten to her, but I have to go out tonight to work. You can stay here, and when I get back we can talk about your future blonde BFF.”

Work? Cass titled her head again, and Selina smiled.

“There’s a bad man who owns a lot of rich things. I steal from the bad people and give the money I make to the people they’re sucking it from. I do keep some for myself, obviously, but some of it goes towards people who need it more than this bastard.”

That sounded good. Different from how Damian explained Batman and his family, but still good. Cass stood up and pointed at herself.

“You want to help me?” Selina laughed and shook her head. “I’m stealing diamonds from a high security penthouse. Think you can help with that?”

Cass nodded stubbornly, and something in her eyes caused Selina’s body language to change. She grinned when she saw that Selina was thinking about letting her come.

“If I tell you to stay put, will you? Or will you just chase after me anyway and get yourself kidnapped?”

Cass’s grin widened, and she nodded.

“Fine.” Selina sighed and rolled her eyes, but Cass could see the excitement in her. “Just don’t slow me down kid. We get the diamond and we get back. That’s all. Then I help you with your family and you go home, understand?”

Cass nodded, but her mind was already imagining what was to come. She didn’t know what a diamond was, so she probably hadn’t stolen one before. Selina made it sound like a challenge, and Cass loved a challenge. Damian had taught her that word, and it seemed sort of similar to ‘game’, which Selina was convinced her older self liked. Maybe she had a point.

“If your dad could see you now.” Selina laughed. “Alright, there’s a spare bodysuit in the closet. Get changed in the bathroom and meet me out here in ten minutes. For tonight and tonight only, you are Catgirl.”


A name she was choosing. Not one from her future life. Catgirl, who didn’t hide in a big house and do nothing when there was danger. Catgirl, who didn’t have people who looked at her like it would make them cry if she got hurt. Catgirl.

She liked it.

Chapter End Notes
Next time: Batman, Robin and Batgirl are patrolling the city, while Catwoman and Catgirl are off to rob someone. No way that could go wrong.
The Searching

Chapter Summary

Cass is probably going to give Bruce four new stress lines by the time this is over. Meanwhile, Damian and Steph talk while scouring the city.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce’s first instinct was to get down to the Batcave as soon as possible, and he’d been halfway there when doubt struck him. Last time he’d left the manor Jason had gone into a coma, and the memory of coming home and seeing his son so frail and feverish in bed made Bruce turn around and head back upstairs. He couldn’t leave this time without making sure that the boys were alright.

Or as alright as they could be, considering Dick was still disappointed in Bruce, Jason believed this was all a dream, and Tim was apparently scared Bruce hated him.

Bruce thought back to when he’d first found out his children were all ten years old. He had hoped that if he got them all safely to the manor, then taking care of them until the spell wore off wouldn’t be too difficult.

How naïve he had been.

He slipped back into the bedroom and couldn’t help but smile faintly at the sight in front of him. All three boys were curled up in Jason’s bed, Dick and Tim listening intently as Jason read out loud.

“What are you reading?” Bruce asked, even though what little he heard had already clued him in.

The boys looked up, and although the way Dick’s face immediately went from sunny to guarded hurt him, the easy smiles Jason and Tim gave him lessened the blow.

“One Thousand and One Nights.” Jason replied, holding the cover of the book up to show Bruce. “Do you think when Damian gets back he can translate the original Arabic version for us? Dick says you probably have a copy of it and Tim says that the original is better because the translators changed some stuff.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to.” Bruce lied. “I think we do have a copy of the Syrian manuscripts upstairs.”

“Told you.” Dick grinned smugly. “Rich people have everything.”

They all laughed, but Bruce noticed that Tim seemed a little embarrassed. He wasn’t sure how to smooth over the class differences between the three boys, but he added it to the list of things to do once he found Cassandra.

He really needed to leave, but a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Alfred was telling him ‘bond with them Master Bruce.’

“I’m glad you three are doing better.” he said, only a little stiffly. “Alfred’s downstairs if you need
anything, and I’ll be back soon and…”

He trailed off, three sets of eyes staring expectantly at him.

“When I get back… maybe you can tell me which story you liked best.”

The boys seemed puzzled by his awkward attempt at being friendly, but they nodded anyway. Bruce gave them a quick smile before shuffling out the door in a way that hopefully did not look like he was fleeing.

He shook his head at himself as he made his way downstairs. Brucie Wayne could charm a room within minutes, and yesterday he’d successfully navigated heavy emotional conversations with Jason and Tim. But the whole situation was so bizarre that he just didn’t know how to casually interact with them. He knew that he should treat them like normal ten-year-olds, and he knew from raising Dick that he was good with normal ten-year-olds. But they weren’t normal children, and he couldn’t help but see their future selves every time he talked to them. It made him overthink every word he said to them.

He would work on that, he thought firmly. He didn’t know how long this spell would last, so it was important that he had good relationships with the de-aged versions of his sons. But first, he had a daughter to track down and catch.

Again.

Funny how he hadn’t pictured Cassandra being his most difficult child when this all began. He really should have, considering how wilful and headstrong her adult self could be. But for some reason, during the first night after the debacle with the kidnapping had been sorted out, he had imagined that today Dick and Jason would be running around causing mayhem while Tim and Cass sat quietly and listened to the adults looking after them.

The idea was laughable now. Cassandra lounging idly around the manor? His Cassie staying put and obeying them without question? He’d truly been out of sorts to think that was going to happen.

It was why he needed to find her now. His poor judgement had enabled Cass to escape the manor, and if anything happened to her it would be Bruce’s fault. He couldn’t handle anything else, not on top of the guilt he was already dealing with every time he looked at the younger, less disturbed and scarred versions of his children.

Barbara looked as tired as Bruce felt when he reached the cave. He didn’t bother speaking, just headed straight for the Batmobile. He knew that Barbara wasn’t offended. She was completely focused on the screen in front of her, and the look of determination in her eyes was what made Bruce pause.

“We haven’t found her yet.” Barbara said. “I’m looking through GCPD files, trying to figure out where Selina might be headed tonight. Robin and Batgirl are out searching the city, so keep your comm on in case they find anything.”

“I will.” Bruce replied, unsure of how to voice the rest of his concerns.

“Selina told me that Cassandra doesn’t want us to know her location. I believe her, but I don’t know why Cass is doing this.”

“She doesn’t trust us.” Even to Bruce’s ears his voice sounded sour.

“That’s the most likely theory.” Barbara admitted. “But we can’t be entirely sure. I’ll let you know if
I find anything that might lead you to Selina. Try starting in the East End, there were a few sightings of her there tonight.”

“Good.” Bruce opened the door to the car.

“When you get back there are a few other issues we need to discuss. People have started to notice that the Wayne kids are missing. Jason’s identity is safe and Cass is known for being reclusive, but we need to get in front of this before someone connects Dick Grayson and Tim Drake vanishing to the absence of Nightwing and Red Robin.”

“Later.” Bruce said, his mind already starting to list the calls he would have to make.

Lucius for sure. And Tam would help with Tim. The Fox family in general would probably need to be clued in. He wasn’t sure who could help him in Bludhaven, but Dick had to have someone he trusted. Bruce would figure it out once he decided on what story they were going to tell the world.

“Later.” Barbara agreed, and Bruce immediately pushed those thoughts into a little box in his mind and focused back on Cassandra.

He hit the button to open the cave door and sped out as quickly as he possible. The Batmobile reached the city faster than any other car could, but Bruce still felt like it wasn’t enough. Part of him wanted to call Clark again, but the other part of him knew that was ridiculous. Metas weren’t allowed in Gotham, and he couldn’t break his own rule unless the circumstances were dire.

This felt dire, but it didn’t count. Unfortunately, knowing that things weren’t apocalyptically bad didn’t stop his heart beating a bit too fast every time he thought of Selina dragging Cass around the worst areas in Gotham.

He pressed harder on the accelerator, and the Batmobile snarled in response, flying through the streets and breaking every traffic law in the city.

He was finding his daughter and he was taking her home. God help anyone who thought they could get in his way.

“Do you think he’ll actually ground her? Because that would be hilarious. I mean, this is basically the ‘running away from home’ phase in her teenage rebellion. And I know she’s only ten but it’s Little Miss Prodigy we’re talking about. It makes sense that she’d start her teen years earlier than us simple plebeians.”

“He won’t ground her.” Damian said, mostly just to make Brown stop talking. “Father being unable to handle Cassandra correctly is what got us into this mess in the first place. He knows that if he wants to get her home he has to get on her good side.”

“I was kidding Robin.” He could practically feel Brown’s eyeroll even though she was behind him. “Obviously he’s not going to ground her. He’s probably going to fire me though; or try to at least. He can’t stop me from being Batgirl, so I say he’ll just lock me out of the Batcave.”

There was a good chance that was true, and Damian didn’t see the point in lying to her. He said nothing instead, choosing to grapple onto the next building and scrutinize the street below them.

Brown followed, because for some reason she thought splitting up wasn’t the right option. Her excuse had been that two pairs of eyes were better than one, and Damian’s reply; that he didn’t need her eyes when his were genetically superior by far, had only gotten him another eyeroll.
Damian had assumed that meant she conceded defeat to his superior reasoning, but instead she continued to follow him across the rooftops while chattering incessantly. Any other night Damian would insult her until she left, but after seeing her cry earlier he was wary about pushing too far.

“Also, we all know I’m not your dad’s number one fan, but I wouldn’t say this mess is his fault. He messed up getting Cass back from Hong Kong sure, but this? This is just Cass being Cass, and I don’t think any of us could have prevented it.”

“Tt.” Damian said in response.

He wanted to argue with her, but his sister was included in the small amount of subjects Brown actually knew more about than he did. So instead he squatted down to get a closer look at the ground below them, searching every shadowed corner for movement.

“Nothing here.” he said at last, standing up from his perch and getting ready to leap onto the next set of rooftops.

“You sure? It’s pretty dark down there.”

Damian breathed in deeply and loudly through his nose, before shooting his grapple gun into the nearest chimney.

“If you want to climb down and poke around, be my guest.” he replied through gritted teeth.

“Seesh calm down. I just don’t want to miss her.”

“And you think I do?” he snapped.

“Of course not!” Good, she was getting irritated too. “But you’re not the one who’s currently the family disappointment!”

“Currently? Please. You and Todd toss that role back and forth every few weeks or so.”

“Not the point Robin.”

She sounded serious. Too serious. His jab had left an ample amount of room for her to retaliate, and she was never afraid to take what he said and throw it back at him. They both knew that Damian wasn’t exactly the golden child either, and for her to ignore that meant that she was actually feeling hurt.

A horrifying thought struck Damian. Was Brown accompanying him on this search for Cassandra because she wanted comfort? Did she want him to make her feel better? To console her about Oracle’s words and Father’s inevitable anger? What if she wanted them to hug?

She’d never found him approachable before. Damn his de-aged siblings for changing that. Just because they liked him didn’t mean Damian understood how it had happened, and it was certainly not an indicator that he was a good person to talk to about emotional issues.

“Besides, it’s not like I’m actually a part of the family.” Steph sighed. “Oracle made it pretty clear what she thinks about me, B-man has always disliked me, Dick and I barely know each other, Jason and I don’t know each other at all, and Tim…”

She trailed off, and Damian leapt at the chance to do something. Comforting platitudes weren’t his style, but insulting Drake was as easy to him as breathing.
“Drake is a snivelling imbecile and an obnoxious git. Despite not having any experience in this department I can say with absolute confidence that he was a terrible boyfriend. Whatever history you have with him is not worth the brain cells you’re wasting agonizing over this.”

“You’re so mean!” Brown said disapprovingly, but Damian saw her lips twitch a little.

Satisfied, they managed to search three more streets in blissful silence before Brown spoke up again.

“I’m not.”

“Good for you.” Damian replied instantly.

She shot him another disapproving look and he sighed. This was veering far too close to what Grayson called a ‘heart-to-heart’ for his liking.

“I’m not agonizing over Tim.” she went on. “It’s Cass I’m worried about.”

“Cassandra can take care of herself.”

“I know that, but something bad could still happen to her. She’s more vulnerable now than she’s been in a long time, and I can’t stand the thought of losing her. Do you know that she treated me just like the rest of you when we first met?”

That took an abrupt turn. Damian shook his head, wishing more and more that he could just turn and vanish into the shadows like Father. Did Batman use smoke bombs? Is that how he successfully got out of conversations like this so easily?

“Well she was. She thought I was a liability, nothing but a burden she didn’t want to be carrying around the city. I mean, she never said that exactly because well, her aphasia was still pretty terrible at the time, but you know how she can convey things without needing words? I knew right from the beginning that she didn’t like me.”

There was a pause, and Damian made a mild humming noise to escape the need for an actual response.

“But I earned her respect, and she earned mine. It took time, but once it was there it stayed there. I never had that respect stick with anyone else. Not Batman, not Red Robin, not Oracle.”

Damian dared a quick glance to his left and was relieved to see that Batgirl wasn’t crying again. But she had stopped talking, which meant she probably needed a response. He tried to imagine what Grayson would say, but Brown had been right when she said Nightwing and Batgirl didn’t know each other very well. Grayson had been mentoring Damian while Oracle had been mentoring Brown, and although their paths crossed from time to time, their mentor relationships never had.

Which meant that if he wanted this conversation to end, he needed to say something genuine and heartfelt. Something that would reassure her and get her spirits back up.

This was hard. This was very hard.

“I… respect you.” he said at last.

She turned to stare at him, and the look of surprise on her face made him want to tug his hood up and hide.

“You.” she said flatly.
“I do!” Damian said indignantly. “I’ve worked with worse people, you know.”

“High praise indeed.” Steph smirked.

Her words were sarcastic, but she seemed cheered up, and her smile made Damian feel proud. His teamwork skills were getting better every day, and he couldn’t wait to brag to Grayson once his brother grew back into an adult.

“And why should you care about what the others think?” Damian continued, high on his unexpected victory. “I say you’re competent and an acceptable colleague, and as the blood son that’s worth more than any opinion from the rest of Father’s ‘family’.”

He expected another smile, but instead she gave him a strange look. Damian got a sinking feeling in his stomach as he saw a mix of pity and disgust flicker across her face.

“You actually… Oh wow. That was you trying to be nice wasn’t it? Like, you actually thought that was a good thing to say?”

She didn’t sound angry or appalled. She just sounded sorry for him, and that was worse than any insult she could have come up with. Damian’s good mood flipped instantly. He felt his face flush red, and he turned and fled across the rooftops before she could see.

“Damian, wait! Slow down!”

“Go away!” he screamed. “I didn’t want your help tonight and I don’t need you smothering me!”

He heard her footsteps halt behind him, but he kept running and jumping until he was far away from her. If Cassandra was nearby she would have heard the ruckus and fled, and that knowledge only added to Damian’s anger.

He didn’t want to be here, out searching for his sister who could probably handle herself just as well as he could in a fight. He wanted to be back in the manor with Dick, but no one else seemed to realise that Cassandra would be fine on her own.

He had to find her as soon as possible so he could get home. He’d been lying before, trying to protect Stephanie’s feelings. It was obvious that they didn’t work as partners. He needed Grayson, not her, and until this spell wore off, Dick was the closest thing Robin had to his best partner.

With Brown’s constantly distracting presence absent, Damian was able to clear more streets and alleys in far better time than they had together. It was just more proof that they should have been searching separately from the start.

He swung onto another rooftop, letting the cool night air clear the heat from his cheeks. His conversation with Stephanie was still ringing in his head, and he wanted so badly to rant to Grayson about it. But if he went to find Batman, it would be Father in the suit, and there was no doubt that the original Batman would not want to hear about Damian’s trivial spat right now.

Movement on the street below provided a welcome distraction. A greasy haired man with a gun tucked into his trousers was strolling along the sidewalk, and Damian’s mouth pulled into a vicious grin as he began to tail the man.

He looked like your average hired muscle, but maybe looks were deceiving and he would actually put up a decent fight.

Maybe then, Damian would stop thinking about just how much he missed his big brother.
Nothing. None of Selina’s current safehouses had yielded anything of interest, and Bruce was slowly growing tired of this hunt. He’d even broken the silence on the comms to ask Damian and Stephanie if they had found anything.

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure you’ve searched the area thoroughly enough? Don’t underestimate her.”

“You’re so right, perhaps we should go back and re-check every single rat-infested garbage bin in the Bowery just in case.”

Steph snorted a laugh at that, and Bruce bit his tongue to avoid lashing out at Damian. It wasn’t the boy’s fault that he didn’t understand the gravity of the situation. He hadn’t been around for the worst of Cassandra’s suicidal behaviour. He couldn’t understand just how little value his sister used to have for her own life.

Neither could Selina, and that was the problem. There were so many challenges in Gotham’s underground that Cass would be eager to face, and she would easily take on every single mobster in the city despite the risk. For so long Cassandra had considered failure worse than death in a way that even Bruce found a little extreme. It had taken a long time for his daughter to start healing from the abuse David Cain put her through, and now she was a confused ten-year-old thrown into the future. Considering her older self had also been dunked in a Lazarus Pit like Jason, Bruce didn’t want to think just how bad her current mental state must be.

Which is why he nearly wept with relief when Oracle’s voice finally spoke into his ear.

“Batman, I have something.”

“What is it?”

“Jack Mannheim recently moved a large amount of diamonds from Metropolis to his Gotham penthouse. There have been a few reports of Catwoman being spotted near him in the last week or so, and he’s in an area she hasn’t targeted recently. If she’s working tonight, that’s where she’ll be.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Just get Cassandra back.”

He wasted no time making his way back to the Batmobile and taking off. The Mannheim penthouse was all the way over in the Diamond District, and at this time of the night there was a good chance Selina had already been and gone.

But when he pulled to a halt in front of the large apartment buildings, he felt himself relax a fraction when he saw a shadow balanced perfectly on the edge of the opposite roof. He'd recognize that shadow anywhere. As usual, Barbara's assessment had been accurate, and now he could finally talk to Selina about why she was keeping his daughter hidden from him.

That feeling of relief faded instantly as soon as he noticed the figure standing next to her. It was a girl, much smaller than Selina. She pointed at the penthouse and he saw Selina nod in reply. Bruce’s hands clenched tightly around the steering wheel, and the worried feeling in his heart turned into something much uglier.

_Cassie._
Next time: Confrontation. Confrontation everywhere.
The Ragers

Chapter Summary

Two arguments happen. The results vary.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce didn’t bother trying to hide himself as he stepped out of the car. He wanted them to know he was here, to see how they would react. If Selina tried to run away…

She didn’t, although he saw Cassandra shuffle backwards once she noticed him on the street below. He watched as Selina stuck her hand out and Cass relaxed, moving back towards the edge of the rooftop.

Somehow, that made Bruce even angrier.

He forced the rage down and made sure his face was a neutral mask. He was furious at Selina for using his daughter like this, but he knew that scaring Cass wouldn’t help anything.

He grappled up to the rooftop, landing a few meters away from them. They turned to face him, and while Cass looked ready to fight Selina remained calm. Bruce gritted his teeth and tried to make his body language as peaceful as possible.

Judging by how Cass balled her hands into fists, he wasn’t very successful.

“Selina.” he growled, dropping all pretences of civility. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Real names on the job? How unprofessional of you Batman.”

She smirked, and Bruce took a step forward, enraged that she was acting like this was a casual meet up. Cassandra took a step forward to match, and her glare made him stop. He couldn’t fight Cassie. Not again.

“This isn’t a joke Catwoman.” his voice was as low as it could possibly get. “You have my daughter dressed up in your old protégé’s gear, and your using her to assist your crimes. Did you really think I would let you get away with this?”

“Oh, because everything Batman does is so very legal? Just because you have an arrangement with the GCPD doesn’t make your vigilante activities any less criminal than mine.”

“That’s not-”

“And I’m not using her to assist in my crimes. I told her what I was doing and she insisted that she tag along. I’d rather have her by my side then running through the streets alone, so I said yes.”

“Of course you did.” Bruce snapped sarcastically. “It’s not like you’re getting anything out of it, right? It’s not like you saw an opportunity and you took it, regardless of whether teaching a child breaking and entering is the right thing to do.”
“What’s your point?” Selina’s voice was colder now.

“My point is that I couldn’t stop you from using the previous Catgirl as a tool to help you rob people, but I’m not going to let you turn my daughter into a common criminal! How do you think Cassandra will feel when she grows up? Do you think she’ll be grateful? Or do you think she’ll feel used?”

He could tell he’d struck a nerve, because the smirk slipped off her face completely. Bruce felt a savage sort of satisfaction at that. She was finally giving the situation the seriousness it deserved.

“Is that what you think of me? A common criminal?”

That wasn't good. He hadn’t thought she’d latch onto that aspect of his tirade. This was supposed to be about Cass. How he felt about Selina was not the conversation he wanted to have tonight.

“I didn’t—”

“Do you have any idea what kind of man owns the diamonds I’m about to steal? Because I do, and when I told Cass here she completely understood why I was doing this. The man in that penthouse didn’t earn a single one of those diamonds. He just profits off the criminal empire his family runs. Why shouldn’t I give those diamonds to the people his family hurt, whose suffering he ignores? I didn’t trick Cass or coerce her into this. She made a choice.”

“She’s a child.”

“Do you really want to go there?” Selina’s voice was deadly soft. “Do you? Because I’ve only mentored one child in the past, and I did it because she would have gone at it alone without me. The whole time she was with me, I kept trying to push her into pursuing dreams that were less dangerous. When your son offered her the chance to go to boarding school, I encouraged her to take it. Do you know where she is now?”

He did, in fact, know what had become of Kitrina Falcone.

“She’s in that boarding school, and she’s thriving.” Selina continued. “That’s how I take care of the kids under my protection. That’s what I’m doing with Cass right now. So, do you really want to come here and lecture me about corrupting your child?”

Bruce felt like his hair was standing on end under his suit. There were implications to Selina’s speech that he didn’t like, and his glare became a lot more dangerous under the cowl. She matched his gaze defiantly, and then spoke those words that Bruce had been dreading.

“Because if we’re comparing track records, I think it’s pretty hypocritical of you to say Cass would be better off in Batman’s care.”

The wind around them suddenly felt so much colder. He saw regret flash across Selina’s face the instant she spoke, but it was too late. Bruce strode forward, his anger replaced by cold determination.

“I’m taking you in. I have enough evidence for the police to throw you in jail, even if it’s just for a night.”

“Batman please.” Selina backed away. “Don’t be this petty.”

“Petty? You clearly intend to rob this man.”

“Bruce.” She didn’t look regretful anymore, just worried. “Don’t do this.”
He lunged.

She dodged, and a familiar dance began. Only this time, there was a new twist.

A small foot collided with his jaw as he attempted to grab Selina, and he reeled back. The follow up punch to his nose made him go down on one knee. There was a ridiculous amount of power behind those blows considering the size of his assailant.

Cassandra stood directly in front of his face, locking eyes with him as he lifted his head.

She *snarled.*

Bruce stared at her, feeling dizzy for more than one reason. He wasn’t as fluent at body language as she was, but the emotion in her eyes was horrifically familiar to him. He’d only seen it once before in the eyes of his children, after Jason came back from the dead.

“Cass, come on.” Selina said, her voice carefully gentle. “Let’s just leave.”

Cass continued to stare at him, teeth bared. Bruce stayed still, staring back but seeing something completely different. When it became clear that he wasn’t going to get up, Cass turned around and ran over to Selina.

They disappeared over the edge of the rooftop. Selina cast him one last sorrowful look before she left, and Bruce knew that she truly regretted how this had gone down.

Cassandra didn’t look back.

After a minute or so of staring into the empty space where they had stood, the cold wind on the exposed areas of his skin prompted Bruce to move. His hand felt numb, but he still managed to bring it up to his ear.

“Oracle? Call off the search. I found her.”

“You did? That’s great! What happened?”

“She got away.”

There was silence on the comms. Bruce continued to stare onto the empty rooftop.

“What happened.” Barbara said again.

“You can access the camera inside my cowl, can’t you?”

“Well yes, but the feed is sent to an encrypted file on your computer and you hate when I bypass your security.”

“Hack the file.”

“…Are you sure? Batman, what-”

“Do it.”

The faint sound of typing could be heard through his earpiece. Bruce began mentally counting the seconds ticking by.

“Done.”
Thirty seconds. He needed to upgrade his encryption.

“You can see the whole encounter, but the part I need you to focus on is when Cassandra snarls at me.”

He listened as Barbara played the footage, starting from when he landed on the rooftop. Idly, he wondered if she was judging him or pitying him. Either way, he found he really didn’t care right now.

“Ok I’ve paused it.”

“What do you see?”

“She looks angry. Really angry. She didn’t like you going for Selina.”

“That’s not anger.” Bruce said dully. “That’s hatred.”

The line was silent. Bruce forced himself to stand, the scrape of his suit against the roof sounding too loud compared to the silence in his head.

“My daughter hates me.” he said. “Call off the search Oracle.”

“Batman-”

“Please.” he wasn’t proud of the way his voice broke. “I don’t need lies right now. She doesn’t want my protection and she won’t let us help her, so just let Selina have her until she’s ready to come home.”

The silence on the other end of the line continued. Then, so quietly that Bruce almost missed it:

“I’ll tell Steph and Damian to come home.”

He nodded, even thought Barbara couldn’t see it, and began climbing back down to the Batmobile.

The thug had a gun. Even with that advantage, he only managed to fire one shot at Damian before his hand ended up pinned to the wall behind him by a knife.

He screamed.

Damian winced at that, more out of embarrassment than pity. If anyone in the League tried to shoot him then they would be prepared for the consequences. Even the ones that Damian killed didn’t cry and scream as he delivered vengeance. This man wouldn’t last a day amongst real killers.

“Congratulations, it’s your unlucky day.” Damian smirked.

In his head, he could picture Grayson smiling at that. Then Brown would shake her head and say “Not bad. You’re getting the hang of this.”

His smirk vanished as quickly as it came. He dug the knife in harder, ignoring how the man writhed in pain.

“What are you planning?” he hissed.

“Nothing!” the man screamed. “I’m just on my regular patrol, I swear!”
As far as Damian could tell, he wasn’t lying. He focused on making his voice as deep and like Father as possible.

“Who do you work for?”

“Black Mask.” the man said instantly. “I work for Black Mask.”

Again, Damian’s knowledge of interrogation said that the man was telling the truth. But it was all too easy for him to be satisfied.

“What do you know about Catwoman’s whereabouts?”

“Catwoman?” the man seemed confused. “I don’t know anything about Catwoman. Last piece of news I heard about her was a few months ago.”

That also seemed true, but after the frustrating night he’d been having Damian wasn’t happy with that answer. He let his fingers drift closer to the knife and watched as the man paled.

“Think harder.” Damian growled.

“I don’t know!” the man cried. “Black Mask isn’t the type she allies with, and I’m just a lackey! Please, I’m just in this to put food on the table, don’t kill me!”

Surprised, Damian stepped back.

“Why would I kill you? Can’t you see that I’m Robin? Black Mask must really value brawn over brains if he’s hiring goons with your level of intelligence.”

The man took a few deep breaths, and when he looked back up Damian was surprised at the cocky expression on his face.

“Give me a break.” the man sneered. “You’re the pyscho Robin, and you’re here alone without Batman, so why wouldn’t I think I’m a dead man walking? Used to be we’d be happier if Robin showed up without Batman, but now we’re all just praying for the day you snap and turn on the old man. Dunno where he found you but with all the good kids he’s lost, it’s obvious Batman is scraping the bottom of the barrel.”

Damian’s hands were shaking. Her forced them to stop, then stepped forward and pulled the knife out. He punched the man in the gut for good measure, feeling the tiniest bit better when he doubled over in pain.

“Next time I see you, you’re under arrest.” Damian hissed.

He took off before the man could reply, climbing onto the roof with steady hands and legs. His body wouldn’t fail him. His mind, on the other hand, was even more rattled than after his conversation with Stephanie.

“Robin!”

Speak of the devil.

She landed on the rooftop across from his, and he watched calmly as she looked down into the alley. He wasn’t surprised when her expression turned from concern to shock, but he didn’t feel like sticking around to be berated further.

He took off, hearing her yell after him. This time, her footsteps didn’t stop chasing him, so after a
few blocks of rooftop jumping he skidded to a halt, turning to face her.

“What?” he snapped.

“Robin.” she panted, bending over to catch her breath. “What was *that*?”

“That was me interrogating someone.” he replied coldly. “If you don’t like my methods then too bad. I’m not like you or Nightwing. I get results quicker.”

He could see her struggling to come up with an appropriate response. He also caught the exact second that she gave up trying.

“Can we talk about earlier?” she said instead. “I didn’t mean to upset you, but that ‘blood-son’ comment really didn’t sit well with me. Why would you think I would respect someone more if they thought that their blood made them superior? Why do you think any of us would?”

“Because it’s the truth!” Damian shot back. “Of course, my inferior brothers would pretend it isn’t, but I see it, and so does Father even if he has to say otherwise!”

He was fully prepared for her to give him another disgusted glare, but the calculating look on her face made him feel far more unsteady.

“Why is it always ‘brothers’ and ‘son’?” she said slowly. “Why do you never include Black Bat?”

“What?” Damian struggled to see why the conversation had taken this turn. “Why does that matter?”

“Because you can convince yourself that you’re better than the boys by comparing their ten-year-old selves to you, but if you compare yourself to ten-year-old Cass, then your whole argument falls apart. How *did* that spar in the cave end anyways?”

“That’s ridiculous!” Damian snapped. “Black Bat doesn’t count because she’s practically a metahuman! That is the only reason I don’t mention her.”

“No, it’s not.” Steph said, with infuriating calm. “You’re a smart kid Robin. You can compare stats all you want, but you’ve been working with your dad for a while now. There’s no way you can genuinely think that he agrees with your whole blood is thicker than water shtick.”

“He does! I know he does!” Damian was practically screaming and he couldn’t calm himself down. “I know because the only reason I’m here is because he’s my biological father! He *chose* all of you, but if I wasn’t related to him do you think I would be in this costume? Do you think he would have let me into his home? He can lie about it all he wants, but he values my worth as his blood son!”

He kept waiting for the disgust to come back into her eyes, but the way she looked at him now was pure sympathy.

“Oh kid.” she sighed.

“I don’t need your pity!” he snarled.

“But you do need something cleared up.” He didn’t understand where her calmness had come from and he hated it. “Your dad doesn’t love you just because you’re biologically his child. He took you into his home and offered you a place in his life because being your bio dad meant he had a responsibility to you. You’re right that being his blood son means he has a responsibility to care about you, but that’s not why he loves you. He loves you because you’re *Damian*. Get it?”
No, he didn’t get it. Father loved him for being himself? Not because of their shared blood? Could
that really be true?

He looked at Brown, and just like the man from earlier, he detected no lies. She truly believed what
she was saying.

Damian realised that his eyes were growing damp. In front of Brown no less. How utterly
embarrassing.

“No real names in the field.” he said, trying not to sound choked up.

She smiled at him, that smile she and Grayson shared that roughly translated to “you’re a little shit
sometimes but we care about you a lot.”

“Say you’re right.” he continued. “Say that my worth to Father does not rest entirely on the DNA we
share. Even if that’s true, I’m still near the bottom of Batman’s list. I’m fairly certain Todd is the only
one Father is more disappointed in.”

“Hey you never know, after today I might be below you.” Stephanie grinned.

Despite the seriousness of their conversation Damian couldn’t help but smirk back at that.

“But honestly, I think your ‘blood son’ comments are the main thing that Bruce gets upset about. I
mean, you’re doing really well looking after your siblings, and other than tonight you’ve gotten
better at controlling your violence towards criminals. I know he can seem really mad when you’ve
done something reckless but all Robins get that so don’t stress too much over it, ok?”

“You don’t understand.” Damian groaned. “The blood son angle is the only thing I have over my
siblings. I’m better than they were at my age but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re all older and
bigger and stronger. How can I ever hope to gain Father’s attention and respect if I’m constantly
overshadowed by them?”

Stephanie chewed on her lip, and for a second Damian thought he had stumped her. He
didn’t understand why he was relieved when she kept talking. Surely he wanted to win this
argument?

“The ‘blood son angle’ might seem like a way to stand out, but it does more harm than good in the
long run. Sure, it got you onto his list of kids, but trust me; every time you bring it up to put your
siblings down, it does the opposite of boost your standing. All the respect you gain from Batman by
doing good as Robin and hell, just by existing and living a good life, you lose a little bit of it every
time you push the blood son superiority thing.”

“So that’s it then.” Damian squatted down on the roof. “I’m stuck at my position. There’s no way for
me to become Father’s favourite child.”

“Ok, the whole ‘sibling ranking’ and ‘favourite child’ are probably really toxic ways of thinking
about it, but I’m not a therapist so I’m not going to open that can of worms.” Stephanie sat down
across from him, lounging back like they were going to start stargazing. “All I’m going to say is that
if you want a better relationship with your dad, there’s one angle that you mentioned but haven’t
actually considered.”

“What?” Damian frowned, racking his brains for everything he had just said. “What is it?”

“You’re the baby of the family.”
He scowled, and she quickly continued.

“Batman screwed up with all of us. Some of us he screwed up more than others, but either way he made a lot of mistakes, both as a mentor and a parent.”

He never liked the disrespectful way she spoke of his Father. He only made exceptions for it when he was also mad at Batman. He wasn’t too angry at Father right now, but he had mild hope that Brown was leading up to some sort of point so he stayed quiet.

“But with you Robin, you’re still so young. Your assassin background is a challenge, but it’s not your fault and we all know it. He has a chance with you, not to repeat the mistakes he made with us. You give him hope, kid.”

“But we hardly ever see eye to eye.” Damian interjected. “I’m trying so hard to do this right, but how can I be what he wants me to be when I still can barely figure it out?”

“Let us help you.” Stephanie replied, reaching out to grab his hand. “I know you’ve been doing it with me and Nightwing, and we’ve all seen the positive results. I also know it bothers you that Batman might respect some of your siblings more than you, but none of us see it as a competition the way you do. If you’re having a problem with your dad, maybe try putting your pride aside and talking to me, Nightwing or Black Bat? We just want to help, I promise.”

Damian nodded slowly, unsure of what to say in response.

“You’ve already been doing it, you know.” Stephanie added. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed it, but it makes Batman happy to see you genuinely getting along with us. At the end of the day, all he wants is for you to be safe, happy and well adjusted. He’s already proud of how far you’ve come, but if you keep improving at your current rate then I know he’ll just gain more and more respect. One day you might even beat Cass on the list.”

“Please.” Damian snorted. “If you were going to lie you should have said Grayson. That would have been slightly more feasible while still being a worthy goal.”

“I’ll remember that.” Steph grinned. “And by the way? I really appreciate having you as Robin.”

“Oh.” Damian tried not to curl up into a ball of awkwardness. “Thank you. I was wrong earlier. You are... an adequate Batgirl.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, easing the awkwardness that always came when the two of them openly expressed affection. Damian had no idea how they were going to move on from this conversation, but thankfully Oracle’s voice in his ear provided an excellent subject change.

“Robin, Batgirl, come in.”

“Here.” They responded in unison.

“The search is off. Return back to the cave for debriefing.”

“Batman found her?”

“Return back to the cave.”

They exchanged puzzled looks. Stephanie shrugged, and Damian sighed before tapping his comm.

“Understood. E.T.A fifteen minutes.”
Oracle went quiet then, and they both stood up and began heading back across the rooftops.

“Where’s your bike parked?” Damian asked suddenly.

Stephanie paused, squinting at the streets around her.

“It’s around a three minute sprint from here.”

“So is mine.”

Damian turned to look at her, seeing the same glint in her eyes.

“Race you?”

“You’ll lose.”

“Hah! Not likely. Hey!”

In the time she finished replying Damian had already taken off. He heard her chasing after him, her laugh ringing out across the street. Damian didn’t smile or laugh, but inside he felt more at peace then he had all day. He was going home with a new sense of purpose.

No, it wasn’t new exactly. He was just more aware now, with a different point of view to consider.

If a small smile crossed his face as he flew through the air, well, that was between him and the wind.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Damian goes home and sees his brothers.
The Visionaries

Chapter Summary

Bruce decides that something needs to change. So does Dick.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce was the first one to reach the cave. Barbara was waiting in grim silence for him, her computers eerily quiet. There was still humming to be heard as their usual activity continued, but it was muted compared to the frantic chugging that had put them on the brink of almost overheating.

“What are you thinking Bruce?” she said at last.

Her voice was carefully neutral, which he appreciated. If she had been angry he might have snapped back, and that wouldn’t be helpful for anyone.

“Selina can keep Cassandra safe.” he said hollowly. “We should focus on hunting down the people who tried to kidnap her. That’s…that’s what I think is best.”

“Ok.” Barbara replied, still carefully calm. “I can trust Selina with Cass for now, emphasis on for now. But there’s some other things we need to discuss. The press is starting to pick up on the boys’ disappearances. I was thinking you could contact Tam Fox and see if she would make a statement explaining that Tim is suffering from a de-aging spell. I’ve contacted the Teen Titans and they’ve agreed to publicly post a picture of Red Robin hanging out with them. They gave me a few options and I chose the one that looks the least out of date.”

She tapped the keyboard and a picture of Red Robin with Wonder Girl and Superboy appeared on the biggest screen. Cassie was taking the picture, while Kon made a ridiculous face and Tim gave a peace sign. Bruce looked at Tim’s nervous smile, his face half hidden under the cowl, and felt a pang of longing go through his heart.

He missed his kids.

“If you want to double check I can show you how I narrowed it down.” Barbara continued. “I haven’t started with Dick yet, but I was thinking Tam’s statement could say that all five children got hit with a de-aging spell. Then all we would have to do is create a sighting of Nightwing in Bludhaven and that’s two alibis done. But obviously if we go public with the children’s condition there’ll probably be an inquiry by social services, but because of your status I’m pretty sure you can play it off as an attack by a witch who was jealous of your wealth, or maybe a scorned ex-lover, but that might raise some red flags. Either way we can work on it.”

“Right.” Bruce said, eyeing the large amount of empty coffee cups scattered near the computers. “Thank you. That’s great.”

The cave was silent.

“So… do you want to start now or…?”
“Later.” Bruce said decisively. “I’ll go over it with you later.”

Even as he said that he could feel the issues burrowing into his mind, demanding to be dealt with. But the numbness that had overtaken him ever since his fight with Cassandra kept those worries at bay. He knew that the practical thing to do would be to go over the problems they had and yet…

He was struggling to care.

The door of the cave rumbled open, and Bruce turned to it with barely hidden relief. This was something he could care about.

Damian and Steph parked their bikes a few metres away, and a quiet argument seemed to take place. It resolved itself with Damian scowling and whacking Stephanie’s shoulder, while she rolled her eyes and muttered “Alright, alright.”

They made their way over to Bruce and Barbara. Damian seemed calm, but Stephanie made no attempt to hide how forced her smile was.

“Where’s Cassandra?” Damian said, getting straight to the point as usual.

He took after Bruce in his bluntness. Bruce wasn’t sure anymore if that was a good thing.

“With Selina.” he said quietly. “I tried to get her to come home and she didn’t want to. At this point I think the best thing we can do is to respect her choice and focus on the people chasing her.”

“You just let her go?” Damian snapped. “Why didn’t you call me? I could have helped!”

“Probably.” Bruce admitted. “But I tried confronting her myself and she got away. It’s my mistake and I’m sorry.”

There was a stunned silence in the cave. Bruce decided to use that to move on to the next thing he needed to fix.

“Stephanie.” he said, wincing internally as the girl jumped. “I asked you to keep Cassandra safe.”

He could see the girl clenching her fists, her body subconsciously moving into a fighting stance. It was a stance he had taught her, one that helped you stand your ground against bigger opponents. The fact that it was her instinctive stance against him was a mistake that he needed to fix.

“Did you do everything you could to protect her?” he asked, keeping all accusation and condemnation out of his tone.

The silence grew tense. Damian glared at Bruce and Barbara looked down at the ground, but Bruce kept his eyes on Stephanie. For a second he thought she was going to bolt, but then she lifted her head up high and stared straight into his cowl.

“Yeah.” she said. “I did.”

Bruce stared at her, looking for any indication that she was lying. After a moment of scrutinizing he gladly accepted that he couldn’t find any. She truly believed that she had protected Cass to the best of her abilities.

“That’s good.” he said. “I’m glad to hear it.”

He turned to face Damian, intending to drop the matter even as an awkwardness grew amongst the four of them. He should have known better than to expect Stephanie Brown to play along.
“Did you?”

Everyone froze. He turned back to Stephanie, keeping his jaw as loose as possible. She glared challengingly at him, and he couldn’t help but think fondly of their previous clashes. He’d grown to respect her defiance, as difficult and inconvenient as it could be.

“No.” he admitted. “I didn’t.”

She stepped back, her eyes wide. He could see that she wasn’t the only one shocked by his response.

So many mistakes to fix. He decided to start with the youngest.

“Damian, can I talk to you for a moment?”

He watched as his son grew tenser, only relaxing when Steph placed a comforting hand on his back. Bruce’s brain flashed back to his fight with Cass, and his determination increased. He would not let his relationship with Damian continue to deteriorate towards that level.

They moved away from the computers and towards the changing area. The cave had been modified according to Bruce’s specifications so that each area could allow for private conversations, as if they were in an actual room.

Damian’s back was ramrod straight, and he glared up at Bruce with the same sort of defiance Steph carried. It was a defiance that insisted that he knew better than Batman, a defiance that up until today Bruce would have dismissed.

Now, he knelt down and placed his hand on Damian’s shoulder.

“I wanted to thank you. This spell has put us all in an incredibly volatile situation and you’ve handled it far better than I have. I’m very grateful to have you as my Robin, Damian.”

The confusion and surprise on his son’s face made Bruce want to hug him, but he had a feeling that it would be too much for Damian to accept right now. He already looked overwhelmed from the three sentences Bruce had said.

He would fix that, Bruce decided. No matter how long it took, he would fix it.

He would fix all of it.

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Dick was bouncing on the bed when the door opened. He prepared to fling himself down and look innocent if it was Bruce or Alfred, but when a head of equal height to his own popped in the door he cheered instead.

“Damian!”

Dick flung himself off the bed, running over and flinging his arms around his little brother. Damian’s clothes were cool, indicating that he’d just changed out of his Robin gear. What had patrol been like? Good? Bad? Had anything big happened?

For a moment Dick worried that he’d misjudged everything. What if Damian was feeling uncomfortable and Dick had just invaded his personal space? Should he let go? Apologize?

Then Damian wrapped his arms around Dick’s waist and sank into the hug. Dick smiled and
steaded himself so that he could support his brother’s weight. There was a lot of stress and tension in Damian’s squeeze. Dick assumed that patrol hadn’t been successful.

“Did you find Cass?”

Unfortunately, Jason hadn’t noticed the signs. Damian let go and Dick did the same, stepping back to allow Damian to see the other boys.

“No.” Damian sighed. “Father made contact with her but was unable to get her back home. She’s safe for now with Catwoman, but the search is off. Father and Batgirl are going to finish up patrol, but he suggested that I spend time with you three.”

“Do you want to?” Dick asked curiously.

From what he’d seen Damian was the kind of kid who would much prefer patrol to babysitting. So Dick was surprised when his brother reached out and ruffled his hair.

“Yes.” Damian replied. “I’m happy to be here.”

Dick beamed at that.

“Good.” he grinned. “Because we had an idea, but we need you to help.”

“I bumped into Alfred on the stairs and he told me something similar.” Damian eyed them suspiciously. “He said you were all being very secretive about this.”

“We don’t think the grown ups will like it!” Jason blurted out.

“But we think it’s a good idea, and we think you’re less likely to be blinded by overprotectiveness.” Tim added quickly. “Out of everyone you’re the one most likely to actually give us a chance.”

“Go on then.” Damian crossed his arms, but Dick could see a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “What’s the idea?”

Dick had a three second silent conversation with Jason and Tim, and they decided that he should be the one to say it.

“We want you to train us!” Dick explained. “There’s a bad guy after Cass and he could be after us too. Jason and Tim have no Batman training, so if they come after us it’ll be up to me to fight them. Tim says you’re a really good fighter, so we were thinking that if you gave us a little training it could help us defend ourselves!”

All three of them had a tight grip on the bedsheets as Dick talked, nervous that he’d get cut off. At first Dick was worried Damian would shut them down straight away. But he said nothing, and Dick smiled when he realised Damian was actually considering it.

“I can see why you came to me.” Damian said in the end. “Oracle has no time, Brown is already on thin ice and Father would need to think it over a lot more. His main concern would be if the training might affect the spell currently keeping you as children. In my opinion the spell seems stable enough to handle a few light taps. It didn’t hurt Cassandra when we sparred or when Dick was kidnapped. Considering everything Jason’s recently been through some training pales in comparison.”

“Is that you saying you’ll train us?” Dick asked hopefully.

“Tt.” Damian said.
Jason and Tim shared a confused look, but Dick’s smile got wider as Damian uncrossed his arms.

“Very well.” Damian said, with a very dignified air. “I accept your proposal.”

He held out his hand, and after a beat Dick realised he was supposed to shake it. He did, and behind him Jason and Tim cheered.

“A few rules.” Damian continued, and the cheering stopped. “First of all I don’t want this to be a secret. That’s just asking for drama. If someone asks you what we’re doing, don’t lie about it.”

Dick pouted at that. He didn’t trust this Bruce to see their side of the story.

“I do, however, encourage very light and vague explanations. If you can get away with not explaining the details of what we’re up to, then go for it. Clear?”

“Sir yes sir!” Jason yelled.

“Good.”

Dick giggled a little at how invested Damian was becoming in their plan. His chest was puffed out and he spoke in a deep voice that attempted to imitate Batman’s natural authority. It sounded pretty good to Dick. Way better than his own Batman impression.

“Second rule.” Damian stuck up two fingers for emphasis. “You do everything I say, and nothing more. If I tell you to stop then you stop. If I tell you not to do something you don’t do it. Break this rule and I stop training you and go straight to Bruce. Clear?”

“Sir yes sir.” They all mumbled reluctantly.

“Alright then. Would you like to begin now?”

That was enough to bring the hyper mood back. Jason and Tim bounced up off the bed, scampering over to stand behind Dick.

“The first thing we need to do is find a suitable training area.”

“There’s a big room in the east wing with carpet on the floor.” Dick suggested. “It’s got lots of empty space in the middle.”

“Hm.” Damian narrowed his eyes, clearly visualising the room. “I suppose that’s adequate considering we’re prioritising discretion. Lead the way Dick.”

Dick resisted the urge to skip out of the bedroom. He was the leading the way, so he had to be cool about it. He did his best attempt at a swagger but judging from the smirk on Damian’s face it hadn’t looked as cool as he thought.

Oh well. Dick kicked off the wall and did a backflip, grinning when he heard two awed gasps behind him.

Oh yeah. Robin number one still had it.

Chapter End Notes
Next time: The boys train, and Cass learns more about her family.
The Teachers

Chapter Summary

Selina and Damian teach the kids a thing or two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The safehouse was quiet. Tense.

Cass liked quiet, and she was used to tension. But Selina’s tension wasn’t natural, it had been created by the fight with Batman. Cass didn’t really understand what was wrong, but she didn’t really understand much about Selina’s relationship with her future father.

They hadn’t stolen the diamonds in the end, but Selina didn’t even seem to care. Instead she paced back and forth in front of the main entrance, while Cass sat calmly on the table, her hands fidgeting with the photo of Stephanie as she observed Selina’s body language.

She saw when Selina was finally about to snap, and sure enough two seconds later Selina whirled around to face her.

“Look kid, I took you in because I’m not fond of leaving children out alone in the East End. But this family drama you have going on, I’m not interested in getting any more involved than I already am.”

Cass didn’t want to be part of the drama either. But she knew Selina understood that, so she stayed quiet and watched Selina vent.

“I want to help you, but I care about Bruce too, as stubborn and infuriating as he can be. I’ve had good times with him, but that man on the roof was a far cry from the usual Batman I’ve grown to enjoy.”

Cass dug her finger into the table, deliberately avoiding eye contact.

“He’s always been protective of you, but there’s something else in play here. He was frantic about keeping you safe. Safe from what? What sort of trouble are you in?”

Cass sighed, reluctantly reaching for the pen and paper. She drew a quick sketch of the man she’d seen at Steph’s apartment, then drew herself being chased by him. She handed the paper to Selina and watched how her forehead crinkled and her lips got thinner.

“You’ve got an assassin after you or something?”

Cass shrugged. She wasn’t sure herself who was after her, but Selina’s guess was close enough that she didn’t see the point in trying to explain further.

“Great. Just great.”

Now Selina was irritated. With who? Cass?
Her fear must have shown on her face, because Selina’s expression instantly softened.

“Honey, when I said that you could stay here for as long as you want, I meant it. It’s just that while I can keep you hidden, if this person does find us I’ll be the only one standing between you and them. I know you hate Bruce right now, and I’m not going to kick you out, but we have to acknowledge that staying at Wayne Manor is the safest option. This safehouse was designed for when I need to go dark, but right now I don’t know what exactly I’m hiding from and that’s a problem.”

Cass understood where Selina was coming from. She wanted to reassure her that the bad man wouldn’t find them, but her hunter had found Steph’s apartment, so how could she be sure he wouldn’t track her here?

The manor had more fighters and better security in the cave. But she didn’t like it there, and she’d rather risk going back on the streets then be forced to pretend she was a normal girl in a normal family.

But Damian was at the manor. Damian and Alfred and Dick were all good to her, and even Jason and Tim with their normal fear of her was fine. It was the others that she had problems with, but if she could help Selina understand, if Selina could explain Cass’s anger to the others…

Then maybe Cass would think about going back.

She tapped Stephanie’s picture, staring up at Selina expectantly.

“You still want me to try and play Dr Phil huh?” At Cass’s confused look Selina just shook her head and sat down across from her. “Ignore the reference. So, Batgirl is the only one we haven’t touched on yet, right? I know Stephanie fairly well. She’s a sweet girl, with a good heart and a passionate soul. She’s been mistreated by your family a lot and I’d say there’s definitely some anger there, but just like with Bruce I can promise that none of it is towards you.”

Cass shook her head impatiently. The problem she had with Bruce and Barbara wasn’t the same problem she had with Steph. Steph was just weird and confusing. She was scared of Cass, but not in the normal way that the boys were. Her fear of Cass was one that even Cass’s body reading skills couldn’t understand. Stephanie’s body was always so relaxed, but her face flickered between emotions and her eyes were always guarded.

She tried to explain this to Selina as best she could. It took a large amount of gestures and drawings, but eventually Selina seemed to get some of it.

“She’s scared of you, but not in a way that you understand?”

Cass nodded in relief, slouching back a little on the table. She expected Selina to have a follow up question, but instead she just stared at Cass with a sympathetic look on her face.

“I’m not surprised.” Selina sighed. “I don’t suppose you’ve had an opportunity to witness emotional fear before now. During your training, the fear of getting hurt that your opponents felt; that was all physical.”

Emotional fear? Cass tilted her head, confused. She understood emotional, and she understood fear, but the words together didn’t click easily in her mind. Selina seemed to understand, because she reached over and gently rested her hand on top of Cass’s.

“What you need to know is that Stephanie has a big heart, and she loves you Cass. She loves every version of you, whether you’re Batgirl, Catgirl, Black Bat or simply Cassandra Cain. But she’s a complicated kid, and she has a boatload of insecurities that can complicate her relationships. I’ve a
feeling that’s what happened here.”

The words made sense, although visualising a ‘boatload of insecurities’ made Cass pause for a few seconds. Insecurity was a word she knew, but it wasn’t one she could relate to. She’d heard some of Steph’s history from Damian, but she didn’t understand why any of it would make her insecure.

“I heard that you moved in together. I’ll be sure to congratulate your older self when she returns.”

Cass smiled at that.

“But think about what that means. For you and for Stephanie. You were so close that you were happy to live together, and now the you she knows is no longer around. Imagine that the one person you trust to be on your side is gone, and in her place is a kid that you don’t know. I know that would throw me off balance, you know, if I had someone like that.”

Selina smirked to show she was joking, but there was a tiny sadness underneath her words that Cass decided not to point out.

“That fear that you see in Stephanie? I’d bet anything that she’s scared you don’t like her.”

Cass blinked, her body going still as she absorbed the new information.

Stephanie thought Cass didn’t like her? That was… stupid. Why should she care if Cass didn’t like her? She didn’t know Cass.

Maybe it was her insecurity. Insecurity. It was an irrational thing. Cass wanted to look down on it, but well…

If Cass could die right now in a way that would let her make up for her bad past, she’d do it instantly. Knowing that, she couldn’t really judge anyone else for being irrational.

Best not to think about death. Bad memories there. Bad thoughts.

She tucked her legs under her chin, thinking harder about Selina’s words. It made sense, in a way. Emotional fear was a weird and useless thing to Cass, but it did explain why she couldn’t fully understand what she read in Steph’s body language.

“Stephanie cares about you Cass. Let yourself see past her insecurities, and I know that you’ll find so much love and affection. Show her that you care too, and you won’t have to worry about the fears you don’t fully understand.”

Again, there was something more to Selina’s words. She seemed to know Stephanie well, but the way her eyes slackened when she talked helped Cass to realise the truth. There was an experience there, a history that belonged only to Selina.

Still, her advice made some sort of sense, so Cass didn’t bother pressing further. Selina would talk about herself if she wanted to.

“So…” Selina let the pause linger, one eyebrow raised expectantly at Cass. “If I can explain everything we’ve talked about to your family, do you think you’ll be able to give them another chance?”

One man Cass used to spar with had a habit of chewing on his lip when he was thinking hard. Cass copied him once, but Cain had backhanded her across the face for having such an obvious tell and that had been the end of that.
She kind of wanted to bite her lip right now. She wanted to give Selina some indication that she was thinking about going back, but her body remained perfectly poised on the kitchen table.

Could she give Batman another chance? She knew that everyone deserved a second chance, didn’t they?

Well, everyone except her, of course.

But Batman wasn’t her. He wasn’t a killer. A monster. He was just mean and angry, and she wanted to punch him for it but if he was able to change, then…..

She gave a small nod, and let her lips twitch into a smile to match Selina’s.

She still hated him. But she liked Selina, and for some reason Selina liked Batman.

That was enough for Cass to give him a second second chance.

“Alright.” Damian said, still in that strict tone that reminded Jason of his former teachers. “You each have twenty seconds to try and defeat me. Dick, you first.”

Jason was surprised at how quick Dick leapt at Damian. He would have needed a few seconds to prepare himself, but by the time Damian had finished his sentence Dick was already starting to flip over him. He tried to grab Damian’s head on his way down, but Damian ducked smoothly out of the way and into the path of Dick’s landing.

Jason’s mouth dropped open as Dick twisted in mid-air to avoid crashing into Damian. It was impressive as hell, even though he landed roughly on his shoulder. With a surprisingly quick recovery time, Dick bounced up immediately and charged at Damian.

The first few attempts at an attack were just dodged, but one swing of Dick’s leg brushed over Damian’s nose, and Jason saw his younger brother’s eyes narrow.

Two seconds later Dick was cradling his jaw, with the sheath of Damian’s sword hovering above his head.

“As expected, you’ve been well trained by Father, and your circus background gives you a unique style. But the old program was thrown out when Todd died, so you’ll have to try harder than that if you want to beat me. After all, your older self was the one who taught me the new Robin training.”

It was still so weird to hear someone mentioning his death. Jason felt something bubbling in his chest at the realisation that he was the Todd Damian was talking about. He quickly pushed it down before it could get a grip on his heart.

“My turn!” he yelled eagerly.

There was no way he was winning this, but there was a grin on Dick’s face and a gleam in his eye that Jason was dying to experience.

Well. Maybe not dying.

He ignored all the budding emotions that one word created, squashing them calmly without changing his cheerful expression at all.

None of this was real. None of it.
“Jason.” Damian nodded. "Your turn indeed.”

Grinning, Jason charged over towards Damian. His strategy was simple: bowl him over, drag him down, and punch him until he stopped moving.

Except Damian stepped out of the way far too quickly, and Jason’s lunge ended with him sprawled out on the ground.

“Smart to try and tackle me, but you overextended yourself. Only try and drag me down if you know you can shift your weight and readjust without falling.”

Jason nodded, climbing to his feet to try again. This time, he was careful not to jump in headfirst, so when Damian sidestepped again Jason only stumbled before regaining his balance. He gave a victorious cheer when he spun around, still standing.

“Congratulations on not falling over.” Damian said dryly. “Tim, it’s your turn.”

“Uh…” Tim did not look anywhere near as eager as Jason and Dick had been.

“It’s fine Tim.” Jason said, rolling his eyes. “It barely hurts when you fall.”

“Yeah.” Dick agreed. “Trust me, Damian won’t let you get injured.”

Tim stared flatly as Dick cradled the side of his jaw Damian had punched. Jason had to admit that the visual did make Dick sound less convincing.

“Ok.” Tim sighed, stepping forward. “I’ll do it.”

“Good.” Damian shifted his stance slightly. “Begin.”

Tim ran towards Damian, just like Jason had. Considering how tiny he was and how he was clearly lacking Jason’s confidence, Damian did not look particularly threatened.

But then, as Damian sidestepped Tim twisted, the back of his leg swinging towards the space Damian now occupied. Damian blocked the kick with his hand, shoving Tim’s leg so that the boy spun fully around and fell over.

“Don’t anticipate.”

“What does that mean?” Tim panted.

Damian said nothing.

“Fine.” Tim muttered, clambering back to his feet.

Jason jumped as Tim suddenly flung something at Damian. Damian quickly jumped onto the closest chair to avoid the device Tim had thrown. It bounced off another chair, and Jason realised that it was just Tim’s phone.

Oh, a distraction.

*Thump.*

Tim landed on the floor, knocked back after attempting to lunge at Damian. The distraction had worked on Jason, but clearly he had been the only one.
“Time’s up.” Damian said.

He reached down to help Tim up. Something passed between them, a tension that Jason didn’t quite understand.

**Why do you even care? They’re not real.**

“Well done.” Damian said quietly, then louder to all three of them. “I now have an incredibly basic grasp of your capabilities. It’s not much, but if gives me someplace to start.”

“Great!” Dick grinned. “So what’s next?”

“Are we gonna learn how to knock people out?” Jason asked, bouncing up and down at the thought.

In his head, he could see himself going back home with this newfound dream knowledge. The next thug that came sniffing around his apartment would get knocked down by a karate chop to the lower back. His mom would be safe, and any of the kids in his neighbourhood who wanted protection would also be safe. He could teach them all to fight, start his own gang, and change Gotham for the better.

It was a nice dream, but there was a good chance everything Damian was teaching him was fake anyway. It wasn’t like Jason’s brain knew which part of the neck he needed to hit to knock someone unconscious, so where was this knowledge really coming from?

“No, if anything we need to work on improving our core strength.” Tim chimed in, pulling Jason from his thoughts.

“I could teach you acrobatics.” Dick offered.

“I could teach you street brawling.” Jason countered.

“Actually.” Damian interrupted. “What you’re going to be working on is-”

“What you’re going to be working on is explaining to me what exactly is going on here.”

Jason and Tim jumped, spinning around to face the booming voice coming from the doorway. Bruce Wayne, out of his Batman uniform but still as intimidating, was glaring at all of them.

Jason gulped.

Well... shit.

Chapter End Notes

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Next time: The world outside the manor starts demanding answers.

A/N: Sorry about the late update. Next update should be a week from now, around this time. These last few chapters have been a bit too short for my liking. Once the end of year exams are over the chapters should get longer again.
Tim tried not to fidget as Bruce swooped into the room. Earlier he had been amazed at how this man with such a friendly smile could turn into the legendary Batman, but now it made more sense. He had the Batman aura surrounding him as he stood in front of them, and it made Tim wonder how much of his gentleness earlier had been fake. Was it possible for someone so grim and fearsome to have a good heart?

He looked around, curious to see how the others were reacting. Jason looked as scared as he did, and Dick looked ready to fist fight Bruce right there and then. Tim had expected those reactions, but Damian took him by surprise. He didn’t look scared or angry. He just seemed calm.

“The boys wanted to learn how to defend themselves. With a masked man on the loose attempting to kidnap our sister I understood their concern and offered to train them in the basics of combat.”

“I see.” Bruce said, and Tim couldn’t hear a single inflection in his voice. “I suppose you considered the risk in terms of the unstable magic binding them to their younger bodies.”

“I did.” Damian answered, equally as inflectionless. “Considering what Dick endured before we found him, as well as the trauma Jason recently suffered, I came to the logical conclusion that some very light sparring shouldn’t hurt them and would in fact be beneficial to their general wellbeing.”

“That does seem to be a sensible assumption.”

“Believe me Father, I weighed the risks and benefits very carefully before choosing this course of action.”

This was the most ridiculously formal conversation Tim had heard them have, and he’d heard them discuss the business section of the Gotham Gazette during breakfast.

“Good.” Bruce said. “I’m glad you’re protecting them.”

For a second something flickered in Damian’s eyes, like he didn’t trust the sincerity of Bruce’s words. But it vanished before Tim could really understand that, and he gave Bruce a stiff nod.

“Still, sparring isn’t everything.” Bruce continued. “I’m sure Dick remembers some of our old training methods that came in handy out in the field.”

“I like sparring with Damian.” Dick replied, deliberately standing closer to his brother.

Tim winced internally at the look of pain that flashed across Bruce’s face, but just like with Damian it was gone so quickly Tim was half convinced he’d imagined it.
“I don’t doubt that.” Bruce said quietly. “But I also remember another game you used to like.”

Before anyone could speak, Bruce darted forward and tapped Jason on the arm.

“Tag!”

“Seriously?” Jason laughed, but he was already chasing after Bruce. “Batman wants to play tag with us?”

“No leaving the room and no attempts to seriously injure your opponents. Those are the rules.”

“Well it’s not like I can catch you anyway!” Jason shot back, jumping onto a chair and springing off it in an attempt to grab Bruce.

“That’s where strategy comes in, lad.” Bruce nodded towards Tim.

Tim felt himself step backwards as Jason turned to him, a dangerous gleam in the boy’s eyes.

“Start running Timmy.”

Tim did, surprised at the laughter that came from his chest as he dodged Jason’s eager hands. He lasted around twenty seconds before tripping over a footstool. He managed to catch himself before falling over, but it gave Jason time to tap him on the head.

“Tag!”

Jason ran straight over to Bruce, and the man smiled as he high fived his son. Curious, Tim turned towards Damian, who’d shuffled over towards the wall as soon as the word “Tag!” had been uttered. Damian raised an eyebrow, clearly amused that Tim would consider him a good target.

Something about that casual arrogance…Tim had never had siblings before this, but Damian was meant to be his younger brother. The fact that he didn’t see Tim as a threat made perfect sense, but part of him really, really wanted to prove Damian wrong.

He circled closer, hiding himself behind a chair. When he peeked out, Damian hadn’t moved, so Tim leapt for him. Damian backpedalled away, still with a smirk on his face. Tim sprinted around the room, trying desperately to catch up, but by the second lap of the room he was panting for breath, and Damian hadn’t even broken a sweat.

Then Jason, who’d been whispering with Bruce in the corner, ran over to Damian. Damian looked at him in confusion, which turned to surprise as Jason leapt on his back.

“Get him Tim!”

Grinning, Tim ran over, and although Damian could still run Jason wasn’t making it easy on him. He dodged two of Tim’s swipes, but with Jason’s hands over his eyes he couldn’t avoid Tim completely, and Tim managed to tag Damian’s shoulder.

“Tt.” Damian grumbled, as Jason leapt off his back and high fived Tim. “Traitors, the both of you.”

He walked over and tapped Dick, who was the only one who hadn’t moved since the game began. Tim watched curiously as Damian smiled at him.

“Tag.”

“No!” Tim jumped a little as Dick yelled, turning to glare at Bruce. “I don’t want to play! Tag was a
game that *my* Bruce played with me, not you!”

The atmosphere instantly turned from giddy to awkward. Tim’s eyes darted between Damian and Bruce, wondering who would be the one to fix this. Damian looked taken aback by Dick’s outburst, and a little hurt that Dick had refused him like that. Bruce on the other hand, looked like a blank slate to Tim. He couldn’t even tell if Dick’s words had made any impact on the man, although if he had to guess Tim would say that Bruce was hurt too.

“That’s fine.” Bruce said calmly. “I understand. I actually came to find you all for a different reason.” He turned and strode out the door. Jason and Tim looked at each other.

*Should we?*

*Follow him.*

They walked out, and after a few seconds Tim heard two other sets of footsteps start to follow them. He glanced behind, relieved to see that Dick and Damian were walking behind them. Dick was still frowning, but he was holding Damian’s hand tightly, so Tim assumed all was forgiven there.

Bruce lead them towards one of the living rooms with a TV in it. So far Tim had found three televisions in this mansion, and he was sure he was missing a few. He’d thought the two TVs in his own house were excessive, but this was a whole other level of rich.

The others filed in, crowding around the screen Bruce was staring at. Tim watched as the news switched to a pretty young woman standing in front of a microphone. The writing at the bottom of the screen labelled her as Tamara Fox, and he recognized the building behind her as Wayne Tower.

“It is with great regret that I inform you all of the tragedy that has befallen the Wayne family, including my own dear friend Tim Drake-Wayne.”

They were friends? Hearing someone call him Drake-Wayne out loud was a strange sensation. Tim leaned closer to the screen, trying to get every bit of information he could.

“Bruce Wayne has been targeted by a malicious sorcerer, and all five of his children are currently ill as a result. We request that you allow the Wayne family to look after the children in peace, and for their safety no further details will be given to the public until the spell has been undone.”

She stepped down from the podium, but Tim kept staring at her until the screen cut back to the newsroom.

“In other news, a photo of Nightwing with his stomach visible has surfaced and thrown social media into a frenzy. Many are linking this blurry picture of his abs to various celebrities, with Gotham citizens claiming it’s anyone from Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson to Jesse McCartney. With no clear consensus, it seems like this vigilante’s secret identity will remain a mystery.”

Bruce hit the mute button as the story changed again, turning to face his kids. Tim had a feeling the others looked as thrown off guard as he did. Dick was staring at the blurry picture of him jumping between buildings, his suit torn up so that his stomach was exposed.

“I’m Nightwing, right?” Dick spoke up. “Is that a picture of me?”

“Yes.” Bruce replied. “Barbara leaked it. It’s the best photo we have of you that could fool people into believing it was taken recently. The fact that you look badly injured in it adds more reason as to why you haven’t been seen in the past few days. The ‘hashtag absgate’, as Twitter has named it, was
an unfortunate side effect.”

“Did…did you just say hashtag?” Tim whispered.

“Yes Tim.” Bruce smiled. “I am aware of youth culture. Hashtag first world problems and all that. It’s very important that I keep up with the trends.”

“Oh my god.”

“You’re messing with us.” Jason declared.

“Perhaps.” There was a twinkle in Bruce’s eye. “Now, are there any more questions?”

“That girl.” Tim said hesitantly. “Are we really friends?”

“You were in a fake engagement with Tamara Fox, then you began a real relationship, then she broke up with you, and now you are somewhat amicable towards each other.”

“Oh.” Tim squeaked, embarrassed by how his voice cracked. “That’s… that’s a lot.”

“It is.” Bruce agreed. “Feel free to sit down if you need to process it.”

Tim did just that, watching as the news continued to report a series of burglaries, homicides and social events. A regular day in Gotham.

“My life is really weird.” he said, a hysterical laugh bursting out of him. “Like, super weird. Does my older self realise how weird my life is?”

“I should hope so.” Damian snorted. “Otherwise he doesn’t have much sense.”

“Right.” Tim said weakly, watching as the news switched back to Tamara Fox addressing the press. Next up was the photo of Nightwing, and now Tim had time to notice the bloodstains on his uniform. It was a really good picture if you wanted people to think Nightwing wasn’t able to patrol. Dick’s injuries looked really painful, even just from the one shot.

Tim hadn’t even been in a real fight yet. He banged his knee off the corner of a table a few weeks ago and ended up crying because it hurt so much.

How had this become his life?

“I understand Lucius. If you could stall them for a little longer Mr Wayne would really appreciate it.”

Barbara sighed as she closed the line. She’d anticipated that social workers would come running as soon as the news broke, but that didn’t mean she liked it. With Cass still missing and Jason officially dead, Bruce needed some time to get his story straight with the other children.

“I don’t know how long we have, so if you’re leaving either do it now or use the vehicle exit.”

“Got it.” Stephanie replied dully, slamming her fist into a punching bag.

Barbara sighed, spinning around to face the other girl. Since the moment she got back Stephanie had gone straight to the training area, attacking the dummies with a fierce anger that Barbara recognized from some of her worst days.
“Stephanie…”

“Should I hand the costume over on the way out or can I wear it home?”

Shame crept up Barbara’s throat, and she felt her face flush. Now that things had calmed down slightly she truly regretted her earlier outburst at Stephanie. She shouldn’t have threatened her with the loss of the Batgirl mantle, and Barbara needed to fix this now before Stephanie’s hurt feelings could grow into something worse.

“Stephanie look at me.”

The younger girl spun around and marched over, fire in her eyes like she was ready to throw Barbara through the computer screens.

“What? What do you want to say now?”

“I want to say…” Barbara cleared her throat. “I want to say that I’m sorry.”

There was silence in the cave.

“You’re sorry.” Steph said flatly.

“Yes.” Barbara replied. “I shouldn’t have said what I said to you. I was stressed and scared and I took it out on you, and that was wrong of me. I’m so sorry Stephanie.”

She tried to reach for the girl’s hand, but Stephanie jerked it away. Barbara felt the pit in her stomach grow as she saw tears begin to form in Stephanie’s eyes.

“You’re sorry.” Stephanie said. “You’re sorry.”

She made a choked sound like a mixture of a laugh and a sob. Barbara let her face twist into sorrow, her guilt fully displayed.

“I know it’s not enough, and I wish I could take back what I said. But please-”

“You’re sorry!” Stephanie cried again, a hysterical laughter bubbling out of her mouth. “You’re sorry for what you said.”

“Yes.” Barbara said slowly. “I’m sorry.”

“This is…this is so fucked up.” Stephanie was still laughing, and Barbara was starting to grow concerned. “It’s so fucked up that I’m actually surprised you’re sorry. I’m shocked that you apologized. I didn’t expect you to. I expected you to brush it under the rug and wait until everything went back to normal. How fucked up is that? I mean look at me, I’m literally crying because you apologized for treating me like shit! Part of me is really grateful that I got a basic apology! That’s fucked up, isn’t it? But that’s how it works with us Bats. Or maybe that’s just how it works with me.”

“Stephanie…” This time when Barbara reached for her, Steph let herself be tugged down into a hug. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

There was no response, just muffled sobs as Stephanie shook in her arms. Barbara looked down, and felt nothing but shame. She and Bruce had done this. Tim had played a part too, but they had been Stephanie’s mentors, and it was clear that they had both failed the girl terribly.

Barbara held Stephanie tightly, and whispered her apology over and over as she cried.
Next time: Selina brings Cass home.
Crying, in Stephanie’s opinion, was sometimes really, really nice.

It was cathartic, and relieving, and did way more for her stress levels than her attempts at yoga. The problem was that eventually she stopped crying, and all that was left was an awkward silence.

If it was Bruce there with her, he probably would have tried to ignore the awkwardness, therefore making it worse. Luckily, Babs was not Bruce, and she smiled and ruffled Stephanie’s hair, her eyes gently asking if she was alright now. Stephanie nodded, wiping the tears off her cheeks. She wasn’t alright, not by any definition of the word, but she wasn’t hysterical anymore, which was really as good as she could hope for.

Now that her meltdown was over, Steph felt unsure of what to do next. Should she pretend it never happened? Should she just go home? She looked at Babs, who gestured towards the computer screens.

“Now that the news of the kids has been made public I’m on damage control duty. If you want, you can help me manipulate social media. You have a Twitter, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” Stephanie grinned sheepishly. “@definitelynotbatgirl is pretty popular. I think it’s mostly due to my Instagram videos. The one of all of us in McDonalds in full costume has over a million likes. Bruce’s face after he found out about it was my wallpaper for a good few months.”

“And people know your identity, don’t they?”

“I never confirm anything, but considering my dad revealed to the world that I used to be Robin a lot of people have put two and two together.”

“Good.” Barbara smiled, the kind of chilling smirk Stephanie only saw her wear when she was about to mindfuck a particularly tricky villain. “Start dropping hints about this mysterious fifth Wayne child. I have no doubt the Jason Todd conspiracists are already going crazy. Throw fuel on the fire, tweet that Bruce hasn’t adopted anyone new since Damian.”

“It’s been a while since the family trended.” Stephanie whipped her phone out, eagerly typing her first tweet. “I bet I can get this to go number one. Or at least higher than the video Tim took of Bruce trying to get a football off the roof.”

“Just don’t actually confirm it’s him. Let people jump to that conclusion by themselves.”

“Aye aye captain.” Stephanie felt something warm and strong settle in her chest, along with a newfound sense of purpose. “This will be a nice change from people asking me to set them up with Nightwing or Red Robin.”
“How do you respond?”

“I tell them that Nightwing doesn’t have a phone and that Red Robin is an incel.”

“Things still not great between you and Tim?”

“Let’s just say I much prefer his ten-year-old self right now.”

Something popped up on one of Barbara’s screens. She wheeled herself over and clicked it, shooting Steph a thumbs up.

“Well done. One tweet and the media’s already scrambling for more information. This is definitely going viral.”

Stephanie smiled, understanding the unspoken intention of Barbara’s praise.

*Fresh start? I’ll do better this time.*

Stephanie just hoped the new attitude would last. She wanted to be confident that Barbara wouldn’t threaten to take away her mantle ever again but well…

Stephanie was hopeful sure, but she’d be an idiot not to learn from past experiences. She wanted to believe that this was a turning point in her relationship with the Bats, but if her death hadn’t been enough she couldn’t be certain that this would work.

Still, she was willing to hope. Maybe that was enough right now.

“What if I upload a selfie of myself with the boys on my personal Insta? I won’t mention any of their names, so people will go wild trying to figure out if the fourth one is Jason.”

“Good idea.” Barbara nodded, pulling up more data on the steadily growing trend. “We only get one chance to reintroduce Jason to the public and knowing him he’s not going to be pleased about any of this. Regardless of what Bruce insists, we have to do this delicately, and give him as many options as possible when he returns to his older self.”

“Got it.”

Stephanie quickly changed out of her Batgirl costume, wrinkling her nose at the stench. It was a great costume, but no amount of deodorant could mask the smell of a hard night’s work chasing criminals. Her clean sweatpants and t-shirt felt amazing, and as the elevator took her up into Bruce’s study, her heartbeat finally began to settle.

She could do this.

Finding the kids was pretty easy. She just followed the sounds of yelling and laughter to where yet another cushion fight was ongoing. Bruce was conspicuously absent, which was probably why Dick was smiling so hard as he tossed two cushions into Jason’s face. Jason ignored him, determined to smother Tim with a cushion while Tim kept a firm hold on Damian’s leg.

Steph’s smile faded as she took in the happy sight, and a small twinge of fear entered her heart. They couldn’t hide these kids away forever but making their condition public put them all in even more danger. She couldn’t help but picture Tim really being smothered to death, scrambling for help but unable to free himself. Seeing the way Jason’s head bounced with each cushion Dick threw made her imagine they were punches instead, and suddenly Steph felt sick.
Her eyes met Damian’s, and she forced a smile at his grumpy expression. Right now, the kids were fine, and as long as the family stayed close no one could touch them.

She thought of Cass out there alone with only Selina to protect her, and immediately forced down the wave of guilt and self-loathing that image created. She’d deal with the clusterfuck that was her complicated feelings towards Cass another time.

“Batgirl!” Dick beamed when he noticed her. “Come help us! Tim and I are losing the war.”

“Mmph.” Tim agreed, a cushion still covering his mouth.

“Never fear!” she dramatically leapt into the room, savouring the giggles that her entrance created. “I shall protect you! The Dark Knight fears no cushion!”

Jason shrieked with laughter as she dove down and began tickling him. Damian finally moved in an attempt to help his partner, but both Tim and Dick dove on him, slowing him down enough for Steph to pick Jason up and twirl him away.

“Justice shall be served.” she growled, giving her best impression of Batman. “All innocent children shall be protected. No criminal’s darkness can reach my level.”

“You think you’re dark enough to handle me?” Damian, to her delight, had a pretty good Batman impression himself. “Your darkness can’t begin to compare to my inner turmoil. Every day I paint my nails black as a metaphor for the colour of my soul. I bet you didn’t even have a goth phase.”

“I’m so proud of you right now.” Steph informed him, amidst the laughter of the other boys.

“Tt.” Damian’s ears went red.

It was adorable. Steph let Jason go, and the boy bounded over to join the others, cushion fight forgotten as they attempted to make Damian buckle under their combined weight.

Once again, Steph’s eyes met Damian’s. This time, he noticed the storm behind her smile, and his eyes flashed with understanding. Something passed between them there, far more serious than the antics surrounding them.

They were going to do everything they could to protect these kids.

“Boys, please don’t kill Damian. We’re going to need him shortly.”

They all turned towards the doorway of the lounge, where Bruce stood. Once again, a complicated mess of feelings rose up in Stephanie’s mind, and once again she pushed them down. *Later.* She would deal with it all later.

“Selina called.” Bruce continued. “She’s bringing Cass home.”

The boys erupted into chatter, but Stephanie remained frozen on the couch. She could feel Damian’s eyes on her, but she couldn’t bring herself to look at him.

Later had arrived far sooner than she expected.

Cass’s stomach was twisting in a weird way. She forced it to stop. It was uncomfortable.

“Here we are kiddo.” Selina drove her car right up to the mansion’s entrance. “You can wait here for a bit if you want. I’ll go ahead and try to clear the air.”
Cass nodded. Now that she was here, she wanted to stay in the car forever. It was nice and comfortable, and no one was looking at her.

The front door opened, and she saw the old man (Alfred? Alfie?) staring down at them. Cass looked the other way, not wanting to deal with whatever emotions Batman’s father had right now.

“Hang tight kid. I’ll be back for you soon.”

Selina opened the car to step out, leaving Cass to ponder what exactly she meant by ‘hang tight’. Was Cass supposed to hang from the car? There were grips above every door, but Cass didn’t really see the purpose of hanging from them.

Oh wait. If she gripped them hard enough she could press her body against the roof of the car. That would hide her from anyone looking inside, making it seem as if the car was empty. How smart.

She hooked both hands into the grip, pulling herself up. Twisting so that all her weight was on her arms took some effort, but Cass handled it with ease. When it came to balancing on her hands, the space between the grip and the roof was smaller than she was used to. But once she managed to press her body tightly against the roof, she was completely hidden from anyone watching outside the car.

She wasn’t sure how long she stayed in that position until she heard footsteps. If felt like ten minutes, but she wasn’t really counting so it could have been longer.

“She’s gone!” Batman-no, his name was Bruce- yelled. “The car is empty!”

Cass grinned at that. She should probably drop down now, but this was fun.

The door opened, and Selina poked her head in, smirking when she noticed Cass.

“‘Hang tight’, I’m guessing?”

Cass nodded.

“I have to remember not to use slang around you.” Selina shook her head. “Still, your stamina and strength are impressive. If you ever want a little fun, the Catgirl costume will be waiting for you.”

“Selina…”

“I’m kidding Bruce. She knows I’m kidding.”

Selina winked, and Cass let herself drop down, landing in a crouch on the passenger seat.

She stared at Bruce, taking in every inch of his body language. He was calmer today, less anger and tension in his limbs. His eyes were softer too.

It was enough for Cass to give him a chance.

“Come on in Cassie.” he said gently. “We’re all waiting for you to come home.”

*Home.* She still wasn’t used to that, still didn’t think of this huge house as her home. But there was someone after her and these people could help with that. So, she would stay.

Her lips moved, mouthing the word Selina had helped her learn. It wasn’t time yet, but she needed to practice it at every moment she could. Words were still so far past her limits, and this one was pretty big.
She stepped out of the car, letting Bruce guide her towards the manor. Hesitating, she looked back at Selina, who was leaning against her car.

This was goodbye.

Cass sprinted back down the steps, leaping towards Selina and wrapping her arms around her. She kissed her cheek, and Selina gently rubbed her back in acknowledgement.

_Thank you._

Cass dropped down and turned back to the manor, giggling at Bruce’s expression. The man probably thought she was going to bolt.

Good. She liked keeping him on his toes.

He led her inside, to where the entire family was waiting. Barbara and Damian were looking at her with pure relief. The three boys were both curious and nervous. She had expected those reactions and didn’t bother responding to them. She still didn’t know how to handle the love Oracle and Damian had for her, and the boys’ reactions were too normal for her to bother caring.

It was Stephanie she focused on. She could see it now, the knowledge she’d been missing. That fear in Stephanie’s eyes wasn’t that Cass would hurt her with a punch or a kick. It was fear of Cass rejecting her, like when Cass had tried to kiss Cain on the cheek and he backhanded her across the face as punishment.

Cass hadn’t felt good then. She didn’t like that she was causing that feeling in others.

Why did Stephanie fear her? It was obvious to Cass now how much the girl loved her, and she didn’t understand why she’d be scared of Cass rejecting that love. Cass knew herself, and she had faith that she knew a little about her older self too. If they really were the same person, there was no way Cass would turn away from someone so willing to care about her like this. She’d never had a friend like Stephanie before, and even though Cass hated herself she knew that she didn’t have the strength to reject the love Stephanie was offering.

There was a word Selina had used about the love this family shared. _Unconditional_. Cass wasn’t sure if that was completely true. Damian, Bruce and Barbara were still tense and ready to strike if she snapped and attacked them. Cass didn’t hate them for it, it was completely understandable.

But Stephanie didn’t fear her at all. She only feared that Cass didn’t think she was good enough, and now that Cass understood her body language better she was amazed by what she saw. The amount of love and concern, all directed at Cass was overwhelming. How had her older self managed to get someone like this in her life? How could Stephanie ever think Cass hated her?

She walked over, ignoring how Barbara tensed, and the fear in Stephanie’s eyes grew. Slowly, Cass wrapped her hands around Stephanie’s waist, staring up at her until the older girl met her eyes. Stephanie was confused and unsure, but Cass knew how to change that. She knew the truth.

“Fa-vour-ite.”

She spoke the three parts of the word clearly, forcing her vocal chords to make the correct noises. Everyone reacted with surprise, but Cass barely paid them any attention. Her gaze was firmly on Stephanie, staring deep into her eyes and watching the fear and shock evaporate piece by piece, until it was replaced with understanding.

“Yeah.” Stephanie said softly, reaching forward to stroke Cass’s hair. “You’re my favourite too.”
Next time: Social services arrive to check on the Wayne kids. All they have to do is not be suspicious.

A/N: Sorry again for the shortness of the chapter. Exams are starting for me, so there won't be an update for a few weeks. Once it's all over everything should get back to normal.
Babs and Bruce have another argument about his control issues. The social worker arrives.

Cass’s return seemed to have lifted spirits somewhat. Bruce watched as Steph led the kids back towards the living room, Cass clinging to her shoulders.

“We’ve got a guest coming to the manor soon, which means everyone has to look super nice.” Steph explained. “Want to help me give Damian a makeover?”

“Try it Brown, I dare you.”

Cass smiled and ruffled Steph’s hair in a way that was only slightly awkward. She reached a hand down and Damian absently brought his up for her to hold. Seconds later, Jason started trying to jump on Tim’s back, and Tim in turn leapt onto Dick for safety. Dick laughed, and then shrieked when Jason jumped on top of Tim, causing all three boys to tumble onto the ground. Bruce watched silently from the hall.

They were good kids, he thought, ignoring the weight growing heavier in his chest. Good kids who deserved better.

He felt Alfred lay a comforting hand on his back, as if he understood what Bruce was going through. Bruce didn’t fully understand it himself, but he let Alfred comfort him for a moment before the butler made his exit, headed towards the kitchen. Barbara was the only one left, and he could tell she had something to say to him. He followed her as she wheeled herself towards his study. She didn’t say anything as he walked, and Bruce in turn tried not to think too hard about what she was going to talk to him about.

Instead he turned his mind towards Cassandra, and the first word she’d said since she was de-aged. *Favourite.* Quite a complicated word for someone with such severe aphasia. He was proud of her.

It made sense that Bruce wouldn’t be her favourite right now. Of course it did, especially after all his mistakes. He didn’t quite get why she said that to Stephanie instead, but he could admit she had done better with Cass than him. The older Cass still considered him her favourite though, didn’t she? He knew that she had Barbara, Tim and Steph, but everyone always told him that she idolised Batman, and he did have a special connection with her. He was certain that he used to be her favourite. That hadn’t changed, had it?

Not that it mattered at all, really. But maybe he’d check when she got back to normal, just to be sure where they stood.

Dick and Tim would be fine, hopefully. Damian too. Jason would definitely hate him, but that had been the status quo for a while now, and Bruce didn’t intend to stop loving him no matter how deep
that hatred would grow after this stunt.

Barbara seemed to share similar concerns, as she handed him her phone as soon as he shut the study door.

“Stephanie’s spread the word, and I helped add fuel to the fire. Jason Todd and Fifth Wayne are trending topics on multiple social networks.”

“Good.” Bruce said, and hoped he sounded convincing.

Fooling Barbara was a futile hope. She raised an eyebrow at him, and he forced himself to look smooth and stoic, completely unaffected by how he was meddling in his son’s life.

“Why are you doing this Bruce? I get how Jason’s predicament makes it the perfect opportunity to reintroduce him without him resistance, but I can’t figure out why you would want to take that opportunity. What’s your goal? What do you gain, other than making him even angrier at you?”

“It’s not about what I gain.” Bruce replied calmly. “It’s about what Jason gains. Being recognized as alive again will benefit him. He’ll be able to put his real name on official documents, maybe even settle down or go to college if he feels like it.”

“I think that opportunity has passed.” Barbara said softly. “And I think you know that too. So, tell me, what’s the real reason for this?”

“That is the real reason.” Bruce lied. “Jason is too self-destructive and stubborn to take this opportunity himself, so I made the decision for him. He already hates me, and I’d rather he does it while thriving in life instead of being a common criminal.”

His words were deliberately harsh, designed to shock and distract. Once again, Barbara saw through him.

“Look Bruce, I know we all like to joke about how much of a controlling, insensitive asshole you can be-”

“I don’t.” Bruce objected.

“-but I also know when you’re actually being an idiot, and when you’re just bluffing. So once again, why did Tam Fox announce to the press that you had five children?”

Bruce opened his mouth to reply, then hesitated, searching for the best excuse. He realised his mistake a second too late, as Barbara’s eyes widened and she leaned forward.

“Did you mean for her to tell the press that?” Bruce said nothing, and Barbara leant forward even more. “Did you write down four kids on the script and she slipped up and said five? Because if this is all just a mistake we can have her make a statement, chalk this all up as a hoax.”

Bruce shifted slightly, and Barbara zeroed in on his discomfort like a hawk.

“I’m right aren’t I? Tam messed up her statement, didn’t she? But then why go through all this trouble? Why not just have her rescind her statement? It would be embarrassing sure, but not as bad as this mess.”

“She didn’t misread the script.” Bruce said at last.

She studied him carefully, and he said nothing more, hoping that she wouldn’t figure it out. But this
was Barbara, and the odds of her not getting to the bottom of this were about the same as the odds of
Damian demanding an interview with Vicki Vale just so he could gush about how much he loved
Tim.

“Bruce…” Barbara said slowly. “The script you wrote for her, it said ‘all five of his children’, didn’t
it?”

“Yes.”

“And was it your intention to write that?”

“…”

“Bruce.”

“…”

“Bruce.”

Bruce said nothing, determined not to wither under her glare.

“Tell me you didn’t make a mistake in the script, and then get so embarrassed by it that you’re now
pretending it was your intention all along.”

Bruce remained silent, and Barbara groaned, putting her head in her hands.

“Oh my God. So this is all just because of your pride? Because you don’t want people thinking the
mighty Batman can make such a simple mistake?”

“No!” Bruce snapped at last. “No. It’s not just that.”

Barbara leant back, clearly unimpressed.

“Then by all means, elaborate. Because right now this isn’t looking too good for you.”

“It’s just…” Bruce closed his eyes and sighed. “I wasn’t thinking clearly when I wrote the script for
Tam’s statement. Jason had just survived a high fever and I had started to become accustomed to
thinking of him as one of my kids again. He is my son, I’ll never deny that, but to have him as a part
of the group… It’s nice. Having them all here under one roof is nice, but also difficult. I’m scared for
them and I’m trying to think practically, but it’s hard when they’re all laughing and smiling and
getting along with each other like normal children.”

“I understand that.” Barbara said, with the edge in her voice softened slightly. “But I still don’t get
why you wouldn’t just let the public know that the statement is wrong. Why-”

Something cold and wild surged inside him. Something that had been building for days, and that
Bruce had been trying to push away.

“How do you understand?” Bruce bit out. “Do you really? Do you know what it’s like to see Jason
playing with his siblings? To not have to fear that he’ll kill them? Do you know what it’s like to see
Damian taking care of them? Being so gentle with them that you can’t even believe it at first? To see
Tim so clueless about most of the tragedy he’ll suffer? The boy cried to me because he felt guilty
about his parents’ death, and I sat there and thought of everyone else he would lose, and I wanted to
cry with him. And then Cass and Dick, unaware of all they will be put through? Getting to know
their family without all the complications of the mission? Because I think about all that constantly,
and then when Tam says five instead of four, and I realise that I’ve made a mistake, some foolish, naïve part of me starts to think: Would it be so bad? If Jason was officially a Wayne again? Would it really be that bad?”

There was silence in the study. Bruce’s chest heaved, but he took a breath and continued on, his voice a little steadier. He hadn’t meant to lose control like that.

“So that’s it. That’s why I’m doing this. Because despite all the times I’ve learnt that I can’t afford to be weak, I still can’t help letting my love for my children influence my decisions. Even when it’s irrational and dangerous, even when logic and practicality is screaming otherwise, I can’t help it. I refuse to stop loving them, even though I know what it will cost me.”

Barbara pushed herself upwards, staring straight into his eyes.

“Loving your children doesn’t make you weak Bruce.”

He felt his anger surge again, eagerly grabbing at the first opportunity it sensed.

“Jason died because I wasn’t thinking clearly.” Bruce spat back. “I loved him, and it clouded my judgement of him, and he ran off to Africa and died because I didn’t keep a closer eye on him.”

“So what then? Are you saying you shouldn’t have loved him?”

“No.” Bruce said firmly. “I have never, for one second, regretted loving Jason, or any of my children. I never will. But I have to acknowledge what that love does, and how I can’t stop it from affecting my judgement.”

“Then what’s the solution?”

“There is no solution.” Bruce chuckled bitterly. “If I love them, I can’t distance myself from them, and that leaves them vulnerable. If I can’t fully think like a detective, then I can’t fully protect them. As long as I love them they’re capable of slipping through the cracks in my judgement, but the alternative… to not love them at all? That’s no solution. It’s just a different kind of pain.”

He took another deep breath, clenching his hands tightly together. He would regret this in a minute. Even with someone he trusted, talking honestly about his emotions could be dangerous.

“I think you’re overthinking things.” Barbara said calmly, although there was a slight tremor in her voice. “You’re not a god Bruce. You can’t control whether they live or die. I remember begging you to stop Cass from fighting Shiva, but you refused, and she died. Whether you listen to your heart or your head, they can still die.”

“When I listened to my head, Cassandra died for less than a minute, and she walked out of that fight with her death wish gone. When I listened to my heart, Jason died and was buried, and he came back half crazed. Even now he’s still suffering.”

“What about Stephanie?” Barbara challenged, a glint of rage in her eyes that would normally make Bruce take a step back. “When she was tortured, when she died on that operating table, was that thinking with your head?”

“Stephanie Brown is not one of my children.” Bruce growled. “My mistake there was not about her. It was about loving Tim so much that I would use her to get him back as Robin, despite all the flaws in that plan.”

Barbara scoffed at that, shaking her head with contempt.
“Keep telling yourself that Bruce. But we both know you spent years forcing yourself not to love that girl, trying your best not to treat her like one of your own. Look at her now and tell me if it was worth it.”

Silence filled the study once again. Barbara glared at him with righteous anger burning in her eyes, and Bruce stared back, forcing his breathing to even out. When he spoke again, it was with his normal, controlled, speech pattern.

“The social worker will be coming in a few hours. You should stay in the cave until they’re gone.”

Barbara turned and wheeled towards the elevator without another word. Bruce watched her go and wondered if he could get through one conversation without a confrontation of some sort. Hopefully tensions would ease between most of them once the kids returned to normal, although things with Jason would certainly get worse.

One problem at a time. Right now, he had to prepare for a visit.

Karen Finch had been working in social services for twenty years. Two years ago, despite her reluctance, she’d been assigned to the Wayne family, namely the youngest son, Damian. Everyone had reassured her that despite their high profile, the Waynes weren’t difficult.

“I had one of them for a good few years, and there were no problems.” Her co-worker Jerry told her. “Just ignore the rumours and focus on the kids. I’m sure Mr Wayne won’t give you any trouble.”

“Speak for yourself.” Her friend Melissa snorted. “My friend’s friend was in charge of the girl, and they say that they’re still having issues to this day. According to them the girl has basically no legitimate documents confirming her identity, not even a birth certificate! Mr Wayne came up with a ton of excuses and a shit ton of paperwork for us, but there’s something real sketchy about it all.”

Surprisingly enough, Karen hadn’t had that much trouble. Legalising Bruce Wayne’s custody of Damian Wayne had been fairly simple, partly due to the blood relation, but mostly due to the large amounts of money Bruce Wayne used to skip queues and cut through the red tape. After that there had been a few phone calls due to incidents at school and in public, as well as one house call that had been incredibly awkward and stilted. But there had been nothing that indicated that Bruce Wayne was an unfit guardian, just like there hadn’t been for any of his other children.

Except for the controversy surrounding Jason Todd’s death. All the Wayne social workers tended to steer around that topic nowadays, and Karen had intended to do the same.

Only now Mr Wayne had apparently acquired a fifth child, and rumours were circulating saying that it was his second son, back from the dead. Oh, and according to Mr Wayne the spell that had hit his children had turned four of them into ten-year-olds. Hence why social services needed to make this call.

When her boss had heard about this, he’d let out a deep groan and planted his face on the table. It had taken five minutes before he’d actually explained the situation to the rest of the office.

“What should we do?” Jerry had asked worriedly. “I think Grayson’s social worker is retired now, and what about this fifth kid? Should we—”

“Forget it.” The boss had interrupted. “Karen, I’m sending you up to them. Find out what’s going on and report back. I’m not sending five people out for something like this, not with the amount of paperwork that would create. Just talk to all of them yourself.”
Damn lazy bosses. She really didn’t get paid enough for this.

Ringing the lavishly decorated doorbell in front of the intimidatingly large mansion, Karen tried to school her face into a pleasantly neutral expression. Five kids, a magic spell, and a celebrity dad. This would be fine. Absolutely fine.

The door opened, and she was greeted by an old man with a smile as politely pleasant as her own. The butler, she assumed. Alfred Pennyworth.

“You must be Miss Finch.” Alfred said. “Do come in. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” she said, letting him guide her through the halls. “If you don’t mind I’d like to speak to all of the children individually, but first, why is Mr Wayne claiming he has five children? His file states he only has guardianship of four.”

“Actually, my file does list five names.”

Alfred led her to a sitting room with plush red velvet sofas and jewel coloured tapestry. Ornaments and fancy furnishings covered the room, but Karen barely noticed them. Her eyes were on the main couch, where five children sat smiling at her.

“Nice to meet you.” Bruce Wayne said cheerfully from where he stood next to them. “These are my children: Dick, Cass, Jason, Tim and Damian.”

“Jason.” Karen repeated dazedly. “Jason…Do you mean…no, not The Jason…”

“Todd!” The boy with dark curly hair and green eyes piped up. “Jason Todd, pleased to meet you!”

Karen stared at Bruce Wayne, absently wondering if she’d hit her head on the way here and this was all a dream.

“So the fifth child you were talking about was…”

“Jason.” Bruce confirmed. “Who I did indeed have guardianship over before his death.”

“I’m aware.” Karen said faintly. “But Mr Wayne, your son is supposed to be… well, dead.”

“Yes, he is.” Bruce agreed.

“Then how exactly did this happen?”

“Your guess is as good as mine I’m afraid.” Bruce shrugged, an airy smile on his face. “I only found out he was alive after he was turned into a child. I went to visit his old home in East End, as I often do when the grief gets too much, and I found him there. None of them have their memories past the age of ten, so right now all I can say is that it’s a miracle I am incredibly grateful for.”

Jesus Christ. The conspiracy theorists were right. The media was going to have an absolute field day with this. How the hell was she supposed to write a report on this?

“Well, I’m very happy for you all.” she said at last. “Very, very happy. The police will most likely be sent to sort out Jason’s story once this spell wears off. It will wear off, correct?”

“We’ve been told so.”

“Good. That’s good.”
Karen realised that she’d been staring at the curly haired boy, and hurriedly drew her eyes back to Bruce Wayne.

“Mr Wayne, if you don’t mind I’d like to speak to all of your children individually. I understand that they have a large gap in their memory, but it’s still important that I talk to them about their circumstances.”

“Of course.” Wayne said smoothly. “Who would you like to start with?”

“I’ll go alphabetically, so Drake please.”

The smallest boy on the couch gave a nervous squirm. Jason gave him an encouraging back pat, and Damian muttered something like “Don’t worry.” before the other children got up and followed their father out of the room.

Was it just her imagination, or had two of those kids been singing ‘Don’t be suspicious. D-don’t be suspicious.’ as they walked by?

No, she was probably just on edge. Jason Todd being alive would throw anyone for a loop. But he wasn’t the only child she was now responsible for, so she sat down focused on the fidgeting boy sitting in the centre of the couch.

“Hello Timothy. My name is Karen.”

“Hi Karen.” he replied. “Uh… I actually go by Tim.”

“Sorry Tim. I’ll remember that.” she smiled.

The boy smiled tentatively back. He seemed friendly enough, and the fact that he’d corrected her on the name was a good sign. He had confidence, but he wasn’t rude about it.

“So tell me Tim,” she crossed her legs and sat back into her chair.

"How are you?"

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The kids get interviewed, but their conversations may not be as private as they think.
The Eavesdropper

Chapter Summary

The interviews begin. Damian isn’t satisfied being kept out of the loop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No one was watching him as they sat in the kitchen. Alfred was bustling around making tea, and Stephanie was trying to entertain Dick, Cass and Jason so that they wouldn’t get uncomfortable with Bruce’s brooding. Damian suspected Father had had another argument with Barbara, as he’d soured even further when Alfred mentioned delivering supper to the woman in their cave.

All in all, it was fairly easy for Damian to slip out. Brown was a good enough distraction that when he muttered “I’ll wait in my room.”, none of the kids kicked up a fuss about it. He slipped away silently, socked feet creeping up the stairs the way he’d been trained to move all his life. Once he was alone in his bedroom, he went over to his desk and began rooting around for the headset he kept there.

The bug he’d left in the room would not be noticed by the children or the social worker. Father might have picked up on it if he hadn’t been distracted, but truthfully Damian was more surprised that he hadn’t bugged the room himself. Damian understood that confidentiality and privacy were important, but not when it came to trivial matters like the social services. He needed to make sure his siblings weren’t hiding anything, and since they might feel more comfortable confiding to an outsider, eavesdropping was a necessary evil.

He flicked his headset on, settling back in his swivel chair. He would be the last to be called, so all he had to do was make sure he went back downstairs before Cass’s interrogation finished, and no one would suspect a thing.

“…how are you?” he heard his social worker ask.

It was a shame that he didn’t have visual footage, just audio. Still, this would do. He could visualise the atmosphere in the room just fine based on the tone of their voices.

“Uh… not to good.” Tim mumbled.

“And why’s that?”

All Damian could hear was silence. He frowned, silently praying that Tim had a plan.

“I’m scared.” Tim whispered at last.

“Scared?” The social worker, Katherine or something, sounded genuinely concerned. “Why are you scared Tim?”

“I’m scared that you’ll think I’m acting weird.” Tim admitted, causing Damian to tense up.

What was the little idiot doing? Surely, he wasn’t going with honesty.
“Because if you think I’m acting weird, I’m scared that you’ll take me away.”

Oh. Clever boy. Tim must have decided that he wasn’t a good enough liar to fool the social worker, so manipulating the truth was his best option. Damian relaxed a little, a small, proud smirk on his face.

“You don’t want me to take you away?” The social worker asked.

“No.” Tim whimpered. “I mean, my parents are dead and I’m not close with anyone else in my family. I only met Mr Wayne a few days ago but he cares so much about me and he plays tag with us and he hugged me when I was crying about my parents. Please don’t make me leave.”

Tim was actually crying. Impressive acting, or rather, redirecting his emotional trauma. No doubt Tim had plenty of tears to cry about his parents’ death, and Damian would bet good money that the boy was tapping into his grief in order to make his fear of being taken away more convincing.

“It’s alright Tim.” Karina or whoever seemed to buy his act completely. “I’m not here to take you away. I just want to make sure you have support during this difficult time, and that you’re safe from harm.”

“Thank you.” Tim said cautiously, sounding less choked up. “But it’s ok. I mean… I’m not fine, but it doesn’t really matter.”

Damian closed his eyes to suppress his wince. Statements like that were the kind that people like Kaari zeroed in on.

“Why doesn’t it matter?” Sure enough, she’d picked up on that like a shark smelling blood.

Damian hoped that this was part of Tim’s plan, or at least that he’d hold back with the honesty.

“Because I’m not real.” Tim gave a shaky little laugh. “Older me has had years to deal with his grief. Soon he’ll be back and nothing I feel will have mattered, because I’ll be gone. I’m basically just suffering amnesia now, right? My personality is based on my ten-year-old self, sure, but nothing I experience here will actually affect ten-year-old me. So, all I have to do is wait it out until I get my memories back.”

There was silence in his headset, and Damian resisted the urge to bang his head against the wall. Tim had been doing so well too, but now he’d slipped up and overshared. Damian doubted Katya or whatever her name was would understand his point of view, not in this situation.

“Tim.” She definitely sounded concerned. “You matter. You understand that, right?”

“My older self matters, yeah. The real me matters, and this is his body, just shrunken, so I get that it’s important I keep it safe. Don’t worry, I care about the real me, so I’m not going to get hurt.”

“I think you’re real Tim. If you’re not real, then who am I having this conversation with?”

Damian could practically hear Tim’s sheepish shrug.

“An amnesiac whose current personality is shaped by memory loss and will fade into oblivion as soon as my memories return.”

“That’s…well…I suppose you could look at it that way…but…”

Well done Tim, Damian thought sourly. First one up and you’ve already broken her.
“I’m going to keep caring about you Tim, and I’ll keep hoping that you’ll grow to care about yourself too.”

“Thanks.” Tim said cheerily. “And I will, just as soon as I get my real personality back.”

The urge to facepalm was growing stronger. Tim actually seemed to think he was reassuring her.

“You can go now Tim, if you want.” Kanna definitely did not sound reassured. “But please remember that I don’t know the older you. I only know this version of you, and you’re the one I care about.”

Damian heard the squeak of Tim getting up from the couch, then footsteps as he approached the door.

“I’ll let Dick know it’s his turn.” Tim said. “And I’m sorry that you care about this version of me instead of the real one. If you want, you can have a memorial once I get my memories back, but I’m pretty sure you’ll be the only one attending.”

Damian heard the door shut behind Tim as he left. He bent over, burying his face in his duvet. That had been worse than Damian had anticipated. Curse Tim and his overthinking mind.

Dick was next, Damian reminded himself. Dick, who was fairly well adjusted compared to the rest of them. He’d already lost his parents at ten, and his emotional reactions so far were fitting for a boy his age. Hopefully that meant there would be no philosophical ramblings about the meaning of existence in Dick’s interview.

As long as Dick avoided talking about his problems with the current version of Bruce, everything would be fine.

Damian sighed and settled back, preparing for the worst.

To say he was nervous was an understatement. The last time Dick had been at the mercy of social services he’d been sent to juvie. He may have his problems with this version of Bruce, but he trusted him far more than he trusted the American government. If it wasn’t for Bruce’s intervention, Dick would have been left at the mercy of the state, and after all the corruption he’d seen as a vigilante, he knew that things could have turned out much worse for him in their custody.

But it was important that he didn’t show that. The social worker couldn’t think that Bruce was turning Dick against the state. Even if his opinion of them was based entirely on his own experiences, he couldn’t trust her to understand that.

So when he walked into the room, he did it with a smile on his face. The woman was sitting calmly on the chair opposite the sofa, writing something in a little notebook. Dick felt the anxiety twist in his gut and forced his smile to be even brighter.


The woman looked up and gave him a friendly smile. Dick felt the knot in his stomach loosen a fraction.

“It’s nice to meet you Dick. My name is Karen.”

Dick settled down on the sofa, crossing his ankles then uncrossing them again a second later. He bounced a little, trying to get comfy. Karen watched him patiently, which was another good sign.
“How are you?”

“How am I? Uh…” Dick bounced a little higher, chewing on his lower lip. “Not great, I guess? This is all really freaky, and I just want to go home.”

“Is there anything I can do to make this easier for you?”

Huh. Dick hadn’t expected her to offer him a choice. He mulled it over for a few seconds before shaking his head.

“It’s weird here, but at the same time it’s better here than somewhere I don’t know at all. It’s a little… well a lot different actually, but some things are still the same.”

“Like what?”

“Like Alfred only letting me have chocolate if I eat all three pieces of broccoli he puts on my plate.”

“I see.” Karen seemed amused by that, and Dick found himself giving her a genuine smile back. “What about the things that are different? Is there anything in particular that’s bothering you?”

“Why?” Dick didn’t mean to sound super suspicious, but he had a feeling it came out that way.

Karen seemed to understand. She had a gentle look in her eyes, way different from his last social worker.

“I’m not going to take you away Dick, not if you don’t want to leave. But I’ll be speaking with both Bruce and Alfred after I talk to all your siblings, so if there’s anything you want me to tell them now’s the time.”

Strangely enough, Dick believed her. He thought about it, debated back in forth in his mind, but in the end, he shook his head again.

“There’s a lot that’s different. I mean, I have siblings now, and that should be weird but it’s not? I think the older me is still in here somewhere, because even though I barely know them I feel comfortable with them, and even though we’re the same age I feel protective of them.”

“Well I’m no expert on magic, but I’m glad your older self is helping ease you through the shock.”

“Yeah.” Dick agreed. “So, the siblings are ok, and Alfred is pretty much the same, just a little older. But Bruce… I don’t know, he’s just different.”

“Different how?”

“Just… different.” Dick shrugged helplessly. “He’s older and greyer like Alfred, but he’s also so much sadder. I think it’s because of Jason, and I know I should be more sympathetic, but I hate seeing him like this. He tried playing tag with us the other day and I almost cried, because he was trying so hard to be the old Bruce but it was just so fake. I know it’s not his fault, but I don’t think he realises just how different he used to be.”

Karen hummed sympathetically. She’d yet to write a single word in her notebook, Dick realised. Somehow, that made him feel better.

“You’re a very articulate child Dick, just like your brother.” Dick felt himself blush at the compliment. “What you’ve just told me, would you like me to try explaining it to Bruce? It’s ok if you don’t want me to.”
Dick gave a little shrug. He’d only really told her the half of the issue, since the other half involved Batman and Robin. Still, she seemed like she genuinely wanted to help, so what was the harm? Bruce probably wouldn’t listen anyway.

“If you think that’s a good idea then sure, go ahead.”

“Thank you, Dick. I appreciate you trusting me with that.” She reached into her bag, then handed him a small card. “This is my phone number. If things ever get too overwhelming and you don’t have anyone to talk to, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

“I won’t.” Dick promised. “And uh… thank you.”

“No problem.” she smiled. “Can you let Jason know I’ll see him next?”

Oh crud. Jason.

“Sure.” Dick smiled, headed towards the door as quickly as possible.

Jason was waiting in the main hall, pacing nervously back and forth. Dick plastered on a fake smile and put a comforting hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“It’ll be fine.” he said. “Mine went way better than I expected and she’s actually pretty decent. Just relax and it’ll be over before you know it.”

Jason smiled and nodded, moving towards the living room. Once he was out of sight Dick let his smile drop and the worry spread over his face. Out of all of them, Jason was probably going to be the trickiest. Someone needed to know what was said in that interview so that they could be ready to do damage control, but Dick didn’t see anyone around.

He really didn’t want to spy on Jason. But at the same time, with everything Jason had been through Dick couldn’t trust him not to say something bad to Karen then try and hide it from the rest of them. She was nice and she cared, which made her a good social worker but dangerous to the family right now. There were too many secrets that Jason could be tempted to spill.

Sighing, Dick crept back over to the living room. While things had changed, the curtained alcove right next to the door was just the same as when Dick was younger, slipping behind it to eavesdrop on Bruce’s conversations with his adult friends.

Bruce always knew of course, but he never got mad. Instead he’d want to hear Dick’s opinion on the visitors, and if the socialites and businessmen had been particularly obnoxious they would have a good laugh afterwards.

Dick didn’t think they’d be laughing after this.

Even with the door closed, his position let him hear every word spoken in the room. He listened as Karen introduced herself, then asked Jason the same thing she’d asked Dick.

“How are you?”

“Great!” Dick winced at how falsely chipper Jason’s voice was. “I’m doing great.”

“Really?”

“Yep! I’ve gone from living in a crummy flat in the East End to living in a mansion! Bruce Wayne is my dad! Yesterday I asked Alfred for seconds and he gave me more dinner! This is all so cool!”
Dick couldn’t even see her face, but he knew Karen wasn’t buying it.

“What’s the last thing you remember? Before waking up in this future world, I mean.”

“Oh, um, I was in bed in my flat and I fell asleep. I was… sad, but then I woke up in a different flat so I was more confused than sad.”

“Why were you sad Jason?”

“Because…” Dick heard Jason’s voice waver. “Because of my mom.”

Karen said nothing. Dick listened to the sound of his own breathing, wondering what was happening inside.

“She promised me she was going clean but then… look, it doesn’t matter. Not now.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s dead!” Jason exploded. “She’s dead here, so who cares?”

“I think you care.”

“I don’t.” Dick could practically picture Jason stubbornly shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter that she’s dead here. I’ll see her as soon as I get back to my world.”

*Lovely,* Dick thought sarcastically. The silence that followed that statement could not be a good thing.

“I’m going to be honest with you Jason.” There was a short pause. “Everything about you is completely out of my league. I work with kids like you sure, but not kids who came back from the dead and are stuck in their ten-year-old body. I can’t try and talk you through any of that, because I’m simply not qualified. All I can offer you is my support and my confidentiality.”

*Confidentiality.* Dick felt himself squirm with guilt. Still, he listened carefully for Jason’s reply. When it came, it was whispered so quietly Dick had to strain to hear it.

“I miss my mom.”

Then there was silence again.

“I wasn’t lying. Things really are great here! Bruce Wayne is super nice and all my siblings are cool even though Cass is kind of scary and Tim can be kind of annoying. If my mom were here I’d never want to leave but she’s gone so I’m not… I’m not ok. I need my mom.”

“I know you do Jason. I understand.”

“No, you don’t.” Jason growled. “This isn’t just normal grief. You said it yourself, my life here is *insane.* I want to talk about it but there’s just too much and she’s the *only* one I want to talk to about stuff.”

“What kind of stuff, Jason?”

There was silence. Dick held his breath, feeling guiltier and guiltier as he willed Jason to clam up and repress everything again.

“I think I really died.” Jason whispered.
More silence. Dick swallowed down the lump in his throat.

“I can’t explain it since I don’t really remember but it’s just this thing that I have. I died but I’m still here and I want my mommy. I want to hug her so bad.”

Jason was crying now. Dick felt like the biggest scumbag in the world for continuing to listen.

“It’s fun here but sometimes I stop getting distracted and the more I’m stuck here the lonelier I get every time the fun slows down. It’s like… I just want it all to be over. I’ve never been away from my mom this long and I’m starting to forget how she really is and not how I see her in my nightmares.”

“These nightmares, they’re troubling you?”

“I see glimpses of the future. I see my mom dead in a bathtub. I feel myself die and I feel myself come back. So yeah, you could say that they’re troubling me.”

“I… I’m so sorry Jason.”

“It’s not your fault.” Jason mumbled. “You can’t get me home either.”

“No, I can’t. But I can sit here and talk with you for as long as you need. You can tell me anything.”

Thankfully, it was at this point that Jason seemed to remember that he couldn’t tell her everything.

“It’s ok. You’re looking more stressed than I am, and you’ll need to save your energy for my sister. I know I cried and everything, but I’m not too bad really. It sucks but… I’m dealing, you know?”

Thinking that this was all a fake dream world was not Dick’s definition of ‘dealing’, but Karen didn’t need to know that. Dick kept still as the door open, and Jason left. As it shut, he heard Karen mumbling to herself.

“Jesus Christ. I screwed that one up, didn’t I?”

Part of Dick wanted to go in and comfort her, because there’s no way she could have talked to Jason and not come out of it feeling completely out of her depth. Most of him was just relieved that it was over, so he slipped out of the alcove and made his way back to the kitchen.

Three down, two to go. His interview had gone alright, and Tim’s probably had as well. Jason’s was never going to be a walk in the park, but now they just needed to get through Cass and Damian, and everything would be ok.

He entered the kitchen just in time to see Cass stuff a handful of fries in her face, inhaling the food at such a fast rate that even Alfred began to look alarmed. Once she’d finished she picked up the plate and licked it clean, before handing it to a faintly concerned Alfred with a grin and a burp. Steph, Jason and Tim were watching in awe, while Bruce stared at his phone. There was no sign of Damian, which was worrying.

“Well I’m glad you didn’t do that in front of Ms Finch.” Alfred said dryly. “Now Master Dick has just returned, so it’s time for you to- Cassandra where are you going? Get away from the fridge young lady. Stop! Master Bruce get her down!”

Dick sighed as Cass sat on top of the fridge, chewing on a packet of jellies she’d swiped on her way up. She gave him a wink, and he gave her a grimace in return.

He really should have given Karen a hug or something. At least she’d been prepared for Jason to be
difficult. Cass and Damian on the other hand…

Damian was cool, but Dick knew that he didn’t get on well with outsiders. He wasn’t great with the press, and Dick doubted that a social worker would be much better.

Cass chose this moment to finally jump down from the fridge, bouncing right off Alfred’s arms, onto Steph’s head, and then finally landing on Bruce’s shoulders. Bruce barely flinched, just reached up to give her an affectionate head pat.

Yep, Dick thought glumly, Karen would definitely need a hug after the final two.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The rest of the interviews continue. Karen considers a career change.
Cass nibbled on the chocolate bar she’d taken from the kitchen. The woman in front of her was staring at her, like Cass was supposed to be talking. Cass didn’t have anything to say to her, so she just kept eating.

After a minute the woman cleared her throat. She really wanted Cass to do something other than eat.

Cass put down the chocolate bar and waved. The woman smiled. That was a good sign.

“So, Cassandra, I understand that you have severe aphasia resulting in complete loss of speech, correct?”

Cass shrugged. Some of those words were unknown to her, but the woman was probably right. Loss of speech seemed true enough.

“Well I’ve got some pen and paper there for you, in case you find it easier to communicate with drawings.”

Cass scowled. She did find it helpful, but that was her and Selina’s thing. She wasn’t going to make it easy for a random woman she didn’t care about.

“…or you could just gesture. Whatever suits.”

Cass shrugged again.

“So, Cassandra, how are you?”

Cass shook her head.

“Not good?”

Cass shook her head again.

“Why?”

Cass shook her head.

“…I don’t understand.”

Cass shrugged.

The woman seemed to be getting more distressed. Cass wasn’t sure what she had expected. She picked up her chocolate bar and continued eating.
“Right.” The woman sighed. “Well, I just want you to know that I’m here to help if you need anything. If you’re having any problems with Bruce or Alfred or anything, I’ll be talking to both of them after you, so if that helps you at all…”

Cass shrugged again. The woman looked like she was about to cry.

“So just to clarify, do you want to be here, staying in this manor while under this spell?”

Cass shook her head. She was starting to get dizzy from all the shaking.

“You don’t? So, you’d rather be somewhere else?”

Cass shook her head.

The woman took a deep breath. She slowly exhaled, with her eyes closed. A technique to keep yourself calm. Cass wondered why she was so upset. All her questions were being answered, so what was the problem?

“What do you mean by that?”

Cass shrugged. The woman took another deep breath.

“All right. I’ll see if I can be any clearer. Do you want me to take you away from this manor and find you somewhere else to stay?”

Cass shook her head.

“Good. Well at least that’s one solid answer.” the woman muttered.

She looked down at her notepad, then looked back up. The smile on her face seemed far more forced than it was in the beginning.

“You don’t want to leave but you say you don’t want to be here. Is there anything I could do to make your stay here easier? Anything I could tell Bruce?”

Cass thought about it, then nodded.

“Really? What?”

Cass stuck out her tongue.

“…You… you want me to tell Bruce that?”

Cass’s thumbs up was only a little sarcastic. The woman was trying, it wasn’t her fault Cass had no interest in any of this.

“Well, I’ll do that. I’ll ask him why, so if you want to tell me yourself it might help.”

Cass shrugged, making a dismissive motion with her hand.

“Thank you, Cassandra. You can go now.”

Funny. That ‘Thank you’ was the first time the woman’s words hadn’t been genuine. It was fair enough. Cass knew she hadn’t been helpful, but none of this stuff mattered to her. She just wanted to track down the people trying to hurt her, and this woman couldn’t help her with that.
As she made her way back to the kitchen, she wondered if she could steal another piece of chocolate without Alfred catching her.

“Hello Damian.”

Karen looked even less enthusiastic for their ‘talk’ than normal. Damian still remembered the friendly smile on her face the first time they’d met, and how he’d slowly worn it away until the meeting was over. The next time they’d met, she looked far less delighted to see him.

But now, now she just looked tired. Having heard her half of the entire conversation with his sister, Damian struggled not to smirk. Out of all of them, Cassandra had proven to be the most successful. From what he’d heard her answers seemed to have been too confusing to understand, and so she had given nothing away that could incriminate them.

She is Father’s favourite for a reason. A voice in Damian’s head whispered.

No time for that. No time for any of his own issues. Right now, he had to deal with the damage his brothers had caused: Tim’s lack of self-worth, Dick’s issues with Bruce, Jason’s… everything. Somehow, Damian would have to smooth that all over.

“I imagine this is all very strange for you. You’ve gone from being the youngest to being the only one of your siblings who knows what’s going on.”

“Tt. It’s not that different. I’m always the one who knows more than my siblings. The real difference is that this time they actually listen to me.”

“That must be nice.” She was giving him that smile, the smile that said look at this adorable child who thinks they’re all grown up.

Damian hated social services.

“It’s nice, but I do worry sometimes.” Damian pretended to look worried. “Tim’s struggling to wrap his mind around everything, Dick’s struggling with being in the future and Jason, well… it’s a miracle he’s alive. Father and I are doing our best to help them through it, but no one really has any idea what the correct method of handling them is. There’s no parenting book or ten step guide that covers these situations.”

“So, what do you do?”

“I give them as much love and attention as they need. I listen to their problems and help them when I can. Essentially, I do your job, but I do it better.”

She took that jab fairly well. At this point Damian doubted there was much that could phase her.

“What about your sister? You haven’t mentioned her.”

“Cassandra’s fine. As long as I play with her she doesn’t get bored, and as long as she’s not bored she won’t want to leave.”

That was simplifying the situation to an extreme degree, but Damian had a feeling Karen would rather not talk too much about her most difficult case. Sure enough, she seemed to accept his answer and move on.

“There’s a lot of responsibility and pressure being placed on you. How do you feel about it?”
“It’s a challenge, and I’ve passed every challenge given to me so far.”

The woman still didn’t look satisfied, and Damian realised that he’d need to give her something real. How annoying.

“It’s also… nice. I never knew my siblings when they were my age. When they’re upset and looking to me for answers it can be hard but getting to interact with them like this can be… fun, I suppose.”

Fun was a bit of a stretch, but he had a feeling Karen would appreciate it. She gave him a genuine smile, and he relaxed, knowing it was almost over.

“Thank you, Damian. I’d like to talk to your butler now, if you don’t mind.”

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Go into this as Bruce. Leave Batman and Brucie Wayne behind. It’s the best way.

Alfred’s advice rang in his ears. He was probably right, but it was easier said than done. While his playboy image was easy to use and discard, Bruce was Batman. The best he could hope for was just to pretend that side of him didn’t exist.

He put on his most charming smile and entered the room. Karen was already sitting, and she gave him a polite smile as he sat down.

“First of all, Mr Wayne, you can relax. I’m not taking any of your children away.”

He made sure to show a relieved expression on his face. He’d believe it once she was gone, but it was important that she believed he believed her.

“I’m glad to hear that.” he smiled. “I know this is a strange situation, but I feel a lot better being able to have my kids under my roof, and I think it’s better for them too.”

“I agree, as does Alfred. However, there are a few things I would like to discuss.”

Here it comes.

“First of all, I talked to Tim. Are you aware that he thinks he’s worthless?”

Bruce frowned. That didn’t sound like Tim at all.

“No, not at all.” he replied. “I’ve heard him talk about how happy he is that his older self has a good life, but he never showed signs of low self-esteem. Why? What exactly did he say to you?”

“He values his older self a lot, but he sees his current self as worthless. I talked to him about it, and the root of the problem seemed to be that his entire sense of self will be erased once he gets his memories back. Instead of being scared of this, he seems to have accepted his inevitable ‘death’ as necessary to get the ‘real’ Tim back. That worries me a bit.”

Oh. That made a lot more sense. Bruce knew Tim had been trying to look at everything that happened to him as logically as possible. But perhaps sharing his opinions with a social worker hadn’t been his best idea. It did sound a lot worse to someone who didn’t know what Tim could be like.

“What do you think I should do?” Bruce asked carefully.

“Honestly? I don’t know.” Karen gave a shaky laugh. “I don’t know how to handle this at all. Technically, Tim is right. But agreeing that a child doesn’t matter doesn’t seem like the right solution.
My advice would be to reach out to former amnesiacs who experienced similar thoughts and feelings. I’ll send you my recommendations once I get back, and maybe one of them could help Tim. Other than that, I’m afraid I’m at a bit of a loss.”

“Finding someone with similar experience sounds very helpful.” Bruce reassured her. “I think Tim would definitely benefit from that. I’ll talk to him, see if I can help him have a more positive opinion of his current state.”

“That’s good. Now Dick…”

Bruce tensed up minutely. Thankfully Karen didn’t seem to notice.

“I’d say he’s doing better than Tim, but there’s still some problems. He’s adjusted well to his siblings, but he’s struggling with you.”

She paused, waiting expectantly for Bruce to say something. He swallowed down the lump in his throat and put a solemn expression on his face.

“Dick’s been… difficult. I mishandled him at first, and he hasn’t forgotten that. He doesn’t like me very much.”

He didn’t mean for his voice to break on that last sentence. Why was he getting choked up? He needed to be calm and composed.

“I disagree.” Karen said softly. “I think he loves you. I think it’s a massive shock for him to see how much you’ve changed. He can see you’re in pain Bruce, and it hurts him too.”

Bruce said nothing. He wasn’t going to talk about his ‘pain’ to a random woman. She could keep making guesses, and he would play along until she was out of his house.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose a child, but I do know that grief changes you. I think Dick doesn’t know how to handle seeing you like this, so different after Jason’s death. You were his only living family before he came to the future, and seeing your current self… He’s a child, and the one person left he loves has been hurt so badly that even after all these years the difference is visible. He can’t process it properly, and that’s why he acts like he doesn’t like you. It's not your fault Bruce.”

“You’re wrong.” His voice was a little too low, so he made sure to lighten it before speaking again. “I said the wrong things when he first arrived. I should have known better. I should have seen where he’s coming from, but I didn’t.”

“Beating yourself up about it won’t help Dick. You have to push through your regret and focus on making him feel better.”

“I’ve been trying.” Bruce whispered. “But he won’t even play tag with me. I don’t… I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you tried apologizing? For what you said to him that you think hurt him.”

Bruce remained silent. Karen smiled sadly.

“Well. That could be a start. Now about Jason-”

“It was about Jason.” Bruce said. “Dick and I fought about Jason when he first arrived. I’ve apologized to Jason for what I told Dick, but I don’t… I don’t think I’ve apologized to Dick about it.”
“I think you should.”

“I think so too.”

“Can we talk about Jason? What happened to him is very much outside my field of expertise. He thinks he really died and he’s been having nightmares. I’m not sure if he told you about that, but I thought you should know.”

“I’m aware of Jason’s situation. Thank you.” Bruce sighed, leaning back into the sofa. “The whole thing is a mess. I just want to celebrate that my son is alive again but so much has happened to him that I just can’t relax and be happy. I don’t know how much trauma he’s suffered but whatever happened to him is leaking into his ten-year-old psyche. We’re doing our best but…”

“It’s an impossible challenge.” Karen smiled sympathetically. “I’ll do my best to keep the reporters and the police away until Jason grows back up. But unfortunately, when he’s an adult again there will be an investigation.”

“I understand. I appreciate your kindness.”

“Just doing my job Mr Wayne. Now Cassandra, she seems to have issues with you as well. She said that she doesn’t want to be here but she doesn’t want to be anywhere else either. Also, I asked her if she wanted me to give you a message and she stuck out her tongue.”

Karen looked up at him, and it was Bruce’s turn to give her a sympathetic smile. The poor woman looked completely baffled.

“My daughter is a very unique case. About as unique as Jason. I’m handling it as best I can.”

“Why is she upset at you?”

“Because I abducted her when I first found her. She didn’t know me and I needed to get her off the streets. She still doesn’t trust me because of that, but she’s safe now and that’s all that matters.”

“Have you-”

“I’ve apologised to her. Multiple times. She knows that I’m willing to make it up to her. We’ll be ok, I promise.”

“I’m glad. I talked to Alfred, and while he is worried about Jason and Cassandra, he seems confident in your capabilities. He was very reassuring, said that you loved those children with all your heart. I believe him.”

Really? Bruce felt slightly proud of that. He hadn’t expected Alfred to give such a glowing report.

“I also talked to Damian, and while he was… abrasive, he also managed to convince me that you were doing your best to do right by your children. He seems determined to help you look after them.” She laughed. “I have to admit I’ve been worried about Damian in the past, but today he seemed different. I think he’s starting to really settle in. Taking care of his siblings seems to be having positive effects.”

“Yes.” Bruce smiled. “At first, I thought having Damian around during this mess would just make things more difficult, but he convinced me to let him help. I trusted him with a lot of responsibility, and he hasn’t let me down.”

“He’s a good kid.”
“He is.” Bruce agreed softly. “And I think he’s starting to believe that too.”

He glanced quickly at the mantlepiece. A small black dot was visible on top of the radio. One of Damian’s bugs. Bruce had been tempted to bug the room himself, but he understood that his children deserved confidentiality. Plus, he had a feeling that Damian had bugged the room, and if anything alarming was said his son would tell him.

He had been right. Damian had been watching over them, in a way that Bruce couldn’t. If there were any problems, Bruce trusted Damian to keep him informed.

It had taken a while, but it seemed like father and son were finally starting to work well together.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: With social services appeased, things finally seem to be settling down. Everyone might even be able to relax, if it wasn't for the mysterious hooded men still on the loose and ready to kidnap. So really, the kids are the only ones able to relax now.
The Director

Chapter Summary

With the visit over, the kids finally get to relax, and Steph gets to teach them about pop culture.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three days had passed since the social worker left. Three days in which everyone tried to get the kids to relax, while simultaneously worrying very hard.

Bruce and Barbara were ghosts around the manor, spending every waking hour searching for leads on the mysterious men who’d attempted to kidnap Cass, only surfacing from the cave when their caffeine supply ran out or when Alfred went down and forced them to eat or sleep.

It hadn’t been too bad at first, but once Jason confessed to also seeing a masked man stalking him Bruce had gone full overprotective Batdad. He still tried to make time for the kids, but it was clear that keeping them safe was his number one priority. It fell to Alfred, Damian and Steph to actually tend to the children. This meant that Alfred gave them meals and dealt with their cuts and bruises. He also mediated things when tensions got a little high and dealt with irrational tantrums that left Damian standing helplessly nearby.

“Jason just punched Tim in the face.” Damian had told Steph after one such incident, when Alfred was comforting both boys in the kitchen. “He started yelling that Tim was making fun of him and Tim started crying and insisting that he hadn’t done anything. Ordinarily I would find such a ridiculous fight humorous but…”

“It’s not so funny when it’s your job to fix their fighting.” Steph had given him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “Welcome to the roughest part of babysitting. Rule number one: If things escalate too far; get Alfred. He’s got some sort of child handling magic that us mere mortals can’t hope to comprehend.”

While Damian may not have been able to soothe ruffled feathers like Alfred, he turned out to be fantastic at distractions. When the kids started clashing, he always seemed to have some sort of toy or game that got everyone’s attention and stopped ninety per cent of the arguments from becoming physical. He also had a great sixth sense that alerted him when the kids were starting reaching critical boredom levels, at which point he would declare that it was time for training. Steph watched with this weird sense of pride as he spent hours teaching them basic combat skills, or in Cass’s case, having serious spars.

Steph didn’t even want to think about how antsy Cass would have been without Damian. Since Bruce was busy, he was the only one capable of helping her blow off steam. Steph tried, but there was a limit to how much entertainment Cass got out of beating her up again and again. Steph had a creative edge that could keep Cass interested for a while, but it was Damian and his extensive knowledge of martial arts that really grabbed her attention. Watching them go at it kept the boys entertained too, and Steph could admit that their fights were pretty gripping. Cass won every spar, but there was always one moment when Steph firmly believed that Damian would come out on top,
only to have Cass do some twist or jump (or during one memorable spar, dislocate her shoulder to get out of Damian’s joint lock) that let her seize the victory.

So, while Bruce and Barbara investigated the masked men; Alfred cooked and cleaned, Damian entertained and Steph?

Steph had fun.

“All right let’s take it from the chorus. Five, six, seven, eight: *We’re all in this together!*”

As the High School Musical song blared from the TV, Steph watched carefully as the five kids obediently followed the dance moves. Dick’s steps weren’t perfectly clean, but he hit each beat with a flair that he’d surely picked up from the circus. His smile was equal parts adorable and charismatic, and his eyes sparkled as he danced. He was probably the only one who was having as much fun with this as Steph was.

Jason wasn’t as smooth as Dick, but he danced eagerly and passionately, and his infectiously joyful grin made up for his clumsiness and the claps he hit off beat. Despite only having watched the movie yesterday, he yelled out every “*Wildcats!*” like he was cheering on a real team, and he flushed red with happiness every time Steph gave a delighted laugh at his antics.

Tim actually knew about High School Musical, so Steph had expected him to be a little more enthused about sharing such an important cultural classic with his siblings. He was the most timid with his moves, refusing to just give in and go wild like Jason. It led to a lot of shuffling and frustrated fumbling, but Steph just kept smiling encouragingly at him. If it was older Tim she would be making fun of him, but this Tim was just a shy kid. He was trying to keep up with a boy from the circus and two trained assassins, so Steph understood why his confidence might be lacking. She made sure to cheer when he finally got Ryan’s part down, and his genuine smile warmed her heart a little.

Surprising absolutely no one, Cass executed each move flawlessly. Steph honestly couldn’t tell if she was actually enjoying herself, or if she just wanted to master this dance routine like it was a particularly unusual kata. Either way she danced obediently along with the others, copying every single aspect of the dance from the facial expressions to the footwork. At one point she copied one of Chad’s goofiest faces, and when Stephanie broke out into giggles the smile she’d given her seemed real.

Damian was about the same level as Dick. His moves might have been a little sharper, but his lack of enthusiasm kept them equal. Every chant was muttered through gritted teeth, and he maintained a constant glare towards Stephanie, a glare that told her if the kids weren’t here he would be kicking her in the shins right about now. She beamed back twice as hard and tried not to laugh as he forced his face into a grimace when Jason bumped into him.

The song came to an end, and all five struck the ending pose in sync. Steph clapped happily, bouncing a little on her toes.

“You’ve got it! You’ve mastered the dance!”

Dick and Jason started whooping and jumping around. Tim and Cass were less enthused, until Damian carefully nudged them into the celebration circle. Steph felt that weird pride thing again.

It wasn’t like she was a proud parent or anything. But she’d known Damian for a while now, so seeing him grow and get better at… life in general to be honest, was nice.
“Now who’s ready to show your dad?”

This time, Jason was the only one who cheered. Dick and Damian wore matching uncomfortable expressions, Tim seemed to shrink into himself, and while Cass did smile, there was a gleam in her eye that Steph wasn’t sure was a good thing.

Not exactly the enthusiastic response she’d been hoping for.

Tim was nervous, and Cass was probably doing this to spite Bruce somehow, but whatever, they’d both do the dance with Jason. Right now, she needed to get Dick and Damian on board.

“Dick, if this was your Bruce, would you do it?”

Dick hesitated, then nodded.

“I know he’s changed, but deep down he’s the same guy. I get why you don’t like him very much right now, but please trust me. If you give him this chance he won’t let you down.”

She probably could have thought of a better way to phrase it, but in the end, Dick gave her a hesitant nod. Steph breathed a sigh of relief, then slapped a perky grin back onto her face.

“Alright then, everybody take five! Get some water and some fruit snacks from Alfred. Bruce is going to be so proud when he sees how talented you guys are! And Cass don’t steal any cookies, there’s no time for a kitchen war with Alfred right now.”

Cass pouted, but trudged out with the others. After a few seconds, only Steph and Damian were left.

“I won’t do it.” Damian said as soon as the room was empty. “Why should I care if Father is proud of me over some stupid dance routine? It’s childish and embarrassing, and I won’t make a fool of myself in front of him.”

Luckily, Steph had been prepared for this kind of argument. She leant over and gently tapped Damian on the side of the head.

“C’mon. You’re a smart kid Damian. It’ll make Bruce happy to see the five of you having fun, but that’s not the only reason he’ll be proud of you. We both know that if you hadn’t agreed to learn the dance, the other four probably wouldn’t have stuck around either. Bruce knows this too. Seeing you up there dancing with them, he won’t just be proud that you learnt a ‘stupid dance routine’. He’ll be proud because he’ll see first hand all the work you’ve put into keeping these kids happy and bright.”

Damian said nothing. Steph could see the wheels turning in his head as he analysed her words, looking for the manipulation or the condescending angle. In the end, he seemed satisfied that she was being honest.

“At least tell me that I was the best.”

Steph hesitated, and he sighed.

“It’s Cassandra isn’t it?”

“She watched the dance once and memorised it perfectly. I’ve been learning it for years and she overtook me in a matter of minutes. Hate to break it to you, but we never stood a chance.”

“I never do against her.”

She’d said to take five, and there were still four minutes left. She might as well tackle this now rather
than leave it to fester.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Steph kept her tone deliberately neutral.

“Five simple words Brown.” Damian growled. “I thought you knew enough English to understand me.”

“Ooh, you’re getting bitchy. Looks like I hit a sore spot.”

Damian glared at her, and she stared back. Her comforting skills were pretty hit and miss, but stubbornness was something she was good at. She wouldn’t drop it unless Damian verbally told her to.

He seemed to understand, because he lowered his gaze and sighed.

“What it means, is that I’ll never be good enough.”

“Still a little too vague for me, sorry pal.”

“Batman.” Damian spat out. “It’s clear that when Father retires, Cassandra will be his chosen successor. If I’m lucky, I’ll get a chance after her. Not just a second-hand costume, but one both Grayson and Cassandra wore before me.”

“Jean Paul Valley too.”

“Who?”

“Azrael. He was before your time.”

“Great. Fantastic, so it’s what, fifth-hand?”

“No offense Damian, but so what? I’m the third Batgirl, maybe the fourth or fifth depending on who you count. That doesn’t make me any better or worse than the previous Batgirls.”

“Cassandra was better.”

Ouch. Steph took a deep breath and reminded herself that Damian didn’t understand the hive he’d just poked. Her issues weren’t the point right now.

“Fine. Let’s say she was. It was because of her as a person, wasn’t it? It wasn’t because she came before me, right?”

“No.” Damian agreed. “But that’s the problem. I was prepared to live up to Father’s legacy, and now I’m confident that I can make both him and Grayson proud when I take the mantle. But if Cassandra gets it before me… how can I be anything but a downgrade? She’s better than me in every way that matters to Father, that matters to Batman. It’s like you said, I can’t compete.”

Well shit. Judging from Damian’s anger he’d been carrying this around with him for a while now. There was probably a smart thing to say in response, an intelligent argument to be made, but Steph didn’t know it. She just went with her gut.


“What-”

“And she’s nineteen. You have time. Sure, right now she might be better at fighting. But so what?
She was seventeen when she became Batgirl, and you became Robin at ten. You have time to catch up, and time to surpass all of us. I’m pretty sure we went over this when we were searching for Cass less than a week ago.”

Damian stared at her, torn between curiosity and scepticism. Steph glared back, confident and certain.

“You really think I can do it?” he mumbled.

“It’s not going to be easy. Cass refuses to lose, and she’ll keep training and growing too. But honestly? Yeah, I do think you have a shot.”

Damian kept staring at her. He still seemed suspicious, and a little confused.

“You’re not lying.” he said at last. “I can tell that much. But I don’t understand. How can you believe that when logic is telling me that the odds of me ever being greater than her are incredibly low?”

“Damian.” Steph found herself laughing, and she wasn’t entirely sure why. “I became Batgirl after Babs and Cass had both become iconic in Gotham. If I had hope for myself, that I could live up to their legacies, then why the hell wouldn’t I have hope for you?”

In the silence that followed, Steph took a moment to mentally high five herself. She hadn’t planned or prepared for a single bit of this conversation, but so far, she seemed to be doing alright.

“…That is a fair point.” Damian admitted. “You are a far more hopeless case than I am.”

“Thanks.” Steph rolled her eyes fondly. “So, do you believe me now?”

“I believe that you believe yourself. I just can’t tell if you’re an idiot for doing so.”

“I like to think of it as being optimistic.”

“Idiocy and optimism do have a lot of overlap.”

The tension was gone from his voice, and his smirk was the final clue that Steph could relax again.

“So, we’re done here? Because I have a performance to organize, and I need all five stars to be focused on the stage.”

“You are unbearable, Brown.”

“Channel that attitude! Turn it into passion and give me a showbiz smile!”

“I still have my suspicions about how you convinced me to do this. There better not be witchcraft involved.”

“Just the spell on your sibs, and that had nothing to do with me. I’m just using the opportunity given to finally force Bruce to listen to High School Musical.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Since I tried to play the soundtrack in the Batmobile and he threatened to fire me.”

“An understandable reaction.”
“Tasteless. Both of you are tasteless.”

With Alfred’s help, both Bruce and Barbara were wrangled from the Batcave and herded into the living room, where the five kids stood waiting and ready. Steph paused to enjoy the confused faces of the adults, before hitting play.

The sheer horror on both their faces when they realised what song they were hearing was a memory Stephanie would treasure forever.

“Together, together, together everyone! Together, together, c’mon let’s have some fun!”

The initial horror didn’t last. Thanks to the enthusiasm of the kids, Barbara began clapping along, and Bruce cracked a smile once Dick broke out the jazz hands. By the time they hit the chorus everyone was singing along.

Steph may have cracked a tear or two. Look, this had been on her bucket list since her Robin days. She was allowed to have a moment.

Dick and Jason were fully into it, Cass was as good as she’d been in practice, and even Tim performed with more confidence, encouraged by the smiles and laughter from Bruce and Babs. Damian didn’t smile, but he didn’t scowl either. Steph noticed him catch Bruce’s eye, and the small nod Bruce gave him made Damian’s neutral expression just the tiniest bit more positive.

Typical Waynes and their stunted emotions. Steph felt oddly fond of both of them right then.

The performance ended with all five of them striking the ending pose perfectly. Bruce and Alfred gave them a standing ovation, and Barbara whistled and cheered next to them. She sent a wink of acknowledgement Stephanie’s way, and Steph felt her heart twinge warmly.

It was nice to feel appreciated.

When the cheers calmed down Bruce began asking the typical questions- How long had it taken them to learn, when did they all get so good at dancing, could they teach him a move. Seeing him try so hard to be a typical dad felt bittersweet to Steph, and she was so distracted she almost missed Jason’s face crumbling.

Damian noticed at the same time she did. He made eye contact with her, tilting his head. She nodded in response.

“I’ll handle it.”

She walked over to Jason, placing a gentle hand on his back. Her concern doubled when she realised he was trembling, but she led him out into the hall without disturbing the joyful atmosphere in the room.


“Ok.” Steph said softly. “We’ll go over to the stairs, alright?”

He didn’t reply, shaking his head slowly to stop his tears from falling. She guided him down the hall and towards the main staircase. Sitting down on the steps put her face to face with Jason, and she carefully placed both her hands on his shoulders.

“Jason.” she said, still carefully soft. “What’s wrong?”
For a minute there was no reply, just the sound of him sniffing and sobbing. Then he looked up, and the pain in his eyes almost made her reel back.

“This is real, isn’t it?” he whispered. “This isn’t a dream or a hallucination. It’s too long, and too vivid. It’s… it’s really real.”

Stephanie swallowed, her mouth suddenly feeling very heavy. There was only one right way to answer Jason, and that was to tell the truth. Yet saying those words seemed ridiculously hard, when a ten-year-old boy was looking at you like you were his last hope.

“As far as I know… as far as I can be sure… this is reality Jason.” His face crumpled even more, and she wanted to reel the words back in, swallow them down and spit out a placating lie instead. “I’m so sorry.”

“They my mom, and the dreams, and me dying… it’s all… it’s all…”

He was choking on his words, so she pulled him close, letting him sob into her shoulder. At first he just whined and moaned, but then he began to wail and roar, shaking violently with a grief so large and heavy she could barely wrap her head around it.

“I’m sorry Jason.” she said again, tears trickling down her own cheeks as she hugged him as tightly as she dared. “I’m so sadry.”

Jason didn’t reply. He just buried his face deeper into her shoulder, and cried.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Jason struggles.
It was all real. All the fun he’d had these past few days, being Robin, having such a huge family who loved him and a good life as a rich kid. It was all real.

His mom was dead from overdosing. He’d been beaten to death as a kid and came back wrong. All of that was real too.

He still wanted to deny it. He wanted to be stubborn and say this was all some evil plot. But no hallucination could be this vivid and detailed or go on for so long. His brain wasn’t letting him run from this anymore.

The cloth around his face was growing damp. He was ruining Stephanie’s shirt. She’d gone through so much trouble to make everything fun for them and he’d ruined that too. The guilt made him cry harder, and he hated himself for crying over something so trivial, and then that hatred made him cry even harder.

He wasn’t ok. He’d died. He wasn’t ok. His mom was really dead.

He wasn’t ok he wasn’t ok he wasn’t ok he wasn’t ok he wasn’t ok. He wasn’t ok. He wasn’t ok.

“Jason!”

He wasn’t ok.

With a gasp, Jason pulled himself up off Stephanie’s shoulder, turning to look behind him. Bruce stood there, a look of terrified concern on his face. Jason opened his mouth, to say something or other, but all that came out was a low guttural wail.

“Jason.” Bruce repeated, rushing over to them. “Jason what’s wrong?”

What’s wrong?

Jason screamed. Stephanie hugged him tighter.

“He realised that this was all real.” she explained quietly.

Jason couldn’t see Bruce’s reaction, because his eyes were closed. He continued to wail, picturing the arms around him as those of his mother. But his mothers’ arms weren’t as strong as Stephanie’s, and her hair smelt different and she cradled Jason differently, and it was all so very, very wrong.

“I want my mom!” he wailed, not caring what a stupid cry-baby mama’s boy he was being. “I want my mom! Mommy! Mommy please! Please don’t leave me please! I can’t…I need you! Mama!
Mama!

But she was gone and dead and he was stuck in the future without her and she hadn’t loved him, not really, because she’d decided that the drugs were better than him, that she’d rather die from them than live with him.

“I hate you!” he screamed. “I hate you I hate you! You liar! Liar!”

“Jason.” Stephanie’s voice was calm, but her arms strained to stop him from thrashing too hard. “Jason take a breath. I need you to calm down.”

He couldn’t calm down. Not when he had the image of his mom’s dealer in his head. That bastard had all but murdered his mother, and he was probably relaxing somewhere in retirement, made rich from all the junkies he’d killed. He didn’t give a shit about the lives he ruined, and right now Jason hated him hated him hated him.

“I’ll kill you.” he growled. “I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll KILL YOU!”

Stephanie froze, and that made Jason pause. She seemed to understand that he wasn’t talking to her, because she didn’t mention it further, just kept stroking his hair soothingly.

He wanted to stay angry, but Stephanie was good at stopping him from exploding. Along with her false promises he remembered the promises his mother had kept. He remembered how she’d always bought him ice cream whenever he got super sad about their life, all the spare cash she could find going into one small baby scoop that he’d treasured. She’d laugh when he ordered banana flavour, affectionately calling him her little monkey and he’d hoot in response. He remembered her hair tickling his face as she kissed him goodnight. He remembered sleeping in the same bed as her and how even when she wasn’t there in the morning her scent would linger in the empty space.

There was no scent left anymore.

“I’m sorry.” he whispered. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. I’ll be good, please. Please don’t go I’ll be good I promise I’ll be better. I’ll be better than the drugs I’ll make you happy I can do it please come back.”

He stared up the large staircase, some stupid childish part of him expecting her to run down the stairs and lift him into her arms, reassuring him that this was all a mistake and she was never going to leave him.

It didn’t happen of course. Why would she even be in Wayne Manor? Stupid.

Stupid, stupid kid. Everyone should be laughing at him. Stupid kid pretending none of this was real. No wonder he’d died so young, being so stupid.

He realised he’d said that last part aloud when Stephanie tensed a little. He tried to care, but it was all whatever. Just another stupid thing he’d done.

“Stephanie.” Bruce said softly. “Give him here.”

He felt himself being lifted, but he was too numb and limp to care. Tears continued to trickle down his face as Stephanie swapped places with Bruce. Bruce balanced him gently on his knee, one hand rubbing soothing circles into his back.

He had a dad now. A real dad, who cared about him. Who loved him.
But he wasn’t happy about it. He wasn’t happy because his mom wasn’t there. Did that make him selfish? Maybe he was broken, maybe that’s why Bruce kept adopting kids after he died. Maybe he had never been able to love Bruce enough. Maybe-

“Would you mind giving us a moment?”

Something flashed across Stephanie’s face, but it was gone before Jason could figure it out. She shook her head and stared at them, slightly dazed.

“Yeah.” She shook her head slightly again. “Yeah of course. Jason, that’s ok with you?”

He nodded. Nothing was ok anymore, but it meant that nothing mattered. Stephanie or Bruce, he’d be broken either way.

“And Stephanie, could you tell Alfred to fetch Rover?”

“Sure thing.”

She left then, giving one last concerned look. It was nice that she cared. Too bad Jason couldn’t care back. It didn’t feel like he could care for anything anymore.

He was supposed to be dead, wasn’t he? He was a walking corpse, nothing more. Zombies were cool, but Jason had never wanted to actually be one. Too bad so sad this was his life now.

He sat there for a minute, hiccupping sadly as Bruce held him. He rocked Jason gently up and down on his knee, and Jason felt his breathing slow, second by second. Bruce didn’t talk, and he didn’t try to push Jason to talk. He just sat there, holding Jason like he was a baby.

His baby.

Alfred came running down the stairs a minute later. He handed Bruce a small brown teddy bear, nodded, and took off again. If Jason could feel anything, the whole exchange would have baffled him.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Your teddy.” Bruce replied. “I got him for you when you first came to live at the manor. You named him Rover.”

There was a dog that lived around the corner from him. His name was Rover and he was super friendly. Jason would always stop to pet him on his way to school or work. The dog would lick Jason’s face despite his owner’s complaints, and Jason would always walk away with a smile.

Rover was probably dead now too.

Slowly, he reached out his hand, petting Rover’s cloth fur in small, soft strokes. It felt nice.

Jason felt his face start to twist again.

“I died.” he whispered.

For the first time since Bruce sat down, his face got harder.

“You did.” he said quietly. “I’m so sorry Jason, but you did die.”

Oh. He was crying again.
It was like looking at someone else through a TV. He could hear himself sobbing, feel Bruce wrap his arms around him, and yet his brain felt completely detached. His body was screaming in agony, but his mind was emotionless.

Maybe he was just too tired.

He tried to speak but ended up choking on his own scream. He coughed harshly, then nestled closer to Bruce, sniffling.

“

“I died.” he said again.

“You did.” Bruce replied again. “And it was my fault.”

Jason gave a half-hearted snort.

“Pretty sure you’re not the one who beat me to death.”

“No, but you were my responsibility and I failed you.”

“Still not the one who killed me.”

Bruce didn’t reply to that. Jason sighed.

“My life kind of sucks.” he said softly. “I dunno how older me deals. I still don’t get it, why me? Why did all this shit have to happen to me?”

“I wish I had an answer for you Jason.” Bruce replied, equally as sombre. “I really do. If I’m being honest, your older self would probably say it was because of me. I took you in, gave you inadequate training, and exposed you to so much danger you weren’t prepared to face.”

“What? That’s bullshit.” Jason laughed, but it came out more of a rasp. “If you hadn’t taken me in my life would still have sucked. I would have died on the streets and probably not come back. There’s no way my older self blames you for my death.”

“He does. I don’t disagree with him.”

“Nuh-uh.” Jason shook his head. “I know me better than you do, and I also know you did everything you could to save me. If he’s mad at you it’s for another reason.”

“I didn’t do enough.”

“You love me. I can see it, and it freaks me out sometimes, but it’s there. If he’s me then he saw it too, and he wouldn’t blame you for my death.”

Bruce was silent then. Jason raised a hand to wipe his eyes and realised that his tears had stopped.

“Perhaps you’re right.” Bruce said at last. “Perhaps he doesn’t hate me because of that. He’s angry at me for other reasons.”

“Like what?” Jason asked curiously.

He didn’t know why talking helped, but it did. Even though they were talking about some sort of fight between his older self and Bruce, at least it stopped him from breaking down and bawling his eyes out again.

Bruce seemed to get that, because he only hesitated for a few seconds before answering.
“Like how the man who killed you is still alive.”

“Oh. That does bother me a little bit.”

“It bothers your older self a lot.”

“Why doesn’t he just kill the Joker himself?”

“He tried. I stopped him.”

Jason tried to understand that. Bruce hadn’t said those words like he’d done the right thing or the wrong thing. He’d just said them like a fact.

“That was kind of shitty of you.”

“I’m aware, and I’m sorry. It was one of the hardest decisions I’ve ever made.”

“You sort of suck for that.”

“I agree.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment. Then Jason’s thoughts started creeping up on him, so he asked another question before the hysteria got a hold on him again.

“Was that all? Was that the biggest fight we had?”

“There was one other thing.” Bruce hesitated again. “Tim. Older Jason didn’t like that I’d gotten a new Robin. He felt very hurt, like Tim replaced him.”

“That’s dumb.” Jason said. “I’m the second Robin, so why shouldn’t there be a third?”

“Because you died.”

“Meh. You’re Batman. You must have had your reasons.”

“I did, but I’m afraid they were very selfish. You see Jason, after your death Batman grew very lonely, and when Tim came along and offered to be Robin I said yes when I should have said no.”

Man, Bruce sure was hard on himself. Jason almost found it funny, except that nothing about this situation was funny in the slightest. If he started finding things funny he’d start giggling and if he started giggling he wasn’t sure he could stop.

“Do you regret it?” he asked.

“It’s… complicated. I never regret meeting any of you or adding any of you to this family. But crimefighting is a dangerous business, and because of my leniency you’ve all been traumatised horribly at very young ages. I became Batman to stop children from being hurt the way I was, but when I look at you all… it feels like I’m incapable of protecting the ones I love most.”

“Well… I’m here now. And I’m alive. I think you’re doing ok old man.”

“Thank you.” Bruce smiled, and Jason almost felt like smiling back. “That means a lot coming from you Jason, even if you’re older self would disagree.”

“Well maybe he’s right.” Jason shrugged. “But from where I’m standing he’s wrong, so unless he can make a case convincing me that he’s right, I’ll have to fight him.”
Bruce laughed at that, his body nudging Jason slightly as it shook. This time Jason did actually smile.

The sound of soft pitter pattering distracted both of them. Cass ran through, barely sparing them a glance as she moved from the right corridor into the left. Jason heard Alfred’s voice before he saw Damian come tearing after her.

“Miss Cassandra! That knife doesn’t belong outside the kitchen! Bring it back this instant!”

Damian gave them a nod as he passed, and Jason waved. He and Bruce listened as Damian’s footsteps got fainter, until once again the hall was quiet. A beat passed, and then Jason spoke again.

“Really?” Jason said. “She’s your favourite?”

“I love all my children equally.” Bruce replied instantly. “Talk of favouritism is nothing more than malicious rumours spread to slander me.”

“Steph told me you made Cass two batcaves of her own in different cities. Damian said it was true, and that she and Dick also have their own planes.”

“Context is key. There were extenuating circumstances and besides, Cassie stole her plane. I just let her keep it.”

“Sure.” Jason smirked. “I still think you have weird taste in kids. Dick told me that when we first met I was trying to steal your tires. You really adopted me after that?”

“You also hit me in the stomach and ran off.” Bruce smiled as if recalling a fond memory. “I knew right then that a lad with that sort of gumption was one that I would love to call my own.”

“You really do pick the weird ones then.”

“And not once have I regretted it.”

It was strange. Jason still felt so sad, but something about those words made him feel warm. It was like the hot chocolate Alfred had made for him last night, only better.

He was definitely broken. His mind was as broken as his mother's after the drugs dug their claws into her, although his was broken in a very different way. Even if he hadn’t learnt all he had about his future, Jason would still be able to feel it. The ground was still calling to him, much fainter now, but there if he focused hard enough. His mind was a mess, and he felt on edge, knowing that anything could set it off for no reason.

But sitting here with Bruce, Jason felt the tiniest bit hopeful. Sure, he was a mess, and it seemed his older self wasn’t much better, but he was still here, still kicking, still smiling and joking, still chatting with his dad, Batman. Even if he couldn’t feel properly, he could still feel something.

Yes, he was broken. But he felt hopeful that he wasn’t beyond repair.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Tim goes snooping. Trouble is afoot.
The Curious

Chapter Summary

Tim wants to know more about himself. He might not like everything he learns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They were changing.

Tim wasn’t sure if the others had noticed it, but if they hadn’t they soon would. He’d mostly picked up on it from listening to Dick and Jason talking. Their speech was different from when Tim had first met them, more mature. They were both starting to sound older than ten.

This probably meant that Tim was changing too.

He knew all along that he didn’t have much time, but knowing that and seeing signs of the timer counting down until you stopped existing were two very different things. The latter spooked him, made his thoughts race even faster. He knew he wasn’t supposed to be here and that the real Tim deserved his life back, but deep down he didn’t want to die.

Bruce had given him the number of a former amnesiac who’d been in a similar situation to Tim. He’d gently advised Tim to talk to the man, and Tim had nodded.

Tim still hadn’t called.

He understood why Bruce thought it was a good idea, but Tim didn’t need to call. It would be a waste of time that he couldn’t afford. He wasn’t fine, but he was in control of it. The anxiety buzzing around inside him like a thousand angry wasps never managed to escape the tightly constructed mental prison he’d made for it. He could reach out and touch it, feel all the fear and pressure, but he could also move around completely calm and composed, as if it didn’t exist.

Maybe that was his older self leaking through. Tim couldn’t tell. It sort of scared him that he couldn’t tell, but that was just another thing to put in the anxiety box. As long as he kept his mind and body occupied, he could avoid opening that box, and ignore the existential despair threatening to crush him.

Yeah, some of that was probably older Tim. Tim knew he was intelligent, but his vocabulary seemed to be increasing exponentially every day. In fact, up until yesterday he probably wouldn’t have understood what ‘exponentially’ even meant. That knowledge didn’t belong in his brain, not yet.

Anyway, the point was, Tim had a tight grip on his negative mental state. To help ease the pressure, he’d made a bucket list.

There were things he wanted to do before older Tim came back. One of those things was to investigate his parents’ deaths further. He wanted to track down their killers, but that was a delicate plan that he had to be very careful with. None of the others could know, because Tim was certain that they wouldn’t approve.
Less delicate was simply learning everything he could about his older self. Tim was curious as heck. It was already mind-blowing that he had become Robin and was currently a vigilante with ties to multiple superheroes. There was also the fact that most of the people who loved him had died, which was mind-blowing in a very different way. Both good and bad had stunned him, and Tim really wanted to know more about this crazy future of his.

He wanted to know what kind of Tim would replace him once he was gone.

He didn’t say any of this out loud of course. He just sat watching TV with Dick, mulling over the best way to start gathering intel. There was a funny show about cops on, and part of Tim wanted to just sit back and relax, but relaxing wasn’t realistic. Not when his bucket list had a timer attached to it.

The first thing he’d done when he woke up in this world was spend all night on the internet. He’d briefly looked through his texts, but with so much context missing the internet had been far more helpful. He’d been looking for solid information on this world, not insight into his future personality. Last night however, he’d pulled another all nighter, thoroughly scrolling through his phone to try and learn more about his future.

He had two phones, one for Tim and one for Red Robin. The Red Robin phone was the one he looked at first. There were texts between him and someone called ‘BB’, who Tim had deduced was not a lover, but rather an acronym for a superhero named Beast Boy. Most of the texts seem to based on Beast Boy giving Tim updates about his day, as well as updates on a girl called Raven. There was one memorable debate about spaceships, and Tim found himself agreeing with his future self that the Millennium Falcon was the most iconic spaceship ever designed. Still, the problem with those texts was that they gave very little information on Tim himself, other than that he was happy for his friends and that he still liked Star Wars.

His texts to Raven herself were slightly more illuminating. It seemed like they weren’t super close, in fact both she and Beast Boy were more Dick’s friends than his. Them being near the top of his contact list was just because they’d worked a case together recently, and he’d been able to update them on Dick. Apparently, Dick wasn’t great at checking his phone.

But there had been texts, mysterious, confusing messages about Tim’s emotional wellbeing. Raven had seemed mildly concerned, citing Superboy once or twice. Tim remembered that alias from his original search through his phone, so naturally Tim had found his messages next.

Those texts had been the most helpful. More than anyone, this Superboy seemed to be the one older Tim talked feelings to, as well as business. He didn’t just react to Superboy’s messages, he engaged with him, talked to ‘Kon’ about his own problems.

A lot of it was repetitive: stressed about work, stressed about his life and his future, stressed about his family, stressed about grief, and insecure about something trivial. Rinse and repeat.

So, older Tim seemed to have a lot of Tim’s problems, only worse. On the bright side, he seemed to have a good support system. As well as Kon, ‘Cassie’ and ‘Bart’ regularly texted him with some variety of ‘Hey, how are you?”. Older Tim rarely gave very detailed responses, but the fact that he had people asking was a good sign.

(Also, apparently Bart had almost been absorbed into something called the Speed Force, and this had happened so recently that they were all still very concerned. Tim kind of wanted to look into that a bit more, but he had to be practical with his bucket list. He needed to stay focused, even if the distractions sounded really wild and interesting.)
So, one of the best things Tim had learnt was that in the future he had friends. Not just school friends who hung out with him because none of them wanted to be loners, but the type of friends he read about in stories. A gang, a squad, a clique. Tim didn’t quite know the best term, but it was super cool that he had them. A group of people bonded for life by the adventures they’d survived together.

Only apparently Kon and Bart hadn’t survived them all, and the group was still sort of traumatised from their deaths. It was understandable and completely weird at the same time.

But still, Tim had a squad.

So, his phone had been helpful, but not as helpful as he’d hoped. It was sort of disappointing how little he’d been able to learn about his older self’s personality. Other than the texts to Kon, Cassie and Bart, the rest of his texts were either professional or just reactions to whatever people sent him. His texts to Bruce were mostly about cases and schedules, although it made Tim embarrassingly happy to see texts addressed to him from The Batman saying ‘Well done’ or ‘Nice work’. His texts to Dick were much of the same, although Dick responded a little less formally. His personal phone was barely used, and most of it was business as well, just Wayne business instead of Batman business.

There were no texts between him and Damian on either phone.

There were, however, texts from Steph and from Cass on his ‘Tim’ phone. Before actually meeting them, they’d been a confusing mystery, a story with half the pages missing. Now… most of the pages were still missing, but at least he’d put faces to the names.

Cass and older Tim didn’t actually write a lot of texts. They communicated mostly through pictures, videos and memes. The last message she’d sent him had been a video of her on a skyscraper in Hong Kong. She’d jumped off, parkouring her way down to land on top of an unsuspecting bad guy. Tim had responded with a gif of people clapping, followed by another gif of someone holding up a sign with the number 10 on it.

He still didn’t know what to think of his sister. They seemed to have gotten on well, but the Cass he knew looked at him like he was a stranger. He probably looked at her the same way, so he supposed that was fine. It was still a strange feeling having texts on his phone that she hadn’t sent yet, texts that indicated they were close. More than anything, it reminded him that none of this was really his. This was older Tim’s life, and he was just stealing it for a little while.

Whatever complicated feelings Cass’s texts gave him, that was nothing compared to Steph. Their texts had been ambiguous, referring to past hurt and past mistakes without specifying anything. All the texts between them were so carefully neutral that it was hard to say at first what feelings were actually being conveyed. Tim had analysed their conversations, from the tone to the texting style, and had deduced that they still weren’t on the best of terms. Meeting Stephanie had confirmed that. There was tension between them, but Tim could see that she wasn’t letting her opinion of his older self influence her treatment of him, and he appreciated it.

It wasn’t all stiff and tense between them. One of their most recent conversations had been her sending him a six second clip of someone yelling “That’s my opinion” followed by a text saying “Why is this Bruce every time there’s drama in your family.” He’d responded with three laughy faces and a ‘Fuck that’s so true’.

Still, he couldn’t help but wonder: How badly had older Tim screwed up with her? There were references to him being ‘emotionally distant’ and ‘closed off’ as well as a mention of his ‘massive insecurities’, but again, nothing concrete for Tim to judge.

So today, he decided to do some more investigating. Slipping off the couch, he muttered some
excuse about going to the bathroom. Damian was still off helping Alfred catch Cass, (Why had she stolen a knife? His sister was so weird.) and it was just him and Dick in the room. Dick nodded at him, most of his attention still on the TV show.

He avoided the main staircase, since Jason and Bruce were still sitting there. It took him longer to find his bedroom, because even after a few days this house was still huge. He slipped inside, scanning the room and dividing it into parts he had already looked through and parts he hadn’t.

There was a lot to look through, because there was junk strewn everywhere. Clothes, paper and various pieces of trash were scattered on his bedroom floor. Apparently older Tim was a slob. Probably the depression.

Tim froze. That last thought definitely hadn’t been his. Where had that even come from?

He took a breath. He couldn’t freak out. He had to approach this logically. If his older self was becoming more and more prevalent, then he could use that to learn more about him. Obviously, it would end with the real Tim coming back and kicking this Tim into oblivion, but he’d known that was his fate from the start. No need to panic about it.

He slapped himself across the face, because his body didn’t seem to be listening to his brain’s no panicking logic. He forced his breathing to calm down, and his arms to stop shaking. That thought about depression might not have had anything to do with his older self. Jumping to conclusions and senselessly panicking was not a smart move.

His eyes were drawn to his bookshelf. He’d skimmed over it when he first started looking around the room, reading few of the titles, but he hadn’t given it much thought. Now though, the fact that his eyes had chosen to look at it made him wonder.

Well, it was worth a shot.

He crouched down and started pushing books left and right, rooting around for anything unusual. When he reached the bottom shelf, he saw something hidden behind a set of books that had been pressed closely together. He stuck his hand in and pulled the small box out, along with a black leather notebook.

The box was labelled Lexapro and contained small white tablets. A quick Google search on his phone showed that it was medication used to increase serotonin levels in the brain.

Shit. Shit shit shit.

The fact that his older self had depression was… not great. The fact that he knew this because his older self was slowly starting to worm their way back into his head was also not great.

The fact that these tablets were hidden and covered in dust was worrying.

He took another deep breath, releasing it in shuddery huffs. So older Tim wasn’t as together as Tim had hoped, but that was fine. He still had friends and family, and they still loved and trusted him.

…Right?

He almost didn’t want to open the black book, but he’d started this with a goal and he’d see it through to the end. His parents didn’t raise a quitter.

Technically his parents barely raised him at all.
That was another joke that Tim wasn’t certain was all him. Maybe he was just losing his mind, and all these thoughts really were his own. But it didn’t feel that way, and he couldn’t try and rationalise the situation if his own mind was unstable.

He opened the notebook. It was best to keep digging. As long as he had a goal and a purpose, he could keep his mind off everything else.

The notebook appeared to be a diary. There was no time and date, just different thoughts written on different pages. He looked down at the random entry he’d opened it on and began to read.

*I feel like I should hate Jason for what he did. He’s tried to kill me more than once, but Bruce and Dick get so sad talking about him that I feel guilty. It’s stupid, I know. They care about me, and they know what he did to me wasn’t right. They’re both angry as hell at him for everything.*

*Sometimes I think; was it my fault? Did I not respect him enough when he was dead? Is that why he hates me so much? Or maybe he’s just jealous about how little I’ve suffered compared to him. I mean sure, I’ve had my traumas, but they were nowhere near as bad as his. I never died, I just sat around and moped while everyone around me took turns jumping in and out of graves. God I’m pathetic.*

The last two lines were crossed out. Tim didn’t know what to make of that.

*I don’t make what he did ok. If I never see him again I think I’ll be fine with that. I just don’t know if I actually hate him. I feel like I have the right to be angry, but sometimes… sometimes I can’t tell. Sometimes it feels like I don’t know anything at all.*

Tim felt sick. He flipped the pages forward, looking for another entry. There was still no date and time, so Tim had no idea how long it had been between the first entry and this one.

*Guess who just got fired and replaced by the kid who tried to kill me? Always knew I wasn’t cut out for the job, but I thought it would be Bruce who would break it to me. Not Dick. This feels wrong. I’m angry now, just seeing Batman and Robin makes me feel disgusted.*

*No one believes me when I tell them Bruce is alive. They look at me like I’m crazy. Maybe I am. When I stop to think about it, it feels like my life is falling apart. What the hell am I doing? Everything about me is a damn mess. I’m writing down my feelings in a stupid diary, because everyone I love is either dead or not trustworthy enough anymore.*

*Maybe it’s my own fault. I’m probably overreacting. I don’t want to be right about this. I don’t want to believe that I’ve got nothing left to offer, and that everyone is starting to see that. Fuck Dick for making me feel this way. Fuck Damian too. Fuck Jason, fuck Steph and Bruce for faking their deaths, fuck Cass and Cassie for barely keeping in touch. Fuck everyone.*

*I’m rereading this and laughing at myself. I sound like such a child. If these are my real unfiltered thoughts… yikes.*

There was another entry on the page next to it. It was only one line.

*I miss Kon.*

Tim closed the notebook.

Maybe that was enough about himself. Maybe he should start learning more about his family instead.

Determined not to think about everything he’d just read, Tim left his bedroom. He walked out into
the sitting room, then turned left into the bathroom he and Jason shared. The door next to his was closed, but when he tried it, it wasn’t locked. He slipped it cautiously, prepared to run if Jason was in there. After everything he had read, he didn’t want to see his brothers until he was good and ready.

Thankfully, none of his brothers were in Jason’s room. Oddly enough, Cass was sitting on Jason’s bed. She was still holding the knife, Tim noticed.

“Hey.” he said. “They haven’t found you yet, huh?”

She shook her head.

“Cool.”

He sat down on the floor, suddenly feeling exhausted. He was too old for naps, but right now he longed to sleep through the entire afternoon. The weight of everything he knew seemed to be physically dragging him down, and if he dared reach into his anxiety box he’d probably start crying.

Cass scooted off the bed and sat down next to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. She snuggled into him, and he rested his head against hers. Even though she was still holding the knife in her free hand, it was nice. Tim decided that he liked her. She was very intimidating and he didn’t understand half the things she did, but compared to everyone else in the family, their future relationship didn’t seem filled with drama.

Tim felt like he could sit here for hours. Cass’s presence kept him grounded, provided a distraction so that he could escape his thoughts. For once he didn’t have to worry about how someone else was seeing him. Cass clearly didn’t care if he talked to her or not, and if she had a problem or got bored Tim had no doubt she would just get up and leave. He could just sit here with her, and not feel scared that he wasn’t being enough. He focused on her breathing, matching his breaths to her steady rhythm. He was feeling calmer now, his head buzzing like a fuzzy TV instead of a group of angry hornets.

So of course, he only got to enjoy it for a moment before a masked man crashed through the window.

Cass was up off the floor before Tim fully grasped what was going on. She lunged straight for the man, and Tim felt even more out of his depth as they began to fight. All this basic combat training Damian had given him was nothing compared to what he was seeing now.

He needed to go get help. Cass was scary good, but this man was bigger and more ruthless. He started making his way towards the door, then froze when the man managed to land a kick on Cass. She blocked it, but it still sent her crashing into the wall. In the two seconds where she landed the man turned to Tim and drew out a knife.

Tim backpedalled away, but the room was too small and he was too exposed. There was nothing he could do but watch as the man threw the knife straight at him. It was going to hit his forehead and then everything would be over.

Tim had accepted that he was going to die. He wasn’t ready to accept that his older self was going to die with him. He opened his mouth to scream as the knife left the man’s hand.

A blur moved in front of him the second before the knife hit him. Tim blinked, and suddenly the blur was Cass, lying on the ground with a knife in her shoulder.

She got up instantly, but this time she bounced from foot to foot instead of attacking the man head on. He observed them coolly, unreadable behind his mask. For the first time he could remember, Tim
felt completely and utterly terrified.

This was a life or death situation, the first one he’d been in.

And they were going to lose.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Things don't go well.
Chapter Summary

Bruce goes after the mysterious intruder, while the others try to piece together what’s happening.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He heard Tim’s screams before he heard the alarms.

Jason had calmed down, and Bruce continued to sit there with him, rocking gently back and forth. It didn’t seem like Jason needed any more words from him right then, just the comfort of his presence. Bruce was happy to oblige. Getting to hold the son he’d mourned for so long in his arms was both incredibly painful and incredibly joyful. Bruce still wasn’t accustomed to the sheer intensity of the bittersweet feeling that having young Jason here gave him.

But then he heard Tim cry for help, and in a second his focus switched completely. He hoisted Jason up on his hip, and with his free hand he pulled out his phone as he ran in the direction of Tim’s voice.

“Barbara?”

“Intruder just smashed through Jason’s bedroom window. I have no idea how he got that far without triggering any of the security measures.”

These were likely the same people who had been stalking Jason and attacked Cassandra’s apartment. From what Bruce knew he would guess that they had been monitoring the family for a while now, and their fighters weren’t to be taken lightly.

“What’s going on with Tim?”

“I’m pulling up the security footage now.”

“Dad?” Jason’s voice almost made Bruce stumble, but he continued sprinting down the corridor. “What’s going on?”

“Bad people are attacking Tim. I’m keeping you close because we don’t know how many there are, but if I say run I need you to run, understand?”

“But I want to help!”

“I know you do, so trust me Jason. I’ll only tell you to run if I think it’s the best option. Oracle, I need answers!”

“Man broke through the window when Tim and Cass were in the room.” Barbara spoke rapidly. “Cass started fighting, he tried to kill Tim and she blocked the knife with her body. Tim tried to help but the poor kid just made things worse. I think he realised Cass couldn’t fight at her best while also trying to protect him, so he ran off to get help. Cass is still fighting now but it’s not looking good.”
Bruce cursed, ignoring how Jason’s eyes widened.

“I’m three corridors away. Tell me you’ve got something up your sleeve.”

“Considering he bypassed Wayne Manor’s state of the art security system and Batman’s extra precautions? I’m more than a little worried. I can give you one bit of good news though, as far as I can tell he’s not trying to kill Cass. It just looks like he wants to incapacitate her.”

That didn’t exactly fill Bruce with hope, but he’d take the small relief it gave him. He turned the corner into the second corridor, and almost ran straight into Tim.

“Bruce!” Tim gasped. “Guy in a mask fighting Cass! Help!”

“I’ll take care of it.” Bruce set Jason down. “Can you two look after each other? If things go bad I need you to protect yourselves by sticking together.”

“Bruce.” Barbara’s voice was too sharp. “Cass is unconscious. He’s taking her away.”

“Track him.” Bruce took off, unable to wait around for a reply from the boys.

“He’s on the kitchen roof, heading east. Remember, you’re not Batman right now.”

“I can’t afford to waste time with a wardrobe change.”

“I know. Just warning you that this situation might get tricky.”

Bruce was well aware of that. Right now, the only useful items he had on him were a grapple gun, a few hidden knives and some coils of rope. It would have to be enough, because his thousand-dollar Gucci suit certainly wasn’t going to be much help.

He burst into Tim’s room and leapt out the window, landing on the kitchen roof. There was no sign of anyone, and Bruce felt his heart hammering from more than just exertion.

“Oracle.”

“He’s running through the grounds, avoiding the traps. I don’t know how he’s doing it but he’s not getting close enough to most of them to get caught, and some of them just aren’t working on him. It’s like he knows where everything is. I can’t touch him. All I can do is watch.”

He could hear the frustration in her voice, but right now he couldn’t find it in him to comfort her. Not when his own frustration was growing dangerously high.

“Keep tracking him. I’m pursuing him on foot.”

“He’s still headed east.”

“Any idea who he is?” Bruce shimmied down the drainpipe, kicking off when he was close enough to the ground and springing after the man immediately.

“Unfortunately not. The only thing that stands out is that the heat sensors aren’t working on him.”

He could barely see the man’s outline, holding Cass under one arm. The man was fast, having covered a lot of distance in the time it took Bruce to reach the ground. Bruce couldn’t let that get to him. He kept sprinting steadily after the man, gaining on him little by little. By the time the man reached the manor wall Bruce was close enough to throw a knife at him.
It hit the man in the leg, just as he tossed Cass up and over the wall. A stab wound like that should have phased a normal human, but the man just began scaling the walls like nothing had happened. When Bruce reached the wall and began climbing, the kidnapper had already disappeared over the top.

“Oracle.”

“He’s headed for the nearest manhole. He’s taking her underground.”

“How far does our surveillance stretch in the sewers?”

“Not far. We’ve got night vision cameras monitoring everything for a fifty-meter radius but looking at them now all I’m seeing is white.”

“Did he disable the cameras?” Bruce pried open the nearest pothole, hopping down into the murky water below.”

“He didn’t trigger an alarm, so I don’t think so. Do you see any indication of how he pulled this off?”

Bruce looked around grimly, taking in the large bright lamps positioned near every hidden camera. He started running again, following the faint sound of footsteps splashing.

“He planned ahead, blinded them. I was right, they’ve been monitoring us for a while now.”

“I can’t see where he’s gone.” It sounded like Barbara had slammed her fists against the table, but he couldn’t be sure. “Bruce, please-”

“I’ll get her back.” he promised. “Damian and Stephanie need to stay at the manor to protect the others. I’m following him.”

“I understand. But you should keep in mind that he came after Bruce Wayne’s daughter, not Batman’s. Whatever he’s up to, it could place your civilian side in a lot of danger.”

“I’m sure a hero will swoop in to protect me, but right now Bruce Wayne needs to save his child. Whatever grand plan they have in store for me, it can wait until Cassie is safe.”

“Kidnapping Cassandra is most likely a trap. Running straight after him would be playing right into his hands.”

“Do I have any better options?”

Barbara was silent.

“Those leads we were looking into, keep researching them until we get a solid answer as to who’s behind this.” Bruce came to an intersection and veered right, praying that his ears weren’t deceiving him. “Once we know who we’re up against I can formulate a better strategy, but until then I have to treat this like a generic kidnapping.”

“Fine.” Bruce could only imagine what kind of storm lay behind Barbara’s carefully calm voice. “I’ll let you know when he pops back up on camera.”

“I’ll let you know when I catch him.”

It had been two hours since the break-in at the manor. There had been a minor debate about calling
the police, which Damian had ended very firmly. The authorities should not be called in until it was
certain they could handle whatever foe was targeting the Waynes. Damian had seen the security
footage and considering how well the kidnapper fought, he had a feeling this case would be a bit too
difficult for the GCPD.

Damian’s current role was to keep the boys calm in the Batcave. There had been no further home
invasions in the two hours since Father had gone out, so really it felt like he was protecting the
children from Barbara more than anyone else. Her eyes hadn’t left the monitors since Cass was
taken, and anytime one of the boys got too loud and too close, her left eye started twitching
dangerously. At that point Damian would swoop in and distract the child into moving a safe distance
away, allowing Barbara to work in relative peace.

Damian knew how much his sister meant to Gordon, but he’d never seen that love be challenged like
this before. The tension and stress radiating from the mighty Oracle was more than a little
disconcerting. It reminded him of the few times he’d witnessed Grayson contacting her while being
in serious trouble, but at the same time there was a noticeable difference. It was the difference
between Father’s concern when Catwoman was in danger, compared to when one of his protégés
was in trouble. There was a protective edge to Gordon’s anger, a slump in her shoulders that spoke
of responsibility.

Maybe before all this had happened, Damian would have been jealous about how much his sister
was loved. Now, he just kept thinking of their playful spars, the infuriating smirk on her face when
she beat him.

Father would rescue her. Then Damian would have plenty of time to learn her tricks, and one day,
they would spar, and it would end with Damian being the one with the victorious grin on his face.

So, no, he wasn’t jealous. He was just impatient for her to get back. He’d almost figured out how to
break a particular wrist lock of hers, but he wouldn’t be able to test his theory until she was home.

Brown checked in every fifteen minutes to confirm that she and Alfred were safe in the manor, and
that no further intruders had been spotted. The only significant find since the incident occurred had
been a note left in Jason’s room.

Dear Bruce Wayne,

Fifteen years ago, you stole our Talon from us. We have decided that the child of Cain will be an
adequate repayment. Do not come looking for her. Our debt has been settled.

Sincerely,

The Court of Owls.

Barbara had gone straight back to the computer, so Stephanie had been the one to explain to Damian
about the old Gotham nursery rhyme. Damian had been less than impressed. Borrowing their name
from a children’s song was an embarrassing attempt at edge, and if the Court of Owls really didn’t
want them coming after Cassandra, signing their name to the note was not a smart move. However,
the fact that they had been stalking the family for quite a while now and had successfully snatched
the most capable child straight from the manor made them a more legitimate threat.

The part that worried Damian the most was the bit about the Talon. He’d been trying to puzzle out
what exactly his father had stolen from this court of cuckoos, and when he broached the question
Barbara had given him a short but surprising answer.
“Fifteen years ago, Bruce made Dick his ward.”

Damian wasn’t certain she was right, but he could see the logic behind that assumption. If Cassandra was the price for settling the score, then the original debt, the stolen ‘Talon’ was likely also related to her. The note had called her the ‘child of Cain’, indicating that they saw her as the assassin her birth father had raised her to be. If they wanted Cassandra for her skills, then the ‘Talon’ Bruce stole was probably meant for the same purpose.

What Damian couldn’t quite understand was how that connected to Dick. Dick becoming a part of the family was definitely the most important thing that had happened to Bruce fifteen years ago, but that didn’t mean it was the most important event to these kidnappers. Dick had been raised in the circus, and Damian had no doubt he was talented, but Dick hadn’t had the same assassin’s training as he and Cassandra did. Why would Dick Grayson have been the Court’s target?

He’d asked Dick about it, but his brother had been clueless. He’d never heard of the Court of Owls, and he couldn’t remember anyone else reaching out to him before Bruce. Damian had almost questioned Barbara after that, but her furious typing had made him reconsider. Once Father checked in and updated them on the hunt, there would be time for everyone to discuss theories.

So here they were, two hours later. The most interesting part of Stephanie’s last update had been about a stray butterfly she’d seen flying past the breakfast room window.

“It was flapping real slowly. Could be a spy.”

“This is serious Brown.” he’d snapped into his phone.

“I make jokes to cope with the severe anxiety I’m currently feeling. It’s how I work, you should know this by now.”

“Anything else to report?”

“Besides the fact that nothing’s changed since I last checked in? Hmm… the butterfly’s wings have like five different colours. It’s pretty sick, I’m going to take a picture and show you later.”

He’d hung up on her then. Five minutes later, he almost regretted it. The cave was a mess of tension and fear.

Dick had been alright up until Barbara’s theory about the note. Now he was curled quietly around the top floor railing. Damian honestly had no idea what was going through his head. He’d tried reassuring Dick that there was no valid connection between him and this group, but the smile Dick gave him in response had been half hearted.

Once Dick had stopped making noise, Jason went equally as quiet. However, unlike Dick he did not stay still. He wandered aimlessly around the cave, poking and prodding at anything he could get his hands on. Damian would take his eye off him for five seconds to make sure Dick hadn’t fallen, and when he turned back around he’d have to race over to the armoury before Jason opened a collapsible Batarang right into his eye.

“If that had hit me, do you think my older self would also have one eye when he came back?”

Damian hadn’t dignified that with a response. Mostly because he had no idea.

Tim at least, hadn’t been much of a problem. Despite the near-death experience almost certainly adding to his current trauma, he’d just sat behind Barbara and watched her work. Damian had been relieved that Tim didn’t want to talk, and then he’d felt slightly guilty about his relief.
“It’s all my fault.”

Apparently, he wasn’t the only one feeling guilty. It seemed Tim had had enough of stewing in silence.

“No, it’s not.” he told Tim, while steering Jason away from the giant T-Rex.

“I got in the way, and she got hurt because of me.”

“Did you throw the knife at her? Because if not, then it’s not your fault.”

“Fine, then I’m partly responsible.”

“We all are.”

“I’m the second most responsible after the guy who kidnapped her.”

“Tim.” Damian sighed, pushing down his irritation. “This was not an enemy you could have fought. You recognised that and decided that it was better to run and get help. You did the best you could considering how woefully outclassed you were.”

“I didn’t though.” Tim mumbled. “I froze up, and then I just stood there because I was too proud to run away. I only chose to be practical after Cass got stabbed with a knife meant for me. If I’d stayed, or if I’d ran straight from the beginning...”

“If you had stayed you would have died. If you had ran he would have tried to stop you, and Cassandra would have blocked him and gotten hurt. None of your choices were good, and you couldn’t have found a better one no matter how much you beat yourself up over it.”

Tim fell silent again. Damian wasn’t sure if he’d made it better, because just like Dick he couldn’t tell what Tim was thinking right now.

He should probably push it more. He should probably talk to Jason instead of continuing to let him act out like this. He should probably hug Dick.

But Damian was tired and stressed and he just wanted to go back to chasing Cass around the manor. At least then all he had to do was get the knife from her, not sit down and talk with her about emotions.

A ringing sound made everyone’s head jerk up. Barbara hit the answer button the second the red call sign flashed up on the screen.

“Bruce.”

“I tracked them all the way into the city.”

It felt like there was a stone in Damian’s stomach. Judging from Barbara’s white knuckles, she could also sense what was coming.

“Under Wayne Enterprises, the sewers split off into seven different tunnels. He must have given me the slip there, and had someone else helping him, because I followed someone’s footsteps until they surfaced, but when I got out I couldn’t see him or Cassandra anywhere.”

“Bruce.” Barbara’s voice was a warning.

“I’m sorry.” His father sounded so broken, it made the stone in Damian’s stomach grow heavier.
“Bruce.” Barbara repeated, practically begging.

Her pleas wouldn’t do any good. It seemed, Damian thought bitterly, that ten-year-old Cassandra was destined to constantly be drawn away from the manor.

“I lost her.” Bruce’s voice was heavy. “Tell me you have a lead.”

“One.” Barbara sounded brittle, but the fire in her eyes had yet to dim. “But it’s not as solid as a location or an identity. We need to discuss it properly.”

“What is it?”

“They left a note.” Damian thought of the piece of paper upstairs, clutched tightly in Alfred’s hand. “They want you to let Cass go.”

“Who?” That was Father’s Batman voice. “Who’s behind this?”

“A group I’ve never heard of before.”

 Damian didn’t miss the glance Barbara sent Dick’s way. Neither did Dick, judging from his scowl.

“They call themselves the Court of Owls.”

The line went silent. Damian’s saw his own impatience mirrored on Barbara’s face. Just when he was about to snap, Bruce finally spoke.

“I’ll be home in fifteen minutes. Tell me everything you know.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The family investigates the Court of Owls, and Dick isn’t too happy with what they find out.

A/N: Sorry about the delay for this chapter. I've got more exams hitting me, so unfortunately I'm going to have to go back to updating every second week. :(
The Investigator

Chapter Summary

The plot has kicked up a notch, and as a result everyone is pretty stressed out. Tensions are running high, and Dick is not pleased.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

These were the facts that Dick knew:

A group called the Court of Owls had kidnapped Cass, because they knew she was the child of some famous assassin. Whether they knew about Bruce Wayne being Batman was unclear. They kidnapped her because fifteen years ago Bruce stole their ‘Talon’.

Fifteen years ago, Bruce made Dick his ward.

It was so strange, Dick could still remember the celebration they’d thrown after the court meeting. Alfred had prepared a huge feast with a large chocolate cake for dessert, and Bruce had been in such a good mood, ruffling Dick’s hair and not complaining when Dick swung from the furniture.

After such a long time the memory shouldn’t be so strong, but in Dick’s mind it had only happened a few months ago. He thought he was dealing well with the whole time travel thing, but this new event had shaken him. It was hard not to think about just how much of his life he couldn’t remember. He was fifteen years into the future, and it was starting to look like his past was still relevant.

The Court had kidnapped Cass as repayment for something Bruce had stolen. Damian had brought up the point that since they kidnapped a child, the logical conclusion would be that Bruce stole a child from them.

Bruce agreed that Damian’s theory had merit, but he still insisted that they consider other options. At the same time, he couldn’t actually think of anything he ‘stole’ fifteen years ago. They had saved a lot of people, but neither he nor Dick could remember a particular rescue that stood out as suspicious.

Now that Bruce was back and suited up, the adults kept talking about the Court, going over the old folk song and trying to find clues hidden in the footage from Gotham’s security cameras. Dick wanted to help, but he couldn’t stop thinking about his possible connection to the Court. If he was the Talon they were talking about, why was that? Why did they think he belonged to them?

It was really starting to creep him out. Just when this future was beginning to feel alright, it all went bad again.

He shuffled a little closer to Damian. His brother shot him a look of concern, but didn’t say anything. He bumped his arm gently against Dick’s, and Dick bumped him back.

I’m ok. Thank you.

He wasn’t really ok, but this wasn’t the time. Barbara was just telling Bruce about this new connection she’d found. Apparently, Bruce’s great grandfather had died talking about owl’s coming
to get him. It was as flimsy a lead as everything else they’d gathered, but Bruce seemed grateful for it anyway.

Dick really wished he cared more. Obviously, he wanted his sister back safe. But he found it hard to get invested in Bruce’s connection to the Owls when his mind was racing with thoughts of his own link to them.

His mother had taken him out one night to try and spot a few owls. He’d been six then, and they’d seen a few barn owls before his father had called them back for supper. That was the only time he could remember owls being a part of his past.

Thinking about the circus made him sad. Why did he always have to be so sad? They were happy memories!

Damian nudged him again. This time, Dick reached over and squeezed Damian’s hand for a few seconds. Damian squeezed back, but didn’t push it when Dick let go.

“So Alan Wayne was afraid of owls.” Stephanie looked around. “That… doesn’t sound like much to go on, no offense.”

“None taken.” Barbara sighed. “But we have to consider every angle possible, especially since I can’t find the kidnapper on the security camera, and his metahuman abilities are still too vague for us to narrow down.”

“His skin isn’t hard like Superman’s.” Bruce said, staring intently at a photo of his great grandfather. “The knife hit him, it just didn’t seem to bother him.”

“What do we know for sure?” Jason asked. “They want to keep Cass, and even though we don’t know why, we can tell that they don’t want us to fight back. That’s what the note said, right?”

“We could set a trap.” Tim proposed. “They warned us against looking for her. If Bruce makes a big public speech and throws the spotlight on this court, then they’ll probably come after him. We could use him as bait, then take down the assassin they send to kill him.”

Everyone turned to stare at Tim. The plan had logic, but Dick was a bit stunned that Tim would suggest using Bruce as bait. It made sense, but it was kind of cold. Tim seemed to pick up on people’s shock, because he blushed and ducked his head.

“Just an idea.” Tim mumbled.

“It’s a fair point.” Bruce didn’t seem offended at all, if anything he looked proud. “But it’s hard to set a trap when we don’t know exactly what we’re up against. They sent one man after Cassie, but they could send three after me, or just blow up a building I’m in.”

“So our main goal is still investigating the Court.” Barbara said. “And our main leads are Alan Wayne and what Bruce stole from them fifteen years ago.”

This time, nearly everyone turned to look at Dick. He stuck out his chin and glared back defiantly. It wasn’t like he was deliberately holding back information. He just didn’t have a clue why the Court would have wanted him.

“If we put aside the mysterious Talon and focus in on Alan Wayne’s fear of owls, here’s a fact that could be something.” Barbara pulled up a photo of the Old Wayne Tower, clearly from before it had become the home of Wayne Enterprises. “You know how the thirteenth floor is sealed off? It was Alan who did that. Said it was bad luck.”
“Really?” Stephanie looked over at Bruce. “What’s inside it?”

“I’m not sure.” Bruce admitted. “That floor is completely sealed off. I never saw a reason to change that.”

“Seriously?” Stephanie gawked. “You just let there be a floor in Wayne Enterprises you knew nothing about?”

“It’s so slim it’s barely even a floor, and it’s been sealed since before I was born.” Bruce said defensively. “It would be like opening up the walls. I know you joke about me being paranoid, but even I’m not that bad.”

“Yes, you are.”

Bruce glared, and the multiple voices that had chimed in pretended to look innocent.

“I’ll look into it.” Bruce muttered.

“Why don’t we call in Superman? Or the group of people he works with, the JLA right?” Dick asked, ten minutes after Bruce had left again. “This is a big deal, so why not get help?”

“Because…” Alfred hesitated.

“Because Batman is a stubborn jackass who refuses to let metahumans help him with ‘his city’.” Barbara supplied. “Not that I can say I’m too much better, considering I faked my death and cut ties with most of the community.”

“Yeah, you both kind of suck.” Stephanie chimed in. “I don’t know why I’m never an option for these teams, considering my people skills are better than yours, Batman’s and Robin’s combined.”

“Excuse you Brown, I have excellent people skills. I merely choose not to waste them on imbeciles who refuse to follow basic instructions.”

“Real convincing Damian.”

The banter was nice, but Dick didn’t feel satisfied. Damian noticed, because of course he did.

“If we need the League, we’ll call them.” Damian promised him. “But this is a family matter, and we prefer to fight these battles ourselves. It’s a matter of pride.”

“It’s dumb.” Tim declared suddenly. “All these amazing assets, and we’re not going to use them, because why? We want to show that we’re capable? What if we’re not? What if Cass dies?”

“Then you will get to say I told you so, and not feel as much guilt as the rest of us.”

“That’s not good enough!” Tim was yelling now, another surprising turn of events. “It’s my fault she got kidnapped, and if you guys don’t help me plan the best rescue possible then… then…”

It looked like he was going to start crying, so Stephanie quickly stepped forward and placed a hand on Tim’s shoulder.

“Let’s just wait and see what Batman finds.” she suggested gently. “We’ll see if this lead pans out and then we can take it from there, ok?”

Tim drew in a shaky breath, then nodded. Everyone relaxed a fraction, although the outburst had left
some lingering tension in the cave. Jason was scowling now, Barbara’s lips had grown thinner, and Stephanie’s eyes flickered warily from one person to another.

Dick noticed all that, but he didn’t try to fix it. Stephanie was right, there was nothing they could do until Bruce contacted them.

He almost wished they’d gone for Tim’s plan. At least that way he’d have a job to do other then to sit around and not get in the way. Oh, and see if he can remember anything about being a Talon. Can’t forget about that.

It took another ten minutes for Bruce to contact them. Dick was in the middle of tidying up the already neat tool bench when the computer started ringing.

“Batman.” Barbara hit answer. “Talk to me.”

“We were right. There is a connection. I got in through the fourteenth floor, and this place was definitely used as one of their hideouts. It’s empty now, but I found a strange, old photograph of people in owl masks. There’s something big going on here.”

“Any clue about where they might have taken Cassandra?”

“Not sure. This place doesn’t look like it’s been used for a while, but it’s possible that they have other hideouts connected to Alan Wayne.”

“Your great grandfather helped build a lot of buildings, didn’t he?” Dick watched as Barbara clicked onto a new page, one with a banner titled ‘The Alan Wayne Trust.’ “I’ll send you a list of buildings that were created with his trust money. See if they have another nest.”

“Already on my way.”

The next ten minutes were even more unbearable than the previous wait. This time, Dick distracted himself by playing leapfrog with Jason. Tim stewed in a corner, and Damian seemed torn between playing or talking to Tim. In the end he just hovered near Barbara, while Stephanie joined in on their leapfrog game.

When the phone rang again, Dick was in the middle of jumping over her. He got distracted and ended up having to use his hands to spring off her back. Stephanie just gave him a thumbs up, clearly unharmed.

“Batman?”

“There’s another one. Just like the first it’s on the thirteenth floor and it hasn’t been used in a while, but it’s clearly related to this Court.”

For the first time in hours, the energy in the cave seemed to perk up. This was an actual lead, which meant they had a chance of finding Cass soon. If they did this right, Dick felt like everything could be over by tomorrow.

“I’ll send Robin and Batgirl out to help you.” Barbara told Bruce. “The three of you should coordinate and tackle every building on that list. Chances are, one of them is where Cass is being held. If you come across anyone while you’re searching, call for back up immediately, got it? No one confronts these guys alone.”

“Yes mom.” Stephanie rolled her eyes, but her words had no bite to them.
Damian nodded his agreement, and for the first time he didn’t seem to notice Dick’s agitated state. Dick clenched his fists and stepped forward, drawing everyone’s attention once again.

“I’m going too.”

“No you’re not.” Barbara and Alfred replied, at the exact same time in the exact same tone.

“You all think I’m connected to this, don’t you?” Dick challenged. “Well if I am the reason Cass was kidnapped then I deserve to be allowed help! You can cover more ground if I’m searching too.”

“Sorry Dick, but it’s too risky.” Stephanie’s voice was less harsh then the other adults, but Dick still felt his temper flare. “If we find Cass only to have you get kidnapped, it’ll be one of the most idiotic rescues this family has ever attempted.”

“Any of us could get kidnapped!” Dick protested. “I’m Robin too! The risk for me is the same as the risk for Damian.”

“The risk is not the same.” Dick had almost forgotten Bruce was still on the comms. “Damian is far better trained than you are right now Dick. The old training program we used was not good enough.”

“Well I used it to train and I survived, didn’t I?”

“Oh right. Jason. Bruce’s voice was so tight that Dick felt kind of bad, but at the same time he was too stubborn to drop this.

“Well I’m not Jason.” he shot back, ignoring how wide everyone’s eyes got. “I have my circus training too, so there’s no reason to keep me on the bench when I can help.”

Jason looked hurt, and Dick immediately felt guilty for dragging him into this. He just wanted to help, and while he knew Damian was a better fighter than him there was still a big gap between Dick and his other brothers. He was Robin, and he refused to be treated like a helpless kid while another boy went out wearing his mantle.

“This is not up for discussion.” Bruce growled. “Robin and Batgirl, head out. Oracle can send you your coordinates on the way.”

Damian and Steph walked towards the garage, and neither of them looked at Dick when they passed him. It felt like he had crossed a line with the whole Jason thing, but Dick didn’t feel like they were being fair. Just because he wasn’t twenty-five right now didn’t mean he was completely incompetent. He was fully capable of helping out, and their stubbornness was more than just annoying. It was costing Cass time.

He glanced over at Jason, and to his surprise the hurt look had vanished from Jason’s face. His brother met his gaze, and there was a fire in his eyes that mirrored Dick’s own.

Jason wanted to help too, he realised. He had an ally in this fight.

He gave Jason a subtle nod, and Jason nodded back. Their goal was clear: sneak out of here and start searching these Owl hideouts. With two of them, it would be even quicker. Dick didn’t quite feel right about involving Jason when he only had street smarts and Damian’s combat classes to aid him in a battle, but considering how frustrating it had been to have the others dismiss Dick’s skills, he didn’t feel like doing the same to his brother.
This was going to be dangerous, but the mix of fear and adrenaline thrumming in his veins brought a comfort to Dick he hadn’t even realised was missing. It made him feel sharper, ready for a fight. No matter what happened, they were going to rescue their sister.

Even if they had to go against the rest of their family to do it.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Dick and Jason try to sneak out.

A/N: Next update probably won’t be until the end of August. Once exams are over, updates should resume as normal.
The Rebel

Chapter Summary

Jason has no idea what's going on, but Dick's Robin so he probably knows what he's doing, right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part of Jason thought he was crazy for doing this.

Dangerous professionals had kidnapped his highly capable sister, and he was going to ignore all the adults to help get her back? The more he thought about it the more he saw the lack of logic in Dick’s plan.

But at the same time, he couldn’t just sit around and do nothing. He may not know Cass that well, but she was his sister, and he couldn’t disappoint older Jason by not doing his best to rescue her. This was his family, and when his older self came back Jason wanted that version of him to be proud of everything he did to help his family.

Besides, if things went bad the worst that could happen was death. Jason didn’t really want to experience that again, but at the same time the fact that he’d been there and done that took away some of the fear.

His life was so weird.

He really wasn’t sure if this was the best idea, but Dick was his older brother, the original Robin. Jason trusted him, more than he trusted anyone else in the cave right now. Alfred and Barbara were pretty cool for grownups, but they didn’t understand what Jason was going through, not like Dick, Tim and Cass did.

Maybe that was another reason why he was so determined to help her. Cass was one of them, a victim of this time travel bullcrap. Jason had been pretty intimidated when they first met, but now they’d danced to High School Musical together, and he thought of her less as a scary girl who could beat him up and more as a weird sister who was actually kind of chill. He may not understand her very well, but until this mess was over, they had to stick together.

Which was why he and Dick were casually sneaking over to Tim. Jason might think Tim was a bit of a snob, but they were brothers, and maybe it was normal for brothers to fight like they did. Besides, Tim carried the most guilt over Cass’s kidnapping. It wouldn’t be right to leave him out of their rescue mission over petty squabbling.

They sat down on either side of Tim. He glanced suspiciously at them, but didn’t say anything.

“So listen.” Dick cupped his mouth to whisper in Tim’s ear. “We’re going to sneak out to help find Cass. Do you want to come with us?”

Jason’s leg bounced up and down impatiently as Tim chewed on his lip. In the end, he shook his head, and Jason felt his jaw drop.

“Of course I do!” Tim snapped, then hurriedly lowered his voice. “I just think I’d be more helpful staying here. I’m a civilian, if I go out there all I’ll be is a distraction.”

“At least if you come with us you can say that you tried your best to help!”

“That’s not true! Cass got kidnapped because she had to look out for me instead of only having to save herself!” Tim hissed. “I’m not going to let that happen again.”

“Master Tim is right.”

All three boys jumped. Jason whirled around to see Alfred standing behind them, a serious expression on his face.

“Where the heck-”

“You boys shouldn’t be sneaking out.” Alfred continued like he hadn’t just popped up out of nowhere. “You won’t be able to help out there, but there’s plenty to do here if you can’t stand to sit around and wait. For example, I’m sure Oracle would love a fresh pair of eyes to help her monitor the situation. Master Tim, would you like to try?”

“Really?” Tim looked surprised. “I wouldn’t get in the way?”

“You may be a civilian, but you are not a burden. Just because you can’t fight like Batman doesn’t mean that you are of no use. Go on Master Tim, I assure you she’ll be most grateful for the help.”

Tim hesitated, but Alfred’s eyes were kind and honest, so he got up off the floor and carefully trotted over to Barbara. Jason gulped as he and Dick were left behind, but to his surprise Dick seemed to be the angrier than the butler.

“How can you bench me like this Alfred?” Dick growled. “I’m Robin! How am I not capable enough to be out there helping? Batman and I are partners, you remember that, right? Was that all a lie?”

“Times have changed Master Dick. Gotham has grown more dangerous, and while I would have no problem with your older self going out to help, in your current state-”

“I was fighting criminals just last week! What, now I need to be raised by assassins to be a worthy Robin?”

“Master Dick.” A hint of steel entered Alfred’s voice, and Jason almost felt like scooting back. “I remember your time as Robin. I know you to be a kind, understanding and intelligent boy. Would you prove me wrong by placing your pride above Miss Cassandra’s safety?”

“This isn’t about my pride! Batman made me swear an oath, to fight against crime and corruption and never stray from the path of righteousness and justice! As Robin, it’s my duty to be out there helping him find Cass. If you were really my Alfred you would understand that!”

“Well I’m not.” Alfred replied bluntly. “I’m not a butler who has been helping Master Bruce take care of you for a few months. I am a man who has not only helped raise you into adulthood, but also helped raise four other children. I trust my judgement over that of your Alfred.”

Dick scowled, but didn’t fight back any further. Jason could see the wheels turning in his head.
Arguing with Alfred wasn’t going to get them anywhere, so they needed to try a different tactic.

“At least let us get into costume.” Dick said at last. “Just in case we’re needed. Let us be ready.”

“…Very well.” Alfred relented, not looking too pleased. “If that’s what it takes to get you two to see reason.”

“Great!” Dick beamed, no trace of his earlier anger left. “Let’s go Jason! There should be some old uniforms knocking around, right?”

“There are spares of all the uniforms past and present yes.” Alfred told them.

Dick took off, and Jason followed eagerly. Judging by how happy Dick was they definitely weren’t going to sit around in their uniforms and wait for Batman to contact them. Jason just hoped Alfred hadn’t picked up on that.

He probably had. Alfred always seemed to know everything and Jason was a little scared of his power. Besides, Jason had only known Dick for a short while, and even he knew that when Dick was angry he wasn’t the kind of guy who would easily calm down and brush it off. This wasn’t Dick agreeing with Alfred, this was obviously Dick trying to make Alfred lower his guard.

“So what’s the plan?” Jason asked.

“Shh.” Dick put a finger to his lips. “Not now. First we get the costumes.”

If it had been Tim that shushed him, Jason would have probably stormed off. But with Dick, for some reason Jason just trusted him. Right now, he was the only real Robin in this cave, and he had this air of confidence about him that made Jason believe they were right to do this.

That belief was tested when he actually saw the costumes.

“Do I seriously wear this?”

“Of course.” Dick look puzzled, already shimmying into his green briefs. “It’s based on my circus uniform. It’s an acrobat costume.”

“I’m not an acrobat though. Why does Tim’s costume have legs?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he really didn’t like how he looked in mine.”

“That’s not fair.” Jason pouted, holding up an old Batarang he’d found in his shirt pocket. “How come I didn’t get to change my design but he did?”

As soon as he asked, the most likely answer popped into his head.

“Wait, it was because I died in it, wasn’t it? If I was Batman I wouldn’t want my new sidekick wearing a costume the old Robin died in.”

“Oh.” Dick paused, one foot in a pixie boot. “Yeah actually, that’s probably it.”

They finished getting dressed in silence. Jason wondered if he should have said anything at all.

On the way out of the dressing room, Jason paused, turning from side to side to admire himself in the mirror.

“You know what? I actually think I look good in this.” He stuck one foot up in the air. “It really
highlights my legs.”
Dick burst into giggles at that, and Jason smiled, glad the awkwardness of his death had once again been brushed away.

“Can you tell me the plan now?”

“I don’t trust them not to be listening. Just follow my lead and everything will be fine.”

“Ok.” Jason sighed. “Can you at least give me a hint?”

“Well,” Dick winked at him. “Let’s just say there are a few secrets in this cave that I doubt anyone else knows about.”

He slipped out, and Jason followed him with a huge grin on his face.

Robin was so cool. Both Dick and Damian were like the smart older kids in his school that Jason had always wanted to be friends with.

And Stephanie actually. She might even be the coolest, but Jason wasn’t ready to make that judgement yet.

Stepping outside of the changing room immediately made Jason shiver, and he went straight back to regretting the short pants. His legs were freezing, and the cave wasn’t even that cold!

He jogged along after Dick, glancing anxiously over to where Barbara was still monitoring the situation. Dick’s paranoia must have rubbed off on him, because Jason couldn’t help but feel like she was watching their every move.

They made their way over to where the Batmobile was parked. Alfred was staring to send suspicious glances their way, so Dick whispered to Jason that he needed a distraction.

Jason had no idea what sort of distraction Dick wanted, so he just started doing cartwheels. Dick gave him a thumbs up, so Jason figured he was doing the right thing and kept spinning until Dick spoke.

“Activate security protocol one-one-one-one, Robin seventy six override.”

Jason heard a beep, and when he finished his cartwheel and turned around, the Batmobile had sprung open. The engine was revving, and Jason could see the exit door slowly opening. Barbara was frantically trying to close it via the computers, but whatever Dick had done seemed to be impossible to undo.

“Hurry!” Dick yelled. “Get in!”

Jason glanced behind him and saw Alfred heading their way, looking angrier than Jason thought possible. He jumped into the Batmobile and the car doors slammed shut.

“Do you know how to drive this thing?”

“It’s ok.” Dick grinned. “It’ll drive itself.”

He reached over to press a button, and Alfred drew closer. Jason shivered at the look on his face. It was like the time when Jason was six and he pushed a girl off a swing on the playground. His mom’s anger and disappointment at the time felt a lot like Alfred’s right now, even without hearing his voice.
They were going to be in so much trouble when this was over. Jason really hoped that when his older self got back, he wouldn’t feel so guilty and horrible over disobeying Alfred and Batman.

“Take us to Gotham City.” Dick said loudly.

The car engine revved, and Jason was thrown back against the seat as they sped out of the cave. He struggled to find his balance, glaring as Dick laughed.

“Buckle up!” Dick told him, a bit late in Jason’s opinion.

“So what now?” he asked.

“I stole an old earphone and mic from the dressing room, so we’ll be able to listen in and communicate with the others. We’ll coordinate with them to search all these buildings, even though they won’t appreciate the help.” Dick explained. “We can start with the building Alan Wayne built in the Queens River docklands. It’s one of the few locations I managed to see on the list without Oracle noticing me looking over her shoulder. We’ll have to send the car back once we reach the city, because Batman is going to find out what we’ve done, and he’ll be able to override my control.”

“Can it drive itself back?”

“Yep.” Dick grinned.

“Cool.” Jason whispered in awe.

The car sped along the highway, and Jason sat back and watched as the world flew past them. His stomach was rumbling anxiously and the look on Alfred’s face still haunted him, not to mention his fear about how Bruce would react.

But then he looked across at Dick, who was rifling through all the equipment he’d managed to sneak out in his uniform, and Jason felt himself relax a little.

Yes, they were about to enter a really dangerous situation that Jason did not have enough training for. But he was sitting in the Batmobile with the original Robin, wearing a Robin uniform of his own. Jason used to daydream about Robin swooping through his bedroom window and telling Jason that he needed his help to solve a specific crime in the neighbourhood. Jason would act like a spy, reporting back to Robin, and together with Batman they’d clean out all of Crime Alley. Afterwards Batman would shake his hand and thank Jason for the help.

This was slightly more chaotic than Jason had imagined, and Batman definitely wasn’t going to be thanking them, but some part of him still found the whole thing really freaking amazing. Dick rolled down the windows and Jason stuck his head out, whooping loudly at the cars they drove past.

For one moment, Jason pushed away all his fear and worries, and let himself enjoy the thrill of adventure.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Cass is not pleased, and makes things very difficult for the Court.

A/N: Sorry for the wait! Updates are back, but they’ll be more irregular than usual until college settles down.
The Fighter

Chapter Summary

The Court of Owls realize that kidnapping the future greatest martial artist on the planet may not be as easy a task as they assumed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The room was dimly lit, but the walls were circular, leaving no shadowy corner for Cass to hide in.

That was ok. She didn't really need to hide. She just pressed her back against the wall and stared down the man with the weird goggles. He hadn't been nervous when he first kidnapped her, but now that she was fully awake she could see that he was wary to approach her.

“What are you waiting for? Subdue her!”

Three people in masks stood on the other side of the room. Cass didn't like them. The way they stood and the way they spoke, it screamed We are important! But she could see what they were hiding. They were weak, soft.

Cowards.

The man who had kidnapped her wasn't a coward, but she could see that he was afraid of the ones in masks. He wasn't scared of Cass, but he was scared of failing his masters.

Cass wasn't scared at all. There was nothing this man could do to make her fear him. He wasn't Cain, he wasn't even human.

She hadn't been able to adjust at first, and by the time she'd figured out how to work around his nonhuman abilities he'd already beaten her. She could feel the throbbing wound in her shoulder, but she grinned and snarled at him as he edged around her, and she knew they could both feel it. She wasn't going down so easy this time.

If he wasn't human, and he couldn't be killed by normal means, then Cass didn't have to hold back.

“We don't have time for this! Knock her unconscious again, we need to get below ground! Batman's started hunting for us, it won't be long until he finds this place.”

The man looked at her, sizing her up, preparing to charge. Cass braced herself, ready to fight back. This fighter was incredibly strong, and part of her wondered if she should try and stall them until her family came to save her, but she'd never relied on anyone else's help in the past and honestly, she didn't know how to.

It was her against the world, and that made her relax her a bit. Fighting these people alone was far more familiar than having a family to help her.

Cass readied her stance, deliberately tilting her injured shoulder a few centimetres back. She saw him notice the opening, and when he struck she knew he would try to grab her bad shoulder. She let him
get close and then stepped into his reach and grabbed his arm. Before he could react, she punched him in the chest, which didn’t do much to him but made her feel better. Then she kneed him in the groin and he stumbled. She used his split second of wrong footing to flip him. He sprang back onto his feet, but she’d already darted over to the other side of the room.

It was tempting to go for the people in the masks, but right now they’d just be a distraction. She needed to take down the fighter first before going after the cowards.

His failure to immediately grab her was getting to him. Unlike Cass, he actually had a stake in this fight. She didn’t know what his masters would do to him if he didn’t beat her, but it was enough to make him nervous. He was more agitated now, sloppier. Cass felt more clearheaded than she had in days. The worst he could do was kill her, and that wasn’t exactly a bad thing.

He came closer and she aimed a kick at him, then kneed him in the head. He didn’t bother blocking and tried to grab her, but she seized onto his head and swung, forcing him to twist himself into a flip. He kept a hold on her leg and ended up dragging her to the ground, but she expected that and escaped with another kick to his crotch while he was busy trying to pin her down. He darted away for a few seconds, and they both took a breath.

This time she charged first. He swung at her with a blow that would have send her crashing into the wall, had she not already anticipated it. His fist swung into empty air, and she kneed him straight in the side of the eye before kicking off the wall and landing a safe distance away.

He lunged at her again, this time swinging straight for her head. While her blows hadn’t affected him much physically, not catching her was taking a mental toll on him. The more agitated he got the more human he became, and the easier it was for her to read him. She ducked his swipe, grabbed his wrist, and used his momentum to send him crashing into the wall.

He bounced off it and spun around, his eyes unreadable through his goggles. Cass didn’t need to read his eyes, the way he widened his arms made it clear enough what his next strategy would be. He was going to try and tackle her, using his size and strength against her.

Cass had been four years old the last time someone had ever managed to tackle her. Cain had crushed her so hard he’d broken three of her ribs, and even now Cass could still remember the panic she’d felt as her lungs got squashed and she struggled to breathe.

Cain wasn’t here. But she still wasn’t going to let this man tackle her.

She ducked under his arms as he drew closer, and when he tried to curl around her she put all her strength into a blow to his jaw. Even with his inability to feel pain, the blow made him reel back for a second, and she used that to dart behind him and kick him in the back. He fell over, and she saw her chance.

He wasn’t human, which meant he probably couldn’t be killed. What she was about to do wouldn’t kill him, and she had to remember that.

She braced herself, and before he managed to get up she grabbed his head and twisted. There was a sickening snap, and he slumped back onto the floor, his neck broken.

For two terrifying seconds, Cass thought he was dead.

Killer. Murderer. Evil, dirty creature, you're filth. Nothing good inside you, all you're good for is killing. You don’t deserve to exist. More blood on your hands, and it’s not going to stop. Worthless. Killer. The only way you can stop being evil is if you-.
Then she saw his eyes move, and it felt like she could breathe again. The words stopped flooding her mind, and she was back to seeing things clearly.

She still did not like this new language in her brain. Words were annoying and complicated, but at least they weren’t swarming her anymore, and she could focus on actions now.

The cowards in masks were scrambling backwards now, shoving each other to be pressed the furthest back against the wall. Their fear told Cass that while the fighter would recover, he wouldn’t recover fast enough to guard them against her.

“What are you waiting for? Summon him! Hurry!”

Cass didn’t know who they were talking about, and she didn’t care. She started walking over to the masked trio, relishing the sudden lack of arrogance around them. She couldn’t wait to punch them in the face.

The one nearest to her was rapidly hitting a red button tied around his neck. She punched him hard enough that his mask cracked, and the woman beside him screamed as he fell back against her. Cass moved towards her next, but then there was a rumbling sound, and the ceiling above her opened.

Another fighter, wearing the same outfit as the one who’s neck she’d snapped, dropped down. Cass immediately dodged back as he threw a knife, and it landed harmlessly in the wall, taking a strand of Cass’s hair with it.

“What took you so long?” The woman snapped. “We brought you out of retirement hours ago, and your reaction time is still this slow?”

The fighter didn’t answer, which Cass thought was good. The woman didn’t deserve his respect. Cass could see how shaky her arms were when she brushed herself off. All three of the masked cowards were trying to get their arrogance back, and it almost made Cass laugh.

She glanced up at the ceiling, but the hole had closed over. The second man walked over to the first and bend down, grabbing his head. He pulled, and the first fighter’s neck cracked into place.

They stood up, and turned to face Cass. She tugged the knife from the wall and slipped it into her pocket, and then she braced herself.

If she could knock them both out, the masked cowards would have to open the hole to summon another fighter, and she would have the chance to escape and find a better place to finish the fight. Two against one were not good odds, but there wasn’t much she could do about that right now. This was her only option, and knowing that helped her stay calm. When the two men moved closer, she threw herself back into the fight.

No matter what happened next, the worst they could do was kill her.

“You don’t have to be there for this.” Barbara’s voice was tight. “Bruce will get in contact any second now, and when he finds out that Dick and Jason are gone it won’t be pretty.”

Tim shrugged, his eyes on the dark CCTV camera showing the east side of the docklands. He thought he saw a shadow move there a minute ago, so he was keeping an eye on it in case it turned out to be a lead.

“If he’s going to be mad, then you shouldn’t have to deal with it alone.”
Out of the corner of his eye, Tim saw Barbara glance at him. He couldn’t quite see her face, because he was keeping his eyes firmly on the CCTV, but she reached over and ruffled his hair, and Tim felt like he understood her.

He wondered if he should say something else, but then one of the monitors started beeping, and Barbara gave a deep sigh.

“Here we go.”

She hit a button, and suddenly Bruce’s voice rang out.

“Oracle, why is the Batmobile not in the cave? My tracker says it’s parked down near the docklands.”

“It’s Dick and Jason.” Barbara’s eyes darted to Alfred, and he nodded. “They stole the Batmobile and ran off to help in the search for Cass. Dick used some old override that I don’t have a way to counter. You could try and bring the Batmobile back but if it’s parked in the city…”

“They left it and are going by foot. Dick’s smart enough to know that I would be able to take control of the car once I realised what happened, even if he was using one of the original emergency codes.”

“Exactly.”

The line was silent. Tim counted the faint blips of static, waiting for Bruce to say something.

When Bruce started laughing, everyone in the cave shared an alarmed look.

“Batman? Is everything ok?” Barbara pulled up footage from the camera in his mask, but everything looked normal. “Talk to us.”

“It’s just… the irony is a little too strong.” Bruce chuckled, not sounding genuinely happy at all to Tim. “Back when Jason was Robin and he would sneak off and get wrapped up in one of Dick’s crises with the Titans, I used to be furious. I’d swear that the panic I felt over both my boys being in over their heads was the most awful feeling in the world. Then after Jason died, I told Dick that I would give anything to feel that stress again, because it turns out that the emptiness that comes after the worst has happened is actually a much more horrible feeling.”

Tim twisted his hands, glancing between Barbara and Alfred. Neither of them seemed to know what to say either. Some part of Tim wanted to ask if the comms were secure enough for Bruce to be talking about Jason’s time as Robin, but that clearly wasn’t a helpful thing to say at the moment.

“Now I’m back to worrying about both of them.” Bruce’s laugh began to sound a lot more jaded. “I got what I wished for.”

The line went dead. Barbara didn’t try to ring him back.

“What happens now?” Tim had to ask. “Who’s going to search for Dick and Jason?”

“Dick’s reckless, but he’s not suicidal.” Barbara rubbed her temples. “If he thinks he’s found Cass he’ll contact us before making a move. I’m going to continue to monitor the situation, but I need you and Alfred to do something for me.”

“Of course.” Alfred said, and even he looked shaken by Bruce’s reaction to the latest drama. “Just tell us what you need.”
“I need more information on these kidnappers we’re up against. They’re not human, at least not fully, but we don’t have much data beyond that. Search Jason’s room again, see if you can find any blood or hair or… anything that guy left behind from his fight with Cass. Right now, even cloth fibres could come in handy.”

“We shall get on that right away. Master Tim?”

Tim nodded and stood up, following Alfred towards the elevator. He looked back at Barbara before the doors closed, but she’d turned her chair away from them, and was busy typing.

The elevator ride up was silent. Tim knew that he should probably say something to break the awkwardness, but he was too embarrassed. Babs and Alfred kept asking him to help, but it felt like they were just trying to make him feel less useless. It reminded him of when his housekeeper would let him ‘help’ with dinner. Baby Tim would sieve the flour, and the one who was actually able to cook would do everything else.

When they reached Jason’s room, Alfred handed him a pair of latex gloves and warned him to be careful of the glass, and then they began to examine the scene of the kidnapping.

Tim was careful not to cut himself as he picked up shards of glass from the broken window. He couldn’t find any blood on them, and there weren’t any visible hairs around either. Alfred had glasses on, his nose almost touching the ground as he searched for traces left behind by the kidnapper. They worked in silence for a minute or two, but Tim had a bunch of thoughts racing through his head, and Alfred seemed like the safest person to ask. Everyone else was always so busy with big dangerous tasks, the butler was the only one who made Tim feel like it was ok to ask irrelevant questions.

“What’s on your mind Master Tim?”

Alfred also had a weird sixth sense that let him notice whenever Tim wanted to talk.

There were a lot of answers Tim could give him. Top of the list included how he wasn’t actually young Tim or real Tim, but a weird mishmash of them both. A close second was everything he’d read in real Tim’s diary, and what it said about him as a person. But the truth was, Tim didn’t feel ready to talk about either of those problems, not right now when there were so many other things going on. So instead, he picked a less personal topic.

“Who’s Cass’s mom? I mean, her birth mom, not Barbara.”

Alfred paused from examining the carpet, pushing his glasses up his nose. Tim hurried to explain himself, because it was kind of a random thing to ask.

“I know about everyone else’s parents. Well, not yours, but Bruce, Dick, Jason, Steph, even Damian and Barbara. And I know about Cass’s dad, but I haven’t been able to learn a single thing about her mom.”

“And your wondering if Miss Cassandra’s mother is connected to her kidnapping?”

“I mean… maybe? I can’t tell, because like I said I kind of know nothing about her. Is she even alive? Do she and Cass get on?”

“She is alive, and I’m fairly certain she had no part in this kidnapping.”

“Oh.” Tim had expected her to be dead. “Do you think she’ll help us find Cass if we ask?”
“I don’t think so.” Alfred’s sad smile only made Tim more curious. “I would say Miss Cassandra has as complicated a relationship with her birth mother as she does with her birth father, but really I don’t know very much.”

“But you still think she won’t help us.”

“I don’t trust her to help us.” Something flashed in Alfred’s eyes. “She killed Miss Cassandra, and even though she brought her back and Miss Cassandra returned the favour later on, under no circumstances would I call on her mother to help.”

“Oh.” Tim said. “That’s… Wait. Did you say Cass killed her mom?”

“Miss Cassandra doesn’t like to talk about it, but from what I’ve gathered her final fight with her mother ended with her impaling the woman on a hook above a Lazarus Pit.”

It took Tim a moment to react to that, because every single thing he learned about Cass’s past seemed to be insane.

“So Cass didn’t really kill her? She survived?”

“She survived.” Alfred confirmed. “But as far as I am aware, Miss Casandra hasn’t spoken to her since.”

“Cool.” Tim said dazedly. “Ok then. So that’s not an option.”

“Would you like a glass of water Master Tim? You look very pale.”

“I’m ok.” Tim said feebly. “It’s just a lot to take in, you know? I mean, even with just her dad it was pretty obvious Cass had the worst parents, but this is super twisted. I knew that Dick had two good parents, then I was next, then Jason, then Damian and then Cass, but I didn’t realise how big the gap was at the top.”

“Master Tim, tell me you are not attempting to rank the levels of abuse inflicted on you by your parents growing up?”

“Uh…” Tim scratched the back of his head. “I kind of already ranked them back when Steph and Jason talked about their dads. Sorry?”

“And did you completely miss when Miss Stephanie pointed out that abuse wasn’t a competition?”

“No, I get that, it’s just…” Tim sighed. “I keep screwing up with Jason. I say the wrong things all the time, and I don’t understand why he gets so mad. The ranking is just my way of being careful. I don’t want to upset anyone, so I need a reminder of who had worse childhoods than me because otherwise I end up being insensitive. With Dick I can just say whatever, but with Jason I might make the tiniest comment and he gets this look on his face, like ‘Oh the rich white boy is talking nonsense again.’ I don’t really know how to deal with that.”

“Has he said anything to you?” Alfred seemed genuinely concerned, which made Tim even more embarrassed.

“Not exactly. It’s just the way he looks at me and stuff.”

Alfred looked ready to press the issue further, but then Tim’s phone started ringing. He fumbled around in his pocket trying to find it, and then he jumped when Barbara’s voice rang out without him even hitting the answer button.
“Alfred, Tim, have you found anything?”

“Not yet.” Alfred replied.

Tim ducked his head to hide his red cheeks. All his talk about not getting in the way, and he’d ended up getting so side-tracked that Alfred hadn’t been able to search much of the room. He should have just waited until afterwards to bring this all up.

“Dick and Jason just got in contact. They think they’ve found the building where Cass is being held. This could get messy, and Alfred I might need you to help talk some sense into everyone.”

“I understand.” Alfred stood up, brushing the carpet dust off his suit. “I shall return to the cave at once.”

He went to walk out the door, and Tim couldn’t help wanting him to stay. It was selfish, but something about Alfred was just so safe and comforting.

“Alfred?” The butler paused on his way out, and Tim couldn’t help blurting out the truth. “I’m scared. I know it’s not completely my fault that Cass got kidnapped, but I can’t stop thinking about it. I just feel so guilty and I can’t stop. I don’t know how to stop feeling like this.”

Alfred turned around and knelt down in front of Tim, a kind smile on his face.

“Now listen carefully Master Tim, I understand how scary this must be for you, but you needn’t worry about Miss Cassandra. That girl has died twice and she’s still ticking along just fine. We’ll sort this all out and everyone will be right as rain, just you wait and see.”

He held out his arms and Tim buried himself in a warm hug. Alfred patted his head and let Tim squeeze him tight.

“It’ll be alright in the end Master Tim. I promise.”

Tim almost believed him.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The family head towards Dick and Jason, who think they’ve found where Cass is being kept.
The Stubborn

Chapter Summary

Damian likes to think he's gotten better at babysitting, but with his sister in danger he's not too happy with Dick and Jason tagging along.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Damian and Steph were the first to arrive. Dick saw them coming, but Jason jumped when they swung down, and Damian felt a spark of anger at Dick’s recklessness. It was one thing to feel slighted and sneak off on your own, but to drag your untrained little brother into it… Batman was absolutely going to flip.

“You understand that Batman is furious at you both, don’t you?”

Jason gulped, but Dick had the audacity to give Damian a cheeky grin.

“We found the bad guys!” Dick pointed to the building behind them. “You’re welcome. No need to thank us.”

Ten-year-old Dick had a lot of misplaced sass. Damian almost felt like chewing them out, but Batman would do a good enough job of that when he got there.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Steph squinted up at the building.

“Positive!” Dick nodded. “There were these men sitting outside in the car, and we were going to knock them out but then I saw this masked guy like the one who kidnapped Cass. They were telling him something and then he disappeared, but I saw a shadow moving up the wall of the building.”

“Shadow monsters?” Jason looked even paler. “I didn’t realise they were shadow monsters.”

“They’re not shadow monsters.” Damian resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “And it doesn’t matter, because you’re not coming inside with us.”

Dick opened his mouth to argue, but someone cleared their throat behind him, and this time both Dick and Jason jumped. Even Damian felt a little shiver at the dark look on Batman’s face, and he wasn’t the one in trouble.

“Batman.” Dick squeaked. “Hey, I swear there’s a good explanation for this. We just-”

“Are you both alright?”

Dick stopped and looked over at Jason, who nodded.

“Yeah, we’re fine. But-”

“And Red Robin is back in the cave?”

“He didn’t want to come along. But see-”
“Red Robin? Are you there?” Batman spoke into his comm. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m very proud of you for not running out with your brothers. It was the right thing to do.”

He nodded along to what Tim said in reply, probably an awkward thank you if Damian was to guess. Dick was practically jumping up and down in impatience.

“As for you two.” Dick stopped bouncing as Batman’s voice got even deeper. “What were you thinking? Robin, you think you should be out here because you’re a good enough to fight with us? Would a good Robin risk his brother’s life? You of all people know this is about more than just fighting skills.”

“Exactly!” Dick shot back. “It’s about the heart and spirit! He has both!”

“That’s an incredibly naïve way of thinking and you know it!” Batman hissed.

“I’m sorry!” Everyone took a step back as Jason unexpectedly began to cry. “I’m really sorry! I know I shouldn’t be here! Please don’t be mad Batman! Please don’t be mad!”

Bruce’s demeanour flipped instantly, from cold and angry to soft and concerned. He crouched down and put his arms on Jason’s shoulders. Jason moved closer and Batman gently wrapped his arms around him, careful not to squeeze too hard with his armoured uniform.

“Shh, it’s alright lad. You’re alright. I’m not going to hurt you. I forgive you. The important thing is that you’re safe.”

Jason sniffled quietly into his shoulder, and Dick pouted.

“No fair.” He muttered. “I get yelled at and he gets hugs?”

“Welcome to the life of an older sibling.” Steph reached over and ruffled Dick’s hair.

Jason quieted down and Bruce let him step away, still keeping one hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Batman, Cass is still-”

“Well get her Oracle.” Bruce turned around to look at the building. “Let’s go inside. Be careful, this could all be a trap.”

“I’m coming too.” Dick announced.

Damian was about ready to drag Dick back to the cave himself, but to his surprise Bruce only nodded.

“Fine. You can come, but Robin number two can’t. He has no training, and could be used as a hostage. Someone needs to stay out here with him.”

Well, Damian certainly wasn’t going to babysit. Other than Batman he was the best fighter here. It should be Dick that stayed behind, and Damian had a feeling that was the point Batman was trying to make. Dick was the one that dragged Jason into this mess, and that made it his responsibility to keep him safe.

But Dick was ten, and he clearly wanted to be a part of the action. So, he shook his head, ignoring the disappointed looks Bruce and Damian gave him.

“I’ll do it.” Stephanie sighed. “I’ll get the kid home, then meet up with you all as quickly as I can.”
“I appreciate that Batgirl. I promise we’ll get Cassandra back.” Bruce was still looking at Dick. “Are you happy with this Robin? You say you wanted to help, but thanks to you we’re going in without our second-best combatant.”

Father thought Stephanie was a better fighter than Damian? That couldn’t be true. He was probably just lying to make Dick feel even guiltier.

Because Dick was clearly the Robin Batman was addressing, and Damian knew that. There was no need for him to feel ashamed, because Batman was very clearly not talking to him. Damian shouldn’t feel guilty about not staying behind to babysit Jason.

He wasn’t like Dick. He wasn’t being stubborn for the sake of his pride. He was a more mature ten-year-old, and it was a fact that he would be of more use fighting the kidnappers than taking care of Jason. Stephanie had better people skills anyway.

Dick didn’t reply, but he stuck out his chin and it was clear that he wasn’t going to change his mind. Stephanie rolled her eyes, reaching down to pick up Jason and swing him onto her back. He giggled, clinging onto her like a little monkey, and she smiled.

“Good luck. Kick them in the nuts for me.”

She winked and shot her grapple gun, swinging off with Jason. Bruce looked highly worried watching Jason flying through the air with her, but they landed safely on the roof a few meters away, and then took off again.

Now there were three, and Dick was still firmly ignoring the disappointed looks both Batman and Damian were giving him. Batman stepped towards the building, and it was then that Damian remembered what Dick told him earlier.

“Robin, where are the men you saw earlier? The ones in the car?”

“Over there.” Dick pointed to the left.

Damian tilted his head, and Bruce nodded. They crouched down and crawled over to the left. Parked on a worn, narrow road was a black car. Inside, three people were visible, all wearing owl masks. Batman signalled with his hand, and Damian understood.

*I’ll smash the window. You get the one in the back.*

Dick very clearly did not understand, but that wasn’t Damian’s problem. He loved his brother, he really did, but he had no patience for Dick’s bout of immaturity. Dick had made his decision, and now he would just have to deal with the consequences. Cass was the priority here.

Batman’s fist smashed through the front window, knocking the man in the driver’s seat unconscious. At the same time, Damian smashed feet first through the rear window, and the man in the backseat got slammed into the back of the front seats. A solid kick knocked him out, and as Damian clambered out of the car Batman dragged the remaining man outside, grabbing the red button tied around his neck before he could hit it.

Dick hung back, an uneasy expression on his face as Batman ripped the man’s mask off and slammed him against the car.

“Where is she?” Batman growled.

“Inside!” The man squeaked. “She’s inside with two of our Talons.”
“The assassins who can’t feel pain, you call them Talons?”

“That’s them!” Even though he was useful, Damian felt disgusted at how cowardly the man was. “There was only supposed to be one inside, but something went wrong and we had to send our other one.”

“What went wrong?”

“I don’t know! We just got the distress signal.” He glanced at the red button lying on the ground, and Damian kicked it further away. “That’s all I know, I swear!”

“Why did you kidnap the girl?” Batman’s voice went so deep the man looked ready to wet himself.

“I don’t know the source, but we got a tip that Bruce Wayne’s kids had been de-aged, and this was before it became public knowledge. We knew that his daughter was Cassandra Cain, the infamous child David Cain raised to be the perfect assassin. The Court decided that she would be perfect as our next Talon.”

“You’re lying.” Batman slammed the man harder against the car. “The spell is temporary. The girl will turn back into a nineteen-year-old soon, so what was the real reason?”

“What? Our tip told us that the spell was permanent!”

“Who’s your source?”

“I told you I don’t know! I’m not that high up on the food chain, I barely know anything I swear!”

As far as Damian could tell, the man wasn’t lying. Batman seemed to agree that the man’s confusion was genuine, because he moved on to the next line of questioning.

“These Talons of yours. How do we beat them?”

“You can’t.” There was a twisted pride in the man’s voice as he spoke. “They’re already dead! We made our Talons unkillable, and only we have the power to end them.”

“How?”

The man didn’t look like he was ready to spill, so Damian stepped forward and snapped three of his fingers. The man screamed in pain, and Dick flinched.

“You seem to have deluded yourself into thinking you are some powerful figure.” Damian calmly broke another finger. “Your Talons are impressive, but without them you are just a weak, arrogant fool. Tell us what we want to know or I’ll show you just how powerless you truly are.”

“You don’t scare me.” The man spat back, very clearly scared. “We all know Batman is a white hat. He doesn’t kill or torture.”

“Well if you know so much, then surely your aware that I don’t play by the same rules.” Damian reached out to squeeze the remaining unbroken finger on the man’s left hand. “I’ve just proven that I’m perfectly comfortable with torture, so are you really willing to push me further?”

Batman was quiet, keeping the man in place. Dick’s face had gone pale, but thankfully he didn’t try to intervene.

“…There’s a poison.” The man admitted. “We created a poison that can shut them down permanently.”
“How does it work?”

“There’s a serum made with electrum. That’s what we used to bring them back to life. I don’t know the specifics, but the poison works against it.”

“You really don’t know anything at all, do you?” Damian sneered. “No wonder they felt comfortable leaving you out here in a car. You’re practically a grunt.”

“That’s enough Robin.” Batman said firmly.

Damian frowned, but stepped back. He noticed how Dick subtly moved away from him, but he didn’t have time to worry about that. He let Batman knock the pathetic man out, and then the three of them bound and gagged the unconscious men.

“What’s the plan?” Dick asked. “Should we use the red button to lure the Talons out?”

“Too risky.” Batman shook his head. “It’s possible they have more than two Talons. We could end up making this fight harder than it has to be. We go in through the roof, find Cassandra and get her to a safe location. Our priority is rescuing her, not defeating the Talons. We can work on a way to stop them once Cassie is safe.”

“Is there going to be any more torture?” Dick asked nervously. “Because I didn’t realise that was something future Batman did.”

“I broke his fingers, not Batman.” Damian cut in before Father could respond. “And that’s not something we normally condone, but these are special circumstances. A child’s life is on the line.”

“Children’s lives have been on the line before.” Dick pointed out. “But it’s not just any child is it? It’s Bruce Wayne’s daughter.”

“Exactly.” Damian said, again stopping Batman before he could try and reply. “Batman can try his best to be objective, but we’re all only human, and she means a lot to him. So, suck it up Robin, because you had a chance to leave and you refused.”

Dick pouted, but he didn’t try to argue anymore. Batman opened his mouth, probably to try and deny that he was treating this any differently to a normal kidnapping. Damian rolled his eyes and began creeping closer to the building, effectively ending the conversation.

The building was a grey bricked townhouse, around five stories tall. There was no rooftop access, so they slipped in from the highest window. Dick’s grappling hook was a little rusty, and he ended up stumbling, but no alarm went off so they assumed they were still in the clear.

They went down two flights of stairs before they ran into a sealed off door.

“The second floor must be where they’re keeping her.” Damian ran his hands along the wall. “How do we get down there?”

“Every building I checked had a different trick.” Batman frowned thoughtfully. “We’ll just have to search this place from top to bottom, and do it fast.”

Damian nodded, moving back up to the third floor, and tapping his foot against the floorboards. He could feel his impatience bubbling up inside him, but he focused on his breathing and forced the anger down. There was too much at stake for him to lash out. He would control his emotions, and channel his rage into fighting the Talons.
“Hey guys?” Dick piped up. “I think I found something!”

There was a clicking sound, and then the floor opened up underneath Damian. He let himself fall, landing on top of someone. One look told him that it was a Talon. Looking up, he saw Cass and the other Talon in front of him, with three masked Owls standing to the side. Cass had her legs around the Talon’s neck and was hammering him over the head while he struggled to throw her off, but she spared a second to give Damian a little wave.

He waved back, then jumped off the Talon he was standing on as the man pushed himself off the ground. A second later he slumped back down as Dick fell on top of him. Dick flipped over his head, landing on his feet back to back with Damian. Damian had to admit, it was a nice entrance.

“The Cavalry has arrived.” Damian announced. “Owls against Robins, I think we know who the winner will be.”

He couldn't see beneath their masks, but the nervous energy coming from the Owls was enough to make him smile.

Together, the two Robins launched into battle.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The Batfamily fight the Talons, and it doesn't end smoothly. Meanwhile, Jason meets someone unexpected on his way home.
The battle comes to an end, but across town a new enemy approaches.

Damian bounced off the wall and roundhouse kicked a Talon’s hand, knocking away the knife he had been about to throw at Dick. The second Talon threw a knife at him, which he deflected with his sword. Cass jumped back onto the second Talon, and with Dick helping her Damian focused his efforts on the first one. The Talon slipped knives between his fingers and attacked Damian with punches, forcing Damian to deflect and dodge all eight knives.

He backpedalled at first, then tried attacking once he gained a sense for the Talon’s rhythm. But the Talon was clearly highly skilled, because he ducked under Damian’s second swipe and managed to rake the knives across his Robin tunic. It hurt, but no blood was drawn, so Damian only gave himself a second to react to the pain before diving back in.

He caught Dick’s eye and tilted his head. As he charged at the Talon, Dick sprang off the second Talon to land on top of the one Damian was fighting. The distraction let Damian aim for the Talon’s legs, and when he stumbled Damian put all his force into a kick that sent the Talon crashing into the wall. Dick’s jump off his head added extra momentum, and the Talon actually looked dazed for a few seconds.

But when the Talon attacked again it was with twice as much energy. Damian pushed Dick back towards Cass’s fight and focused on dodging each swipe. A few strokes narrowly missed his face, but he got a fair few sword swings in that almost cut the Talon’s goggles off.

Annoyed, Damian tossed his sword to the side and lunged fully at the Talon. The unexpected move took the Talon by surprise, and Damian was able to knock one of the knives out of his hand. Damian grabbed it, then rolled backwards to pick up his sword in his free hand. The Talon gave up close combat and started throwing knives at him, aiming for his head. Damian used both blades to deflect the knives, frowning when one cut the top of his hair.

Another knife knocked the blade out of Damian’s hand, and he ducked and rolled to avoid the next barrage. Rolling closer to the Talon, he flung a Batarang at the man. The Talon dodged it, and Damian smirked as it bounced off the wall and ricocheted back, stabbing the Talon straight in the hand.

It would be more satisfying if the Talon actually looked like the stab wound bothered him, but still. Small victories would be enough until Batman finally made it down here to join his children in this fight.

He risked a glance over to his left. Cassandra and Dick looked to be having the time of their life jumping and kicking their Talon. Dick looked like he was performing a circus routine and Cassandra was practically dancing. Their Talon couldn’t seem to get a grip on them, because when he tried to grab one the other would kick him from behind and jump out of reach when he turned to face them.
Damian was slightly worried by how relaxed they seemed, but at least it didn’t look like they were losing.

Damian’s attention was drawn back by his Talon lunging for him. He turned and ran straight for the wall, backflipping over the Talon’s head. He twisted his sword in an attempt to cut the man’s head off his shoulders (since they were apparently already dead it wasn’t technically an attempt to kill him) but the Talon ducked under the sword swing and kicked Damian in the stomach. Damian flew back into the wall, and landed on his knees, winded.

All those zombie movies Brown and Grayson had shown him were nothing but lies. These undead assassins were far harder to put down than the shambling decomposed corpses Hollywood loved so much.

The Talon grabbed Damian by the throat, and he could see Cass preparing to lunge. Before she could reach him, the ceiling opened again, and Batman dropped down, grabbing the Talon and flinging him away from Damian.

“What took you so long?” Damian rasped, rubbing his throat.

“Had to secure our exit.” Bruce nodded upwards, where the hole in the ceiling remained open. “We should go now.”

“Agreed.” Damian grabbed two knives off the ground and threw one of them at the Talon coming towards them. “How do we stop them from chasing us?”

“First things first.” Bruce punched the Talon, bringing himself closer to Cass and Dick’s fight. “Cassandra honey, it’s time to go. Your dad is very worried about you and we need to get you home to him as soon as possible.”

Cass shot Bruce an unimpressed look that bore a remarkable resemblance to her older self, and then spun around to kick Dick’s leg out of their Talon’s grip. Bruce sighed, elbowing his own Talon in the face while Damian went for the kneecaps with his sword.

“Did you really think she’d be willing to leave first?” Damian blocked a knife headed towards his father. “Our best option is to finish this all four of us, then go home.”

And that’s exactly what they did. It wasn’t easy. In fact, it was incredibly difficult, and by the time they managed to snap one Talon’s neck Damian was covered in cuts and bruises. Batman and Cassandra were slightly better off, but Dick had a black eye and long streaks of blood trickling down his legs. The four of them converged on the second Talon, and there seemed to be an unspoken agreement between Bruce, Damian and Cass to shield Dick as much as possible now that they were down to one opponent.

Damian had to admit, his brother had held his own very well against the assassins. While he had taken the most damage, Dick was still alive, and considering how strong these Talons were Damian was more than a little impressed.

The remaining Talon was growing less composed, and his strikes were getting more vicious. He aimed a knife at Dick, and when Bruce went to block he quickly directed his blade towards Batman and managed to stab him in the shoulder. Batman grunted in pain, but Damian didn’t bother worrying about that. He rooted around in his equipment, finding the smallest bomb he could.

It was time to end this.

The Talon pulled the knife out of Batman, and blocked Cass’s kick to his face. He whirled around to
bat away Damian sneaking up on him from behind, but Damian managed to press the bomb onto his thigh before getting knocked across the room. By the time he got back onto his feet the rest of his family had scrambled as far away from the Talon as possible.

The bomb beeped, and then exploded, covering half the room in smoke. Out of the smoke the Talon came crawling, but with both his legs blown off, the undead assassin clearly wasn’t able to continue fighting. His fellow Talon was still lying motionless on the floor, and the Owls...

Damian’s blood ran cold when he saw the female Owl holding a knife to Dick’s throat.

“Nobody move!” she screamed shrilly. “Any one of you bats moves an inch and I cut this boy’s throat!”

After what felt like hours spend fighting, the sudden stillness in the room was jarring.

The knife in Damian’s hand suddenly felt far heavier. He could make the shot, kill the woman before she even realised he’d thrown it. But was that the only option they had? If he killed her, none of the people in the room would be happy about it.

Batman was still, pure anger in his glare, but nothing in his hands. Cass’s teeth were bared, but she was standing too far away from Dick to do anything.

Damian slowly began to calculate how he’d need to aim. The woman was standing around two meters away from him. He would need to angle the throw upwards, which meant he’d need to pull back his arm fast before she noticed him. If he miscalculated the angle or the timing, Dick could end up dead.

He didn’t want to do this.

He looked over at Batman and Cassandra again, and his heart sank when he saw Cass staring at him with wide eyes. He should have known she would be able to read his intentions. Now that she knew about his plan, she would surely try to stop him. He had no choice now. If Damian didn’t kill the Owl this very second, Cass would run over to stop him and Dick would die.

He pulled back his arm and flung the knife. The woman fell backwards, letting Dick go. Damian had one second to feel relieved before a screaming ball of rage barrelled into him and knocked him over.

He let himself go limp as Cass pummelled him, screaming and crying. He’d never seen his sister this angry, and there was nothing he could do but lie there and feel numb, until Batman finally managed to drag her off him.

He sat up, his head throbbing from the punches. The woman was lying on the floor, still wearing her Owl mask. That was good. There was a little bit of blood visible around the area where the knife was embedded, but this way Dick and Cass didn’t have to see the gory details.

The other two Owls were frozen in fear with their backs to the wall, as if Damian was going to snap and stab them in the head next. He should probably feel some way about that, but his face was still hurting from Cass’s punches, and he just felt numb.

“It’s over.” Batman said, breaking the shocked silence.

He was right. The Talons had been defeated and Cass was unharmed. They could go back to the manor now, victorious.

No one felt like cheering.
We’re almost there.” Stephanie said cheerfully, jumping from the top of one building to another. Jason held on tightly, burying his face in her shoulder to hide his grin. He knew that things were super serious and he’d messed up by sneaking out, but running across the rooftops was so cool! Plus, Stephanie seemed really nice, and Jason felt safe around her. Even though he’d been bad, he knew she wasn’t going to hurt him.

“Here we are kiddo.” Stephanie came to a stop, crouching down so Jason could climb off her back. “My bike’s parked down in that alley. Let’s use the fire escape.”

“Why not just swing down?” Jason tried not to sound like he had an ulterior motive. He did. Swinging was super fun, and he loved how giddy he felt when Stephanie jumped off the edge of the roof.

“Because it’s dangerous, and we can afford to take our time now.” Stephanie ruffled his hair, and this time Jason didn’t try to hide his grin. “You can be an adrenaline junkie back at the manor, because if I don’t get you home in one piece your dad will kill me.”

“Will he really?”

“No.” Stephanie admitted. “But he’ll glare at me and act all disappointed and I’ll tell myself that I don’t care while actually feeling like shit, so let’s go.”

“You said a bad word!” Jason giggled as they started climbing down the fire escape. “You’re not supposed to curse around me.”

“I did? Fuck!” Stephanie groaned, wincing when Jason laughed even louder. “I mean, frick. That’s what I said, got it?”

“You still said shit though.”

“No I didn’t. I said shoot.”

“Nope!” Jason grinned cheekily. “I’m telling dad!”

“As if you didn’t already know those words.” Stephanie grumbled. “Look, if you don’t tell the grown-ups I cursed in front of you I’ll buy you—”

A woman’s scream interrupted them before Jason got to hear what Steph was going to bribe him with. It sounded like it was coming from a few streets away, and Jason immediately started climbing down faster. The fire escape shook as Stephanie sprang down from above him, jumping from rung to railing like gravity didn’t exist. Jason was tempted to try copying her, but he knew he’d fall flat on his face if he did.

“It’s probably a mugging. I’m going to go check it out, and I’ll be back in two minutes. Stay by the bike and if anything happens press the red button on the handlebars. That’ll let me know you’re in trouble, got it?”

Jason nodded, climbing down faster as Stephanie sprinted off in the direction of the scream. He trotted over to the bike, admiring it. It was the kind of bike kids in his neighbourhood would love to steal. There were so many buttons and gadgets that probably did lots of cool things, but Jason didn’t dare touch any of them. This was the future, so one of those buttons could probably turn the bike into a jet pack or something.
Gotham wasn’t that cold tonight, but Jason still felt himself shivering. At first he thought it was because of his costume, but even when he crouched down on the curb and used his cape to cover his bare legs, he still felt like something was crawling up his spine.

He stood up, looking up and down the alley. There was no one there.

He turned around, and the Joker smiled at him.

“Oh.” Jason said. “I thought I got rid of you.”

“And I thought I got rid of you years ago, but now I get to do it all over again!” The Joker laughed, a high maniacal cackle that made Jason want to curl up and hide. “Y’know, I had a feeling that spell would cause a lot of fun, but I didn’t expect you to come out and play! I almost feel bad for killing the sorceress, but she just kept upping the price. That’s business I guess! You know how it goes, right kid?”

The red button. Jason just had to turn and hit it, then Stephanie would come and everything would be ok.

“Nothing to say? Really?” The Joker leant over, titling his ear towards Jason. “I go through all this trouble lying to the Court of Owls to lure you birds out, and you won’t even talk to me?”

Jason’s legs were shaking. Why couldn’t he turn around and press the red button? That was all he needed to do.

“You’re not real.” Jason said, his voice trembling. “You’re just in my head.”

“Huh.” The Joker stepped back. “Didn’t see that coming. Well, we’re almost out of time, so let’s catch up properly later, ok?”

It wasn’t ok, but before Jason could say that the Joker stuck his hand out and blew a handful of dust into Jason’s face. Jason coughed, rubbing at his eyes to dislodge it. When he looked up, the Joker had vanished.

“Jason!” That was Stephanie, running over to him. “Are you ok? I thought I heard you talking to someone.”

Jason looked down at his hands. There was no dust on his fingers. His eyes and mouth still felt itchy, but there was no proof that it hadn’t all been a hallucination.

“I’m fine.” he said. “But this place is a little scary. Can we go home now?”

“Sure thing kid.” Stephanie picked him up, and he hugged her tightly, absorbing all the warmth and comfort he could. “Hop on the bike in front of me, and let’s hope the cops don’t try and pull us over.”

Jason nodded and scrambled on, ignoring the look Stephanie shot him.

“You sure you’re ok Jason?”

*I don’t think I am.* He almost said.

*I’m seeing things again.* He almost said.

*I talked to the Joker and he’s after me.* He almost said.
“Yeah.” Jason said. “Everything’s fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The kids are home safe, but things aren't alright.
Chapter Summary

The gang goes back home. They may have won the battle, but things are now very tense between certain family members.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stephanie and Jason were the first to arrive back. Jason looked a little dazed, but Stephanie greeted Barbara with a smile. Her smile faded once she noticed the older woman’s grim expression, so Barbara explained quickly before Stephanie grew too worried.

“IT’s alright. They got Cass and they’re on their way home now.”

“What happened?”

“The fight against the Owls took a bad turn when one of them took Dick hostage. Damian killed them in order to save Dick.”

“Oh damn.” Steph winced sympathetically. “I’m guessing they won’t be in the mood for a victory party then.”

“Nope. Can you take Jason up to Alfred? Make sure he’s safe and sound, and then come back down. I’ve got most of the preparations in order for the hostages but I could use some extra muscle just in case.”

“Got it.”

Stephanie scooped Jason up and headed towards the elevator. Barbara was a bit concerned by Jason’s glazed expression, but she would have to look into that later. According to Bruce they were taking two Owls and a Talon back to the cave. The Talon was currently missing his legs so he wasn’t much of a threat, but it was better safe than sorry. Especially since Batman had to leave the second Talon behind.

They had discussed calling the police in, but Bruce had been adamant that the Talons were too dangerous for the GCPD to handle. Ideally Batman should have taken both of them hostage, but since they didn’t know if Talons with broken necks could heal without help, they couldn’t risk it. The priority was keeping the children safe, which meant only the Talon unable to heal fully could come on the drive back with them.

Neither Bruce nor Barbara liked the idea of leaving one of the Talons there for the Owls to collect, but it was the best option they had. They’d tied the Talon up up, and Bruce had left a camera behind and slipped a tracker on him so that Barbara could keep tabs on the situation. She had a feeling the Talon would discover both pieces of spyware quite quickly, but hopefully she would be able to gain some new information before then.

She looked up as the Batmobile pulled into the cave, and the passengers emerged in total silence. Barbara watched them as they walked towards the elevator. She’d seen what had happened through
Batman’s camera feed, but it was only by seeing them in the flesh that she could really judge how they were doing.

Damian stomped past angrily, moving fast so that no one would try to talk to him. Barbara understood why; the poor kid was running from the judgement he feared was coming. Personally, she didn’t condemn him for killing the woman, not when the Owl had been threatening Dick’s life and there hadn’t been another way. But she had a feeling that most of the others wouldn’t see it like she did. Stephanie probably wouldn’t be too hard on him, and she could trust Alfred to be sensible about it, but Barbara wasn’t so optimistic about Bruce and the kids. She knew Cass was angry at him, and Dick…

Dick looked shaken. He moved towards the elevator at a much slower pace, like he didn’t feel safe with Damian anymore. Barbara’s heart went out to both of the kids. She couldn’t blame Dick for being scared, even if it was hurting Damian. It was one thing to know that your brother was a former assassin, and it was a whole other situation to watch him to kill a woman right in front of you. Barbara would wager that there was a fair bit of guilt mixed into Dick’s fear, since Damian was only forced to kill that woman because she threatened Dick’s life.

Cass was also pale faced, but she looked even angrier than Damian. It almost made Barbara smile, in a sad way, because those two had far more in common than just their childhood training. Bruce was the same too, using anger as his main tool to deal with the trauma life threw at him. It was practically a family trait.

Batman was the last to leave the car. He opened up the boot and hauled out the legless Talon. The first thing that got Barbara’s attention was the blindfold, as well as the two other blindfolded men still in the trunk. All three had their hands tied too. The second thing she noticed was how badly the Talon was injured. She grimaced at the sight. With his legs blown off, the remaining flesh of his thighs was badly burnt, with bits of bones sticking through. Barbara immediately made note of the lack of bleeding and the lack of pain on the man’s face. The knife in the shin and the healed snapped necks had already proven that these Talons weren’t human, but this was far more graphic. Without his mask, he looked like a corpse, but he wiggled desperately in Bruce’s grip. It reminded Barbara of a zombie movie.

Bruce moved over to the metal table she had prepared. He strapped the Talon down onto it, making sure that the metal restraints were secure. Then he went back for the two other men, and dragged them roughly over to the normal cell. They screamed and threatened him, and Barbara felt no sympathy for them as Bruce gagged them before throwing them into the cell, still blindfolded and with their hands tied.

Once the prisoners were secure, he turned to look at her. Barbara gestured to the right, and he followed her into a small soundproofed room tucked into the wall of the cave.

“Is Jason-”

“Batgirl brought him home earlier. He’s safe up with Alfred. She’ll be down soon to help me with the hostages.”

“Good.” Barbara smiled at the way Bruce visibly relaxed, even in his Batman suit. “I don’t know how long we have until the Court comes after us again. These Talons seem to be their main weapons, so I need you and Batgirl to find every weakness we can use to stop them.”

“I heard about the poison, so I can try and look into that. But Bruce, you know I can’t let anyone see me. If you want me to fully examine this Talon as Oracle I’ll need to go back to my place, where I have anonymity as well as better equipment.”
“That’s fine. Batgirl can stay with the prisoners and you can communicate with her. I’ll be down to help as soon as I can.”

“You’re not jumping straight into this?”

“No.” Batman clenched his jaw in a way Barbara knew meant he was conflicted. “I have to talk to my children first. This has been a difficult night for all of them.”

Well, that was a pleasant surprise.

“I was about to suggest the same thing, so I’m glad we agree.” Barbara reached up to squeeze his shoulder. “Batgirl and I can handle things here for now. Those kids need their father.”

Bruce let out a humourless chuckle.

“What they need is a good parental figure. But unfortunately, they’re stuck with me for now.”

“Hey.” Barbara blocked him from leaving. “Don’t say that. We both know those kids love you.”

“Doesn’t mean I’ve been a good father to them.”

“Where’s this coming from?” she demanded. “I know we haven’t always seen eye to eye when it comes to your parenting but now’s not the time for reflective self-loathing. If you really think you’re not doing a good job then just do better.”

That seemed to strike a chord in him. The chuckle he gave this time had a bit of life to it.

“You’re right. You always are.”

“As much as it pleases my ego to hear you say that, I’m not. We’re all just human in the end, and I hate it as much as you do, but we’re going to make mistakes.” She wheeled back to let him pass. “Just try not to go too deep into your own head. Focus on what the kids need right now, not what you need from them.”

Bruce nodded, and then he walked over to the changing rooms. Barbara watched him go, wondering what was going on in his mind. Some parts of his behaviour had become predictable to her after all these years, but many of his thoughts and actions were still a mystery.

The elevator dinged, and Steph emerged. Barbara turned to focus on the Talon. She’d have to trust that Bruce could handle the kids now.

She was mildly surprised to find that she did trust him, even with Cass. Barbara couldn’t put her finger on when exactly it had happened, maybe when they’d argued after Bruce accidentally revealed that Jason was alive, or maybe after the social worker came. Either way, his attitude had changed. Not a whole lot, but noticeable enough.

Barbara was a practical person by nature, and that often involved having a cynical outlook on most things. But for some reason this change left her feeling optimistic.

When Bruce emerged from the cave, the first thing he heard was his children yelling at each other. Not a great start.

He walked quickly out into the hall, where Dick and Damian appeared to be in the middle of a confrontation. Cass was there too, but she was glaring silently at Damian from behind Dick.
“Robin doesn’t kill people!” Dick yelled.

“Robin doesn’t let people die! Especially not his family.” Damian snapped back.

Dick’s face grew paler and Damian’s eyes widened once he realised his mistake. Bruce hastily intervened.

“Can I talk to Damian alone please? I hear the television blaring in the lounge, so maybe you two would like to watch cartoons with Tim and Jason?”

Dick nodded faintly and stumbled backwards down the hall, still staring at Damian in shock. Cass jutted out her chin and her glare grew sharper, but she followed Dick towards the lounge. Bruce doubted she was actually going to sit quietly and watch the cartoons with her brothers, but he’d deal with one problem at a time. Alfred would just have to handle that for now.

“Damian, can we talk?”

Damian’s face was tense and angry, but he nodded and let Bruce walk with him to his bedroom. Bruce stayed silent as they walked, going over what he needed to say. Barbara had told him that he needed to do better, and Dick was the shining example of someone who did a better job of parenting Damian that Bruce. If Bruce was going to get this conversation right, he needed to think more like Dick, just for a moment.

But at the same time, he couldn’t just attempt to imitate Dick’s words. His relationship with Damian was different. The approval Damian wanted from him was different to that which he wanted from Dick. This conversation had to be genuine. Bruce’s words and opinions had to be his own.

Just… phrased in a better way than usual.

“So?” Damian said sharply, as soon as the door was closed. “Just get it over with. You’re angry and I failed you.”

“You didn’t fail me Damian.”

“Fine then, I disappointed you.”

“You didn’t do that either. I’m the one who failed you. I was in charge of the rescue mission, and I should have never let you end up in a situation like that. You did the best you could, and the only person I’m angry at in this family is myself, for not protecting all of you better.”

“I killed someone!” Damian cried. “Are you really going to say that that doesn’t upset you?”

“It upsets me very much.” Bruce replied calmly. “But again, I’m upset at the Court of Owls and at myself. Not at you. It wasn’t your fault Damian.”

“I made the choice to kill her.”

“Because you thought it was the only choice you had to save Dick. I may be against killing but that doesn’t mean I can’t see why you did it. I hate that you felt the need to do it but I don’t hate you for doing it. Do you understand?”

Damian nodded slowly. Bruce was tempted to pat his shoulder but worried that it would come off too awkward.

“So if you don’t hate me, then what do you feel?”
That was a loaded question, and one Bruce had to consider carefully. His instinctive response was sympathy and pity, but Damian wouldn’t like that. Even if it was the truth it was too patronizing, so Bruce would need to look deeper in order to find a better emotion that wasn’t a lie.

“Pride.” he settled on at last. “I feel proud of you Damian.”

“Proud of me?” Damian looked gobsmacked, but he masked it quickly with a scoff. “Now I know for sure that you’re lying Father.”

“I’m not proud of you for killing. But I remember what you were like when you first arrived, and looking at you now I can see just how much you’ve grown.” Bruce reached over to stroke Damian’s hair. “You’re not happy you killed her either, are you? You’re distressed and ashamed, feeling guilty for ending a life even if she was an enemy. You understand the weight of your actions far more than you used to. And that makes me proud.”

He was trying to sound genuine but he worried that his words had sounded scripted instead. Bruce had been aiming for comfort, but his tone had been far too neutral and analytical for that. He wasn’t sure he’d succeeded at all until Damian looked up at him with unshed tears in his eyes.

“I really didn’t want to kill her.” he whispered.

“I know, son.” Bruce opened his arms, and Damian hugged him tightly.

It wasn’t like the hugs his other children gave him. Damian never flung himself into his father’s arms. Even at his most vulnerable the move was delicate and controlled. It would almost seem stilted and forced, if it wasn’t for the way his hands clung tightly to Bruce’s jacket.

Bruce hugged him back equally as tightly, and hoped that Damian understood everything else he hadn’t been able to convey with his words. He closed his eyes, and tried his best to push away all the negative thoughts and fears. Just for a second, he focused completely on the boy cradled in his arms.

Sometimes, he was so determined to keep his kids safe, that he forgot to treasure the time they actually had together. Hearing that Dick and Jason had snuck out, the nostalgia combined with the fear that he’d lost them again had almost broken him.

But he was here now, and his children were all safe for the moment. He could allow himself a few seconds to appreciate that.

Damian pulled away soon after, as uncomfortable with long hugs as his father was. This time Bruce did pat him gently on the shoulder, and the awkwardness he worried about never set in.

“I’m glad I have you.” Damian said quietly. “But I’ve lost the others. Cassandra is even worse than you when it comes to no killing, and Grayson would have understood, but Dick…”

“Dick’s very new to this.” Bruce said. “At his current age he’s only been Robin for a short while and I’ve kept him away from anything too traumatic. The last time he saw anyone die was when he watched his parents fall.”

“And I…” Damian buried his head in his hands with a sigh. “I didn’t mean to imply I was a better Robin because he couldn’t save his parents. I was trying to get him to see why I killed the Owl, and it didn’t come out right.”

“I know.”

“What do I do?”
Damian was looking up at him again, and while his eyes were no longer watery, he looked so helpless and confused. His son’s defences were down, and Bruce was getting a rare glimpse at the young boy Damian tried to hide.

“You take care of yourself.” Bruce told him, the words spilling out with strange emotional confidence. “Killing can take a toll on you, and if you ever need to talk come find me. If you don’t feel like you can talk to me, then Alfred, Barbara and Stephanie will also be willing to listen. I know it.”

“But what about Dick? And Cassandra?”

“I’m going to talk to them too. But no matter what I say, they’re traumatised, and they’re going to lash out at you.” That much Bruce knew for certain. “You don’t have to sit there and take it. I know I told you to guard them, but if they start trying to hurt you, swap with one of us. Even if they just yell at you, trying to get under your skin, you don’t have to let them do that to you. You can walk away Damian, go down to the Cave and help with the examination of the Talon.”

Damian looked miserable at the thought, and Bruce realised he needed more comfort as well as practical advice.

Well, he’d done alright with his words so far. Might as well keep the ball rolling.

“They’ll come around eventually.” he said. “Dick’s got a temper, and he’s stubborn, but he’s always been better than me at recognising when he’s in the wrong, even if it does take time. And Cassandra believes more than anyone in the possibility of redemption. Her anger will fade too, and when she sees that your remorse is genuine, I have faith that she will come to trust you again.”

Damian nodded, but Bruce could tell that there was still something on his mind. He waited.

“I was a decent babysitter, wasn’t I?” Damian asked. “I wasn’t perfect, but the kids, they liked me. Maybe not Tim, but I was good with the other three.”

“You were.” Bruce agreed. “Better than me for a lot of it. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

He hadn’t expected that last question at all. Of all the insecurities Damian could possibly have, being a good babysitter was not one Bruce had imagined.

Damian was quiet, but Bruce understood that it wasn’t the kind of quiet that needed more words to fill it. He sat there, one hand on his son’s shoulder, and let him think. Bruce felt like he’d done alright with his talk this time, but he still preferred the comfort of peaceful silence.

Unfortunately, the silence only lasted a minute or so. There was a loud crash, and then Alfred’s distressed voice could be faintly heard. Damian sighed deeply through his nostrils, then stood up.

“I’ll handle that. It’s probably Cassandra.”

“It could be Dick swinging from something he shouldn’t.”

“No.” Damian shook his head, listening closely to Alfred’s scolding. “I recognize that tone. That’s his ‘Miss Cassandra please get down here before you hurt yourself’ voice.”

“If you want I can-”

“Talk to Dick. I have this under control.”
Bruce closed his mouth. The corner of his lip twitched upwards.

“Alright Damian. Take care of it. And remember-”

“I know.” Damian turned to look at him, and there was a subtle gleam in his eyes that Bruce didn’t fully understand. “If I need to talk, I’ll come and find you.”

He walked out and shut the door.

Bruce allowed himself to smile properly.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The grown ups learn more about the Court and their Talons, while Dick gets a few new shocks.
The Confused

Chapter Summary

Tim has no idea what's going on. The only thing he knows is that Alfred deserves a raise.

Chapter Notes

TW: mentions of past child abuse and past rape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim couldn’t tell if he was being extra fidgety, or if Jason was just weirdly still. His brother had been strangely quiet when he came into the room, responding to Tim’s questions about what had happened with shrugs and short answers before sitting down and staring blankly at the TV.

Tim was worried that something really traumatising had happened, and the angry way Dick and Cass stomped in didn’t help ease his fears. He was tempted to ask them more about whatever they’d done to get Cass back, but he didn’t want to annoy them. Tim had moved into the living room when he couldn’t find anything useful in Jason’s room, figuring that at least when he was sitting quietly and watching TV he wasn’t in the way. Now that his siblings were back, talking to them might be helpful, but on the other hand Tim didn’t have a stellar track record with that. Even if he just tried to comfort Jason he would probably screw it up again. Everyone already had enough to deal with, his curiosity about what had gone down would just have to wait.

Dick seemed as tired as Jason, but even when he slumped down on the couch next to Tim there was a fire in his eyes that stood out compared to Jason’s dull gaze. Was Jason experiencing that Lazarus Pit thing again? Tim would try and mention it to Alfred next time the butler came to check on them.

Or at least, that was his plan. Then Cass started climbing up the bookshelves, picking out books, glancing at them, and then throwing them on the floor.

“Uh… what are you doing?” Tim asked nervously.

He didn’t expect a verbal answer, but Cass didn’t seem to pay him any attention at all. Once the first shelf had been completely emptied, she moved onto the second shelf, glancing at covers, skimming a few pages, and then throwing the book on the ground.

“Miss Cassandra!” Alfred came rushing in. “Please stop that. If you want a book you just need to ask.”

Cass looked straight at Alfred, and then she dropped another book on the ground. Dick’s jaw dropped, and Tim saw Alfred’s eye twitch slightly.

“Young lady I hope you intend to clean this mess up. All those books were meticulously organized and it’s very rude of you to-.”
Cass sighed, flicking through another book before tossing it away. Alfred’s eye twitched again and he began walking over. Before he could get to Cass she quickly scurried up until she was clinging to a shelf beyond his reach.

“I’ve no idea where your sudden interest in books has come from, but I strongly recommend you start with something easier than the ones on that shelf.” Tim was impressed by how polite Alfred still sounded. “If you come down now, I would be happy to help you learn how to read, but if you continue destroying the bookshelf, I will be very cross and you won’t get any of the fresh pancakes I just cooked.”

Dick audibly gasped, so Tim assumed Alfred’s pancakes were pretty good. Cass threw another book, and this time it came very close to hitting Alfred’s head. Tim wondered why she was so determined to ransack the shelves, but he didn’t want to speak up because the tension between Cass and Alfred was thick. Even Jason had turned to watch the showdown, although he still looked kind of disinterested.

Tim couldn’t tell how this fight was going to turn out. Cass was faster than Alfred, and from what Tim had seen so far, she was incredibly willful. But Alfred had an aura about him that Tim couldn’t explain. The only way he could think to describe it was ‘somehow more intimidating than Batman’.

Maybe because this was the man who had raised Batman, Tim realised suddenly.

“I’m going to count to ten.” Alfred said. “And I want you back on the ground picking those books up by the time I finish. One. Two…”

Cass went back to grabbing books, seemingly unaffected by Alfred’s counting. The boys watched with bated breath as Alfred just stood there, counting slowly and sternly.

“Seven. Eight. Nine…”

“Cassandra.”

Tim felt Dick tense up next to him, and he didn’t understand why. It was just Damian, standing calmly in the doorway.

“Come down from there. Tell me what you want and I’ll find it for you.”

Tim expected Cass to relax and climb down, but instead she seemed to grow even angrier. The glare she was sending to Damian was like the one Tim had seen her give Bruce, and he didn’t know what Damian had done to earn such a harsh reaction.

“She doesn’t need your help!” Dick snapped. “Come on Cass, let’s get out of here.”

Surprisingly enough, Cass jumped down, following Dick out past Damian. Neither of them looked at Damian as they walked by, although Cass did bump into his shoulder. Damian was strangely calm about all of this, but when both Dick and Cass were gone Tim thought he looked kind of sad. Part of Tim wanted to try and cheer him up, but he didn’t have a clue why everyone was acting weird and Damian didn’t like him anyway.

“I’ll keep an eye on them young sir.” Alfred patted Damian’s shoulder as he went after Dick and Cass. “I’m grateful for the help. Miss Cassandra is quite the terror when she wants to be.”

“She had even less of a childhood than I did, so it’s somewhat understandable.” Damian said, with only a faint hint of his usual snark. “I want to judge but Father reminded me of what I was like when I first came to the manor. It’s satisfying to know that the golden child would have been just as bad at
Damian was clearly joking, but Tim didn’t understand why. Something was very wrong, but none of the people involved seemed interested in talking openly about it. There was something bitter about the way Damian said *golden child*, like he was angry at Cass but trying hard not to be.

What the heck had gone wrong with the Cass rescue mission?

Damian went over to the bookshelf and began picking up the books Cass had strewn everywhere. Tim quickly ran over to help, while Jason continued staring at the TV.

“Are you ok?” Tim couldn’t help asking. “Dick and Cass were really rude. Cass was really rude to everyone actually.”

For a second Tim feared that Damian would just ignore him, but surprisingly enough his brother didn’t seem annoyed at Tim for talking to him.

“It’s… complicated.” Damian sighed. “If I had disrespected my instructor by throwing books like this back in the League, I would have gotten a good caning. I’d say Cassandra’s birth father would have thrashed her just as hard, if not worse.”

Tim was reminded once again that his siblings had really awful childhoods. He really wanted to hug his parents right now, but then he remembered that they were dead. He’d never see them again, would he?

“At her current age the only authority figure she ever knew abused her and tricked her into killing a man.” Damian continued, shoving another book back onto the shelves. “She doesn’t have a clue how families are supposed to work, and she definitely doesn’t trust or respect any of the authority figures in this household. Father shoving her into a cage when they first met made sure of that.”

“So what, she’s lashing out to test boundaries?” Tim struggled to understand what Damian was trying to say.

“I don’t think so. I think she just wanted something from the bookshelves and didn’t appreciate Alfred trying to stop her. The disrespect wasn’t intentional, she just doesn’t see him, or any of us, as someone she needs to obey.”

“Oh.” Tim handed Damian another three books. “Well I still think she and Dick were really rude to you.”

“Thank you Tim.”

For once, it looked like Tim had said the right thing. Damian still had this melancholy aura around him, but he actually smiled a little at Tim’s words.

“I did kill someone.” Damian admitted. “It was to save Dick’s life, but still.”

He said it so casually, the way Tim’s parents would talk about missing a bus or forgetting to call a friend back. Tim almost dropped the book in his hands once he realised what Damian had actually said.

“Oh.” Tim squeaked. “So that’s why they…”

“Yes.”
“Oh.”

Tim put another book on the shelf, and hoped Damian didn’t notice how much his hand shook.

Dick didn’t know where he was going. He just had to get away from Damian. After what had happened with that Owl it was too much to be around him right now.

*He did it for you.* An ugly voice in his head whispered to him. *He wouldn’t have had to kill that person if you hadn’t been there. This is all your fault.*

*Shut up.* Dick hissed fiercely.

This wasn’t his fault. He hadn’t forced Damian to kill that Owl.

*He hadn’t.*

He knew Alfred was probably going to come after them, which was fine with him. Maybe Cass found it less fine, but Dick didn’t really understand what was going on with her. Why suddenly start throwing books around?

She was leading him somewhere now, her steps purposeful as opposed to Dick’s simple desire to put as much space as possible between him and Damian. He realised where she was going when they came to the study leading down to the caves. Bruce was waiting for them there.

“Dick. Cassandra. Can I talk with you both?”

“We’re fine Bruce.” Dick said, not bothering to sound polite. “We don’t need another talk or a heart to heart. We’ll be good and stay out of trouble.”

“I’m just concerned.” Bruce said calmly. “What happened was very traumatic for everyone involved.”

“It’s fine. It was my own fault for being there.” Dick said dismissively.

“It wasn’t your fault Dick.”

“Sure. Ok. Can I go now?”

Bruce looked like he was struggling, and Dick kind of felt bad but at the same time, this man still wasn’t his Bruce. Dick wasn’t going to open up to him just because he asked nicely.

Bruce seemed to understand that, because he switched tack and focused on Cass instead.

“I assume you want to help with the Owl investigation? That’s why you’re trying to get down to the Batcave?”

Cass nodded, and Dick finally realised what she’d been trying to do earlier. He doubted that bookshelf held any information on the Court of Owls, but Cass couldn’t even read so how would she know where types of information were stored? That bookshelf must have seemed like as good a starting point as any.

“But there’s a reason why you can’t help downstairs.” Bruce said gently. “The Owls kidnapped you from Bruce Wayne, and as far as they know Batman returned you home safely to Bruce Wayne. If they see you, a ten-year-old child, helping around the Batcave, they’re going to put two and two together.”
“Isn’t Cass like a ninja or something?” Dick butted in. “Wouldn’t they already know?”

“They know Cassandra is a trained assassin, but it’s unclear if they know about her work as Batgirl and Black Bat. Until I’ve interrogated them thoroughly, you can’t come down to the cave. It’s not just about keeping you safe Cassie, you being there could put all of us in even more danger.”

Cass looked angrily down at the ground, but Dick could tell she understood the truth in Bruce’s words. He was surprised Bruce actually explained himself, but maybe he knew Cass would just sneak out if he didn’t.

“What you can do now, if you want to help, is protect your siblings who don’t have your skills. I know Damian is with them now, but the more protection they have the less likely it is that the Owls will try and kidnap one of you again.”

“I think they’re pretty safe with Damian.” Dick said, trying not to sound bitter.

Cass nodded and made a cutthroat motion.

Bruce sighed, and Dick didn’t like how much it reminded him of his Bruce. They’d only had one or two serious fights before Dick was sucked into this weird future, but the way this Bruce took a deep calming breath and wrinkled his forehead was eerily familiar.

“What happened tonight was just as traumatic for Damian as it was for you two. If you feel upset, talk to Alfred or me or Stephanie. We’d be happy to listen and help in any way we can. But don’t you dare take it out on Damian, understood?”

His face turned stern, and again Dick was reminded of his own Bruce. This time he was reminded of when he’d broken Alfred’s favourite chandelier. The memories made him feel homesick, but he was standing in a Wayne Manor that wasn’t his own so it was extra frustrating.

“I understand.” Dick mumbled.

Cass nodded, looking a tiny bit ashamed.

“Good. Now, are you sure you don’t want to talk? I’m not going to force you, but I feel like it could help.”

He was being so sincere about it, and combined with Dick’s memories, it was enough for Dick’s guard to lower, just for a second.

“I don’t think I can.” Dick said quietly. “I’m just… I’m not ready yet.”

“That’s alright lad. Just know that whenever you’re ready, I’m here for you.”


Bruce didn’t seem to know how to react to that, any more than Dick did. He didn’t call his own Bruce dad, and he hadn’t been planning on saying it, but it just felt like the right moment to try.

“Cassandra?” Bruce switched focus again to avoid awkwardness. “Would you like to talk?”

Cass pointed at her throat, unimpressed.

“I’m sure we could find a way to communicate.”

Cass shook her head and pointed at the door of the study. Bruce smiled.
“Alright, I’ll go down and help Oracle and Batgirl. I promise to let you know as soon as we find any useful information.”

He left then, and Dick and Cass lingered for a while outside the door. Dick noticed Alfred waiting for them at the end of the hallway, but despite Bruce’s words he still didn’t want to be around Damian yet. If Damian was going to be protecting Jason and Tim then Dick needed another way to help. If Jason and Tim were under Damian’s protection, then maybe Dick should focus on helping Cass.

But how to help her? Cass wanted to stop the Owls, but she didn’t know how. The Batcave probably held the answers to that, but they weren’t allowed down.

Dick could help with that.

“So I was thinking,” he said. “Bruce told us that we couldn’t go down to the cave because the Owls would see us, but what if they didn’t?”

Cass perked up, and Dick grinned.

“If we sneak in from another entrance, we could hide from everyone. We wouldn’t be able to interact directly with anyone, but we could figure out what’s going on and maybe think of a way to help without being seen.”

Cass hummed, and then she gave him a thumbs up.

“Great.” Dick glanced back at Alfred. “We’re going to have to make a run for it to escape our watcher. Meet me at the secret hiding place in the front hall.”

Cass looked surprised, and Dick smirked.

“I’ve lived here for months now. Did you really think you were the only one who knew all the best places to sneak around?”

She rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her face that made Dick smile too. With his relationship with Damian so rocky at the moment, it was nice to have one sibling completely on the same page as him.

“Three, two, one. Break!”

They took off, sprinting down the corridor away from Alfred. Dick could hear the butler giving chase, so when an opportunity came for them to split up, they ran in opposite directions. Dick felt giddy as he jumped through the rooms, like he was playing tag with his friends.

Once he was sure he’d lost Alfred, he doubled back and snuck into the hallway. Cass was waiting for him in the empty cupboard above the coat rack.

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“I think Bruce blocked the well entrance after Stephanie used it, but there’s another way in through the library. It’s probably shut down by now since no one but me and Bruce seem to know about it, but if I can open it, we might be able to sneak down.”

Cass gestured at him to lead the way, and Dick did, sneaking through the corridors and hallways until they reached the small west wing library. Dick’s nerves were a mess by the time they made it inside. It felt like Alfred would be waiting around every corner, but so far there was no sign of the butler.
Dick hit the secret switch, relieved when the bookcases slid open. Two metal poles were on the other side, and they quickly slid down before the shelves closed again. At the bottom of the shaft, the door Dick normally used was gone, replaced by a steel wall.

“Ok, so now we just need to figure out a way through.”

Cass shimmied back up the pipe, tapping the wall experimentally. After a minute or so she found something, reaching out to kick at a certain section. Dick clambered up to join her, and together they managed to knock out a lose metal panel. There was a narrow dark tunnel behind it, most likely a natural cave passage. Cass flung herself into the tunnel without hesitation, crawling so fast Dick lost sight of her within seconds. He hesitated before following her, worried that it wouldn’t lead anywhere and they’d just get trapped in a deep dark hole.

But still, this had been his idea. Cass was his little sister, if she was going to get stuck in a tiny claustrophobic tunnel because of him then he had a responsibility to get stuck right next to her.

_Shut up older Dick._ Dick said to himself, but he jumped into the tunnel anyway.

He regretted that decision the minute his hands touched the damp, cold rock. But he squeezed his way through, trying to catch up with Cass. Dick couldn’t tell how long he spent in the tunnels, wriggling through the darkness and trying not to panic when the walls got extra tight. He almost screamed when he felt a hand touch his, but it was just Cass, guiding him through the last few meters. He didn’t know how she’d managed to find an exit, but when he wriggled out and flopped onto the ground, he could see where he was. The lowest level of the cave, mostly empty and unused ever since Bruce expanded it upwards. There was music coming from the higher floors, and the two kids crept their way up, making sure to stay hidden.

“Batgirl.” Dick recognized Batman’s deep voice. “Why do we have to listen to this drivel? Can you even call this music?”

“What do you have against kpop?” That was Stephanie. “And anyway, this is Tim’s playlist not mine.”

“I have nothing against Korean pop music, but this song in particular is just pure noise.”

“It’s EDM Batman, god.” Something metal rattled, but Dick couldn’t see what. “And Black Bat used to love this song, which is why I’m playing it.”

“She’s not dead.”

“You know what I mean.”

“You know, maybe you can give the Owls headphones and make them listen to the song on repeat. I’d say they’d crack after three listens.”

That was a new voice, weirdly robotic. Dick wondered if the cave had gotten an AI system sometime in the future.

“You might be onto something Oracle.” Batman almost sounded amused.

Oracle, that was Barbara’s codename. Was Barbara a robot?

“You both are tasteless.” Batgirl declared. “Do you want to know the DNA results or not? Because they’re pretty damn interesting.”
“Hit me.” The robotic voice said.

“So I got a match for the Talon. He’s a relative of Dick’s, which isn’t super surprising considering the note they left about you stealing Dick from them. The really freaky part is which relative he is.”

Dick’s head was already spinning. He must have looked really bad, because Cass put her hand on his shoulder to steady him.

“His name is William Cobb, and he’s Dick’s great grandfather.”

“I see.” Dick couldn’t tell if Bruce was as freaked out by this as he was, because his Batman voice was as steady as usual. “So there’s a connection between Dick’s family and the Owls. We need to figure out just how deep that connection goes. Oracle, can you start looking into that?”

“Already on it.” The robotic voice spoke. “But Batman, are you going to tell Dick about this?”

“I’m not sure.” Bruce admitted. “When he gets back to his older self I will, but right now, on top of everything that’s happened, I feel like it would do more harm than good.”

“He would want to know.”

*Thank you.* Dick thought silently. At least robotic Barbara was on his side.

“He’s been through so much already, and he doesn’t even know what happened to him in Bludhaven. I don’t know how many reveals Dick can take before he snaps.”

“Wait, what happened in Bludhaven?” Batgirl asked. “Do you mean how the town was destroyed? Because it’s been rebuilt pretty nicely so I think we can keep it a secret.”

“You know about Bludhaven?” Maybe it was Dick’s imagination, but her robotic voice almost sounded shocked. “He told you?”

“He didn’t tell me.” Batman replied. “I was hoping he’d talk to you about it, but it doesn’t seem like he’s told anyone. He doesn’t know I know, and I don’t know how to bring it up without hurting him.”

“Ok, clearly you’re talking about something more personal that’s probably above my paygrade.” Batgirl paused. “Get it? Because I don’t get paid for any of this.”

The cave was silent.

“Yeah, I’m going to go over to the Owls and try that music torture technique you suggested. Enjoy your private conversation about classified incidents or whatever.”

A set of footsteps grew fainter, and part of Dick made note that the Owls must be located further away from them than Batman. The rest of him was entirely focused on the conversation between Bruce and Oracle. What exactly were they keeping from him? Why was it so bad that his older self hadn’t told anyone about it?

“This isn’t the same thing Batman.” Oracle spoke again. “This isn’t dark history that ten-year-old Dick doesn’t need to know. Tarantula is dead, but the Court of Owls is a threat to him right now, which means he deserves to know what’s going on, even if it will be a shock.”

Tarantula. Dick made note of that codename. He’d look into them later.

“You’re right.” Bruce sighed. “I’ll talk to him about the Talon. And as for the other thing, we
shouldn’t mention it again until this de-aging mess is all over. The last thing Dick needs is to find out his older self was raped.”

What?

No.

No no no no no.

What?

There was no way. He had to have misheard.

Cass was staring at him, confused. She probably didn’t understand what that word meant, or maybe she was just worried about how freaked out he looked.

Dick needed to get out of here. He couldn’t- He needed- He just-

Dick ran. He stood up and sprinted back the way they came, not caring about how much noise he was making. His head was spinning, it felt like someone had thrown him into the deep end of the pool and he was struggling not to drown.

There was no way. His future couldn’t be this awful.

He barely made it a few meters into the tunnel before the pressure in his chest burst open. Dick let the panic flow over him, curling up as small as he could and trying not to cry too loudly.

Was his future really this grim? He felt sick just thinking about what Bruce had said. It was disgusting, awful, he could barely understand it. But if this really was his future, then it had already happened.

And there was nothing Dick could do about it.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The adults try and find Dick, while Damian and Tim worry about Jason.
Stephanie was in a good mood, by bat standards anyways. The Owls had been so confused when she stuck headphones on them, and the look on their faces when the music started playing was priceless. She hummed happily as she slammed the cell shut, strolling back over to where Bruce and Babs were hopefully finished their intense secret conversation.

They were, but it was very clear to Stephanie that another problem had emerged. Namely, the fact that Cass was standing in front of them, blinking up innocently while Bruce seemed to be flickering between anger, shock and fear.

Well. This couldn’t be good.

“Someone was with you.” She heard Bruce say as she got closer. “Was it Dick?”

Cass nodded, and the half of Bruce’s face visible under the cowl turned white. Steph still didn’t know a lot of the context for this, but putting two and two together was fairly simple. Bruce and Babs had been talking about something that had happened to older Dick while younger Dick had been sneaking around the cave. Clearly, he’d heard whatever the secret was, and had run off.

How Cass and Dick had gotten down to the cave was still a mystery, but Steph couldn’t say she was too surprised either. Out of all the de-aged kids, those two were the most likely to go sneaking around places they shouldn’t. Steph wanted to dub them something like the Terror Twins, but knowing this crazy world they lived in there was probably a supervillain duo with that name already.

“How can you lead me to him?” Bruce asked.

Strangely enough, Cass turned to look at Steph. Steph wasn’t sure what the kid wanted from her, so she just nodded.

Apparently, that was enough for Cass. She stuck her hand out, gesturing for Steph to hold it. Steph did, shooting Bruce a confused shrug as they set off.

Cass led them down to the bottom floor of the cave, filled with old equipment and random trinkets from different adventures. Steph smiled when she saw an old exploding arrow, one Connor Hawke had given them after she, Tim and Cass worked with him on a mission.

It felt like a lifetime ago, the days when she was Spoiler, Cass was Batgirl and Tim was Robin.
Steph had been all three at some point in her crime fighting career, but her first run as Spoiler had a special place in her heart. It had been the only time all three of them worked together as a team, and back then, working with Tim and Cass was the closest Steph came to feeling like a part of the family. With Robin, and now Batgirl, there was always that nagging fear that she’d end up dropped and discarded, deemed unworthy of the mantle. Spoiler had been her own creation, an identity no one could take from her.

At this point, she liked to think that Batgirl was also hers. Or at least, that she’d fight harder to keep it than she did with Robin. Bruce and Babs couldn’t scare her anymore, their approval just didn’t weigh the same after everything that had happened.

Cass led them over to the wall, where a hole just big enough for a child to squeeze through was visible.

“He’s in there?” Steph gawked. “You crawled all the way down here? Without getting lost?”

Cass nodded, not bothering to hide her smug look despite Bruce’s glower.

“Can you find him for us?” Bruce asked. “Make sure he’s safe and try to get him back out. It’s too dangerous for you two to be wriggling around tunnels this narrow.”

Cass nodded, climbing up and slipping gracefully into the tunnel. Steph switched on her night vision goggles, peering into the darkness. The tunnel was straight enough that she could see Cass’s legs as the girl wriggled down with impressive speed. A few meters in, the tunnel widened a fraction, and Steph saw a second pair of legs that Cass squeezed around.

“What’s going on?” Bruce peered down to try and look too.

“I see Dick, and I can hear him crying. I think Cass is hugging him. It doesn’t look like they’ll be moving for a while.”

“He’s alive. Good.”

Steph turned to glance at Bruce. The big bad Bat still looked very pale. Whatever this secret was that Dick had found out, it seemed pretty huge.

“You alright B-man? Want to sit down for a minute while we wait?”

He didn’t even glare at her for the informal nickname, which is how Steph knew something was really wrong.

“I don’t know what to say.” Bruce muttered. “He heard something he wasn’t supposed to, something his older self doesn’t know I know. It doesn’t feel right to discuss this with him while he’s a child, but I can’t just ignore this either.”

Steph could see his point. It was pretty unfair to older Dick to have a serious conversation about something he couldn’t remember right now.

“What if you let me talk to him?” she suggested. “I’m good with kids, and I don’t know what this secret is, so there won’t be any power imbalance. You and Oracle keep working on that Talon info, and I’ll wait here to comfort Dick once he climbs out. If he wants to talk to you that’s fine, but this way I can make sure he won’t feel pressured to talk about the thing you’re not telling me.”

“That… might just work.” Bruce looked a bit more energised. “His feelings towards you are a lot less complicated than the way he feels about me. If you could stay with him and Cassandra until he’s
ready to talk to me or go back upstairs that would probably be for the best.”

“You got it boss man.” Steph grinned. “Now get going. If Dick wants answers about why his great grandad is still alive, we better have them.”

Bruce did that thing where he almost smiled at her and it was almost a nice moment. Then he made a smart choice and left before the unaddressed history between them could ruin the vaguely pleasant atmosphere.

Steph crouched down next to the wall, keeping one ear near the hole and making sure she could still hear Dick. After a few minutes his sobs and cries lessened, and soon she couldn’t hear him at all. She peeked in and saw Dick’s face crawling towards her. Steph could only pray Cass was following behind him and not gone off exploring some more.

Thankfully, two kids did climb out of the hole. Cass wrapped her arm around Dick’s shoulder as he stood there trembling, and it was like there was a physical pain in Steph’s heart, seeing the young boy look so distraught.

“Hey.” She knelt down so that she was face to face with him. “I don’t know what this secret you found out is, and you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But can I give you a hug?”

Dick nodded instantly, wrapping his arms tightly around Stephanie. She reached out to include Cass in the hug. Neither of the girls fully understood what was going on, but Dick needed comforting and in Steph’s opinion a hug could be a good start.

After that, things got a little trickier.

“Do you want to talk?” she asked. “It doesn’t have to be to me. You can talk to Batman, or to Oracle, or to Damian or Alfred. Or you don’t have to talk at all. We can just stay here until you’re ready to go back upstairs.”

Dick said nothing, his face buried in her shoulder. It was silly, but Steph couldn’t help looking at Cass for help, in hope that her ability to read body language would give her a clue how to cheer Dick up. Of course, Cass’s ability didn’t make her a mind reader, so she just stared blankly at Steph.

Steph hugged Dick tighter, hoping the right words would suddenly pop into her brain. But instead, Dick lifted his head up and looked at her with sad, clouded eyes.

“Were you ever raped?”

Oh. Steph tried not to look freaked out, but that question… Jesus Christ. What the actual fuck?

“I’m sorry!” Dick cried immediately after. “That was really insensitive I’m so sorry.”

“No, no. It’s ok.” Stephanie reassured him quickly.

It wasn’t ok. The implications of that question made it feel like there was a hole in Stephanie’s gut. She tried to figure out what answer to give, because there was no way this was an appropriate subject to discuss in detail with a ten-year-old, especially one who may have just found out that they or someone close to them was raped. That was Stephanie’s guess as to why Dick had randomly asked her that, because she couldn’t think what else could prompt him to talk about such a stomach-churning subject.

“No, not exactly.” was what she answered in the end.
“What do you mean not exactly?”

“I mean…” Stephanie sighed, wishing she’d just said no. “I was tortured once, and the guy got off on it. He didn’t actually… you know, but I was still violated and the whole thing sucked.”

“Oh.” Dick looked even greener.

Stephanie definitely shouldn’t have said that much. At least she hadn’t gone into detail about how Black Mask had drilled into her, because for a kid Dick’s age that would have been TMI for sure. She glanced at Cass, who thankfully looked confused. Steph was grateful that ‘got off’ was such a vague slang term, because Dick thinking about such a gruesome topic was bad enough.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked again.

“How… how do you deal with it?” Dick asked. “How do you get up and keep going? I just heard about what happens in the future and I don’t think I’m ever going to forget it. It’s already happened and there’s nothing I can do to change it or fix it. I don’t think I’m ever going to stop feeling like I’m going to puke and that scares me so much.”

“Honestly?” Steph looked straight into Dick’s eyes. “It did take time to get better. I had pretty bad PTSD, but I took some time to myself recovering away from Gotham. I went to see a psychiatrist and a physical therapist, as well as a counsellor who dealt specifically in trauma like the kind that happened to me. When I was ready, I came back to Gotham, and as cheesy as it is, after that I just had to keep moving forward.”

Dick hung on to her every word, and the slight colour returning to his face convinced her that she should keep talking.

“I try to act like it doesn’t haunt me, because at this point if I wallow in all the bad shit I went through, it feels like he’s won. So, whenever I can’t get it out of my mind, and I feel dirty and weak and helpless, I get angry. Then I channel that anger into being a ray of positive fucking sunshine. I reach out and talk to my friends, I’m extra chipper on patrol, I treat myself to some shopping or visit my mom to catch up. Because at the end of the day, he didn’t break me. No one can.”

Dick looked at her with wide eyes, and Steph worried she’d gone overboard.

“If I’m being real with you, I probably don’t open up to my friends about it as much as I should. It’s not weak to admit he hurt me, but that’s something I still kind of struggle with. I wish there was a quick and easy solution but I’m sorry Dick, that’s all I’ve got.”

“Thank you.” Dick whispered. “I’m sorry for bringing up bad memories.”

“It’s alright kid. I wouldn’t have answered you if it was too much for me.”

“My older self, do you know if he’s coping well? If he’s dealing with what happened the way you are?”

“I want to say yes, but the truth is older Dick is the only one that can answer that for you. I’m really sorry Dick. I don’t know what happened and I don’t think your older self wouldn’t want me to know.”

“That’s ok. I don’t think I want to talk about it with anyone right now.” Dick shuddered. “I just want to forget it ever happened.”

“I can take you back upstairs if you want? We can try and find a distraction good enough to push the
bad thoughts to the back of your mind.”

“That sounds nice.” Dick stood up, wincing at the stiffness in his knees. “Can you promise me something? Tell me the truth about what’s happening with this Court of Owls thing. I heard Bruce say he wanted to keep the Talon’s identity a secret from me, and it would drive me crazy thinking that he’s not telling me secrets like that about me.”

“I heard that too. But Oracle convinced him not to, remember?”

“I know.” Dick nodded. “But just in case she can’t next time, can you promise you’ll tell me what’s going on?”

“You got it.”

Steph stuck out her pinkie, and Dick smiled as he linked it together with his. Cass watched them, fascinated, then reached over to tug on Steph’s costume. When Steph looked over, Cass pointed curiously at herself.

“No.” Steph shook her head. “As far as I know you were never sexually assaulted. You died a few times, but that’s the worst of your future trauma.”

Cass looked disturbingly content about that. Steph hated that her best friend had a death wish again, but she hoped Cass would be fine as soon as she grew back up. She was relieved the girl hadn’t caught on to her deliberately not bringing up the whole clusterfuck with Deathstroke violating her by drugging her and turning her into a cold-blooded killer. Steph was confident older Cass would understand why she left that little titbit out. No one liked to talk about that time, especially not Cass.

“So how about it Cass? You want to keep challenging Damian for the title of Demon Brat or will you come back upstairs and stop sneaking off without telling us?”

Cass smiled as Steph ruffled her hair, clearly understanding that she wasn’t as mad as her words made her seem. She stood up and jumped onto Steph, hanging from her neck with her legs wrapped around the older girl’s waist. Dick jumped up so he was piggybacking Steph, and she wobbled for a second before finding her balance.

They didn’t weigh too much, and with one hanging on her front and one hanging on her back it wasn’t that hard to walk over to the elevator. Steph made sure to stay out of the Owls’ and the Talon’s line of sight, but she did enjoy the look on Bruce’s face when she waddled past with the two kids clinging to her.

She shot him a subtle thumbs up, and saw his jaw unclench a fraction.

For now, that would do.

“I think there’s something wrong with Jason.”

Damian put the last book on the shelf, then looked over at Tim. Tim shot another glance towards the couch, where Jason was still looking at the TV with no indication that he’d heard Tim’s whisper.

“Why do you think that?” Damian asked, equally as quietly.

“He’s just… distant. I don’t know, he’s been really spacey and quiet ever since he got back.”

“He could just be tired.”
“Yeah. I don’t know, I just thought he was acting weird.”

“Tt.” Damian looked over at Jason thoughtfully. “Has he said anything to you? Anything unusual?”

“No, he didn’t say much at all when I asked what happened. He either shrugged or answered in ten words or less.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

Damian’s words still sounded stilted, but Tim appreciated that he was making an effort to be polite. He watched as his brother walked over to Jason, sitting down carefully beside him. Jason made no effort to turn and look at Damian, and Tim saw the exact second Damian understood why he was concerned.

“Jason.” Damian said. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” Jason shrugged.

Even his voice sounded duller to Tim, far less full of life than the energetic brother Tim had grown used to. It wasn’t as bad as when he’d woken up from the Lazarus Pit nightmares, but it still left Tim with the beginnings of a stomach-ache.

“Did anything happen on your way back home with Brown?”

“Noppe.” Jason shook his head, still staring blankly ahead. “She carried me across the rooftops. It was fun.”

“Are you sure nothing happened? You didn’t hit your head?”

“Nope. Didn’t even scrape my knees.”

“I see.” Damian turned around and tilted his head, indicating that Tim should follow him outside.

“What do you think?” Tim asked, as soon as they were out of Jason’s hearing range.

“I think you were right to be worried.” Damian’s words filled Tim with an embarrassing amount of relief. “I’ll tell Alfred to call Doctor Thompkins. She’s the only doctor we can trust right now, even if Father is still not on good terms with her.”

“Great.” Tim had no idea who Dr Thompkins was, but at least Damian seemed to have a plan.

“What can I do to help?”

“Right now, we should just keep an eye on him. Let me know if you notice any further developments.”

“Got it.” Tim loved this; getting to help and feel useful.

“And Tim?”

“Yeah?”

“I appreciate you not being so… upset about what I did to protect Dick. He and Cassandra are taking what happened quite hard.”

“Oh.”
Truthfully, Tim’s negative feelings about Damian killing a man had been pushed to the side by his positive feelings when Damian started listening to him and taking him seriously about Jason. He couldn’t lie and say he was completely cool with it, but it wasn’t the first thing he thought of when he looked at his brother.

“It’s ok.” he said. “I mean, I wasn’t there so I guess that helps.”

“Still. I’m grateful for your maturity regarding the situation.”

Damian was grateful to him? Now there was a sentence Tim never expected to hear. Part of him wondered if he was right for bouncing back so quickly after that bombshell had been dropped. It was like all it took to make him relax around Damian was a scrap of attention and respect.

No, Tim couldn’t think like that. He was just being practical. It wasn’t a bad thing that he wasn’t stressing over Damian’s actions like his siblings. It was a sign of emotional maturity, right?

But then again, Dick was also pretty mature for a ten-year-old. If Tim was dealing with this mess better than him, what did that mean? Was his older self influencing him more than his siblings’ were? Or was he just overthinking things?

His hand rested on the pocket of his jeans, where his phone was. The tabs on his phone showed two search results, one for the Obeah Man and one for Captain Boomerang.

If he was maturing faster than his siblings, then he was probably going to be the first one to turn back. Tim didn’t know how long he had left, but he knew he had to execute his plan soon, before he died.

First step: Find a way to get to Arkham Asylum.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The kids are sent to bed to try and get some rest, but for some reason Jason can’t sleep.
Chapter Summary

Something doesn't feel right to Jason. He just can't figure out what's wrong.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bed was cold. The room was also cold. It shouldn’t be this cold, Jason thought. The heating was on, and his body heat should be making the bed nice and snug. But there was a spring digging into his back and he felt so, so cold.

Alfred had sent them all to bed. He’d told them to sleep as much as they wanted to because of the ‘long night’ they’d had. But Jason didn’t feel sleepy. He had something he needed to do.

What was it again? He couldn’t remember.

He was so tired. But not sleepy.

(That was weird. Wasn’t that weird?)

He got out of bed. That thing he needed to do, it didn’t involve lying in a cold and lumpy bed. He stepped outside and wondered where to go next.

His feet started moving. He let them take him to the study door. Alfred was standing inside. He looked surprised to see Jason.

“Master Jason, is everything alright?”

No. There was something Jason needed. What was it again?

“My Robin costume!” Jason blurted out.

(Where had that come from? Why did he want his Robin costume?)

“Your uniform is downstairs in the cave.” Alfred said, a note of confusion in his voice.

“Can I wear it tonight?” Jason heard himself ask. “After everything that happened, I just want to feel safe, and being Robin makes me brave.”

Alfred looked at him. Jason wasn’t sure what the butler was seeing.

“I’ll pop down and fetch it for you now.” Alfred said at last. “Wait here and please don’t go gallivanting off like your older siblings.”

“Ok.” Jason said. “I won’t.”

Alfred went down to the Batcave. Jason blinked, and the next thing he knew Alfred was back with the Robin costume.
“Just this once, you understand. We can’t expose your identity but Master Bruce agrees that it’s been a very hard day for you.”

“Cool.” Jason said. “Thank you.”

He took the Robin costume and then went back to his room. He changed into it and looked around, wondering what to do next. He wanted the Robin costume to feel safe, right? That’s what he told Alfred.

(So then why did it feel like it was someone else talking?)

But now that he had the costume, he didn’t feel like sleeping. He felt like doing the opposite. He needed to run away. Alfred had told him not to, but Jason’s feet were already heading towards the window. Dick and Cass got to sneak off twice, it was only fair that Jason got to do it twice too.

The window was still smashed from where the Owl had burst in. Damian had offered to let Jason sleep in with him but Jason had said no even though it sounded nice. There was a plastic sheet covering the window and keeping the wind out. Jason tore through it then climbed out onto the roof.

They’d probably catch on to him soon. The security here was really fancy and scary. Jason half expected a laser grid to activate on the grass below him because he was in the future and also Bruce Wayne was very rich.

He climbed down from the roof and began to run. Lights flashed behind him and he ran faster. It was dark and the farther he ran the less he could see, but a weird circular shape stood out in the distance. Jason realised it was a well. Something told him to jump down it.

So he did.

(What was he doing? He was going to break so many bones or maybe even die!)

Someone caught him. At first he thought it was Batman, because that was the kind of cool hero entrance Batman would make. But the man that caught him was wearing a purple suit, and the skin of his hands was much paler than Batman.

Jason looked up, and the Joker grinned down.

“Oh.” Jason said. “You were behind all of this, weren’t you?”

“That’s right sonny! What a smart little bird you are.” The Joker winked, and then he started cackling. “That powder wasn’t cheap, I tell ya that. Part of me thought it would just drive you crazy, make you go skydiving without a parachute.”

“So what happens now?” Jason asked.

“Well.” The Joker began to move, carrying Jason further away from the manor. “First I’m going to run really fast before old Batsy catches up. The powder should be wearing off any second now which means you’re probably going to start being a real pain. But once I get you out of here, well then…”

His mouth opened wide, a grotesque smile with teeth and eyes like a shark. Jason blinked, and then suddenly he felt very, very afraid.

What was he doing? Why was he here? How had he just willingly walked out into this?
“Oh, it’s hitting you now, isn’t it? Knew I should have gotten more of the stuff, but didn’t want you to completely lose it you know? It’s no fun making you crazy that easily.”

The Joker was running so fast, and the tunnels were long and windy. Wayne Manor was far back and Jason couldn’t hear anyone coming after him.

He was alone. Trapped with the man who killed him once before. The reality sank in, and fear flooded through his veins, replacing the lethargy and apathy and making his whole body feel like it was being electrocuted.

Jason screamed.

The Joker’s laughter echoed all around him, more real and nightmarish than all the hallucinations had made it seem.

When Tim woke up, he had a plan.

That plan was immediately pushed to the backburner when he stepped outside his bedroom and realised that the house was in chaos. Everyone being relaxed and safe was essential to carrying out his plan, so when Dick and Damian (and someone else who moved so fast Tim assumed it was Cass) ran past him, he quickly shifted focus from planning his Arkham trip to finding out what the heck had happened.

“Dick I understand you want to help but we’re certain he’s not here. Father chased him through the tunnels for hours last night.”

“He could have gone the other way into the caves!”

“Father blocked that entrance after I used it to get down to Cassandra. Jason’s not here.”

Dick ran past him again, Damian following after him. Tim stood there for a minute, then looked up when he heard the sound of a foot scuffing. Cass was pressed into the corner of the wall like a spider above his head, staring down calmly at him.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

She dropped down and took his hand, guiding him into the kitchen. Alfred looked worryingly stressed, although he still smiled when he saw Tim.

“Good morning Master Timothy. Did you sleep well?”

“Really well. Why is everyone so stressed out? Did Jason run away?”

“We’re not quite sure if he ran away or if he was kidnapped. Master Bruce has been out searching for him since last night.”

“Oh.”

Tim smiled faintly as Cass pushed a box of cereal towards him. He didn’t want to make Jason’s disappearance all about him, but he couldn’t help but feel like this was his fault. He’d known that there was something wrong with Jason but he hadn’t done enough.

“I’m sorry.” He mumbled. “I should have-”

“None of that.” Alfred said briskly. “Just eat your cereal, there’s a good lad. Every child in this house
seems to feel personally responsible for Master Jason’s actions, and I can’t fathom why, since I was the last one to see him. None of you could have done anything to stop him. I’m simply glad you all got one undisturbed night of peaceful sleep.”

Cassandra frowned, digging deeper into her own cereal box.

“Yes yes, I understand you want to help now since you didn’t last night, but you know very well that you can’t just scour the city by yourself.” Alfred handed Cass a spoon, and she promptly put it down on the table and continued scooping the cereal out with her hands. “There are dangerous people after you, and it would be incredibly foolish to let you all run wild when we don’t know what exactly we’re up against. If Master Bruce needs help, he will call.”

“About that.”

They all turned to look towards the kitchen door, where Steph stood, still in her Batgirl uniform.

“Babs just sent me something. A kid by the name of Duke Thomas told the Gotham police that he saw the Joker last night, carrying Robin towards the Narrows.”

The Joker? Tim gulped. The thought of Jason trapped with that deranged clown was horrifying.

“Are you sure this boy wasn’t lying?” Alfred asked. “When did he report this?”

“An hour ago, but he only took so long because he was waiting for a cop he could trust to be on duty. Oracle did a background check. The kid’s clean, and Bruce agrees with us that he’s most likely telling the truth.”

“So what happens now?” Tim couldn’t help but ask.

“Now, Batman is headed to the Narrows, but the Joker will be expecting him. He needs back up, and with Batwoman and Huntress both out of town, no word from Azrael, the Justice League scattered on different missions and the rest of Batman Inc busy with their own work, Damian and I are all he has.”

That did not sound good. The Joker was the most terrifying villain Tim knew, and coming to the future had just made that fear worse. Before, Tim was mildly comforted by the fact that Batman always beat the Joker in the end. But now, he knew that in the future the Joker murdered Robin and shot Batgirl. Batman didn’t always win against him.

“Tim, Cass, come with me.”

Cass jumped off the table immediately, grabbing Tim’s arm to tug him off his chair. Alfred reached over to swiftly catch the cereal box that Tim knocked over in his struggle to get down.

Seriously, that butler had some amazing reflexes.

Steph led them to the study, where Damian was waiting with Dick. There was still a notable coldness between the boys, and Cass’s frown confirmed to Tim that everything was not fixed between the three of them.

“Here’s the thing.” Steph began. “We’ve got a bunch of undead assassins trying to get to Bruce Wayne’s kids, aka you four. With Damian and I keeping an eye on you together you’re relatively safe in this house, but at least one of us needs to go help Bruce. That leaves one of us protecting three of you, and I know that at least two of you will be eager to run off and help find Jason, right?”
“So this is what I think we should do: All five of us will go out to help look for Jason. Tim and I will search the north end of the Narrows and you three can search the south. You stick together and listen to me and Damian, or else we’ll take you straight back home and all you’ll have accomplished is making the search harder than it needs to be. If you find anything, contact the rest of us, and if we tell you to wait outside or to run you do what we say. It’s either that, or we all stay here and hope Batman can handle the Joker alone.”

Steph stepped back, staring into the eyes of the four kids in front of her.

“Those are the two options I can think of. If you don’t want to go out that’s fine. It’s dangerous and scary and none of us will judge you for it. But either all five of us go or none of us go. We’ve already lost one kid and those creepy Owls are probably dying to snatch another one of you. I’m not willing to let that happen, are you?”

“I’ll go.” Dick said at once, and Cass nodded her agreement.

“For once, I agree with you Brown.”

With the other three kids on board, all eyes turned towards Tim. He gulped.

How could he say no? Jason was in danger, and he couldn’t hold everyone back just because he was scared. Steph would keep him safe. He trusted her.

“I’m in.” he said.

The relieved smiles on everyone’s faces eased his anxiety a little. He could feel the adrenaline building up, just at the thought of going outside when the Talons were still on the prowl.

He could do this. He wanted to help, to be Robin.

He could do this.

“Why do we have to go with Damian?” Dick asked. “Can’t Tim go with him instead?”

Tim looked at Damian to see his reaction to this, but the boy was stone-faced, unreadable.

“Not happening.” Steph said firmly. “I get that you three aren’t best friends at the minute, but you’re a family and you love each other even if you can’t remember just how much. I know that this isn’t fair, but if you want to help this is how it has to be.”

Dick and Cass looked at each other, and then they sighed.

“Fine.” Dick said. “We’ll go with Damian.”

No one asked why it was necessary the three of them went together. Tim had a feeling he knew the answer, but he didn’t want to say it out loud.

Steph took them down to the cave, where they all changed into costume. Tim noticed a blanket thrown over a human shape that was probably the Talon. No sign of the Owls, they were probably being kept out of their sight.

Changing into his Robin suit was a surreal experience. Dick and Damian ended up helping him get it on, because there were a bunch of hidden pockets and emergency buttons that he found tricky to figure out. When it was all done, Tim stood shoulder to shoulder with his siblings, and tried very,
very hard not to feel like a kid at a costume party.

Steph guided him down to the garage, where two motorcycles were waiting. She lifted him up onto the purple one, adjusting his grip so that he wouldn’t fall off the second they started moving. The other three got on Damian’s bike, and Steph handed Tim an earpiece and a helmet before revving the engine.

“Can everyone hear me?” she asked.

“Unfortunately.”

“Yes!”

“Favourite.”

“Loud and clear.” Tim added his voice to the chorus.

“Remember, stick together and listen to Damian. Dick, I want you to respect him as if he was your Batman. Scratch that, respect him more than that. Cass… please trust us. Be a team player.”

“Favourite.” Cass repeated.

“Thank you.” Steph smiled.

Tim had never ridden a motorbike before, and the bubbling mix of anxiety and adrenaline turned into pure, sharp energy when Steph let go of the clutch. The metal wall in front of them opened up and they sped out. Tim felt like they were going faster than 100 miles per hour, but in reality, they were probably just slightly over the speed limit. Damian’s spare helmet was a little too big on him, and it rattled as the wind whipped by. Soon the open country roads turned into narrow city streets, and the world became a mess of blurry colours and noisy cars. Steph guided them through the traffic with ease, even waving at the little girl who gawked out the car window as they drove past.

Tim remembered suddenly that usually Batman only came out at night. The normal citizens must be wondering why he and Batgirl were driving around in broad daylight with a bunch of Robins. Maybe they’d even end up on the news.

Tim’s first instinct was to wonder about his parent’s reaction to that. Then he remembered they were dead.

When they finally slowed down, Tim realised that the other bike was no longer behind them. Steph parked her Batgirl bike in an inconspicuous storage unit, helping Tim down since his legs felt like jelly. With the others gone, he finally felt like it was a good time to check if his theory was correct.

“The reason I’m with you, it’s because I need the most protection, right? You’re stronger than Robin and I’m the weakest so it balances out.”

“Robin would definitely disagree with you about me being stronger.” Steph said.

Then she winked, and Tim figured that was her way of confirming his theory. He was tempted to press more, but another voice suddenly spoke through his earpiece.

“Batgirl, what’s your status?”

“Just arrived at the north end of the Narrows with Robin number three. Starting the search for Robin number two now.”
“Batman’s already covered most of the west side and he’s headed towards Arkham. I’d say start on Twelfth Street and work your way east.”

“Will do. Anything else?”

“I finished analysing the dust you sent me.”

Dust? Tim wondered what that was all about.

“What did you find?” Steph asked, serious again.

“You were right to think it was odd. It’s new, only in the case since Jason’s costume was put back after his night out. It’s not just colourless, it’s scentless too. There’s something either alien or magical about it, but I can’t figure it out properly, so I’ve sent it on for further analysis to both Zatanna and Blue Beetle. So far all I’ve got back from them was that it’s some form of mild mind control and once it hits the victim it fades out of visibility.”

“Thanks Oracle.” Steph turned and shot Tim a grim smile. “You hear that kid? Magic dust that made Jason climb out of his bed and run off with the Joker. It’s turns invisible once it finds its target, so be careful. Chances are you won’t run into it, but if you do don’t hide it from me.”

“Ok.”

“I need you to say it to me Tim. If you see the dust, what will you do?”

“Tell you.” Of course he’d tell her, Tim didn’t get why he needed to state something so obvious.

“Good boy.” Steph led him out of the storage unit, then picked him up and grappled onto the nearest roof. “We’ll start here and move east. Let me know if you see anything suspicious.”

Tim looked down at the three people gawking up in the street below. One was an ordinary looking woman, but the other two were rough looking men with narrowed eyes, and Tim thought he caught a knife sticking out of one of their pockets.

Define suspicious. He wanted to say, but he knew that random shady looking people were not what she was talking about. Over half of Gotham would be considered suspicious if that was the case.

Don’t panic. He told himself. It feels overwhelming but you’re fine. You’re Robin. You can do this.

He tried to jump between roofs, skidded and almost fell. Stephanie grabbed him and tugged him back up, not looking worried in the slightest.

This was going to be a long day.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Jason's trapped with the Joker, and he's not having a good time.
The Legacy (Reprise)

Chapter Summary

The search for Jason continues. He's not having fun.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sorry this chapter is late, it was my birthday last week so writing got delayed because of that. Also I struggled with writing the Joker because he's a difficult character to get right, but I hope it turned out ok!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part of Dick really didn’t want to be doing this.

This future was all kinds of awful, and after everything that had happened, more drama with a side of possibly deadly fights was the last thing Dick wanted to be involved in. Yet here he was, jumping across rooftops with his future sister and the future killer Robin.

The shock and horror of the fight with the Talons had worn off slightly, and Dick was able to admit that branding Damian a psycho, stab-happy Robin was unfair. He’d only killed that Owl because she was threatening Dick’s life and there hadn’t been another way. Dick could acknowledge that now, and he accepted the guilt instead of twisting it into unjustified anger.

But at the same time, there was something about Damian’s actions that was still so chilling. If the roles had been reversed, would Dick have been able to do it? Would he have been able to make that split-second decision to take a life? He didn’t think so.

What did that make Damian? What did that make him?

Maybe there was strength in making those kinds of decisions. Maybe in some way, Damian was better than him. But that kind of strength, the power to make tough decisions like killing, it wasn’t Robin. That much Dick knew for sure.

He was the original Robin, and he’d donned that costume to protect the innocent and help people get justice. Killing had never really crossed Dick’s mind, especially since Bruce was so against it. But he’d had some time to think it over, and the more he thought about it the more he realised that not killing was a very important part of being Robin.

Damian’s actions had saved his life, but despite that Dick’s heart told him that killing was wrong. In this case, not for the sake of the Owl, but for… Damian’s sake? The principle of it all? Dick still hadn’t quite figured that part out.

He’d only been wearing the costume for a few months. The moral philosophy behind being Robin wasn’t exactly something he’d expected to deal with so early. Maybe when he became a teenager the lines would get a little blurry and he’d have to make some of his own rules to go along with
Batman’s, but at ten years old he really hated that he was being forced to worry about the legacy of his mantle.

He hated that it couldn’t be so clear cut as labelling Damian a bad, evil Robin. It wasn’t fair that his little brother, the one who’d been nicest to him since he arrived in this future, was capable of that kind of darkness.

He hated that thinking about this was the better alternative than thinking about… the other thing.

Dick did a flip between rooftops, just to try and clear his mind a bit. Cass did a double flip over to the next rooftop, and Dick grinned at the challenging look in her eyes. The next jump had enough distance that he managed to do a triple somersault, even if the landing was a little shaky.

Cass hummed thoughtfully as she eyed up the gap ahead. She tugged on her costume, scrapped together from all the clothes small enough to fit her in the cave. A black domino mask, a tiny Robin top that Alfred had accidentally shrunk in the wash, and a pair of black trousers and boots that were slightly too big on her. Dick thought she looked kind of cool as Robin, even though her costume didn’t have any green.

She ran, jumped, and flipped three times. Dick gasped when she barely landed at the edge of the roof, but she kept her balance and fell forward. There was a smirk on her face when she got up, and Dick couldn’t help grin back.

“Would you two please-”

Damian stopped talking halfway through his complaint, grabbing Dick and pulling him lower on the roof.

“Down! Get down!”

A dagger flew past the space where Dick’s head had been a second ago, embedding itself in the cement of the chimney he was leaning against. Damian was half on top of him, but Dick could see over to the other roof, where Cass was darting around with incredible speed.

“Talons.” Damian hissed. “Come on, we need to take them down while they’re focused on Cassandra.”

“Shouldn’t we use a codename for her?” Dick stood up and followed Damian towards the source of the knives. “Do they know it’s her in that costume?”

“If they didn’t already, dodging multiple knives at practically inhuman speed would have given it away.”

“But those throws look lethal. They’re aiming for her head, aren’t they?”

Damian seemed surprised at Dick’s observation, which stung a tiny bit. Dick knew his two companions outclassed him in terms of fighting skills, but he was still a detective trained by Batman. Just because he wasn’t raised to speak all posh and stiff didn’t make him any less intelligent than Damian.

“You’re right.” Damian said, blocking a knife thrown at Dick’s head. “These are all kill shots. It seems like the Owls have given them new orders.”

“Why would they do that?”
“If I had to guess…” Damian paused to leap over a rooftop and dodge a knife from the nearest of two visible Talons. “I would say they really didn’t like that we took Cassandra back. Clearly, they’re not used to people standing up to them, so they’re throwing a hissy fit like a spoilt child.”

“If they can’t have Cass no one can, that sort of thing?”

“Horribly cliché isn’t it?” Damian smirked.

Putting all the bad stuff aside, Dick was glad to see that Damian really had the Robin combat banter down pat.

Then the bad stuff promptly made itself known again when a Talon swung up from the gutter below them, lunging towards Dick. He barely had time to get his arms up in defence, but the pain he was anticipating never came. Damian’s sword swung out and slashed right into the Talon’s skull.

Dick’s jaw dropped open, but Damian didn’t even miss a beat. He pulled the sword from the skull with a stomach-churning squelching sound, and Dick watched in shock as the Talon fell back off the roof.

“I didn’t kill him.” Damian said. “Focus Grayson. They’re already dead. Just think of it as fighting zombies.”

Dick wasn’t sure why the use of his last name snapped him out of his daze, but it did. The remaining two Talons were closing in on Cassandra, so he picked up a loose brick and flung it at their heads. They dodged, but it distracted them enough to give Cass a little respite from the flurry of knives.

Then one of them changed tack and started jumping towards Dick. Not a part of his plan, but he managed to roll under the first tackle.

“Oracle, are you seeing this?” Damian’s voice in his ear was a bit of a distraction, but Dick successfully dodged the Owl’s punch. “We’re under attack over here. Think it’s related to the Joker?”

“What do you mean?” Dick still couldn’t get used to Barbara’s Oracle voice, it was all scrambled and creepy. “You think they’re connected?”

“It’s too much of a coincidence.” Damian replied. “I don’t know if the Owls would be willing to team up with such an unpredictable ally, but I wouldn’t put it past the Joker to use them unwillingly for his own ends.”

“Is this really the time to be thinking about this!” Dick yelled, sticking a knife into the chest of the Talon in front of him. “We’re kind of fighting for our lives!”

“Our mission is still to find Jason.” Damian responded, weirdly calm despite being in the middle of a swordfight with an undead warrior. “It’s possible the Talons’ arrival means that we were getting too close.”

“It’s an interesting theory.” Barbara agreed. “I’ll send back-up your way. If you can interrogate one of these Talons they might know something about Jason, but don’t take unnecessary risks. We still don’t have any proof that there’s a connection.”

The knife in the chest had done little to stop the Talon barrelling towards Dick, which did actually make him feel better about going for such lethal moves. They were just fast-moving zombies, Dick told himself, as he scrambled backwards to try and find a way to evade the oncoming tackle. A blur suddenly flew in from the right, and Cass grabbed the Talon’s head and twisted, using its own
weight to fling it into a chimney.

“Thanks.” Dick said. “You know, I’m starting to really hate zombies.”

Cass stared blankly at him, and Dick made a note to watch a bunch of horror movies with her if they all made it through this in one piece.

“Gray son.”

Dick blinked, swivelling around to face the Talon crawling out of the broken chimney.

“You should be fighting on our side. Blood traitor, a disgrace to your lineage.”

What the hell? Blood traitor? What did he mean by that?

The Talon talking was weird enough, but what he was saying in their weird whisper voice was what really creeped Dick out. Ever since the note explaining Cass’s kidnapping, part of Dick had been secretly fearing something like this. The DNA test on the Talon they captured had basically proven him right. He was connected to the Talons and the Court of Owls, so much so that they knew him even through the Robin costume.

But now, he was just too tired to deal with the full confirmation.

He was stuck in the future where his great grandfather was apparently an undead assassin and now another Talon was trying to spill all the shady details while also trying to kill him. Dick had heard enough tosh for one day.

“I’m a Flying Grayson, not a Talon!” he yelled. “That’s my lineage right there, and I know they’re proud of me! So bug off!”

He couldn’t see the Talon’s reaction underneath the mask, but Dick liked to believe he looked surprised.

“I forgot how old you were.” Damian ducked and the Talon he was fighting went stumbling into the one talking to Dick. “Your cursing is adorably quaint, especially since I know you can say worse.”

“Damian, don’t be a bad influence.” Barbara almost sounded amused.

“All I’m implying is that if Dick wants to say fuck, he can.”

“You never say that word either!” Dick protested. “How come you get to make fun of me for it?”

“Because I don’t say ‘bug off’ unless I’m ironically mocking someone.”

Cass slammed her feet into one of the Talon’s heads, cracking their skulls together.

“Fuck off.” she growled.

She turned to look at them, tilting her head in question. Dick almost started laughing, and he gave her a thumbs up. Meanwhile, Damian had gone very pale.

“Oracle I swear to you I didn’t intend for her to pick up on that.”

“Well on the bright side, she’s getting better at verbal communication.” Even with the mic filters Barbara’s voice had a certain chill to it. “But I can’t say I’m happy about the specific vocabulary.”
“Traitor.” The Talons were up and moving again, and the brief moment of levity was over. “Richard Grayson was destined for great things, but you are a disappointment. Today we will correct the mistake and end the disgrace you bring to your family.”

Ok, that got to him a little. He really didn’t like the way the Talon was talking about him. Dick didn’t know this guy at all, which made the zombie’s personal investment in him pretty dang creepy. Luckily, Damian stepped in front, shielding Dick from the empty goggle stares.

“I assure you, Robin here is the opposite of a disappointment. He’s Batman’s pride and joy. We all are, really.”

Right. Dick shook his head to focus. He had another family to help right now. Jason needed him, so this confusing blood traitor garbage would have to wait.

The Talons were strong, fast and deadly, but at least they weren’t the Joker. Dick didn’t want to think just how bad things were for his brother right now.

When Jason woke up, he was sitting in a chair with his hands tied behind his back. The room was dark and cold, with no windows. The only light came from a few torches situated around the room, including the one in the hands of his kidnapper.

Jason winced as he blinked awake properly. The last thing he remembered was screaming for help as the Joker ran through the tunnels with him. At one point he thought he heard Batman yelling back, so he’d screamed louder, and the Joker finally stopped finding it funny. He’d deliberately whacked Jason’s head off the wall, and now here they were.

“Wakey wakey little birdy.” The Joker scooted forward, his grinning face uncomfortably close to Jason. “I have so many fun activities planned for us! Whipping, torture, maybe a snack break, who knows!”

Jason wanted to be tough. He wanted to be brave and strong, a Robin who laughed in the face of danger. But he wasn’t. He could feel himself trembling, the fear making his heart hammer uncomfortably loud.

“Why?” he said. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why?” The Joker blinked, looking surprise. “What do you mean why? I have no reason, that’s the whole point! It’s chaos kiddo. That’s what I do.”

The flippant dismissal was enough to put a spark of anger back in Jason. His voice was stronger, more sarcastic when he asked his next question.

“Then why not be chaotically good? Why not hand out lollipops to random orphans or something?”

“Well that sounds very boring.” The Joker laughed cruelly. “You see little Robin, this city is chock full of saints and sinners, good people and bad. But they’re all so routine, so fixed in their daily boring ways. It’s people like me and dear old Papa Bats that make the world any fun at all. This right here is just the next chapter in our little game!”

“This isn’t a game you sick bastard!” The spark found fuel, and now Jason was raging. “You killed me! You murdered me just to make Batman suffer!”

“You got better.” The Joker said dismissively. “You became a real player, not just some boring old sidekick. You should be thanking me! If anything, killing you made you far more fun.”
Jason struggled against his bindings, but the rope tying his hands together was strong, and his feet couldn’t reach the floor.

“Maybe this time death will stick, who knows?” The Joker chuckled. “Either way I’m going to enjoy seeing dear old dad’s reaction. Maybe torturing you horribly before killing you will be enough to make him snap, what do ya think?”

“I think you’re sick.” Jason’s voice still trembled, but he didn’t give a damn. “I think I should have shot you years ago, even if that makes Batman hate me.”

“But’cha didn’t!” The Joker cackled. “And here we are. You’ll be grateful soon enough, because let me tell you boy…”

The Joker reached down, picking up a long, sharp needle. The metal gleamed off the light reflected by his giant white teeth.

“The fun’s only getting started!”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Things escalate. Fights, death, and chaos ensue, and the Joker's loving every second of it.
The Hero

Chapter Summary

Tim tries to be sensible and obedient, but maybe there's more Robin in him than he realised.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*This will be fine. Tim told himself. This is going to be an adventure. You'll see.*

Then his siblings were attacked by Talons, and all hell broke loose.

Stephanie stopped scouring the building they were in once they heard the others on the comms. She scooped Tim up, who wrapped his arms around her neck and let her give him a piggyback without protest. They got outside and took off towards the coordinates Oracle rattled off, and Tim tried not to be too anxious. It felt like his stomach was chewing itself to bits, because he was going to be fighting highly trained assassins with a few basic combat lessons courtesy of Damian.

He told himself that it was ok, that they had a few highly trained assassins on their side too. But Tim couldn’t stop thinking about the last time he’d faced a Talon, and how utterly useless he had been.

So, when Stephanie stopped running towards the fight and abruptly veered left, Tim was mostly confused. But he was also a little relieved. In his current state he would be dead weight in that fight, and there was no point denying it.

He wanted to ask where they were going, but the answer became obvious once he saw a looming shadowy figure on the roof ahead of them.

“What are you doing here?” Batman growled. “I’ve narrowed down the Joker's location to one of these three warehouses. Robin shouldn’t be anywhere near him.”

“Well the alternative is a fight with the Talons or hiding him somewhere alone and hoping he doesn’t get snatched. So sorry, but he’s yours now.”

Tim felt himself flush red. It wasn’t like they were trying to be mean, but even if it was logical, arguing about why they shouldn’t take him hurt a little.

“Did you not hear me Batgirl? The Joker could be right below our feet and you want to let Robin tag along?”

“It’s not like I’m telling you to use him as a meat shield!” Steph snapped. “Obviously keep him away from the Joker. You’re the world’s greatest detective or whatever, I’m sure you can figure out how to keep him out of sight while rescuing Robin Two. Just keep an eye on him until we’ve sorted out the Talons.”

She crouched down and Tim scrambled off her back, trying not to seem nervous. Bruce was nice and gentle, but Batman’s demeanour was practically the opposite. Tim knew that Batman wasn’t actually mad at him for being here, just mad at the situation itself. But he’d seen that frustrated look
on his parents’ faces, when they had to cancel an important conference in order to attend his parent-teacher meeting. The situation was clearly very different, but that look… that look was the same.

Stephanie took off before Bruce could protest any further. Tim gulped, and wondered how he could be the least annoying helpless kid possible.

“Follow me.” Batman growled. “And if I tell you to run, you run. Got it?”

“Yes sir.” Tim squeaked.

Batman paused, and maybe it was Tim’s imagination but his face seemed a little gentler, a little more like Bruce.

“You don’t have to call me ‘sir’ Robin. Batman is fine.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Batman skulked across the rooftop towards the skylight. Tim followed behind, doing his best not to trip.


For a second Tim thought he meant through the skylight. Then Batman walked over to the fire escape and Tim flushed at his own silliness. They ended up going through the front door after Batman picked the lock, with Tim sticking close enough to feel every time his cape swooshed.

The warehouse was dark, with the only light coming from the skylight. Every footstep they made seemed too loud to Tim’s ears, and he was so busy looking for monsters in the shadows around him that he ended up bumping into Batman when the man stopped walking. Tim poked his head around to see why they stopped, and gulped. There was a woman standing in the middle of the warehouse, with strange looking packages strapped to her body. Tim noticed the button in her hand, and he gasped when he realised what the blocks on her body were. She was covered in explosives, just like the ones he’d seen in action movies.

“Who are you?” Batman growled. “Where’s the Joker?”

“You’re close, but you made the wrong choice.” The woman grinned, and there was a manic gleam in her eyes that scared Tim.

“Robin move!” Batman picked him up and ran towards the door.

With his face pressed into Batman’s chest, Tim didn’t actually see when she pressed the button. But he certainly felt it, as the explosion took Batman off his feet and sent them both flying. Batman clung tight to Tim, shielding him from the fire. He felt the heat, but it didn’t burn him.

It hurt when they landed on the ground, although Batman did his best to cushion the fall. When the debris stopped falling, Tim pushed himself out from under Batman, shaking. Batman grunted in pain, but thankfully the suit and cape seemed to have absorbed most of the damage.

“Robin. Are you alright?”

Tim’s eyes went to the centre of the room, where the woman had stood seconds ago. There was only a mark on the floor now, no sign of death other than the burnt black mark.

It was the first death Tim could remember seeing. He felt numb.
“I’m fine.” he said quietly.

Physically, that was true. And mentally the shock was keeping any sort of meltdown at bay. Besides, they didn’t have time for this. Jason was still missing and Batman had to save him.

“She said we were close. He’s definitely in one of the warehouses, isn’t he?”

“Most likely.” Batman pushed himself to his feet. “I have to check out the other two. Stay at the doorway next time.”

Tim wanted to suggest that they split up, take one warehouse each. That way they’d definitely find Jason quicker. But he knew Batman would never go for that, and he could understand why.

Still, as they crept over to the second warehouse, the itch wouldn’t leave him. He needed to do something, to help. He wasn’t just a burden. Sure, he didn’t have fighting skills, and he’d be a dummy to just jump into a fight with the Joker of all people. But Tim was small and sneaky. He could scout ahead without being caught, he knew he could.

Tim had been careful ever since arriving in the future. He’d thought everything through as best he could, stepped back where his other siblings had leaped forward. But in the end, here he was, out on a mission with Batman, and now he had a little more understanding for what drove his siblings to be so reckless.

Being reckless wasn’t good, Tim knew. From what he’d picked up on, being reckless got Robins killed. But the urge to help was so strong, Tim got why the Robins made rash decisions.

Batman entered the second building, and each second Tim waited by the doorway the temptation got worse. What was Batman doing, had he found Jason? If Jason was in the third warehouse, how long would it take them to reach him? What would the Joker have done to him by then?

There was no time to waste. Even if it meant being a little reckless, Tim had to save Jason. He didn’t even think it was his older self driving him to slip over towards the third warehouse. This was just who he was, a kid who tracked Batman and Robin across the rooftops long before he ever wore a costume.

So much for not being a silly annoying kid. Tim thought glumly. Even if he saved Jason, Batman was definitely not going to be pleased with him, and Tim couldn’t blame him.

Obviously, entering through the door of the third building wouldn’t be a good idea. Batman could get away with it because he was tough and had a bunch of gadgets to help against all the traps he was probably dealing with right this second. Tim didn’t have that, so he needed to be smart about this.

There was a back entrance to the warehouse, an emergency exit that was most likely boobytrapped as well. But between the front entrance, the skylight and that, Tim figured it was his safest bet.

He creaked open the door slowly. No alarms blared. No knives sprang out of the floor and attempted to impale him. So far so good.

Then he heard it. The screaming.

Tim’s blood ran cold. He knew that scream, had heard it before when Jason collapsed. He had been screaming in agony at the memories of what the Joker did to him. Only now it was real.

Any fear or hesitation Tim had was quelled the second he heard Jason cry out. He had to go further
inside, had to distract the Joker long enough for Batman to get there and stop the clown.

He had to save Jason.

These Talons were not messing around. As Dick jumped and dodged the various attempts to kill him, the number of cuts and bruises on his body grew. Even ignoring the fact that they were zombies, these Talons were no joke. Cass and Damian seemed to be holding their own, but Dick was very grateful that they were only fighting two of these undead assassins.

He paused to knock on the nearest wood he could find. He was not jinxing it, no way.

Turns out that might not have been the best move. Dick thought he had time for a harmless knock on a plank of wood, since his siblings were keeping the two Talons distracted. But the second he looked up, one of the Talons was right in front of him. He heard Damian yell, but it was too late. Dick backed up, trying to get some space to dodge, but the Talon followed him, boxing him against the chimney.

Dick blocked the first swipe and dodged the second, but the Talon was bigger and stronger and he was running out of space. His second attempt to dodge the knife in the Talon’s right hand lead him straight into the knife in the Talon’s left hand. Dick screamed as the blade pierced his shoulder, and he continued screaming as the second blade dug deep into his other shoulder.

“Pathetic, Gray son.” The Talon hissed.

Dick wanted to reply, but if he opened his mouth he was just going to start screaming again. The Talon flicked out another knife, ready to deliver the final blow. But before he could kill Dick, Damian crashed into him with as much strength and speed as he could. It was enough to knock the Talon off the already uneven roof, and together they rolled down into the alley below. The second Talon jumped back from fighting Cass and went down after Damian. Cass ran over to try and help, but from the left a third Talon appeared, racing across and lunging for her.

This was completely unfair, Dick thought dimly. He’d knocked on wood and everything.

His priority needed to be getting these knives out of his shoulders. But if he did it right now, the bleeding would get worse. Dick stumbled forward, wincing at the unbearable pain with every movement.

This was bad. This was really, really bad.

A grappling hook landed in the roof, and Damian came flying up from the alley below, the two Talons hot on his tail. Dick’s stomach sank at the sight of his brother. Damian’s face had a bunch of fresh new cuts and bruises, and part of his mask had been ripped off. Clearly taking two Talons on at once had been too much, even for such a short period of time.

With his injuries, Dick wasn’t going to be much more help in this fight. It was already three Talons on two Robins, if Cass or Damian got seriously injured, it would be over for all of them. Cass seemed to be doing alright with the newest one, but she didn’t look close to beating it either. The bigger problem was the two Talons zeroing in on Damian, with Dick unable to help fight.

“Cowards.” Damian spat, his lip bloody. “These are the fearsome Talons? Rotting corpses too scared to take on a child alone?”

The Talons looked at each other, communicating silently. Then the one on the left stepped back, while the one on the right took a step closer to Damian.
Damian’s grin was practically a snarl.

Dick watched as they fought, leaning against the chimney wall to keep himself upright. The pain in his shoulders wasn’t easing, and he couldn’t see a way to run off and get medical help. In his current state he couldn’t make the steep jump to the left or to the right, and Damian was in front of him, protecting Dick from the Talons, who were blocking the one ladder off the roof. Dick could risk a grappling hook, but with the knives in his arms he didn’t think he could hold on.

Right now, there was nothing Dick could do physically to help. All he could do was observe what was happening, and hope that something useful would pop out to him.

The Talon who’d taken Damian’s bait fought like a kickboxer, that was the first thing Dick noticed. Damian had sheathed his sword in order to fight back against the punches and kicks being rapidly thrown at him. He was holding his own pretty well, and the second Talon seemed content not to interfere. Dick was impressed that Damian’s unsubtle baiting technique had worked, but he could kind of understand how bad it would look if you needed two assassins to take down a ten-year-old. He was also pretty impressed that Damian had called himself a child. Apparently, his brother’s pride had its limits, and with the stakes as high as these Damian was using every advantage he had.

Damian blocked another punch, then quickly shifted styles from boxing to karate. The Talon was unprepared for such a rapid change, and Dick silently cheered when Damian managed to get under the assassin’s guard, elbowing him in the gut and knocking him off balance. The Talon tried to grab him and Damian climbed up his back, then wrenched his head so that the Talon’s own momentum carried him off and over the roof.

It was the same technique Cass had used earlier, Dick realised. Somehow, that made him feel a little more confident in their chances. It was one thing to know that your siblings were highly trained assassins with the skill of world class martial artists, but moments like these really hammered home the fact that Damian and Cass were on another level, and just because the Talons were dangerous didn’t mean the situation was hopeless.

The Talon swung back up, his mask off. Dick was surprised at how human he looked. He had light brown hair and a scar on his chin, and his eyes were alive with anger. Dick almost wished the mask was back on, because the creepiness made the Talon less human, easier to think of as a zombie who needed to be killed.

The Talon charged at Damian with blades in his hands, too fast for Damian to draw his sword. Damian kept calm, using his green gauntlets to block the blows. Dick saw how he eyed the blades, waiting with every block and dodge for the right moment to strike. When the Talon swiped upwards, overextending his reach, Dick saw Damian’s eyes light up.

But then Dick noticed the second blade waiting. He went to yell out, but it was too late. Damian broke the blade in front of him, and as he leaned in to push the Talon’s arm away the second blade sank into his stomach.

“No!” Dick screamed.

Damian coughed wetly, a stunned look on his face. But even through the shock he managed to spit blood into the Talon’s face. The Talon jerked backwards and Damian kicked him away, before falling on one knee.

“Robin!” Dick couldn’t believe this was happening.

“It’s alright.” Damian said, very clearly not alright.
Dick rushed over as Damian fell forward, bracing himself on shaking arms.

“I told Batman I needed better armour.” Damian rasped. “Although I will admit, it was foolish of me to let him get that close.”

The two Talons seemed satisfied with the injuries inflicted on the brothers, turning their attention to Cass. Dick hadn’t been paying full attention to her, but judging from the pained look in her eyes she’d seen all of what happened, and hadn’t been able to stop it due to the third Talon keeping her on the other side of the roof. She bared her teeth as the three Talons surrounded her, and there was so much righteous fury in her eyes part of Dick genuinely believed she could take on all three Talons by herself.

Luckily, he never had to see if that was true or not. Three smoke bombs bounced onto the roof, and soon Dick’s vision was filled with purple smoke. He heard a sickening crack, and when the smoke cleared, Batgirl was standing over the body of the unmasked Talon.

Her face was more serious than Dick had ever seen, and she didn’t make a single quip as she headed towards Cass. The other two Talons had goggles on and hadn’t been as affected by the smoke, but they were clearly rattled by how quickly the numbers had evened out, right when they’d just gotten the advantage.

“ Heck yeah.” Dick whispered. “You see that Robin? The Batgirls are going to save us.”

Damian said something in reply, probably sarcastic. But Dick couldn’t hear him properly, because his vision was starting to get really blurry. The roof was suddenly a lot steeper than he remembered, and he felt like he was going to fall asleep any second. In fact, there was darkness at the corners of his eyes, flickering closer.

*Probably the blood loss.* he thought.

Then he blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: All games must come to an end.
Chapter Summary

Jason makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a hot needle under Jason’s index fingernail, and it was absolutely agonising. The Joker laughed as he shrieked and writhed, screaming curses at the clown whenever he had the breath.

“My my, what a foul mouth.” The Joker said with mock astonishment. “I don’t think dear old Batsy would like you using words like that. I guess that’s why he never adopted another gutter rat after you. He likes his Robins… well bred.”

“Fuck you.” Jason rasped. “Batman loves me.”

“Oh I’m sure that’s what he-”

“Shut up.” Jason closed his eyes. “Just shut up. There’s nothing you can say to break me, you twisted freak. You don’t know anything about love, or family, or any of that shit. Trying to get in my head isn’t going to work, because you don’t have a fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

He opened his eyes and grinned, feeling the blood run down his teeth from the Joker’s beating.

“Right now… you’re boring me.”

“…Hm.” The Joker wasn’t laughing anymore, he wasn’t even grinning. “Alright then. Skip the mental scrambling and focus right in on the physical, is that what you want?”

He took out another needle, glowing orange from the fire, and positioned it under the nail in Jason’s thumb. Jason braced himself for the pain, but it never came.

“Leave him alone!”

Jason had to be hallucinating. Tim was standing at the other end of the room, dressed in Robin gear. But the Joker was staring at him too, which meant this was real.

Which meant Tim was in real danger.

The Joker grinned, and began slowly walking towards the other Robin. The way the clown walked reminded Jason of a lion stalking a baby gazelle, and he found himself struggling even harder to get free from the chair he was tied to.

“Well well well, aren’t you a brave little bird? To come running into my den all alone.”

“I’m not alone.” Tim said, but the tremble in his voice told a different story. “Batman is right behind me. So if you don’t want to go back to Arkham you need to leave Jason alone and get out of here right now.”
“Oho, very nice little Robin. Very nice indeed, but your threat ignores two important facts.” The Joker stuck two fingers in the air. “Number one, even if I get put back into Arkham, it’s only temporary. Like going to jail in Monopoly, they can’t keep me there forever or else there won’t be a game. So you see, the threat of Arkham is more of a minor inconvenience really.”

“What’s the second fact?” Tim asked, his face pale.

“The second fact?” The Joker’s mouth opened wide, a grin that stretched grotesquely larger than it should. “The second fact is… this!”

The Joker pulled out a gun.

The rope tying Jason’s right arm and leg to the chair finally gave way, and he half stumbled half charged over to the Joker as fast as he could. Tim dove out of the way just as the Joker fired, and Jason crashed into the clown, smashing the chair as he did so.

“Robin!”

Batman came running in, grabbing Tim just as the Joker fired off a second round. It bounced off his armour and for a second Jason was scared, but Batman just grunted and placed Tim down behind a bunch of crates.

“Stay here.” Jason heard him growl.

The Joker struggled to get to his feet, tangled up in the remains of the chair and the rope he’d used to tie Jason down. He lashed out, landing a solid kick to Jason’s stomach. Jason gasped as the wind was knocked out of him, and he struggled to breath as the Joker stood up and pointed the gun at him.

A Batarang knocked the gun out of the Joker’s hand, and a second later Batman delivered a punch straight to the Joker’s face. The Joker flew across the room, cackling all the way. Jason scrambled to his feet, and as Batman went after the Joker, his eyes were instead drawn to the gun lying on the floor.

No one was watching. He could grab it right now, use it to end this.

The Joker killed him. Jason knew how he felt about that, and he knew that his older self would have shot the man dead as soon as he was resurrected. So why was the Joker still alive?

Batman. That was the only reason that made sense to Jason. Not that he thought Batman could physically stop him, not if Older Jason kept trying. But Batman didn’t want the Joker killed, and he’d stopped Older Jason at least once before. Maybe Older Jason was scared of crossing that line. Maybe he knew that if he killed the Joker, he’d ruin something important in his relationship with Batman.

But Jason didn’t have that problem. If he killed the Joker now, surely Batman couldn’t blame it on his older self? If he killed the Joker now, he’d only have to suffer the consequences for a little bit, and then he’d be gone and his older self would come back to a Joker-free Gotham.

It wasn’t even just for revenge. The Joker had said it himself, Arkham didn’t work for him. If Jason didn’t kill him now, the justice system would keep sentencing the Joker to Arkham instead of real jail or death, and he would keep breaking out and killing more innocent people.

Jason picked up the gun.

He didn’t want to be a killer, not even to the man who’d tortured and murdered him. He wanted to arrest the Joker and let him get justice, but he was years into the future and justice had yet to be
served. How high had the Joker’s body count gotten, every time they put him back into Arkham only for him to escape?

Batman wouldn’t kill him. Older Jason wouldn’t kill him, not unless something changed between him and Batman.

He had to do this. For himself, for his older self, and for all the Joker’s victims, past present and future.

The Joker stumbled backwards as Batman landed another punch. He was swaying badly, clearly unable to fight back for much longer. He was still laughing though, laughing like this was all one big joke. It made Jason sick, and that anger gave him the courage to raise the gun and aim it, right at the Joker’s back.

He hesitated. Just for a second.

Then he fired.

The recoil was stronger than Jason had been expecting. It jerked the gun upwards, and the bullet ended up landing in the Joker’s neck. His laughing cut off abruptly, and instead the warehouse was filled with the sound of him gagging, choking on his own blood.

*I did that.* Jason thought, and felt sicker than before.

The Joker fell over, lying face down on the ground. There was blood pooling from the wound in his neck, and Jason couldn’t stop staring at it. The Joker, one of the scariest criminals in Gotham, was dead. Ten year old Jason Todd had killed him.

He almost felt like laughing. Not in a happy way. More in disbelief that he’d actually done it.

He finally dragged his eyes away from the Joker’s corpse, and immediately wished he hadn’t. Batman was staring at him, and even with the cowl there was a deep sadness in the way he looked at Jason. It made Jason understand a little better why his older self would hesitate to kill the clown.

It would be ok though. Maybe Bruce didn’t love him the same anymore, but he would only be here for a bit longer. Soon the older Jason would come back, and maybe things between him and Bruce would be better now that the Joker was gone.

Not gone. Dead. Jason had killed him. He shouldn’t try and sugar-coat it, because judging from Batman’s face he certainly wouldn’t.

That was ok, Jason reminded himself. He’d known there was a good chance it would be like this. What mattered was that Bruce didn’t blame his older self. This had been Jason’s choice, nothing to do with Older Jason. From the second he’d arrived in this future Jason had been a passive victim, forced to deal with all sorts of crazy shit without getting a chance to fight back. Now he’d finally gotten the chance to make a difference, and he didn’t regret it.

That was something he knew for sure. He felt weird, and shaky, and a little horrified that he was now a killer. But he didn’t regret it, not one bit.

“Is it over?”

In all the chaos, he’d almost forgotten about Tim. His brother peeked out from behind a stack of crates, and his eyes widened when he saw the Joker’s body.
“Woah.” he looked at Batman. “You killed him?”

“No.” Batman said, and even though it was only one word, Jason could sense disappointment in his voice. “Jason did.”

“Oh.” Tim said quietly.

*Oh. Jason* agreed.

Barbara watched it all go down from the camera in Bruce’s cowl. When the gunshot rang out, she had to cover her mouth with her hand so she wouldn’t cry out.

Jason. It had to have been Jason.

Sure enough, Batman turned his head, and she saw Jason standing there with a gun. That poor boy. No child should have felt the need to kill someone, even a proper bastard like the Joker.

The Joker. He was dead.

The Joker was *dead*. The man who had shot her and altered her life permanently, was dead. Barbara had once told him that he had taken nothing from her, and she meant that. But he had still hurt her, traumatised her, and Barbara was not one to forgive someone who showed no remorse.

She wasn’t sure how she felt about this, and she simply didn’t have the time to deal with it right now. So she pushed all her personal Joker related feelings into a box in the back of her mind, and focused on cleaning up the mess that had been made.

“Batman.” She needed to make sure he didn’t make this situation worse than it already was. “Get home now.”

“The Joker’s body.” Bruce said. “The police will need to know what happened.”

There was something definitely off about him. Shock, if Barbara had to guess.

“Jason Todd was kidnapped and shot the Joker in self-defence.” she said. “We can either go with that, or clean up the crime scene and dump the body in the river. Either one works for me, but I’m assuming you want to be as straightforward as possible with the police.”

“His uniform. He’s wearing the Robin costume.”

“Take his mask off. Tell the police that the Joker forced him to dress up as Robin with the intent of torturing and killing him. It’s the truth, it just leaves out a few details. Drop him off at the police station, he can tell them what happened, and then you leave and Bruce Wayne comes rushing in to pick up his missing son, who Batman assured him he would get back safely.”


Barbara hesitated, but decided not to tell him about Dick and Damian just yet. Bruce didn’t need the extra shock right now.

“They’re wrapping up the fight as we speak. I’ll talk to her, tell her to go to the warehouse as soon as she can.”

She switched her focus to Stephanie’s cowl camera, and a new wave of fear hit her at the black
screen. Dick and Cass both had old Robin suits, which let her monitor their vital signs but didn’t have cameras in their masks. Last she checked Damian’s camera mask was firmly facing the roof tiles, but both he and Dick’s vitals weren’t critical yet so Barbara had trusted Steph to handle the situation. She’d only kept her eyes away for a minute or so, what the hell had happened?

“Batgirl? Batgirl are you there? Batgirl what’s your status?”

“I’m fine.” Barbara breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of Steph’s voice. “Cass and I just finished snapping these Talons’ necks. We need to get the other two some help before they bleed out.”

“Why can’t I see you?”

“You can’t see me?” Barbara heard a tapping sound, likely Steph hitting her cowl. “Damn, looks like the camera got hit when one of the Talons whacked me. But that was like, a full minute ago. Why did you only notice now?”

“Batman got Jason back. He and Tim are both unharmed.” Barbara deliberately avoided answering the question fully.

“That’s great! So everything’s ok?”

“There are probably more Talons coming your way and you need to get out of there now, but provided Robin One and Five get patched up soon, I think it’s all going to be alright.”

“Cass and I are going to carry them to Dr Thompkins. She’s closer than Agent A and she likes me so she should stich them up without much of a problem.” Stephanie tapped her cowl again, then sighed. “Kind of bummed that me and ten-year-old Cass teaming up to take down the Talons happened completely off camera. I was hoping to show her older self that footage when she gets back, but it’s whatever. The important thing is that all the kids are safe.”

The camera on Damian’s Robin mask finally showed some light, and Barbara watched the sky fly by as Steph carried him across the rooftops. He and Dick were slowly getting worse, but Dr Thompkins’ clinic was only a few blocks away. At their current pace, they should have plenty of time before their conditions worsened beyond saving.

“They are.” Barbara confirmed.

“And the Joker? Batman delivered him to the GCPD or what?”

“That’s…” Barbara sighed, pushing her glasses off her face. “A complicated situation. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Thankfully, Stephanie didn’t push. Barbara watched the heart rate on Dick’s monitor get slower and slower, until after five minutes and ten seconds it abruptly vanished. Barbara didn’t panic. Dr Thompkins had most likely removed the tunic in order to fix Dick’s shoulders properly.

This was a far messier outcome than she had wanted, but it could have been worse. They would all be physically fine, and mentally…

She needed to talk with Jason, or Bruce, or both. Otherwise, this whole situation could get a whole lot messier.

Chapter End Notes
Next time: The number of killers in the family is back to three. Damian isn't exactly happy about status quo being restored, even if Dick is less upset this time.

A/N: We're over 2000 kudos now, which is absolutely incredible. Not to get all sappy but I'm really grateful to everyone who liked this fic, and especially those who commented. This was my first Batfam fic and the response has been so amazing, I'm really glad so many people are enjoying this!
The Punisher

Chapter Summary

Jason and Barbara talk, and Damian firmly subscribes to the family motto: "Listening in on private conversations is justified when I do it."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cassandra was in the kitchen, ‘eating her way through all the unhealthy food previously hidden in the cellar’ according to Alfred. Damian was slightly worried about her, because once they got home and she pieced together what had happened, she didn’t lash out at Jason like she had at him. She just looked sad and scared.

He didn’t think anyone was up for another search if she ran away again, but Damian also knew that he wasn’t the right person to talk to her. He’d lost her trust when he killed the Owl, and despite Father’s comforting words, he hadn’t gained it back yet.

Thankfully, Tim was in with her, helping her eat all the ice cream in the fridge. There was something suspicious about the way those two were whispering together every time Damian checked up on them, but he honestly didn’t have the time or energy to figure it out at the moment.

Dick at least, was taking this death better than the previous. Damian was only slightly bitter, because realistically he understood why the circumstances were different. Dick hadn’t been there to see Jason shoot the Joker, he’d just heard afterwards that Jason had shot in self defence and was dealing with the trauma. That distance gave him the ability to see Jason in a more sympathetic light straight off the bat.

Not that Damian believed the self defence line in the slightest. Father and Oracle were clearly hiding something. There was a distance in Batman’s eyes when he spoke to Jason. It wasn’t unkind, but it was the difference between comforting a Robin and comforting a random civilian child.

Damian needed to find out what had happened in order to help. Obviously, they weren’t going to willingly reveal their secrets. Right now, Jason was on his way down to the cave for a chat with Oracle, while Father was strangely content just to sit on the couch and watch cartoons with Dick.

It was all very odd. More context was required, and Damian doubted Father would just start confessing the truth to Dick. He needed to get down to the cave, and he needed to do it without alerting any of his highly trained, paranoid family.

As long as he avoided the living room, Father shouldn’t see him. Oracle would know the second he tried sneaking down through the study, and the entrance via the well was still boarded up.

Dick and Cassandra had snuck down another way, hadn’t they? Damian still didn’t know all the details about that exploit either. What he did know was that his brother had been noticeably shaken afterwards, while Cassandra had been mostly fine. If he had to pick a child to show him the secret entrance, his sister was the better choice right now.
He made his way to the kitchen, where Alfred was watching disapprovingly as Tim and Cass lay on the floor eating a carton of chocolate ice cream. Damian didn’t understand why he was so worked up, at least they were using spoons.

“Cassandra.” he said. “Can I talk to you outside? Nothing bad, I promise.”

That last part was more for Alfred and Tim, since Cass could probably tell what a lie it was. Still, she shrugged and got off the floor, taking a dripping spoon of half melted chocolate as she went. Alfred winced as drops splattered on the floor, but Tim quickly wiped them up with a cloth before the butler finally snapped.

Once they were a safe enough distance from any other ears, Damian let her in on his plan. She hadn’t smiled at him since she saw him, but she was listening carefully, so hopefully she wouldn’t rat him out straight away.

“So can you get me down there? I need to know what’s going on. There’s something they’re not telling us.”

Cass stared at him with shrewd eyes, and for a moment it was like his older sister was looking at him, seeing far more than he was comfortable with. He knew that Cass was not actually telepathic in the slightest—Brown had once told him a story about how his sister accidentally misread a boy helping his grandma as a mugging, and ended up carrying all their groceries home in apology afterwards— but sometimes, like now, it felt like she was gazing straight into his soul.

Then, for whatever reason, she nodded.

Damian blinked, honestly surprised that she had agreed. Still, he wasn’t about to question this chance, and he followed her quietly through the manor, until they reached the small west wing library. Cass pressed a seemingly ordinary book, and Damian raised an eyebrow as the shelves slid open. He was slightly impressed that this had been hidden from him for so long. Perhaps, once all this nonsense was over, he should investigate the manor more thoroughly.

He stepped closer, peering down to the darkness below.

“You can come with me if you’d like, but honestly I would prefer to go alone. The information I plan to eavesdrop on could be extremely sensitive, so—”

Cass abruptly shoved him forward, and he fell downwards for a few seconds before grabbing on to one of the poles. The last thing he heard before the shelves closed was Alfred calling out.

“Miss Cassandra? Where did you go?”

Well. That was convenient. It seems the butler had learnt the importance of keeping tabs on all the children at all times. However, in this case, he had actually granted Damian more freedom by getting Cassandra to stay upstairs. He needed her help to get down, but he didn’t actually want her listening in on Barbara and Jason’s private conversation.

Perhaps that made him a hypocrite, but Damian liked to believe it wasn’t as clear cut as that.

He paused before touching down on the ground below him. Something was off about the floor. There was a faint crack of light coming in from the closed doors to the cave, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness Damian could see that some kind of pressure pad had been installed. It seemed Oracle or Father had taken precautions in case one of the children tried to climb down here again.

Well they needed more than that to keep him out.
He kicked experimentally at the walls around him. How had Dick and Cassandra gotten through here before? Not through the main doors, Damian was certain about that. His foot found a hole, and he wriggled it around. Enough room for a small child to creep around, and unlike his siblings he didn’t run the risk of suddenly growing much bigger.

He squeezed into the hole, groping around blindly to push himself forward. It was unpleasant, but Damian had been through worse. In fact, it was almost comforting, the way it felt like just another test he would have been put through back in the League.

He got lost twice, which was not something he was going to admit to anyone. The tunnel sometimes split in two and Damian had to wonder how his siblings had navigated this before. Did they just pick a tunnel and hope for the best?

Eventually, he saw light ahead, and heard the faint sound of voices. He crawled carefully and silently towards the exit, staying far back enough that the shadows obscured him from view.

“So, let me guess what you want to say.” That was Jason’s voice. “I shouldn’t have killed the Joker and I’m very bad and evil for doing it. Right?”

“Wrong.” And that was Barbara. “Very wrong. I don’t give a damn that the Joker is dead, and I’m certainly not going to condemn you for it. All I’m worried about is how you’re dealing with this all.”

“Because I’m a killer now? An evil dirty killer?”

“You are a killer now.” Barbara agreed. “Do you think that makes you evil? Because I disagree.”

“I know you’re lying.”

“Really? So you think I hate Damian as well? You think I hate Cassandra? That I think they’re both evil, unforgivable monsters?”

“…Maybe.” Jason clearly knew he was bullshitting, but in typical stubborn ten-year-old fashion he seemed determined to drag this out.

“Well I don’t. I love them both and I think they’re both heroes trying to do the best they can to help people. Do you think they’re evil?”

“…No.” Jason admitted.

Hearing Barbara call him a hero, putting him on the same level as his sister, it made Damian feel things. Feelings that he didn’t want to focus on right now. He needed to stay on task. Asses the situation and fill in the missing pieces, that was his goal.

“Exactly. So now that we’ve established that I’m not judging you for killing the Joker, will you please talk to me? Killing someone, even someone as evil as the Joker, is a lot to go through.”

There was silence in the cave, and Damian used the break in conversation to mull over what he’d heard. There was no doubt in his mind now that the Joker hadn’t been killed in self-defence.

“…I think Bruce hates me now.” Jason said, sounding smaller than Damian had ever heard him. “Or at least, I don’t think he loves me anymore.”

“Why would you think that? Has he said anything?”

“No it’s just… the way he looks at me I guess. Like, he’s barely talked about what happened at all,
except for asking if I was ok. But his eyes are kind of… empty isn’t right because he’s not that bad, but it’s something like that.”

_Distant._ Damian supplied in his own head.

“Oh honey.” Barbara’s voice was soft. “Your dad doesn’t hate you. He’s just scared.”

“Scared of me?”

“No, he’s scared of himself. He’s scared of saying the wrong thing and hurting you even more.”

“I don’t get it.” Jason said honestly.

“Well, the Joker has been an awful presence in his life for so long, and he has a lot of complicated feelings about that bastard, and a lot of complicated feelings about your older self. But he and I both agree that it’s not fair if we take any of that out on you. He doesn’t hate you Jason, I promise. He’s just trying to keep his emotions in check.”

“Oh.”

There was another stretch of silence, and Damian shifted slightly trying to get a better view of the cave from his hidey hole.

“When the older Jason gets back, please don’t hate him!” Jason suddenly burst out. “I know he and Dad aren’t super close right now but he had nothing to do with this! I killed the Joker because I wanted to, not because he was influencing me!”

“I believe you.”

“Good! Make the others believe it too. They need to know that it wasn’t him. I killed him, and I don’t regret it. I’d shoot him again right now if he was standing in front of me!”

Barbara was worryingly silent.

“You don’t understand!” That was Jason again. “Tim tried to threaten him with the police and the Joker just laughed. He said they’d just throw him back in Arkham and then he’d escape and keep killing. And you know what? He was right! Killing him was the right thing to do.”

“I don’t fully disagree with you.” Barbara said quietly. “After beating you, killing you, and torturing you, I’m not going to blame you for killing him, or say it was wrong of you to do so. But if prisons aren’t keeping convicts contained, the solution is generally fix the prison, not kill the convicts.”

“The Joker deserved to die.” Jason spat. “How many families did he hurt? How many were scared that he’d break out and come after them again? I did the right thing, and I don’t regret it, even if you all hate me for it.”

“I told you already I don’t hate you for it, nor do I fully disagree with you. In this one situation, the only problem I have with you killing someone is the mental toll it took on you.”

“I’m fine.” The tremor in Jason’s voice told Damian otherwise. “But I don’t get why this is a one-time thing? Why is it ok with you now, but not ok if I killed the Penguin or something?”

“Because circumstantially, this wasn’t an execution. It wasn’t a cold-blooded murder, no matter how much you insist otherwise. You can’t make me believe that it was easy for you to pull the trigger Jason. I can tell you’re lying.”
“Maybe I am.” Jason retorted. “But I’m not wrong. Even if the Joker hadn’t done anything to me, killing him would have still been the right thing to do.”

“And that, I’m afraid, is where I’m going to have to disagree with you.”

“Whatever.” Jason muttered.

“Jason.” Barbara said calmly. “Remember when you found out about Cass’s dad, and you wanted to kill him? Do you think you were the only one who felt that way?”

“That’s different. Steph already explained it to me. Cass doesn’t want her dad dead, which means it’s not my job to kill him, no matter how much of a bastard he is. But someone like Joker or Penguin, who the fuck wouldn’t want those scumbags dead? The Penguin may not be as twisted as the Joker but he’s just a black hole, sucking the life out of Gotham, out of people like my mom!”

“So you judge Penguin as unworthy of life, and you kill him. Then what? The next drug dealer rises and you execute him too? What happens if he has a child? Does that child have the right to kill you for murdering their father, in your book?”

“No, because it’s their dad’s fault. If he really loved them, he wouldn’t be a fucking drug dealer.”

There was so much bitterness in Jason’s voice, and Damian was struck by how childlike he sounded. Obviously, it made sense, since Jason was ten, but he usually had a certain way of speaking, surprisingly similar to Damian’s only with very different accents. It had been there at the beginning, but the more they talked the more his speech changed. Currently Jason didn’t give a damn about using the best words he knew. He was angry, and passionate, and not entirely wrong in Damian’s eyes.

“Alright, so you kill everyone who you think deserves it, because you don’t think the justice system will do it for you.” Barbara still sounded calm, if a little strained. “Does that seem like a better system to you? One where you have all the power to decide who deserves to live and die?”

“It’s better than having all these people walk free because the system is rotten all the way to the top!”

“So why not fix the system? Why not work together to make a better Gotham, instead of jumping straight into being a lone wolf who kills anyone he thinks deserves it?”

“I’m not doing that!” Jason cried angrily. “All I did was kill one evil psychopath! I’m not a freaking serial killer like he was!”

“I know you’re not. I still don’t blame you for killing the Joker Jason, I’m just trying to make you understand why killing anyone you think deserves it isn’t the right answer. Ok?”

“...Fine.” Jason said sullenly.

There was the sound of a chair scraping, and small footsteps pattering away from Damian.

“Thanks for the talk. I don’t feel better or anything, but it could be worse.”

There was a ding indicating that the elevator had closed, and Barbara let out a deep sigh.

“Well you could have handled that better. What did you do today Barbara? Oh, I just debated the ethics of vigilante killing with a ten-year-old, how was your day Dinah?”

Damian slipped further back into the tunnel. He’d gained all the knowledge he needed.
So Jason had killed the Joker, not in self-defence, and he didn’t regret it. It was very Todd-like of him, but his willingness to listen to Barbara and not stubbornly shut out other opinions towards killing proved that his mentality wasn’t as completely set as it was when he was older.

Now that he had gained all that information, Damian wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. He could talk to Jason, but after the way he’d sulked out of the cave Damian doubted he’d be in the mood for another talk. Best to let him stew in what Barbara had said, and hopefully he would reach out when he was ready.

Shimmying back up the pipe towards the library, Damian realised suddenly that he had no idea how to get back inside.

“…Cassandra?” he whispered tentatively.

By some miracle, the doors slid open. His sister stood there, smirking at him. The scowl Damian shot her was instinctive at this point.

“I could have gotten out myself.” He informed her.

She didn’t even need to reply, just one raised eyebrow and Damian felt his cheeks redden in embarrassment.

“Shut up.” he muttered.

He heard her laugh as he exited the room, and suddenly he realised something that cleared his grumpiness away. Cass was smirking and laughing at him, not frowning or eyeing him warily.

Damian smiled.

Progress.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The Joker's dead, the Owls have temporarily retreated, and the clock is ticking until the kids turn back. Dick is glad that everyone finally has time to catch their breath, but one sibling has different ideas.
Chapter Summary

Dick gets to have one normal day at the manor. Everything is nice, and then it isn't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dick didn’t know how Damian did it. He was up and walking like nothing had happened, like he hadn’t just been stabbed yesterday. Dick could barely move without his shoulders aching, and yet Damian took firm steps and never once held his stomach or winced. Dick wasn’t sure whether he just didn’t feel it or if he’d gotten really good at blocking out the pain.

Assassin training was really disturbing to think about. Dick used to feel like Bruce’s Robin training was tough, but after meeting Damian and Cass, his standards had changed.

“Seriously.” He said, pouting from the couch as Damian walked past him. “How are you up and moving? You were stabbed in the stomach!”

“I was lightly stabbed. Not a big deal.”

“Please tell me that was an intentional reference.” Steph grinned, handing Dick a fresh bowl of cheese puffs on her way out of the room.

“Tt.” Damian stole a handful of puffs. “You still have abysmal taste in general, but for an American comedy show it’s not that bad.”

“High praise.” Steph smirked, causing Damian to roll his eyes.

Dick didn’t bother asking what they were referring too. Most likely another pop culture thing that he was fifteen years too old to get. Weirdly enough, Bruce was the only one who seemed to have picked up on Dick’s mild discomfort. It was why they were currently watching an old anime from 2004. The animation was dated, but looked pretty dang fresh to Dick. According to Bruce, Dick had forced him to sit down and watch the first eighty episodes or so together when they were younger. The act of picking a show he knew Dick would love because future Dick had already seen it, was so Bruce-like that it made Dick smile. It reminded him of his da- his Bruce. And not in an uncomfortable way for once.

Damian had wandered in around five minutes ago, hovering awkwardly at the edges of the room. Steph shot him mildly amused looks every time she came in to whisper something to Bruce or bring Dick things he couldn’t get himself.

Dick hated that, by the way. Bedrest always sucked, but his current injuries were so bad that even moving a little jolted his shoulders painfully. He also felt a little guilty, because he knew that part of the reason Damian wasn’t sitting down with him and Bruce because he was still worried Dick hated him.

Dick didn’t. He wasn’t full of awe at his cool little brother anymore, but he wasn’t angry and upset at Damian either. Damian wasn’t bad or evil for killing that Owl. Dick hadn’t figured the rest out yet,
but that much he knew. There was still something about killing someone, even someone awful, that really didn’t sit right with Dick. But from the looks of it, it didn’t sit right with Damian either.

Plus, Damian had protected him on the roof yesterday, risking his life in the process. Dick would be a real jerk-face if he kept being mad at him after that.

He wanted to say something, to reassure Damian that he could sit with them if he wanted to. But he couldn’t find the right words, and for whatever reason Bruce was ignoring Damian and staring at the TV.

Dick understood a minute later when Damian shuffled over and sat down on Bruce’s other side. Bruce didn’t say a word, just lifted his arm to let Damian snuggle closer. It reminded Dick of a cat looking for cuddles, and he smiled. It seemed the key to making Damian relax was not spooking him with too much attention at once. With that in mind, Dick let go of his worry and focused on the show, hoping that Damian would do the same.

Bruce wasn’t fully paying attention to the show, but Dick didn’t mind. With the Owls still out there, he understood why Batman would need to check his phone every few minutes. Constant vigilance and all that. But Bruce had seen Bleach before, and managed to keep up with Dick’s commentary, so it was all good. He seemed interested in everything Dick had to say about it, even though it was just an anime and Dick had probably said all of this years ago.

“So does Rukia remain my favourite character all through the show? Because right now she’s at the top, no question.”

“She does.” Bruce confirmed with a smile. “I was always more partial to Ichigo, although my favourite character hasn’t shown up yet.”

“Of course, you’d like him.” Damian said with a smirk. “He just went on a rant about how he wants vengeance and justice against his mother’s killer.”

“Not to mention for all his toughness, he’s completely whipped for Rukia and devoted to his family. Just like you with us and Selina.”

“I am not whipped for Selina!” Bruce protested. “I don’t know where you got that idea from.”

“Uh huh. Sure. Whatever you say Bruce.”

“I’m not!”

“You are somewhat whipped for her, Father.” Damian chimed in. “I don’t understand why, but that’s between you and her I suppose.”

“Damian.” Bruce turned to him with a look of exaggerated hurt in his eyes. “My precious youngest child, why would you betray me this way?”

Dick burst into giggles as Damian picked up a cheese puff and flicked it at Bruce. Bruce caught it in his mouth and chewed it with a straight face. Damian rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth was tilted upwards.

This whole day had been a new kind of weird for Dick, the nicest kind of weird that he’d experienced since he arrived in the future. For whatever reason, since Jason’s rescue, Bruce had spent most of his time hanging out with Dick. He did check his phone, probably monitoring Gotham, but most of his attention was directed towards Dick, and now Damian too. Maybe it was because they were both injured, and, in Dick’s case, too incapacitated to resist Bruce’s bonding. Alfred was
keeping an eye on the other kids, while Barbara and Steph were helping out too, but mostly focused on the Talon in the cave.

It was a much better change of pace than the usual panic over one of the kids being missing. No one was horribly upset or fighting with each other, and no one was in immediate danger. They were just... chilling. Spending time together like a normal family.

“I think I like Inoue the best.” Damian announced. “Neither of the main two have captured my interest yet. She seems competent and her test scores show that she’s intelligent.”

“Really?” Dick screwed his face up in a grimace. “I feel like she’s meant to be the comic relief character, but I don’t find her funny.”

“That’s how I feel about you, Grayson.” Damian shot him a smirk. “It seems I have a type of favourite.”

“Aww, I’m your favourite?” Dick teased back. “I’ll never get tired of hearing you say that. Dick Grayson: Cool Older Brother.”

“I regret my honesty. Your ego is far too inflated right now.”

The ice between them felt nearly fully melted at this point. Damian was more relaxed, more comfortable teasing Dick back. That was good.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Cass standing in the doorway, staring in at them with a strange look on her face. Part of her seemed confused, but she also stared… longingly? Dick frowned, trying to understand what he was seeing.

He opened his mouth to call her in, offer her a seat on the couch. But then Tim appeared, tapping her on the shoulder. A second later, she was gone.

It was probably nothing, Dick decided. For all he knew, the two of them could be playing hide or seek with Jason or something.

“This Ishida boy seems very uptight.” Damian commented, drawing Dick’s attention back to the show. “Is he your favourite, Father?”

“He endangered everyone in the town just so he could challenge Ichigo and prove he’s the better fighter. In what world would someone like him be my favourite?”

“You mean you don’t have those kinds of pissing contests with Superman?”

“Language.” Bruce chided Damian gently. “And no. Clark and I have our differences, but we share a common respect for the value of life. This is just... juvenile.”

“Maybe because they’re teenagers,” Dick supplied helpfully.

“Hmm.” Bruce grunted.

Dick was familiar enough with Bruce-speak to translate that as ‘Fair point.’

They ended up watching two more episodes before Alfred demanded they stop ruining their eyesight and come eat. Dinner was another surprisingly pleasant event. Jason was a bit sulky, but Dick figured he was allowed be a bit upset after everything that happened to him. Cass didn’t fight with Damian or anyone, instead focusing on Tim, who ate his food quietly. There was definitely
something going on there, but Dick didn’t have the first clue what. Had something happened yesterday after he’d fallen unconscious?

Babs and Steph were still researching the Owls, but Alfred brought a bowl of food down to the cave and Bruce rang Barbara to specifically remind her to eat something. All in all, it was a pretty good meal. For the first time Dick got a glimpse of what his future family could be like, if they were all happy with each other.

He hoped they could stay like this, even after they grew back up.

After dinner they switched to watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Damian mocked the special effects of the first season, but Dick found some of them pretty impressive.

“So, who’s your favourite here?” He asked Damian.

“The Mayor.”

Bruce pulled a face.

“He comes in during season three.” Damian explained to confused Dick.

“Oh. Who’s my favourite?”

“Spike. You’ll meet him in season two.”

“What if I end up having a different favourite?”

“Well then I suppose the space time continuum will be irreversibly damaged by this change.”

“Cool.” Dick grinned.

Bruce sighed, a familiar sigh of a tired adult. But still he stayed, watching nineties TV with them. Dick wondered why. Not that he had a problem with it, but it was still so strange to have Bruce dedicate so much time to bonding with them.

Jason walked in a few minutes later. Unlike Cass, he actually stayed, sitting up on the couch next to Damian.

“We watching Buffy?”

“Yep. Season one.”

“Have you gotten to the episode where Cordelia-”

“Spoilers!” Dick and Damian yelled at the same time.

Dick swore Bruce actually laughed at their reaction, but it happened too fast for him to be certain.

There was tension between Bruce and Jason, probably due to the whole Joker incident. Dick noticed it, but both of them seemed comfortable not acknowledging it and pretending everything was fine. They’d probably talk about it later, alone.

For now, Dick let himself relax and enjoy the cheesiness of a demon using the internet to magically catfish students.
When he went to sleep that night, Dick was filled with a sense of calm. Tomorrow he might help Cass steal the pretzels from the pantry, or maybe talk about Buffy with Damian. He’d hang around the house and bond with his siblings and this version of Bruce who maybe wasn’t as bad as Dick originally thought.

Then he woke up in the middle of the night with Bruce looming over him.

“Have you seen Cassandra? Or Tim?”

Bruce’s face was dead serious, and Dick sighed. How foolish of him to think they could go more than one day without a crisis.

“No, not since we all went to bed.” He blinked blearily, rubbing his eyes. “They were whispering together a lot yesterday. I don’t know why, but it was definitely unusual.”

“Thank you. Go back to sleep now Dick.”

There was a part of Dick that really wanted to do that. This was like the third or fourth time Cass had gone missing, Batman could probably deal with it alone at this point.

But the other part of him, the Robin part who had trained so long and hard to be allowed jump across Gotham’s rooftops at night, that part of him couldn’t let this slide.

With a groan, he pushed himself out of bed. Bruce frowned, but didn’t protest as Dick followed after him.

“Were they kidnapped? Or did they run away?”

“No signs of a break in. Barbara caught a glimpse of Tim disabling one of the security cameras, and Cassandra, well… if she wanted to get around unseen she could.”

They passed Jason’s room, where the door was open but the bed was occupied. Damian was waiting for them at the end of the corridor. He had his Robin costume on, but his hair was messy and his expression even grumpier than usual.

“Batgirl is out patrolling, and she’s already covering both my shift and Father’s.” Damian said, forgoing a normal greeting. “Oracle will help as best she can while also keeping Gotham under control, but for the most part the three of us will have to solve this on our own.”

“Great.” Dick said sarcastically, still a little grumpy himself from being woken up. “So where do we start?”

“We start with finding out whose idea this was, and what their motives are.” Bruce said. “Did Cassandra want to go out fighting crime and convinced Tim to help her? Or did Tim want to escape the manor, and if so why?”

“And why did Cassandra agree to help him?”

“If she thinks he has a good reason, she would help him without question. But what reason would he have?”

“Uh…” Dick stuck his hand up. “This is just a theory, but when Jason was unconscious and feverish, Tim stayed beside him while I ran up and down to the cave. He spent a lot of time on his phone, and once I saw him searching some article about a tragedy in Haiti. Does that mean anything?”
Bruce’s face had gone pale, while Damian’s frown had deepened.

“He’s going after his parents’ murderers.” Bruce whispered. “He’s going to do what Jason did, kill them before he grows up again.”

“Maybe.” Damian said. “Or maybe he just wants to see them for himself, before he ‘dies’. He’s not Jason. I don’t think Drake could ever be a killer. Besides, Cassandra wouldn’t help him if that was the case.”

“Forget about that.” Dick cut in. “Where’s he going?”

“Arkham.” Bruce said instantly. “That’s where his mother’s killer is currently located. Robin helped prosecute him.”

“Are we sure this is why they snuck out?”

“If Cassandra wanted to leave, I can’t think why she’d take Tim with her.” Bruce said. “It has to have been Tim’s idea. The boy views growing up again as his own death, so I’m guessing this is some sort of bucket list for him. Like Damian said, this is something he must want to do before he ‘dies’.”

“So why didn’t he tell us?”

Both Bruce and Damian were silent.

“Maybe he thought we wouldn’t approve.” Damian said at last. “With so much on our plate, why would we have time for a visit the asylum?”

“Or maybe, he knew we wouldn’t approve.” Bruce replied. “Because he knows that what he’s going to do isn’t right.”

“Well there’s only one way to find out.” Dick said, pushing Bruce towards the study. “Let’s get the Batmobile and go!”

Bruce still looked broody, but he started moving without Dick forcing him, so that would do for now. He could brood all he liked on the drive over, Dick was certainly too tired for conversation.

He was going to kill Tim next time he saw him. He understood his brother wanting closure, but was it really so hard to communicate with your family and not sneak out in the middle of the night, throwing everyone into a panic?

Dick suddenly remembered just how many times that had happened since he got here. Huh. Maybe Tim was just following his older siblings’ bad example.

He changed into his costume as quickly as he could, jumping into the back of the Batmobile and sticking his tongue out at Damian, who was smirking from the front seat.

“Alright boys.” Bruce sounded as tired as Dick felt. “Let’s go pick up your siblings. Again.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The adventures of Cass and Tim attempting a prison break-in.
The Trespasser

Chapter Summary

Cass doesn't want to be here. But Tim roped her into this, so she's going to make sure she gets him out of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

12 hours earlier.

It started like this. Jason was back, and he wasn’t ok, but Cass didn’t know how to talk with him, or deal with that. He killed someone. So had she. But he wasn’t hurting the way she had been. It was different, a different she couldn’t understand.

Tim was acting different too. He was jumpy and fidgety and Cass was really confused why no one had said anything. Was she the only one who could see how unusual his body language was? Because it looked fairly obvious.

She hung out with Tim, because even with the weird jumpiness he was still pretty nice, and he always let her have the last scoop of ice cream. She wondered if she should talk to him about the jumpiness, but what could she say? Like Jason, she didn’t understand what was causing this change. All she could do was be there with him and try to make him have fun.

She thought it was working, until Tim cornered her after lunch.

“I know you know something is wrong with me. Don’t tell anyone.”

Cass raised an eyebrow. Tim’s directness was unexpected, but nice.

“I need your help to sneak out of the manor tonight. I need to get into Arkham. There’s a guy there who killed my mom and I... I need to see him. I need to see him with my own eyes, before it’s too late.”

Cass pointed behind her towards the living room, where Bruce and Damian’s voices could be heard chatting about the TV show they were watching. She gave him a questioning look, but Tim immediately shook his head.

“No. If I go to them, I know they won’t let me. It has to be a secret, because otherwise it would take too long and then I wouldn’t get the chance to do it before I changed back.”

Cass shook her head. There was no way for him to know for sure they wouldn’t let him. Asking Bruce was the simplest option.

“No!” Tim hissed. “If you tell them, they’ll say no. And then I’ll sneak out anyway. Only this time, I’ll be alone. Without you, the chances of me dying go up, very, very high. So either you help me tonight and we don’t tell anyone, or you break my trust and I risk this alone when they lower their guards.”
The hurt look she shot him was raw and deliberate. Tim squirmed a little, but even though he knew trying to pin her with guilt was wrong, he didn’t back down. Probably because he could tell he had her convinced. Cass wasn’t going to let him wander Gotham alone at night, even if the rest of the family would be mad at her.

That was pretty normal anyway. Ever since she got here she’d been causing them a lot of stress, and it probably didn’t help that she had no regrets about sneaking out. It was amazing they still loved her at all, but they were weird like that. Apparently older Cass had found herself a group of people who were willing to forgive her for anything.

Even killing someone. Cass still wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

She nodded once, curtly. Tim relaxed slightly, although his eyes were still full of guilt. Good. This was… what was the term Steph had used when the Talon cracked her helmet? A dick move, that was it.

Cass didn’t know what Dick had to do with being mean, but the term felt appropriate.

“Come wake me at night, when everyone’s asleep. We’ll sneak out of here and head towards Arkham. Deal?”

He stuck out his hand, and reluctantly, Cass shook it.

And now here they were. Cold and, in Tim’s case, shivering outside Arkham Asylum. They hadn’t worn their uniforms, but Tim at least had his coat on. Cass was still in her pyjamas. They were comfy.

“So uh, I’m guessing we can’t just walk in the front door?”

Cass rolled her eyes, and began walking around to the side. Sneaking in here had been simple enough; a child size hole in the chain linked fence that was easily ripped open wider by Cass. From the look of surprise on Tim’s face, she could tell he hadn’t expected them to make it this far.

The competitive part of her really wanted to prove him wrong now. This was still a bad idea, but she was stuck being a part of it, so she was going to do her job well.

There was a locked metal door at the side of the building, with three skips filled with rubbish beside it that made both of them wrinkle their noses. Cass eyed the side of the building carefully. Two stories up, one of the windows was open and there was a light on. The window was only open a fraction, and most likely didn’t open any further, but that was a fraction Cass could wriggle through.

“So what’s the plan?” Tim whispered. “Do you know how to pick locks? Because I could give it a try but I didn’t see any keyhole. I think the door opens from the other-”

Cass sprinted at the wall, jumped, and dug her fingers into the bricks.

“Oh.” Tim whispered from below.

He sounded impressed, which was strange. Cain had made her climb up walls with far less ridges and grooves than this. The space between bricks even worked as footholds, which meant she didn’t need to just use her arms when climbing up.

She scuttled up the wall and slipped in through the window. A man with a stubbly chin and bleary eyes squinted at her from a comfy looking armchair.
“That’s a new one.” He muttered. “Not sure I like meds that send me little girls as hallucinations.”

Cass ignored him, walking over to the door and examining it.

“Oh, so that’s what this is. Well sorry imagination, I’m staying right here. You can’t trick me into another prison break.”

The door wasn’t that strong. Cass stepped back, then kicked it once, twice, three times. It crashed open, and the man’s jaw dropped.

“Definitely not the right dose.” She heard him say as she left the room.

Guards came running up the stairs, but all of them were focused on the door and the man inside, not on the moving shadow darting from dark corner to dark corner. She made her way down two flights of stairs, but stopped before reaching the door to Tim.

The cells on this floor were different from the ones upstairs. The doors were more like jail cells, with bars instead of solid wood. These people were probably more dangerous, and needed more supervision than the first man she encountered. Most of the patients appeared to be sleeping, but there was one that caught her attention.

There was a man in the cell opposite her. A man wearing a black mask.

Now, Cass didn’t know much about hospitals of any kind. But she was pretty sure normal patients didn’t get to wear black masks. There must be something special about this guy.

Damian had told her about Black Mask. He said that he’d done bad things to Stephanie, but hadn’t told her the details. And then Stephanie had talked a little about what he’d done to her. She hadn’t said his name, but Cass had been able to guess who she meant.

Slowly, she moved into the light. The man seemed shocked to see her at first, but then his face split into a large grin.

“Hey there, little girl. Fancy helping me out of this cell? These mean evil people are keeping me prisoner here!”

Cass walked closer.

“That’s right, all I need you to do is unlock this cell door. Please save me, you’re the only one who can!”

It was tempting. Maybe once Tim’s plan was done, she would come back and break him out, just so they could have a proper fight.

For now, she settled on punching him in the face. Hard.

“Ow!” The man reeled back. “What the fuck did you do that for?”

She let herself get closer, watching as he reached his hands out to try and grab her. She caught his wrist and pulled him close, aiming for a chop to his neck. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he fell on the floor, unconscious.

Cass turned around, ready to leave and head to Tim. But something made her pause. A memory, of Steph’s face, when she talked about recovering from what he did to her.

She turned back around and spat on him.
Then she went and opened the door for Tim.

“Oh thank god.” Tim crept in, still shivering from the cold.

Cass wanted to give him her pyjama top, because she was dealing a lot better with the cool night air. But she had a feeling he’d be uncomfortable seeing her walk around without a top on, and besides, they were inside now.

“He’s on the third floor.” Tim told her “Cell block D, Room Number 3. We need to get up these stairs then go straight until we reach the north wall. Then right, and left, and then we should be there.”

Cass didn’t like relying on Tim for directions. She didn’t like relying on anyone really, but it could have been worse. Tim was very passionate about this, so he probably made sure his directions were accurate.

If they were wrong, then Cass wouldn’t trust him with something like this again.

Arkham wasn’t a nice place. With Tim by her side, it was harder to get around unseen. She kept him out of sight of the security guards and the cameras, but sometimes she had to let a criminal or two see him so they could sneak by. Some of them jeered, others made threats and a few of the creepiest ones just stared blankly.

Cass felt sorry for them.

One of the few she recognised was Two-Face. Damian had told her a bit about him. She didn’t hate him the way she did Black Mask, but she still twisted his hand when he tried to snatch Tim on their way past.

He yelped in pain, and she twisted harder. If he screamed for the guards it could be bad for them. She dragged him closer and slammed his head against the bars twice. He dropped to the floor, and she turned to face Tim.

Tim looked terrified. She couldn’t tell if he was scared of Arkham or scared of her. Either way, it didn’t matter. This was his plan, and her job was to keep him safe. If he didn’t like that, he should have cancelled this whole trip before it began.

They reached the door without further complications. It was a door with bars, but the room was darker inside, the fluorescent light from the corridor only stretching so far. No one was visible. Tim looked paler and paler the closer they got, and Cass kept a careful distance between them in case he decided to vomit.

“Ok.” Tim said, nervously bouncing up and down a little. “Ok, this is it. I need to see him, how do I see him? I have to get inside right?”

Cass rolled her eyes again. When they got back to the manor, she was spending more time with Dick. He seemed to be the only brother left who hadn’t annoyed her one way or another.

She walked up and rapped impatiently on the bars.

“What are you doing?” Tim hissed.

She stuck out her hand, and he hung back. From where he was standing now, he’d be able to see his mother’s killer, but the man would only be able to see Cass.
The man came forward, squinting suspiciously at the girl in front of him. Cass couldn’t explain it properly with words, but something about his body language gave her the creeps. Maybe it was because there was awareness in his eyes.

Some killers were good at recognising their own.

“Who are you?” he snapped. “What do you want with me?”

Cass remained silent. She didn’t want anything from him.

“Are you here to kill me, girl?” he sneered. “Go ahead. Batman tried to once, but he couldn’t beat me.”

He was lying. Cass didn’t need her body language skills to see that much. Still, it was nice to know Batman truly never killed, not the man who killed his son and not the man who killed his other son’s mother.

He was growing impatient with her silence. She didn’t care. Nothing he said meant anything to her. She was just waiting for Tim.

“Is that why you’re here? Because of Batman? Because of what I did to the Drakes? That’s all anyone ever seems to remember me for anyway. You know, I had a lot of other kills before them, but no one cares about that. Any time anyone comes to talk to me nowadays, it’s always about Batman and Robin or the Drakes. Why people care so much about such a sloppy kill I’ll never understand. Didn’t even kill the husband! Heard Captain Boomerang did that for me in the end.”

“It’s ok.” Tim’s voice rang out, small but with strength. “We can go now.”

Cass turned and walked away, leaving the confused criminal shouting after them.

Tim was shaking again. Cass didn’t think it was from the cold this time.

“I needed to see him.” He kept repeating. “Just to see him. I couldn’t- I can’t do anything else. I couldn’t hurt him, even though I wanted to.”

He turned to look at Cass, and for a moment she forgot how mad she was at him for dragging her out here. Because the look of grief and pain on his face made her want nothing more than to fix all of his problems, erase all of his hurt.

“He killed my mom.” Tim choked out.

Cass had never had a mother. Never really had a family either. If someone killed Cain, she honestly didn’t know how she would feel.

But she knew a bit about what mothers were supposed to be like. She could see how losing one could hurt, and Tim’s body didn’t lie. He was in huge pain right now, and even if she didn’t fully get the cause, she knew what she could do to ease it.

She hugged him. Hugged him tight and let him sob into her shoulder.


Cass didn’t have an answer. She just held him tighter and let him get it out.

After a minute, she felt a familiar presence behind her. She sighed, stepping back and letting Tim go.
He blinked blearily, then stumbled backwards when he noticed who had found them.

Batman loomed over them, glaring down. Cass gave a little shrug, half apology half “not my fault”. Tim was shaking again, just after she’d gotten him to calm down.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “I’m sorry. I just- I needed to see him. I had to know- I had to- I needed to see-”

Bruce stepped forward, crouching down to place a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“It’s alright Tim.” he said softly. “I understand.”

Sometimes when fighting people, it got to a point where Cass could see them lose hope. She broke their spirits before breaking their jaws, and afterwards Cain would ruffle her hair proudly.

Cass had never seen anyone break the way Tim did. Bruce wrapped him up quickly in his cape before she could get more than a glimpse, but the look in his eyes was scary. She wasn’t scared of him, but she was scared for him. For the pain he must be feeling right now, the hopelessness and the brokenness.

“It’s alright.” Bruce said, and with a start she realised he was talking to her. “I’ve got him. It’s all going to be alright. Damian and Dick are waiting for us in the car. You did good Cassandra. You kept him safe.”

And for some reason, his words actually made her feel better. Bruce had raised Tim before. He’d probably seen Tim break like this at some point. Just because Cass didn’t know what was going on didn’t mean that everyone else in the family was unsure.

Tim was going to be ok. He was just grieving, like Jason had with his mother. Like the look Bruce got every time Jason’s death was mentioned, the same look Dick got when talking about his parents.

Grief like that looked really awful. Cass hoped she never had to experience it.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Jason isn't pleased that he missed the night. Nor is he pleased with how easily everyone moves on from what Tim did.
The Pariah

Chapter Summary

Jason knew they would keep treating him differently after what happened. It doesn’t mean it hurts any less.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Jason woke up, he knew something wasn’t right.

It wasn’t bright out yet, which meant that something other than the sun had woken him up. Jason was usually a heavy sleeper, but if something shady was going on around him, his body would somehow be able to sense it. His good instincts had saved him and his mom more than once back in Crime Alley, once when a guy tried to rob them in the middle of the night, and once when a drug dealer stayed the night and tried to kill them in their sleep.

But he was in Wayne Manor now, and you’d have to be crazy to try and rob from Batman. It could be the Owls, and that thought made Jason tip-toe carefully over to the door, opening it a crack and silently peeking out.

There were voices in the hall, getting closer. Jason held his breath, then relaxed when he heard Alfred’s voice. Footsteps passed and Jason watched everyone walk by his bedroom. With wide eyes he realised that the entire family was out there.

“Quiet.” Bruce whispered. “Don’t wake Jason. He deserves a good night’s rest.”

“I can’t believe he slept through everything.” That was Dick. “What do we even tell him?”

“The truth, obviously.” Jason was relieved to hear Damian’s reply. “Tim and Cassandra sneaked out. We tracked them down and dragged them back.”

“Good to know.” Jason chose that moment to step out into the corridor.

Only Dick and Tim jumped, but it was still satisfying.

“Why’d you sneak out?” Jason asked, focusing in on Tim.

Tim shrank under his glare, but Jason didn’t let up. He wanted to know what happened, and why he wasn’t involved.

Bruce stepped between them, placing one hand gently on each boy’s back.

“Tim’s very tired right now. I think we should all go to bed and then tomorrow I’d be happy to explain.”

Jason wanted to protest, but it was hard to say no to Batman. Even though he’d killed the Joker, which was a big Batman no-no. Funny how that worked. Logically he knew that he could argue, and maybe even win, but with Alfred and Bruce both staring at him his gut just told him to do what
“Fine.” Jason muttered. “Wake me up with all the noise and then don’t bother explaining anything. Sure.”

“Jay-”

Bruce sounded upset, but Jason was too caught up in his angry sulk to stop now. He stomped back to his room, relieved when no one followed him.

Or at least, that’s what he thought.

He flopped down and closed his eyes. Then he twitched.

Something wasn’t right.

He opened his eyes and looked up. A small figure was pressed against the corner of the ceiling, staring down at him. Jason’s brain recognised the face about two seconds after his mouth opened.

He shrieked and fell out of the bed. Cass jumped down and tilted her head curiously at him.

“What are you doing?” Jason hissed. “How did you get in here? Why did you think that was a good idea?”

She reached out and poked him.

Jason’s first instinct was to snap at her, but he stopped himself. He looked at her, really tried to understand where she was coming from with this.

The concern in her eyes was what made him realise. She was trying to help him.

“I’m fine.” He said. “I know I was cranky with Tim but it’s ok. I’m not going to make you act out everything that happened tonight to explain it to me. Let’s just wait until the morning.”

Cass blinked, then shrugged.

*Your choice.* She seemed to say.

Jason expected her to leave, but instead she curled up at the foot of his bed.

He could ask her to leave and she would. He knew that.

But despite her weirdness, his sister was clearly a talented fighter. And after being kidnapped very recently, having her watch over him was a comfort Jason appreciated.

He got back into bed, closed his eyes and slept.

When Jason woke up in the morning, someone was stuffing bread against his nose.

Unsurprisingly, it was Cass. Jason took the bread with a nod of thanks, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Outside he could hear voices, and when he followed the noise, Bruce and Tim were visible in the breakfast room. They were all smiles and laughter, like Tim hadn’t ran away last night, and it made something curl in Jason’s stomach.

He walked into the room, chest full of words he couldn’t get out. Tim visibly gulped when he saw
him, and Bruce’s smile seemed a little more forced.

(He wasn’t reading into things, right? Bruce really was treating him differently. Of course he was, Jason was a murderer now.)

“Jason, come sit.” Bruce patted the seat next to him, only slightly awkwardly. “We’ve got a choice of five different cereals today.”

“Cool.” Jason mumbled, hopping up and grabbing some cocoa puffs.

“About last night…” Tim began, then hesitated when Jason looked up.

“What’s the big deal?” Jason tried not to sound too annoyed. “It’s not like you snuck out to dance on my mom’s grave. I’m not mad at you Tim, I just want to know what happened.”

“Tim went to see his mother’s killer.” Bruce interjected, taking the attention off a grateful Tim. “He convinced Cassandra to help him sneak out, and then when we realised they were missing, Alfred and I woke Damian and Dick up to ask them for help. I decided not to involve you due to the recent trauma you suffered.”

“Right. Trauma.” Jason muttered.

It made sense. Of course Bruce wouldn’t trust him to go along on this. He’d killed the Joker, Bruce was probably worried he’d shoot up a bunch of other criminals.

“So what did you do, once you found the killer?” He turned the attention back to Tim. “Did you punch him? Yell at him?”

“I didn’t need to.” Tim stirred his cornflakes as he spoke. “Cass got his attention and I just listened as he talked. The things he said… he’s a monster. I couldn’t stand to look at him for one more second.”

“Glad that worked out in the end.” Jason said.

“Yeah.” Tim replied.

The following silence was definitely awkward, no matter how Jason looked at it.

Thankfully, a distraction came in the form of Cass, who walked in, grabbed the box of cocoa puffs, poked Tim in the head, and walked out again.

“What’s that about?” Jason asked.

“Oh I… uh… kind of blackmailed her into coming with me last night. I don’t think she’s happy about that.”

“You did what?”

“Well ok, blackmailing might be too harsh a word but…”

Jason looked over at Bruce, who was calmly reading the paper. Had he known about this? Was he ok with this?

Was Jason overreacting? Maybe. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was some kind of double standard in play. He knew killing the Joker would make Bruce treat him differently. He’d been prepared for that.
But still. It wasn’t fair. Jason got kidnapped and killed the guy who tortured him. Tim deliberately snuck out and dragged Cass into it. And yet somehow Bruce could look past all Tim’s mistakes and still treat him the same, but he couldn’t do that for Jason?

It just wasn’t fair.

He pushed back his chair and ran out after Cass. He could hear Bruce calling him but he couldn’t bring himself to go back. He knew that things would be like this, no matter what Barbara told him. All he could do now was try to avoid Bruce until he grew back up.

It would be worth it when older Jason came back to a world free of the Joker. Jason could suffer through the unfairness of it all for a little while longer.

As he followed Cass through the halls, he wondered why she was so ok with him. She’d been angry at Damian for killing someone, but with Jason she was weirdly nice. Why?

Probably because she’d been told he killed in self-defence; Jason realised. She felt sorry for him because she thought the choice had been forced on him.

Well. He wasn’t going to tell her the truth now. He needed some people to hang out with before he grew back up, and Bruce and Tim clearly weren’t options.

He suddenly realised that he didn’t know where they were going, and just as he thought that Cass turned into a room Jason hadn’t been in before. With wide eyes he took in the sight of the large home gym. There was all sorts of gymnastics equipment, strength machines, treadmills and other stuff that Jason didn’t recognize but looked cool nonetheless.

Dick was there too, holding onto a pair of rings longingly. He didn’t pull himself up though, and Jason felt bad for him. Dick’s shoulders were still heavily bandaged. He wouldn’t be swinging out of anything for a while.

With Dick and Damian injured, Jason was probably the second best fighter now amongst the kids. That thought almost made him laugh nervously. If the Owls attacked again…

Cass pulled herself onto a set of monkey bars and was flying around the room in no time, while Dick pouted below. Jason walked over to a plain set of bars and examined them curiously. He’d never used gym equipment before, but this looked pretty straightforward. He gripped the bars and jumped up, straining as he held himself in the air.

Honestly, he had no clue what he was doing. But it didn’t look like he was breaking anything, so he was probably doing it right.

“You’re doing it wrong.”

Damian stood in the doorway. Despite his words, his tone was light, so Jason just grinned back.

“No I’m not. I’m just playing around.”

“That’s not a toy. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“You sound like a forty year old man.” Jason rolled his eyes, but hopped down.

“ Compared to you I am.” Damian smirked, and tilted his head. “Come on. I want to show you something.”
Jason looked behind him. Cass was busy carrying Dick through the air while using her feet to swing from the ropes. Dick was giggling as they swung, and it made Jason smile too.

“Is that not more dangerous than what I was doing?”

“If it was you doing it? Absolutely.” Damian replied. “But it’s Cassandra. So I’m going to trust her not to drop Dick on his head.”

In this case, Jason thought that was a pretty fair judgement.

“So what do you want to show me?” Jason asked, following Damian out of the gym.

“Video games.” Damian answered. “Do you like them?”

“You mean like a Gamecube or a Playstation? Never had one but they look cool. One time a kid at school let me play his GameBoy, and that was pretty fun.”

“In that case, playing Skyrim should blow your mind.”

“Skyrim?”

“It’s a Playstation game.” Damian explained. “Father bought it for me, part of his attempt to get me interested in normal child toys. Of course, he has no idea what normal child toys are, so he just looked at everything Tim liked to do and picked things he hoped I wouldn’t hate.”

“Oh.” Jason didn’t know what to say to that. “Is it good?”

“I’ll help you create a character and you can see for yourself.”

As they entered Damian’s room and booted up the weird looking Playstation, there was one question that lingered in Jason’s mind.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked. “I mean, it sounds fun, but why me?”

“Because my job is to look after you all, and I felt like you would enjoy this the most.”

“So Bruce didn’t put you up to it?”

“Why would he?”

Jason scoffed, but Damian just stared blankly at him.

“Because I’m a crazy murderer now, remember?” he snapped. “I can’t be trusted.”

“Well that’s just stupid.” Damian snorted. “I’m a murderer too. Why would you be singled out as the crazy one?”

“Probably cus I killed the Joker.” Jason sighed. “Everyone keeps telling me that Bruce’s reaction is ‘complicated’ due to our ‘history’. But what I’m seeing is that it’s one rule for me one rule for everyone else.”

“Well if that’s true it’s also very stupid.” Damian handed Jason the controller. “The Joker tortured you, and you shot him while he was fighting Batman. I’ve killed people for much less. Cassandra’s only kill was a man she’d never met before that day. You killed a horrible monster that everyone hates, while he was threatening people you care about. I don’t see why you should be treated any different than Cassandra or me.”
“Probably because I don’t regret it.” Jason tried to sound strong. “He had it coming. The world’s better off now that he’s dead. But Bruce only sees the fact that I killed him when I didn’t need to.”

“Maybe so, but that’s just Father. No one else is going to hold it against you.”

“But I don’t regret it.” Jason didn’t know why he was pushing this. “Good guys are supposed to regret killing people, aren’t they? But I’m glad I killed him.”

“Again, it’s the Joker. You could dance on his grave and Father would be the only one upset.”

He didn’t know why Damian’s flippant attitude annoyed him so much. This was what he wanted, right? Someone to tell him that what he did was ok?

“What if it’s not just the Joker?” he said. “What if I’m ok with killing all the asshole scumbags in Gotham? Would that not bother you?”

Damian switched off the TV, turning to face Jason properly.

“What are you trying to get out of this?” he asked. “Do you want me to say I’d disapprove? That it would wound me to see poor little Jason go down such a dark path? What are you trying to gain with this tough guy act?”

“It’s not an act!” Jason protested. “I am tough! And I am ok with killing people who have it coming!”

“You killed one serial killer.” Damian shook his head. “One who was intent on torturing and killing you. That doesn’t make you evil, no matter how much you pretend it does.”

“Then why does it feel like everyone is judging me!” Jason threw the controller on the ground in frustration.

“Because we’re concerned about you.” Damian replied calmly. “Caring doesn’t equal judging.”

“I know that!”

“Good. Then you know when I offer you my PS3, it’s not because I’m judging you for whatever evil you think you are. It’s because you’re my brother, and it’s my duty to be concerned for you and try and keep you happy.”

Jason wanted to argue, to say that even if Damian wasn’t judging, Bruce and the adults definitely were. But what good would that do? Damian couldn’t control them or how they felt. He was just trying to be nice, and it was up to Jason to decide whether he wanted to accept it or not.

He picked up the controller, and Damian gave him a genuine smile.

“Let’s get you set up with a character. And if you throw my controller again, I’m breaking into older Jason’s safe house to pay for a new one.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Tim prepares to say goodbye
A/N: Sorry about the wait! With exams over I should be able to get chapters up regularly again.
The Doomed

Chapter Summary

They start growing back up. Tim's anxiety increases tenfold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It started with Cassandra.

Tim was in the kitchen when it happened. Two days after he’d visited his mom’s killer. He was trying to enjoy his poptart as Alfred chased Cass around the counters. It felt worryingly normal, watching Cass hoard her chocolate bars on top of the fridge while Alfred stood below with his hands on his hips. Worrying, because Tim knew it couldn’t last. This wasn’t normal, it just felt that way to him because he was a part of the abnormality.

“Miss Cassandra if you don’t come down here right this instant-”

Cass jumped down, landed on Alfred’s shoulders, and used them to spring back onto the top of the china shelves. She sat there as Tim took another bite of his poptart, trying not to giggle at the look on Alfred’s face.

“I’ll get her.” Bruce walked in, not bothering to hide his own smile. “Cassie honey, come on down. Stephanie is looking for someone to spar with.”

Cass perked up at that, and she carefully climbed to her feet. Alfred looked very stressed as the china wobbled, but Bruce just calmly stuck his arms out, waiting for her to jump.

She did, and at first Tim though Bruce would catch her just fine. But halfway through the jump, there was a popping sound, like a cork coming out of a wine bottle. Bruce’s eyes widened as the girl in front of him grew in the blink of an eye, and instead of catching her she crashed into him, knocking them both to the ground.

Tim jumped off his chair, poptart forgotten. Alfred was already helping them up, but neither of them looked upset. Cass, the real Cass, was smiling, and Bruce was too.

“Welcome back.” Bruce said fondly. “We missed you, Cassie.”

Cass dusted herself off, and Tim continued to stare with wide eyes. This was his sister in her actual body, nineteen years old. The t-shirt she had been wearing had turned into a very short crop top, and her jeans lay in tatters on the floor. She was still small for her age, and she still looked like the Cass he knew, but there was something different about her aura. This Cass was more relaxed, more confident in her place here despite only being back for five seconds.

“That was… not fun.” Cass said. “Sorry Alfred.”

Oh right, future Cass could talk. Tim had forgotten that.

“That’s quite alright Miss Cassandra.” Alfred looked the most relieved out of all of them that Cass
was back. “Although I must say, your younger self was quite the handful.”

“Yes. She is very small.”

For a moment, Tim was just caught up in the weirdness of it all. This was definitely Cass, but it wasn’t his Cass. This Cass was talking, and completely at ease around Bruce, and apologised to Alfred. She had the same mannerisms as her younger self, but they were softer somehow. To Tim, who’d never seen this version outside of pictures and videos, it was completely bizarre.

And it had only been half a minute.

“Am I the first one back?”

That question seemed to snap Bruce and Alfred out of their Cass-is-back happiness. Cass took one look at their faces and nodded seriously.

“Jason.”

“Jason.” Bruce agreed heavily. “I need an excuse to stay near him, so that I’ll be ready to contain him when he comes back.”

“Dick and Jason will both want to see this new Cass.” Tim piped up. “We can use that to get them wherever we need them to be.”

“Might I suggest the gym?” Alfred added. “You can tell them that Master Bruce is going to spar with her, and then keep them there until the next one transforms.”

“If it’s Dick or Tim who transforms, you and Damian will have to handle that.” Bruce told Alfred. “If it’s Jason who transforms, get the kids out of there and leave me and Cassie to handle him.”

Part of Tim was curious to see what older Jason would be like, but the rest of him already knew enough from what he’d read and heard, and was in no hurry to get hurt.

Besides, there was a far bigger issue at hand. Time had run out; they were growing back up. Tim remembered all the research he’d done on Captain Boomerang. He wouldn’t get to see him before time ran out, but for some reason it didn’t seem to bother him that much. After seeing his mother’s killer, the thought of seeing his father’s didn’t seem too pressing. The illusion that it was a worthwhile venture had been shattered.

Was his language getting too fancy? Was he going to be next? No, he needed to calm down. There was no proof that he would be the next one to grow back up.

Bruce was walking out of the kitchen, and Alfred handed Cass a set of clothes that fit her. Tim had missed how the conversation ended, which was a bad sign about how anxious he was getting. No matter what he tried to tell himself, the thought that kept running through his mind was that he was going to die, and he really didn’t want to.

He yelped in surprise as Cass picked him up, slinging him onto her back. He grabbed on quickly to her fresh hoodie before he could fall, and she carried him piggyback style out of the kitchen.

“It will be ok, little brother.”

“Thanks.” Tim mumbled.

“I’m still me. I remember everything. You will too.”
That did make him feel a little better. It was probably the best way to think about it. He and older Tim were the same, he’d just forgotten some of their life.

Well, seven years to be exact. Which made it a little harder to think of him and seventeen-year-old Tim as the same person, but that was what he had to do because otherwise he’d start to panic about dying when it wasn’t even really a death and then-

Cass threw him up in the air again. Tim shrieked as he flew over her head, and glared at her when she caught him.

“You’re really weird.” he said.

“You thought the same about little me.” Cass smirked. “Just like I think the same about both you and big Tim.”

“What do you think of me?” Tim was curious now, because as far as he could tell Cass was his favourite sibling, but without words he’d never really been sure how she felt about him.

“Best brother, but you worry too much. Smart, but needs protection.”

“And is that what little you thought?”

“Yes, up until you forced her to go to Arkham together. Then she thought you were… an asshole.”

Tim felt himself flush red, embarrassed by Cass’s frank honesty.

“Sorry about that.” he said, cringing.

“It’s fine.” Cass shrugged. “I’m glad you were not alone.”

They reached the gym, and Cass placed him gently down on the ground. Steph was the only one there, doing cartwheels on the sparring mats. She looked up when she heard them come in, and then her eyes widened when she saw Cass.

Then, she shrieked. Louder than both of Tim’s squeals when Cass had thrown him. She charged over and full on tackled Cass, causing Tim to dodge out of the way when they fell on the ground together.

“You!” Steph yelled, and Cass started to laugh. “You are such a little brat! Do you have any idea how stressful it was to babysit you?”

“I remember.” Cass grinned. “You were very good. Very patient.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” Steph grumbled, but she was smiling as she helped Cass up off the floor. “Who else is back? And who knows?”

“No one else. Bruce and Alfred know. Barbara will probably know soon.”

“Ooh, can I be the one to tell her?” Steph’s eyes lit up in excitement, and she whipped her phone out from her jacket pocket. “Tim, get in here! Both of you say cheese!”

Cass smiled and held up a peace sign as Steph took a selfie of the three of them. Tim looked as awkward as he felt, but Steph didn’t seem to mind. She sent the photo to Babs, grinning as she did so.

“She is going to flip. I mean, she’ll obviously be thrilled that your back. But the fact that the mighty
Oracle was the last to know? I expect seven new hidden cameras in Wayne Manor before the end of the week.”

Tim watched them laughing and smiling together, and he felt like there was a large knot in his stomach. Everyone here was so happy that the old Cass was back. Not a single one seemed sad to lose the Cass Tim knew. Would it be the same way for him? His entire existence would just be a funny story about the time Tim got de-aged?

He knew he was the only one having this existential crisis. Everyone else seemed comfortable not seeing the siblings and their de-aged selves as different people. Maybe when the old Tim got back, he’d see things the same way as them, but he wasn’t back yet. Right now, it was this Tim, and this Tim couldn’t stop picturing growing back up as the death of him.

He’d thought he’d be fine with the small bucket list he made. Look his mom’s killer in the eye, look his dad’s killer in the eye, complete a Rainbow Road race on the highest difficulty level without falling off once (that one had taken a lot of time yesterday).

But now, he couldn’t stop thinking of the legacy he’d leave behind. He didn’t want to just be a story, an annoying gap of memory that people would laugh about later. If he was going to die, then he was going to do his best to change things for older Tim before he went.

“Hey Cass?” he said, interrupting Steph’s explanation of all the drama Cass had missed while small. “I don’t know if Tim every told you this, but I read some of his diary and texts, and I think he really appreciates having you as his sister. So, thanks I guess. For being there for him.”

At first Cass looked confused, and she looked so much like younger Cass that Tim’s heart ached a little. Then her face melted into a smile, and she reached forward to ruffle his hair.

“Thank you.” she said. “And don’t worry. I will always be there for my little brother.”

“Cool.” Tim felt himself grow embarrassed again. “That’s… good to know.”

He turned to face Steph, who was looking at him with a knowing expression that did nothing to lessen his embarrassment. This was awkward, yes, but it would be worth it when older Tim got back.

“So…” he cleared his throat. “I know that things between you and Tim aren’t great. And I don’t know all the specifics behind that. But what I know for certain is that you mean a lot to him, so maybe if he gets back, you guys could talk things out and… stuff.”

“It’s ok kid.” Steph looked mildly amused, which was better than angry and annoyed. “You don’t have to solve all Tim’s problems for him. The two of us will be fine, it’s just going to take time for us to heal and grow as close as we used to be.”

“Dating?” Cass asked.

“Definitely not.” Steph said firmly. “But close friends is a possibility I’m willing to work towards, if Tim is too.”

“He is.” Tim said quickly. “Or at least, he will be. I’m sure of it.”

Steph shot him a look, like she was concerned over his sudden desire to become Tim’s spokesperson. But she didn’t get it. Her and older Tim may have time, but he didn’t. He could transform back any minute, so every second counted. Whatever legacy he wanted to leave behind, he had to do it now.
“He will still be you.” Cass said suddenly. “You will still be him. I promise.”

“What if I’m not?” Tim burst out, voice louder than intended. “What if it’s different for me? What if I’m not wrong about feeling like we’re two different people?”

“He’ll still have your memories.” Steph said. “You’ll still be a part of him, and you’ll live on.”

“Tim will remember how you felt.” Cass added. “I remember what small Cass thought and felt. That’s why I’m looking forward to fighting Bruce.”

“You’re fighting Bruce?” Steph turned to face Cass, her face lighting up. “Can we watch? I want to see you kick his ass.”

“Everyone can watch.” Cass grinned back. “Little Cass would have wanted everyone to see.”

They both seemed so certain about this that Tim couldn’t help but calm down a bit. Even if he was right, older Tim would have his memories. He closed his eyes and through really hard.

Please go see a therapist.

Satisfied, Tim opened his eyes, just as Bruce walked into the gym with all three boys trailing behind. Seeing Jason and Damian reminded him of what he’d read in the diary, so he closed his eyes again.

Heck, just take better care of yourself. Talk to the people who love you. Let them help.

When he opened his eyes again, Dick and Jason where crowding around Cass with wide eyes. She smiled happily at them, answering all their questions with short and simple replies.

“Yes, I remember being small.”

“Yes, I will beat Bruce. No problem.”

“It’s weird being back. But I’m ok.”

Eventually, they let her on the mats to fight Bruce. Despite the hyped-up atmosphere from the kids, both Cass and Bruce seemed calm and happy. When the match began, Cass dodged every strike, and even though he was focusing intensely, there was a proud smile on Bruce’s face.

After a minute or two of attempted attacks followed by quick blocks and retreats, Bruce finally overextended on one of his punches. Cass wasted no time tripping him and causing him to hit the mats. By the time he turned around, her fingers were at his throat.

“You’re knocked out now.” she informed him with a smug smile.

The kids all cheered and hollered, delighted that they’re big sister had lived up to the stories. Cass took a mock bow, and Bruce’s proud smile seemed to grow three sizes.

He’d never looked at little Cass that way. He’d always been worried and distant. Tim understood why, but it still got to him.

Suddenly, there was a popping sound. For a terrifying second Tim thought it was him, but instead it was a much older Dick, who was now completely naked. The shock on his face lasted for a longer time than with Cass, and he stumbled when Bruce tried to approach him, one hand held out in warning.

“Just… just give me a minute.”
Dick’s voice was so much deeper. Unlike Cass, he looked very distressed to be back. Tim wasn’t sure what was so overwhelming to him, but it was enough to make Dick run out of the room, stumbling as he went.

“Damian follow him. Stephanie, take Tim and keep him safe until he grows up. Jason, you stay here with me.”

No one questioned Bruce’s orders. Damian immediately shot out after Dick, while Steph took Tim’s hand.

“C’mon Tim. We can find something to distract you if you want.”

Tim doubted there was a distraction good enough in the world, but he let Steph lead him out of the gym. He stopped when he saw Cass close the door and lock it, leaving her and Bruce inside the gym with Jason.

“What’s wrong?” Steph asked.

Tim didn’t have time to go into all the ways that question could be answered, so instead he just pointed at the door.

“Can I listen in on them? In case Jason wants someone to talk to.”

Steph gave him a look, like she knew just how weak his excuse to eavesdrop was. But still, she rolled her eyes and nodded. Probably felt bad for him, being so scared of growing up.

He suddenly remembered something else he needed to say before he went.

“I found a box of antidepressants hidden in Tim’s bookshelf. I’m not sure if he’s meant to be taking them or not, but will you let Bruce know?”

And now Steph looked really concerned. Her nod this time was far more serious, which was good enough for Tim. He trusted her, and he trusted Bruce to deal with his older self.

It didn’t feel like enough. But it would have to do.

He put his ear to the door, hearing Jason’s voice clear enough through it.

“I still don’t get it. Why do Tim and I have to be separated? He looks like he’s freaking out big time, maybe I can help.”

“It’s just…” Bruce sighed. “We’re worried what state your older self might be in when he gets back.”

“What do you-”

There was a popping sound. The room fell silent.

“…Jason?” Bruce said, and Tim had never heard Batman sound so unsure.

“Get away from me!” A deep voice screamed. “Let me out of here right now.”

“Calm down.” That was Bruce again, his voice deeper and firmer. “We don’t want to hurt you. Jay-lad, please-”

“Don’t call me that!” The voice that must belong to older Jason bellowed. “That’s bullshit! You have
your little guard dog here and you want me to believe that all you want is to talk?”

“Can I break his face now?” That was Cass.

“Fuck you too, sister.” Jason sneered.

“Enough. Both of you.” Bruce snapped. “We can’t let you leave until we know you’re not a danger to others. I don’t want to hurt you Jason, but I can’t let you walk out of here knowing that you’ll go back to killing people.”

“You think you can stop me? I’m not a weak kid anymore Bruce!”

There was a sound of a scuffle. Bruce grunted, and Jason snarled.

“We don’t have to-” Bruce’s voice was muffled, like he had a broken nose.

There was a cracking sound, and then silence again.

“Sorry.” Cass said.

“It’s fine.” Yeah, Bruce’s nose was definitely broken. “He needed to be stopped. We can try again when he regains consciousness.”

Tim wanted keep listening, but right then, his whole body started to fizz.

There was honestly no other way to describe it. It felt like every atom he was made of was shaking and bubbling. He had one second to thank Jason for being an effective distraction, one second for the full impact of what was about to happen to hit him, and one final second to look into Steph’s worried eyes and realise that there was still so much left he wanted to do.

_ I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die._

Then Tim didn’t think anything anymore.

Chapter End Notes

_next time: The dust begins to settle._
The Fixer

Chapter Summary

Barbara does her best to smooth things over.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So Tim’s going to be alright?”

“I think so.” Even through the mic, Barbara could hear the nervousness in Steph’s voice. “His younger self got so worked up over turning back that he fainted when it happened, but Alfred said Tim should wake up just fine.”

Just fine. Well that was probably a lie, but she understood why Alfred would say it. Stephanie definitely needed the reassurance.

“You made the right decision, leaving him with his family.”

“Yeah.” Steph didn’t sound so sure. “Me and Tim aren’t as buddy-buddy the way me and little Tim were. I know he’d have wanted me to stay, but this Tim will be much happier to see Bruce or Alfred.”

“I’m sure Tim would have been perfectly happy to see you too. But after everything that’s happened, I do think that it’s best he talks to Bruce first. Right now, you’re more useful to me here.”

“Agreed.” Cass’s voice chirped through the comms. “So can we fight now?”

Barbara hesitated, looking at the camera feed from their masks to observe the building the girls were facing. Countless hours of research, analysing and planning had led her to this one rundown warehouse, which she knew for a fact was the main hideout currently in use by the Court of Owls. They usually went with something fancier, but considering how they’d lost every fight so far it was no surprise that they were running scared.

Barbara wasn’t scared, but she was worried. It was why she hesitated to give the order, something in her gut telling her to double check that everything was fine.

“Cass, are you sure you’re up for this?”

“I’m fine.”

“No you’re not.” Barbara didn’t leave any room for debate.

“No I’m not.” Cass relented. “I hated feeling weak and scared. I hated remembering everything. But these people hurt my family. Fighting them will make me feel less… helpless.”

“You’re really enjoying having your words back, aren’t you?” Stephanie joked, but then her voice became softer. “Seriously Cass, we can reschedule if you’re not ok. No one would blame you for needing more time. I mean, you went from being trapped in an unfamiliar world and barely able to
communicate, to suddenly having a ton of awful memories, including dying twice.”

“It’s the drugged memories that I hate.” Cass shrugged. “Dying wasn’t that bad, the first death is a nice memory.”

“See, when you say stuff like that it doesn’t ease my concern for you at all.”

“I’m ok.” Cass insisted. “I’m… coping. So can we fight these guys, please?”

There were a million logical arguments Barbara could have given against letting Cass do this, but she knew Cass was stubborn enough to refute every one of them. She sighed, doing one last sweep of the building.

“Go ahead. Remember, gas first, then take out the Talons.”

She watched anxiously through the cameras as they crept down towards the warehouse. It was a strange feeling, to be more worried for Cassandra than for Stephanie. Not that she didn’t always worry about the both of them, but when it came to fighting Cassandra was just so capable. Every time Barbara sent her out for an average patrol night, she was fully confident that Cass could beat every lowlife criminal she came across. The girl could dodge bullets, after all.

But now Barbara was deeply worried. Cass claimed she was coping, and although she was handling the whole thing better than her brothers, that was a very low bar to cross.

Part one of the plan went fine. Before entering, Black Bat and Batgirl used the gas Barbara had given them to fill the entire warehouse, knocking out all the Owls. Once they put on their gas masks, the harder part began. The Talons were still active, just like Barbara had assumed, but luckily they were prepared for that.

After days spent examining the body of Dick’s great grandfather, she and Stephanie finally had a breakthrough. Freezing the Talons caused them to shut down, or so they assumed from how the one they captured reacted. With this information, both Batgirl and Black Bat were equipped with a large tank of liquid nitrogen to fight the Talons, and were careful not to freeze any of the unconscious humans as they did so.

There were a few close calls, where the Talons stood too near the Owls for the girls to freeze them and so they had to fight. The tanks could have been an issue then, but Cass dove into every fight and ended them quickly, before either she or Steph could get injured.

In the end, it took under half an hour for them to clear the place. Barbara sent an anonymous tip to the police as they took off. Whoever was behind those Owl masks, she had enough evidence on them from their previous assaults on the family to make the police detain them.

It was all so neat and easy. Barbara knew that this wasn’t the end, that there were still more Owls and Talons out there lurking in the shadows. But they’d come after the family at their weakest and failed, so how well would they do now that everyone was back to full strength?

Well, physically they were strong. Mentally…

She tuned back in to what Steph and Cass were chatting about, leaning against the ledge of an apartment rooftop.

“So, feel better now?”

“A bit.” Cass sounded disappointed. “I remember them being tougher when I was small.”
“They weren’t tough to you? Because they were really tough for me.”

“That makes sense. You’re you.”

Stephanie scoffed, and even without seeing it Barbara could picture the smirk on Cass’s face.

“You had an excuse when you were small, but now? You better be prepared to get hit if you talk shit.”

“Try and catch me.” Cass jumped up onto the ledge of the roof. “You should have played rooftop tag when I was little. Maybe then… you could have won.”

“Oh it’s on.” Stephanie jumped up after her, and with a giggle Cass dove down towards the streets below.

Barbara switched the comms off, her worries somewhat eased. It made sense that Cass would cope the best, she didn’t have any sort of normal childhood like the boys did, so getting her memories wouldn’t be such a painful contrast to the innocence of youth. Unlike-

There was a knock at her window. She swivelled around, stunned. Who would visit her out of the blue and be polite enough to knock? Dinah? Kirk?

Neither. It was who Barbara had feared it would be. Dick crouched in the window with heavy eyes, wearing rumpled civilian clothes. Barbara hurried to let him in before anyone saw him.

“Dick! What are you doing here?”

“Had to get out.” He mumbled, and it was clear that he wasn’t alright on any level. “Tim woke up and Bruce was talking to him. I was going to be next and I just… couldn’t.”

His body language was tense, ready for a fight. He expected her to judge him, and it broke her heart.

“That’s fine.” Barbara said softly. “You don’t have to explain anything to me, ok? You can stay here for as long as you need.”

He was shivering, she noticed. But she didn’t want to say anything, in case he took it the wrong way. In his current state, any attempt to physically help him could cause him to get defensive. He was already eyeing her warily, like he suspected this was a trap.

“I’m not Bruce. I’m not going to try and play mind games with you Dick. If you want to stay then stay, if you want to talk then talk.”

For a moment she thought he’d just leave, clam up and try to find somewhere else to hide. But then he seemed to deflate, the fight in his eyes dying, replaced by a defeated look.

“You knew.”

“Yes.” Barbara said immediately. “I knew.”

He took a moment to process that. She eyed him levelly, but didn’t say a word.

“There were no cameras.” Dick said hoarsely. “How?”

“The same way Bruce did. Witness reports before and after the incident, as well as Tarantula’s own statements. She didn’t hold back in talking about it, and combined with the state everyone said you were in at the time, we both made the logical assumption that it wasn’t consensual.”
Dick flinched at that last word. Barbara longed to reach out, to take his hand, but that gesture might not be appreciated at the minute.

“Why didn’t you say anything? Why didn’t you talk to me?”

“Because you didn’t talk to me. Or to Bruce. Or to anyone, it seems.”

“So you just decided I didn’t need to know.”

“I decided to let you talk about it whenever you felt comfortable enough. This whole messy incident with your younger self was not how I wanted to handle this, but here we are.”

“Yeah.” Dick agreed softly. “Here we are.”

The room fell silent. Barbara waited patiently, watching as Dick sifted through the emotions in his mind.

“I don’t-” he took a breath. “I can’t- I don’t want to talk about it. Not… not now.”

“That’s fine.” Barbara tried to make her voice as soothing as possible. “You don’t have to talk to me or Bruce ever about it if you don’t want to. It’s not our place to demand that from you. But Dick, please talk to someone. Whether it be family, a friend or a professional, you need to open up somewhere. Because it’s clearly not something you’ve dealt with.”

“I’ve dealt with it.” Dick’s voice was rough, and if he wasn’t so distressed, he probably would have snapped loudly at her. “You were the ones who let a ten-year-old overhear you. I kept it under wraps and kept doing my job just fine.”

“Really? Then what are you so scared of? If you’ve dealt with it then why sneak out of the manor instead of talking to Bruce?”

She saw Dick eyeing the distance to the window. It wasn’t like she could stop him if he tried to bolt, and if he ran away, she wasn’t going to chase him. She’d given him support and advice. He was a grown man now, she was willing to help him with his trauma if he needed her to, but he had to ask.

He didn’t run. He dropped his head in a shaky nod, backing slowly towards the window.

“Fine. Maybe you’re right.”

“I usually am. And if you’re going to leave, please use the door.”

He froze, another sign that he was not in a clear headspace right now. Ordinarily he’d know that his body language was so blatant a child could see what he was trying to do, but he seemed genuinely shocked that Barbara had pointed it out.

“Dick.” She wheeled closer, making sure that he was looking at her. “If you want to stay, and not talk, that’s fine. You can watch Cass and Steph play tag through their mask cameras. If you want to talk to me at any point, I’ll always be here for you. There’s no pressure for you to do anything you don’t want to.”

This time, she actually seemed to get through to him. A flicker of understanding passed through his eyes, and his nod this time was much firmer.

“I’m going to stay here. I want to watch the kids have fun.”

“They’re both technically adults now, but well…”
As if on cue, there was a yelp from Barbara’s headset as Cass tackled Steph into a garbage dump. Dick gave a small chuckle as their cameras went shaky, hearing Steph’s indignant shouting even before Barbara put her headset on speaker.

It was a shadow of his usual laugh. But it was a start, and that was enough for Barbara.

Dick stayed for a few hours. At first, he just watched the girls patrol and have fun, but after Barbara made them both tea, they managed to have an actual conversation. Not about Dick, or any of his trauma. Just about the small stuff he’d missed; Wally and Bart doing a race around the world, Donna, Vic and Kori having an adventure in space, Garfield and Raven taking a quiet vacation in the Bahamas.

When he left a few hours later, his steps looked a bit lighter. Maybe it was just Barbara’s wishful thinking, but she’d like to believe that she’d helped him, in some small way.

She wasn’t sure if he would go back to the manor or not. He would probably go to the penthouse, or maybe even all the way back to Bludhaven.

She hoped not. The city may have been rebuilt from nothing, but sometimes even just a name could be an unpleasant reminder of the past.

Wherever he was going, he didn’t tell her. And she had to respect that. She wasn’t going to pull a Bruce and slip a tracker on him or something. If he happened to show up on CCTV footage of Gotham… well monitoring that was just part of her usual job as Oracle.

With the Owls subdued, and Dick and Cassandra taking their first steps in recovering from the incident, there was just one problem left that Barbara needed to fix before the day was done. She got a taxi to the manor, and Alfred let her in, unsurprised by her sudden arrival.

“Master Bruce is in the study, I’m afraid he’s rather broody at the moment.”

“I’m not here for Bruce. I need to talk to Jason.”

She wondered if Alfred would try to stop her. For a second it seemed like he would try to talk her out of it, but he took a good look at the cool determination in her eyes and appeared to reconsider.

“He’s currently restrained in the gymnasium, due to multiple attempts to attack Master Bruce. All the same, please be careful Miss Gordon. I’d hate to see you get hurt.”

“Don’t worry. If it gets too much, I’ll cut and run.”

Alfred didn’t look convinced, but he led her down the hall anyways. She wheeled herself into the gym, and Jason looked up as Alfred shut and locked the door behind her. There was a key in her pocket when she needed to get out, and Jason probably suspected that.

He looked about as good as Dick did. Bags under his eyes, a tired expression on his face, but a little more anger than Dick had. He snarled at her when she entered, and she didn’t flinch, just wheeled herself forward calmly.

She stopped at a safe distance from where he was restrained, and his snarl turned into a smirk.

“Barbara Gordon, Batgirl turned Oracle. Now that was a surprise to me.” He tilted his head curiously. “All this time spent keeping it a secret and I find out thanks to a de-aging spell. I didn’t expect you to be so careless.”
“I wasn’t careless. The family needed me, and whether you like it or not this spell included you with
them. And after the Joker was shot, I chose to talk to you for a reason.”

“Hoping you could get through to me? Make me see the error of my ways?”

“Something like that.”

“Well too bad, the manipulation you tried on my younger self failed. He killed the Joker, and I’m
more confident in my beliefs than ever.”

“Ah yes, manipulation such as trying to help him through his trauma and not telling him the full story
of who he grew up to become. Definitely an ulterior motive there and not just trying to help a
confused innocent child.”

“You’re a bat.” Jason sneered. “You always have an ulterior motive.”

“Bruce wants you to be a part of the family again. That’s his ulterior motive, not mine. I don’t think
that’s going to happen anytime soon, so all I want to do is fix the damage this incident caused.”

“Oh yeah, Bruce is a real softie. That’s why he has me locked in here and let me get knocked
unconscious by that-”

“Choose your next words carefully.”

Barbara’s voice was ice. Jason stared at her, rattled his own restraints and saw her hand stray towards
the escrima stick strapped to her wheelchair. He rolled his eyes, but she could see him relent.

“That lovely little sister of mine.” Every word was laced with sarcasm.

“Actually, I’m fairly sure Cass is older than you.”

“What? No she’s not.”

“By a few months, yeah.”

Jason deflated, looking both baffled and upset. The fact that this was the thing that got to him almost
made Barbara laugh.

“Well shit.” Jason sighed. “One older sibling was bad enough. Two Bruce-moulded protégés who
both think they know better than me? It’s going to be real hard to get anything done around here.”

“Also, the fact that we won’t let you leave until you agree to stop killing people. That’s also going to
make things hard for you.”

“You think you can stop me?” Jason grinned; a smile that promised nothing good. “Sooner or later
I’ll get out of these restraints. And then I might just shoot every one of you, depending on how
annoyed I feel.”

“Good luck with that.” Barbara made a show of turning her wheelchair around. “If you actually want
to get out of here, let me know and we can make a deal.”

She saw the surprised look on his face, but kept her expression calm, almost bored. She was halfway
to the door when Jason cracked and spoke.

“What kind of deal?”
Barbara swivelled back around, making sure that none of her satisfaction showed.

“Bruce accidentally told the whole of Gotham that you were alive. The police want answers, and the second they find out you’re not ten anymore they’ll be on there way here to ask you what happened. Obviously, I don’t want them to talk to you.”

“Scared I’ll tell them everything?”

“Yes.” Barbara answered honestly. “You could expose all of us, and I’m not going to let that happen. So here’s the deal I’m offering you: I let you out of here, and you go back to your Red Hood business. We tell the police that you escaped, and you keep yourself hidden from them. The second you try to tell them about us the deal is off and we drag you back in.”

“Simple as that? Bullshit.”

“You’re right. I have three conditions. Number one, no killing.”

Jason made a noise that sounded like a cross between a growl and a scoff.

“No killing.” Barbara repeated firmly. “You can use guns, or whatever method you prefer to enact vigilante justice, I don’t give a damn about that. But if you kill someone, you’re going to need to explain to me why.”

“Explain to you?”

“Number two, once a month you make contact with me. No other Bats need to be involved, but as long as you check in, I know you’re doing alright. If you’ve broken condition number one, we hash it out.”

“So killing isn’t actually a dealbreaker?”

“Depends on the kill.”

Jason let out a low whistle, and there was a gleam in his eyes that Barbara wasn’t sure she liked.

“Careful Oracle, that’s a slippery slope for a white hat to go down.”

“I managed the Justice League for years. I juggled countless different teams, sometimes with clashing motives and goals. I had to lie and manipulate good people so that the job could get done, and I crossed more than one line for the greater good. I was shot by the Joker, and made my peace with it. Believe me when I say your morality isn’t the introspective and thought-provoking challenge you assume it to be.”

Jason stared at her. The gleam was gone.

“…What’s the third condition?”

“Your sidekick, Scarlet. You know she’s not safe with you.”

“She wants to be with me.” For the first time Jason’s voice went hard. “I’m the only family she has, you’re not separating us.”

“Then retire from being a criminal. Get a normal job and give her a normal life.”

“She can’t have a normal life. Professor Pyg took care of that. I’m just doing what Batman did to all of us: giving her a way to cope.”
“Yes, because Batman’s strategy of letting children fight crime to cope with their trauma turned out so well for all of you.”

Jason scowled, but Barbara stared back, unrelenting. She wasn’t backing down on this, no matter how stubborn Jason could be.

He seemed to get that. He shifted in his seat, wriggling the restraints thoughtfully.

“If you let me out of here…” Jason sighed. “I swear that I’ll look into alternative options for her. I can’t promise anything, but I will try.”

“I’ll send you a list of boarding schools that specialise in caring for victims of supervillain crimes. We can discuss them further at our monthly check-ins.”

“Yeah.” She could see the exact moment Jason’s anger won out against his desire to be free. “Or… I can say no deal and wait for the police to come.”

Jason flashed her a smug grin. Clearly, she’d pushed him too far. Barbara had expected that; the deal wasn’t exactly appealing.

“The police won’t get to you, or at least not as Jason Todd. If you don’t take this deal then I slap the Red Hood mask onto you and throw you back into Arkham. You can rant all you like in there about how you’re actually Jason Todd, and no one will believe you because you have no proof. All Bruce has to do is deny that you’re his son, and the police will take his word over yours.”

She saw actual fear in his eyes then, and it made her stomach tense. She didn’t like doing this, but Jason couldn’t expose the family. It wouldn’t be hard for her to get him back into Arkham, they both knew that with her connections and skills it could be done in a matter of hours. She didn’t want to go that route though, so she really hoped he could put his pride aside and choose the better deal.

“No killing, monthly meet ups, and a better life for Scarlet. Those are your conditions?”

“They are.” Barbara nodded.

She could see the fight going on in Jason’s mind. His anger at the family and his pride demanded he spit in her face and reject all offers, but she’d laid out all the facts plainly and honestly, and hopefully he could recognize that, and maybe even respect it.

“Fine.” He said at last, so quiet she almost missed it. “Get me out of here before I change my mind.”

She didn’t gloat, didn’t try to reassure him that he’d made the right choice. Just wheeled over and untied him, tossing him the key to the door.

“If it’s any consolation, Bruce isn’t going to be pleased that I did this behind his back.”

“That does help a little.”

For a second, she thought he was going to attack her, to try and overpower her, maybe even kill her. But for whatever reason he didn’t, just turned and ran, leaving her alone in the empty room. Barbara let herself breathe normally again, tension dissipating as his footsteps faded.

If there was one thing that exchange had taught her, it was that little boy she’d talked to in the cave was gone. Maybe if they’d given him some space once he got back, he could have calmed down. But then they would have risked him escaping, and while he was still a ruthless killer, they couldn’t let him go. Maybe traces of that young boy remained, but the real Jason had too much pain and
bitterness inside him to immediately try and reach out to the family he’d hurt so badly. Realistically, the fact that he agreed to communicate with her once a month was a huge success.

 Somehow, it still felt like a failure.

 She wheeled herself out of the room, and tried not to think about how furious Bruce was going to be.

 Chapter End Notes

 Tim's awake, Jason is free, and Steph somehow gets the pleasure of talking to both of them.

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