Blood in the Water

by MishaBerry

Summary

We all do stupid things when we are lonely, and in faraway lands, we hardly expect the consequences to follow us. Bruce certainly never thought twice about an American woman in Jaipur after one night with her. He hardly expected to see her ever again.

The universe, on the other hand, had different ideas, and the tides of time and chance brought Tim Drake to Bruce's life over and over again.

Notes
Check out mishaberrywrites for more of my writing!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Some Years Ago

Novembers in Jaipur were mild, in comparison to Gotham. Temperatures rarely got below ten degrees celsius, and the rains were long over. In honesty, it was one of the nicer places Bruce had visited in the last year. At the age of twenty-two, he had become well travelled in his journey to become a pillar of justice for his home city (he was still working out the kinks in that plan, but at least his training was going well). He wasn't where he needed to be, not yet, but he was slowly getting there.

Bruce was actually following Alfred’s advice (delivered over the phone) to take a day off and rest for a bit. The tourist season wasn’t for a while, so it was the perfect time to sightsee without being crowded. The hotel Bruce was staying at wasn’t far from the Palace Quarter, so he walked there, enjoying the mild weather.

Purchasing a cold soda from a corner store, Bruce took a moment to look up that the building, admiring the red and pink sandstone construction of the Hawa Mahal. He considered going inside, wondering if he’d have to pay to get in, or if it was even open to visitors outside of tourist season.

As he was thinking about it, a woman passed by him at a quick step, tension radiating off of her. She was white, American in her style of dress, but tanned in a way that suggested she’d been in India for a while. Bruce might have paid her no mind aside from wondering where she was off to in such a hurry, but as she turned a corner, he noticed a group of three men follow her. Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, Bruce downed the last of his soda and hurried after them.

As he suspected, at the end of the narrow side street the woman had turned down, the three men had stopped her and were now trying to accost her. One had their hand wrapped around her upper arm, tight enough to bruise. The woman tried to struggle away and was speaking angrily at the men, but they only laughed at her. Bruce tried to keep his head cool and walked towards them quickly, deciding to forgo stealth in this instance.

“Hey!” he called out, “Leave her alone.”

The men looked up at Bruce. Two of them looked him over, taking in his 6’2, 200 pound frame and decided it wasn’t worth it, starting to retreat. The third, the man with his hand on the woman’s arm, sneered at him.

“Get on, man!” he called, jerking his head towards the mouth of the street, “Not your business, man.”
Bruce took a few more steps, looming over the man, “Leave her alone,” he said again, deepening his voice to make himself sound more threatening.

The man glared up at him, looking like he was ready to say something else, but one of his friends said something in Hindi, sounding urgent. The man glared at Bruce for another minute before dropping the woman’s arm and stomping off. Bruce waited until they were gone before turning to the woman.

“Are you alright ma’am?” he asked. She didn’t look any worse for wear.

“I’m fine,” she said, rubbing her arm, “Thank you.” She smiled up at him.

Bruce found himself smiling back. She was pretty, with brown hair and blue eyes. She was American, as Bruce had guessed, and she spoke with an inflection that he associated with coming from a background of wealth. She was a few years older than Bruce, but probably not quite thirty, if he had to guess.

“You’re welcome,” Bruce said, “Why don’t I walk you the rest of the way to wherever you’re going?”

The woman looked him over, and Bruce could see the wheels behind her eyes turning, “I’m not really heading anywhere, why don’t you join me for lunch?” she suggested.

Bruce smiled, “Alright.” He extended his arm in a gallant fashion, “Shall we?”

The woman smiled and took his arm, “We shall,” she said, and they walked out of the alley together.

“It occurs to me that I haven’t introduced myself,” Bruce said, “I’m Bruce Wayne.”

“Wayne?” the woman asked, “Have I heard that name before?”

“Perhaps you’ve heard of my family’s company, Wayne Enterprises?” Bruce suggested, a little embarrassed, “I’m the heir.”

“Right, yes I have,” the woman said, though there was a changed element in her voice, “I’m Lynn Fischer.”

Bruce smiled down at her, “Nice to meet you Lynn,” he said.

Halfway through lunch, Lynn put her hand on Bruce’s arm and propositioned him. Bruce was sorely tempted—it had been a long time since he’d been with a woman—but he also had his reservations.

“What would your husband think?” Bruce asked, though he laid a hand over hers, running his fingertips over the soft skin of her outer wrist.

Lynn raised an eyebrow, “What makes you think I’m married?” she asked.

Bruce gently grasped her wrist and lifted her hand, “The skin around your third finger has a tan line. I’d guess you removed your wedding band recently?”

Lynn huffed and pulled her hand back, “Clever boy,” she said. She looked down at her hand, regarding the white skin that gave away the absent ring, “Don’t worry about him. It’s not going to last much longer.”

“I’d rather not get in the middle of anything,” Bruce said, leaning back a little.
Lynn followed him, leaning forward, “You won’t. We’re leaving for the States tomorrow. I doubt we’ll ever cross paths again.”

Bruce knew he shouldn’t. It was stupid and he was only setting himself up for trouble; but it really had been a long time since he’d been close to anyone, woman or otherwise. Bruce was lonely, and it was so nice to speak to another American, as well as someone who was normal. No assassins, no training in ancient techniques, no dark pasts, just an ordinary woman with ordinary marital problems. Bruce craved normalcy, just one last time, before he committed himself fully to his chosen path. One little side street on the way to becoming the symbol he was meant to be.

One stupid act wouldn't change his life, not just this once.

In the morning, Lynn was gone from Bruce’s hotel bed. He expected to never see her again.

35 weeks later, July 19th

Janet hadn’t planned to stay with Jack; she’d planned to leave him the moment they got back to the US. They’d even been in the process of finding lawyers to settle the divorce, but then Janet had found out she was pregnant, and Jack had been so overjoyed at the idea of being a father that he’d been prepared to swipe everything off the table and stay with Janet. He’d practically begged her to stay, ready to forgive her for everything, but that hadn’t really been why she’d ultimately decided to stay with him.

Janet was a smart woman, but she was still a woman, and the courts were run by old men. Old men with pre-conceived idea about women who got pregnant by men who were not their husbands. If Janet tried to divorce Jack, he’d vy for custody of the baby, which she would have gladly handed over to him, if not for knowing that the lawyers would insist on a paternity test. Janet couldn’t guarantee that the baby was Jack’s; maybe the condom had failed and the newborn in the bassinet beside her was Jack’s, but it was more likely that little Timothy ‘Drake’ was actually little Timothy ‘Wayne’.

Janet looked over to the bassinet, sitting up a little to get a better look into it, though it strained her C-section stitches. Timothy Jackson Drake, only a few hours old, slept fitfully, swaddled in the softest blankets Jack’s medical insurance could buy. The doctors and nurses said he was small, strangely underdeveloped, but Janet knew better, she knew that Timothy was actually premature by a couple of weeks. Not enough to be a danger, though she’d worried a little that she might be found out. However, the doctors had only assumed Tim was a small baby with slightly weak lungs, and fitted Timothy with a nasal cannula to help him acclimatise to the outside world.

Timothy huffed a little in his sleep, and Janet worried for a moment that he might wake up and start crying, but he settled after a moment. Janet breathed a sigh of relief and watched the baby for another minute. The baby, her baby, her son, she was a mother now.

Janet laid back down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. In the quiet of the room, she whispered to herself, “I’ve made a mistake.”
Chapter End Notes

Oh no.
Part I Chapter i: Runaway

Chapter Notes

I should be working on my essays, but here I am posting fic. I don't think I'll post anything until December after this, I really do need to work on my school.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They were arguing again.

Tim curled up on his bed, pulling his covers over his head to try to block out the sound of his mom and dad shouting downstairs. It was such a big house, why could he always hear them? Why did they always have to fight? Why couldn't they get along like normal moms and dads? Tim whimpered and hoped they stopped soon.

The sound of glass shattering made Tim bolt upright in bed. Were they throwing things at each other? They’d never done that before. Some more glass shattered and Tim was overcome with fear. What if they hurt each other? What if they killed each other? The police would come and they would ask Tim ‘why didn’t you stop it? You're a stupid boy who couldn’t stop his parents from hurting each other. You should have been better, then they wouldn't have had to fight all the time.'

Tim whimpered and quickly got out of bed. He had to run away, before the police could come and take him to jail for not stopping his parents from hurting each other. More glass shattered downstairs and Tim tiptoed to the window. He wouldn’t be able to get out through the door, he’d get caught by nanny and his parents. He’d have to climb down the big tree outside his window. He was on the second floor, so it was a fair ways down. Tim bit his lip, wondering if he would be able to make it.

Turning and looking around the room, Tim tried to think of something that would help him get down. He spotted his teddy on the shelf and considered him for a moment. Mom said teddies were for little babies and girls, and Tim was a big boy now, not a baby, but he was running away, and he needed someone to protect him. Joe would keep him safe, even if Tim was too big for teddies. Quickly, Tim ran over and took Joe off the shelf and tucked her under his pyjama shirt, so he could have his hands free.

Taking a deep breath, Tim opened the window and leaned out. The cold September wind blew across his face and he shivered. He wanted to go downstairs and get his coat and mitts and boots, but if he could go downstairs, he wouldn't be climbing out of the window.

Tentatively, Tim pulled himself up onto the sill, swinging one leg over the side so it dangled over the two story drop. Taking a deep breath, Tim reached for the branches of the tree. On windy nights, they scraped against his window, so he should be able to reach them if he leaned.

Tim held his breath a little as he tried to grab a hold of the closest branches. He finally managed to wrap his hand around one and let out a sigh of relief, “It’s okay Joe,” he whispered into his shirt, “We’re going to be okay.”

Tim pulled the branch towards him so he could grab onto the sturdier parts of it. Once he felt like he was secure, he pulled himself up and away from the window. The branch sagged a little and Tim panicked for a moment, but he scrambled towards the trunk quickly and managed not to fall.
Tim let out a breath and rested for a minute, watching his breath fog like a dragon creating smoke. If he were a dragon, he'd have wings, and he could fly away to the mountains and never come back. Well, maybe not never, he'd have to come back to go to school, though he didn't know if his school had desks that could fit dragons.

Another cold wind blew past and Tim shivered. He had to get out of the tree and find somewhere warm, like a cave or something. Maybe he could dig a burrow, like animals did. He could sneak back to his room and get his blankets another time to make it warm. But first he needed to get out of the tree.

It was hard to see in the dark, so Tim had to be careful. The bark was rough and hurt his bare feet and hands, but he didn't cry. Crying was for babies and he wasn't a baby. Slowly, he made his way down towards the ground, double checking and even triple checking before he put his feet anywhere.

Suddenly, a branch under him snapped, and Tim went tumbling out of the tree. Thankfully, he'd made it most of the way down already, and it was only a short drop. He landed on his butt and let out a cry, feeling the shock travel up his spine. He sat there for a moment, trying to catch his breath and not think about how scary that was.

The wind picked up and Tim could feel his pants getting wet from the grass. It wasn't raining, but it was a damp, foggy night, so the wet made everything colder. Tim remembered reading about frostbite, and how it could make people lose their fingers and toes. Tim liked his fingers and toes, so he had to find a place to hide soon. Shakily, he stood, wincing when a sharp pain traveled up his leg. Tim lifted his pant leg and let out a little cry when he saw blood.

He must have scraped himself on the broken branch when he fell out of the tree. Tim bit his lip and tried to put weight on his foot again. It hurt, enough for Tim to gasp, but he'd just have to deal with it. Big boys just dealt with it, they didn't cry and call for mommy and daddy to fix everything. He'd find some shelter, and then he'd find some bandages.

Tim took a deep breath and started walking away from the house. He tried to remember if there was anywhere on the property around the house where he could hide out for a while. As he walked, he realized that things looked very different at nighttime. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as Tim realized that he had no idea where he was. He knew the house was behind him, but it was as unwelcoming as the cold night around him. Tim whimpered and pulled Joe out of his shirt so he could hold her tightly.

Suddenly, something above him screeched; an owl or something probably, but in Tim’s agitated state, all he could think of were monsters in the dark ready to swoop in and gobble up little boys who should have stayed in bed. Despite the pain in his leg, Tim broke out into a run, sprinting across the damp grass as fast as his little legs could carry him. He ran until he nearly collided with the wall at the edge of the property.

Tim huddled against the wall, breathing hard and looking around frantically for the creature in the darkness trying to eat him. He was too exposed near this wall, he had to get on the other side of it. He remembered his dad talking a while ago about there being a break in the wall on one side; maybe it was close by?

Sniffling a little, Tim walked along the wall, hoping to find the crack so he could slip through and get away from the monster. Monsters were big, and if the crack was small enough, it wouldn't be able to follow Tim through it. He just had to find it.

Tim kept his ears perked as he walked along the wall, trying to pick out if the monster was near him.
He kept one hand on the stone wall, feeling for the hole, because it was so hard to see in the fog and the darkness. He didn't notice that a dip was coming up in front of him and let out a yelp as he slid down the incline, landing in a frigid creek at the bottom.

Tim hissed at the ice water soaking his feet and bottom, scrambling backwards onto the muddy bank. He gingerly picked Joe out of the water from where he dropped her, “Sorry,” he said, feeling his chest go tight. He bit his lips as he felt hot tears fall down his cheeks.

Tim took a deep breath and swiped at his face, even though he knew his mom would be mad at him for using his sleeve. He sniffled hard and tried to figure out what to do. He watched the water flow, winding away from the wall and into the thickening fog.

Away from the wall?

Tim turned to the wall and saw that there was a storm drain under it, to let the water flow through. It was fairly big, and looked like it would fit Tim if he crouched down. Tim weighed his options, trudging through the freezing water, or staying on this side of the wall and maybe getting eaten.

Taking a deep breath, Tim tucked Joe back into his shirt, ignoring how wet and cold she was and bent down to look into the culvert. He could see out the other side, so it wasn’t blocked, and it looked like it was only a few feet long. He could totally do this.

Pulling up his pant legs, even though they were already soaked, Tim bent down and started walking through the culvert. The water ran over his ankles, freezing him and almost making him turn back, but he persisted. He just had to get to the other side of the wall and he’d be safe from the monster.

Tim let out a deep breath when he reached the other side, scrambling up the embankment away from the cold water. His feet were completely numb, which was a bad sign, if he remembered the effects of frostbite correctly. He had to find a safe place to get warm, and soon.

The fog had gotten thicker, but Tim was determined; he’d made it this far, he wasn’t going to turn back now. He followed the creek for a while, it being the only thing aside from the wall and trees that he could see. Tim was starting to get tired, his leg aching his body shivering from the cold, when he spotted a light in the distance. A light usually meant warmth and people, so Tim made in that direction. He had to cut through an elaborate garden to get closer, but he tried to watch out for any flowers.

A huge house loomed up out of the fog, like something out of a fairy tale. It was bigger even than Tim’s house, and in a completely different style (architecture, Tim remembered). It was dark and old looking, and Tim thought a witch must live there, or ghosts.

Tim wanted to cry. The only shelter he’d found was a ghost house, and he was too tired to go on anymore. He was cold and wet and his leg hurt and his feet were numb and he was probably going to lose his toes. He should have stayed in the house, as he was certain prison wasn’t as bad as this.

The wind howled again and Tim didn’t care anymore, he let the tears fall down his cheeks. Sobbing and whimpering, he walked towards the house, hoping to find something outside to shelter him so he wouldn’t have to go inside and get eaten by ghosts. He found some garbage bins and huddled behind them, clutching Joe to him and sobbing into her wet fur.
Alfred stifled a yawn as he carried the trash out to the bins at the back of the house. It was supposed to be Dick’s job, but the teen had forgotten, once again, to take it out before patrol. Alfred had debated letting it sit until the end of patrol and making Dick do it then, but it was starting to stink up his kitchen, and Alfred wouldn’t tolerate that. He’d just guilt the boy over it when he came home, that should be sufficient punishment.

The wind blew past Alfred’s ears as he opened the door to the back. The fog rolled across the grounds, making it impossible to see anything. Alfred quickly went to the bins and tossed the bag into one, making a mental note to get his rose bushes wrapped before the frosts settled into the delicate roots.

Alfred was just closing the bin when he heard shuffling coming from behind the cluster of bins (garbage, paper recycling, metal recycling, plastic recycling, compostables). If it’s that bloody racoon again, I swear I’ll turn it into mince, Alfred thought, gritting his teeth and reaching for the broom he kept for this purpose specifically. Cautiously, he approached the bins again, broom raised to swipe at whatever was hiding in his bins. He kept it raised in one hand as he reached the other out to shift the bin out of the way, prepared for anything.

He was decidedly not prepared for a pair of frightened blue eyes to look up at him.

“Good Lord,” Alfred said, immediately dropping the broom with a clatter. A child, no more than five years old, was huddled up close to the compost bin (the warmest spot), clutching a teddy bear to his chest and crying softly. He was soaked to the bone and muddy, wearing nothing but pyjamas, not even socks. Alfred could see a bit of blood around a tear in one pant leg.

Kneeling down, Alfred extended a hand, “It’s alright, dear thing,” he cooed in his most soothing tone, knowing he needed to get this little boy out of the cold and damp as soon as possible, “It’s alright now, come here.”

The boy sniffled and came towards him, either too tired or too scared to think about stranger danger. Alfred quickly gathered the child up into his arms and carried him inside, leaving the broom where he’d dropped it. He’d pick it up later.

“What’s your name my boy?” Alfred asked, shutting the door tightly behind him. The boy was small, and very young. Where had he come from at this time of night?

The boy sniffled and clutched his bear tighter, one arm around Alfred’s shoulders to keep himself steady, “I’m Tim,” he said in a small voice.

“Where are your parents, Master Tim?” Alfred asked, bringing them to the kitchen. He grabbed the kettle from the counter and set about filling it. Tim was cold against him, and he needed to be warmed quickly, but not too quickly. Hot cocoa would do the trick.

“Fighting,” Tim answered sullenly, putting his face back into his teddy, “They always fight.”

Alfred ground his teeth together once, “I see. Did you run away?” he asked, setting the kettle on the stove.

Tim nodded, his little body hitching with a sob. Alfred shushed him gently and rubbed his back, trying to soothe him, “It alright Master Tim, it’s not your fault. There there.”

Tim continued to sob and snifflle, letting out little whines here and there. Alfred held him close even as he bent to get the first aid kit from under the sink, “Master Tim? Is it alright if I take a look at your foot?” he asked.
Alfred waited until he got a shaky nod against his shoulder and gently set the boy down on the counter. He was filthy, but counters could be cleaned, and he needed to get a better look at what sort of damage there was. Alfred flicked the lights on and checked the boy over.

He was mostly just dirty, to Alfred’s relief, but there was a nasty scratch along the inside of his left calf. Alfred quickly rinsed the wound with warm water and a clean towel, soothing Tim when he hissed. He gently applied a disinfectant and put a pad of gauze over the scratch, taping it down. The kettle whistled and he turned to get started on the cocoa.

“Can you tell me where you came from, Master Tim?” Alfred asked, spooning the cocoa powder into the mug.

Tim kicked his feet a little, but didn't bang his heels against the cupboards, “The other side of the wall,” he answered, looking down at his knees.

The Drake property, Alfred thought. If he recalled, the Drake’s had a little boy, though they travelled so much that he’d never met them, “How old are you, Master Tim?”

“Six,” Tim said, looking up a little and smiling, clearly proud of being six.

“A grand age to be,” Alfred said, handing Tim a mug of steaming cocoa. He’d been off the mark on how old Tim was. He was rather small for his age, “Drink it slowly, it’s hot.”

“Thank you,” Tim said, well mannered even in his distress. He was still shivering, still cold and drenched.

“Why don't we head to the parlour and I’ll find you something dry to change into?” Alfred suggested. Tim nodded and Alfred gently lifted him off the counter.

He took the mug of cocoa in one hand and Tim’s icy hand in the other. He led Tim to the parlour and had him sit on the couch, pulling a throw blanket off the back and wrapping it around him.

“I’ll be right back, Master Tim,” Alfred said, handing him back the mug of cocoa, “I want you to stay right here. Do you understand? No wandering off.”

Tim nodded. “I won’t, I promise,” he said.

Alfred gave him a nod back and darted off, trying to remember if he’d saved any of Dick’s old clothing. Dick had grown out of most of his clothes in the last year, growing like a mushroom, but even so, the old clothes would drown little Tim. They would be dry and clean though, and that was the important part.

After navigating Dick’s disaster of a bedroom and finding what he was looking for, Alfred hurried back to the parlour. Tim, true to his word, hadn’t moved an inch, aside for take small sips of his cocoa.

“Here we are,” Alfred said, “These will be large, but they’ll be much better than those soaked pyjamas.”

“Thank you,” Tim said, and he winced a little when he realized that he didn't know Alfred’s name.

“Alfred Pennyworth,” he said, bowing with a bit of a flourish, “At your service.”

Tim giggled. “Thank you Mr. Pennyworth,” he said. He set his mug down and picked up the clothes. Alfred politely turned his head as the boy changed.
Once Tim was dressed in the clean clothes, Alfred bundled him back up in the blanket and set the dirtied pajamas aside (Tim had folded them neatly, which shouldn’t have worried him, but it did somehow). He sat down on the couch next to Tim and wondered what to do next.

He should probably call the police, but Batman would be home soon, and he didn’t think it would be a good idea to have police wandering around, just to be on the cautious side. Alfred thought about calling Tim’s parents, letting them know where their boy was, what Tim said made him think twice. *Fighting, they always fight,* he’d said, before bursting into tears. Alfred couldn’t identify any scars or bruises or other injuries aside from the scraped leg, but he didn’t think handing the boy over to his parents was in his best interests either.

“Your home is very nice, Mr. Pennyworth,” Tim said, his voice still soft. He was either shy or tired.

“Thank you, Master Tim,” Alfred said, smiling down at the boy. He hadn’t really interacted with six year olds since Bruce was a child, and he wasn’t sure what he should say. What did six year olds like?

Alfred noticed the teddy that was pressed up against Tim’s side, “And what is his name?” he asked.

“Joe,” Tim said with a slight frown.

“Like ‘Joseph’?” Alfred asked.

Tim shook his head, “Like ‘Joan’,” he said softly, like he didn’t want to be heard.

“Oh?” Alfred asked. Children usually gendered their teddies the same as themselves unless the teddy came with a specific gender, so he was a little surprised.

Tim nodded, “Like Joan of Arc,” he said.

“Ah, I see,” Alfred said. The boy probably enjoyed reading.

“I read about her in a book,” Tim said, become animated for the first time since being brought inside, “She spoke to angels and led a whole army!”

“Indeed she did,” Alfred said, “She was a very remarkable woman.”

Tim smiled, pleased by the positive attention, “She was great!” he said. His face fell again and he settled back down onto the couch, “I know boys aren’t supposed to have girl teddies, but she was so great. She could protect *anyone* from scary monsters.”

Alfred felt his heart clench, wondering what sort of monsters Tim felt like he had to be protected from, “I imagine she could,” he said.

Tim looked up at Alfred again and smiled softly. Alfred returned it and reached to tuck the blanket around Tim a little more securely. He was starting to look a little warmer, at least.

Alfred’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out. Bruce had insisted on getting him a cellphone so he could reach him if he needed to. Alfred had agreed, though he’d rejected Dick’s suggestion of getting him one of those little smartphones that had a million little things on it that were useless and only took up space.

The buzzing was from a text. *On our way back,* it read, and shortly after, *You’re not downstairs?*

*We have a guest,* Alfred typed back, sending it quickly and then stowing the phone, “Master Tim,”
he said softly, “Can you please tell me how you came to be hiding behind the bins?”

Tim’s face crumpled and Alfred quickly soothed him, “You’re not in any trouble my boy, I just want to know what happened,” he said, reaching out to rest his hand on Tim’s shoulder, “Can you please tell me?”

Tim tensed at the touch, so much so that Alfred nearly took his hand away, but then he leaned into it like he was desperate for even the smallest amount of affection. Alfred had to consciously keep from gritting his teeth, wondering what sort of environment this little boy was fleeing from.

“Take your time Master Tim,” Alfred said, “No one will be angry with you.”

Tim bit his lips and shifted around in his seat, clearly trying to decide what to say. Alfred patiently waited for Tim to offer the information, gently rubbing his back in a soothing manner.

“Mom and Dad were fighting downstairs again,” Tim said softly, almost too quiet for Alfred to hear, “They started breaking things, and I got scared they’d hurt each other and the police would come, so I climbed out the window.”

“The window?” Alfred asked, surprised. He’d have expected a boy like Dick to try climbing out of windows (which he often did), but Tim didn't seem like he was the same kind of athletic type as Dick.

Tim looked up at Alfred, clearly distressed, “If the police came, and they saw I didn't do anything to stop Mom and Dad from hurting each other, they’d arrest me and I’d go to jail!” he said, on the cusp of crying again, “I don’t want to go to jail!”

Alfred wrapped his arm around Tim’s shoulder and tried to calm him down, “Alright, it’s alright, no one is going to jail.” Except for maybe your parents, “Did someone tell you that you’d go to jail if your parents hurt each other?”

Tim sniffled, “Bad boys go to jail,” he said, “That’s how the law works.”

“Right,” Alfred said, wondering what to do next. Clearly Tim’s home life was not great, but nothing suggested he was in any danger outside of verbal and emotional abuse. Despite what Alfred might like to think otherwise, that was never enough to have a child removed from a home, especially a rich home like the Drakes'.

The sound of footsteps coming from down the hall made Tim tense and curl into Alfred, already trusting the elderly man to protect him. Bruce stepped into the parlour, face stoic and ready for whatever ‘guest’ he had in his home at this time of night. He was clearly not expecting a six year old anymore than Alfred had expected to find Tim behind the bins. He stopped up short and watched Tim for a moment, the boy trying to make himself as small as possible under the scrutinizing gaze.

“Master Tim, this is Master Bruce. He’s the proprietor of this estate,” Alfred said, “Master Bruce, this is Master Tim, from the other side of the wall.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow, but Alfred gave him a pointed look, telling him he’d better play nice or else get the cold shoulder for a week. Bruce let out a sigh and put a kind smile on his face, slowly making his way over to the couch.

“Hello Tim,” he said, putting out his hand for the boy to shake, “What brings you over at this hour?”

Tim looked down at the hand and then back up at Bruce, tentatively putting his comically smaller hand in Bruce’s, “I ran away,” he said.
“I see,” Bruce said, glancing at Alfred again, trying to assess the situation. Alfred gave him a look back that translated to ‘there’s more to this and I’ll tell you in private’, “And your parents don’t know where you are?”

Tim shook his head, “I climbed out the window,” he said.

Bruce let out a hum, trying to figure out what to do when light footsteps came down the hall, “We have a guest?” Dick called, poking his head through the door, “What sort of guest?”

“I thought I told you to go to bed?” Bruce said, watching Dick come into the room, “I specifically remember telling you to go to bed.”

“Master Dick, this is Master Tim. I found him outside when I was putting the trash in the bins,” Alfred said, giving Dick a sharp, knowing look.

“Right,” Dick said, looking appropriately shamefaced, “I mean, it was a good thing there was trash to take out, or you might not have found him.”

Alfred raised a single eyebrow, clearly unimpressed, “Indeed,” he said.

Bruce sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, “Dick would you mind staying with Tim for a moment? I need to speak to Alfred.”

“Sure, that’s fine,” Dick said, smiling cheerily down at Tim, “We’ll just sit and chat, right Tim?”

Perhaps because Dick was closer to him in age, Tim seemed a little more at ease with him, “Yeah,” he said, smiling shyly back at the teenager.

Dick’s smile widened and he plopped down next to Tim as Alfred stood. Bruce and Alfred stepped into the hall, far enough away where they wouldn't be heard if they spoke in low voices, but close enough that they’d be able to run back into the room if they heard anything. Bruce turned to Alfred and waited for him to explain what was going on.

Alfred quickly gave Bruce a cohesive version of what Tim had told him, “Something is not right in that house,” Alfred finished, “That child is terrified.”

“Yeah,” Bruce agreed, brows furrowed. Alfred could see the gears in his mind switching over and whirring, “But there isn’t anything we can do, legally.”

“Absolutely nothing, sir?” Alfred asked, heart sinking a little.

Bruce sighed, “We only have Tim’s word to go on, and from what he’s said, he hasn’t been physically abused. It’s not enough for the courts to remove him from his parents.”

“I was afraid of that,” Alfred said, “And the Drake’s are quite wealthy, I doubt they would allow their child to be taken.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Bruce said, “There isn’t anything we can do.”

“How awful,” Alfred said, “That poor boy.”

Bruce grumbled something indistinct, “We have to get him home though,” he said, “I don't really want the police coming to our doorstep.”

“Should we simply bring him home?” Alfred asked, “We don't know what his parents might do to him if we bring him home and let them know he ran away.”
“No,” Bruce said, tapping his chin pensively, “I suppose we could sneak him back in through his window. Assuming his parents haven’t noticed his absence.”

“Brilliant idea, Master Bruce,” Alfred deadpanned, “Though I suppose it’s no less illegal than vigilantism.”

Bruce huffed, “What do you want me to do? We can’t call the police, and we can’t risk the boy being caught and punished by his parents, if he hasn’t been found out already.”

Alfred grumbled, unhappy, but knowing that Bruce had a point, “We should send him home soon then,” he said, “Though I’ll need to clean his pyjamas first.”

Bruce nodded, “Alright,” he said, plan in mind. Hopefully, Tim wouldn’t resist being taken home after all the effort he went to running away.

Tim was settled on Dick’s lap when they returned, the two boys giggling and cuddling and whispering to each other. Dick looked up at Bruce’s return and smiled brightly, “Hey, did you know that we met once before?”

“Oh?” Bruce asked, picking up the pile of soiled clothes and handing them to Alfred, who took them away to be washed.

“Yeah, like, three years ago,” Dick said, wrapping his arms around Tim’s midsection and hugging him close, “At the circus, on That Day.”

“I see,” Bruce said. ‘That Day’ was code for the day Dick’s parents died, but if Dick was upset by the reminder, he didn't show it, “How did you meet?”

“We took a picture!” Tim said, smiling and leaning into Dick’s chest, “Just before the show.”

Bruce vaguely recalled a photograph of Dick and his parents posing just before the show that killed them. It had been sent to them by other family in the photograph, which Bruce now remembered as being the Drakes’. The little boy in the photograph couldn’t have been more than three years old, which would add up if Tim was six. It impressed Bruce that Tim was able to remember it.

“I think we still have that photo,” Bruce said, smiling at Tim, “Somewhere.”

Tim smiled and turned to nuzzle into Dick’s neck, who laughed and hugged Tim impossibly closer, “You’re just too damn cute!” Dick said, “I want to keep you in my pocket.”

Tim giggled again and Bruce couldn't help but smile. Tim really was a cute kid, “As tempting as that sounds, Tim needs to go home at some point,” he said.

“Aw,” Dick whined, “Can’t he stay?” he asked, pressing his cheek to the top of Tim’s messy mop of hair and pouting, trying to give his best puppy-eyes. It was a lot less effective now that Dick was fifteen and growing out of his baby fat.

“No, he needs to go home at some point,” Bruce said, glancing down at Tim, who was frowning into Dick’s shirt. “But,” he relented, cursing himself, “I suppose he can come visit tomorrow, if he wants.”

Tim looked up at him peering at him through long black lashes, and smiled tentatively, “Okay,” he said.

Bruce smiled back and crouched down to Tim’s height, “You can come over whenever you like
“Tim,” he said, “I can’t promise Dick or I will be here, but Alfred’s usually around.”

Tim smiled a little wider, “Thanks,” he said. His smile faded a little, “Do I really have to go home?”

Bruce’s smile faded to match Tim’s and Dick pulled Tim close again, stroking his hair in a comforting manner. “Yes, you do,” Bruce said, “I’m sorry, but you have to go home to your parents.”

Tim let out a long sigh, resigned, “They’re going to be very mad at me,” he said.

Bruce’s mouth twitched, “Well, we don’t have to tell them.”

“We don’t?” Tim asked, looking confused.

Bruce shook his head, “We can sneak you back in,” he said with a little grin, like he was sharing a secret, “Through the window that you came through.”

“Yeah!” Dick said, “I can totally sneak you back in. I’m an acrobat, remember?”

Tim looked between them, trying to understand what was happening, “Really?”

“Yes Tim,” Bruce said, sitting up on the couch, “Your parents won’t have to know. You won’t be in trouble.”

Tim smiled, “Okay,” he said. He relaxed against Dick again, who went back to rocking him and stroking his hair.

Bruce watched the two of them for a minute. With their dark hair and blue eyes, they almost looked like brothers. He smiled a little and wondered if Tim would take them up on their offer to have him around more often. Bruce found himself hoping that he would.

Chapter End Notes

So it feels a little awkward to end it there, but this was getting really long and it's also past midnight right now. I need to sleep.
Part I Chapter ii: Navigation

Chapter Notes

So I'm really swamped with essays and exams right now, but I'm slowly writing these as much as I can. I'm not sure how much I'll be able to get done, but I'll be free soon.

WIN A FIC! The first person to guess the literary reference in this chapter gets a FREE 1K FIC! Any characters/fandoms/OC's welcome. Find the literary reference and the first one to comment with the book that it's from wins! Good luck!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Once Tim had been cleaned up and dressed in his washed and dried pyjamas, Dick hoisted the boy onto his back and started walking him back to his home, Bruce following along with a flashlight. It was still foggy, but being carried by Dick and having the light, Tim was a lot less scared. The distances seemed a lot shorter, and they came to the wall that Tim had climbed under shortly.

Bruce crouched down to look at the culvert that Tim had crawled through, “You came through this?” he asked, not really believing it. It was so small.

Tim nodded, dozing a little on Dick’s back, “Yeah, through there.”

Bruce hummed and stood back up. The wall was about seven feet high, and made of old Gotham quarry stone. It was in good condition, for all that it must have been nearly a hundred years old. Bruce was already trying to think of some sort of ladder they could put over it so Tim could easily climb it without having to wiggle through the storm drain.

“I guess we have to climb over,” Dick said, looking over at Bruce, “’Cause you sure aren’t going to fit through the drain.”

Tim giggled and Bruce rolled his eyes, “I’ll boost you over and then follow,” he said. Dick would have had no difficulty scaling the wall himself, but not while piggybacking Tim.

Dick made sure Tim was secure before letting himself be hoisted over the wall. He sat on the top of the wall for a minute, looking down, “Hold on okay? I don’t want to drop you on accident.”

Tim nodded and tightened his arms around Dick’s neck, curling his fingers into his hoodie. Dick smiled and jumped, making sure not to slip on the wet grass. Bruce dropped down next to them shortly after.

“Now we have to be quiet,” Bruce said, “We don’t want to get caught.” At least, he didn’t want to have to explain to the Drake’s why they were sneaking across the property at five in the morning.

Whatever fight the Drake’s had been having looked like it was long over, and all the lights were out. There was no movement, so they probably hadn’t noticed Tim’s absence (which Bruce didn’t exactly approve of, but it served their purposes at least). They walked around to where Tim’s window was, still open from when he climbed out of it.

Bruce looked at the tree next to the window; it seemed sturdy enough, but it looked like there were a few dead branches, “Be careful climbing up,” he said to Dick.
“I will,” Dick said, not hesitating to start shimmying up the tree, Tim clinging to his back like a baby koala. Bruce sighed and wondered if it was too late to teach Dick to have a healthy fear of heights. That ship had probably sailed a long time ago.

Dick easily scaled the tree, stopping once or twice to make sure Tim didn’t slip. As quietly as he could manage, Dick slipped through the window and set Tim down on the floor. The room was cold from the window having been left open, so Dick quickly led Tim to his bed and tucked him in.

“There we go,” Dick said, fluffing the blankets and pillows around Tim so he was nice and snuggled up. “No more sneaking out, okay? You’re gonna get hurt if you try to do that again.”

“But what if they fight again?” Tim asked, hugging Joe close to him.

Dick chewed the inside of his lip, looking around the room. He spotted a little chair and had an idea, “Here, you can do this,” he said, getting up and showing Tim how to wedge the door shut with the chair, “That way they can’t get inside. You can hide until they’re done fighting.”

Tim nodded, “Can I come over tomorrow?” he asked, settling back into bed.

Dick smiled, “Sure, I’ll be home. I’ll come to the wall around lunchtime, okay? So you don’t have to go through the drain.”


Dick crossed the room and gave Tim a quick hug, “Goodnight kiddo,” he said. Tim hugged back tightly, clinging to his shirt like he didn’t want him to go. Dick was tempted to try and stay until Tim went back to sleep, but he couldn’t risk getting caught, and pulled away.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Dick said, giving Tim’s hair one last stroke before heading to the window. As quietly as he could, he shut the window behind him and climbed down the tree. Wordlessly, he and Bruce stole across the property to the wall and hopped over. It was only once they were back on the Wayne property that Dick let out a sigh.

“That poor kid, he’s so scared of his parents,” he said forlornly. He had seen enough on the streets to know that not all parents were good, not like his had been, but it hurt to know that a kid living so close by was in such a bad situation.

Bruce sighed, “There’s nothing we can do yet, not until we get more evidence,” he said, “We’ll keep a look out. In the meantime, we look after Tim.”

“Yeah,” Dick said, stuffing his hands into his hoodie pockets, not comforted in the slightest. Parents were supposed to love you, take care of you and keep you safe. He remembered how little Tim had been when he’d met him those three years ago; had his parents been bad back then? He didn’t really remember too much from that day other than what had happened to his own mom and dad (and it still ached every time he thought about it), but he guess he sort of recalled the little boy’s parents. They hadn’t seemed bad, but he had only met them for a few seconds.

Bruce could see the sadness settling over Dick like a blanket, weighing him down further and further. He hated to see such a cheerful kid look so down; gently, he laid his arm around Dick’s shoulders and pulled him close to his side. They walked in silence back to the house.
The next morning, Tim cautiously made his way downstairs. It was early, he hadn’t gotten a lot of sleep last night, but already he heard movement. As quietly as he could, he made his way through the halls, ready to bolt if he needed to.

It turned out the noise was only Mrs. Mac cleaning up. She was sweeping up what looked like the remains of a decorative vase into a dustbin, muttering to herself. Tim generally liked Mrs. Mac, though she never bothered with him much. Tim had the suspicion that she didn't like small children, and that was why he had a nanny, but he never stuck around her long enough to ask.

“You’re up early,” Mrs. Mac remarked, “Careful where you step, there’s broken glass.”

“I will, thank you Mrs. Mac,” Tim said, skirting around her and making his way to the kitchen. Tim’s current nanny, Tambu, liked to sleep late, so Tim was used to getting his own breakfast.

Tim was putting his cereal bowl in the dishwasher by the time Tambu came downstairs, “Already awake again Tim? You should sleep more,” she said, reaching down to ruffle his hair.

Tim liked Tambudzai; she was one of the nicer nannies he’d had. She was very beautiful, with extremely dark skin and a pretty accent. She did her best with Tim, played with him and taught him phrases in Shona, but she was young and a recent immigrant to the US from Zimbabwe and wanted to explore her new surroundings, so she tended to sneak out to go into town in the evenings. She never did this while Tim’s parents were home, but they were away so much that she had plenty of opportunities to go out. Tim didn't mind, especially since Tambu was a lot nicer than Marjorie from last year.

“I’m alright Tambu,” Tim said, “I went to bed early, remember?”

“Of course, of course,” Tambu said, walking over to the coffee maker and making a pot, “It’s much better for little boys to go to sleep early and wake up with the sun.”

“I like nighttime better, actually,” Tim said. Nighttime could be scary, but the world was so calm and peaceful at night (usually).

Tambu smiled down at him, “It is pretty nice at night,” she said, “But you should be careful, or you might get eaten by spirits.”

Tim remembered the screeching monster from last night and shuddered, “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said.

Tambu chuckled, “So, what do you want to do today?” she asked.

Tim shifted on his feet, “I was thinking I’d play outside today,” he said.

“All day?” Tambu asked, raising a dark brow, “It’s gotten quite cold recently, are you sure you want to be outside?”

“It’s not that cold,” Tim said, “And only after lunch, when it starts warming up.”

Tambu didn’t look very convinced, “It’s never warm here. It will probably rain again.”

Tim bit his lip, wondering how he could convince Tambu to let him go so he could see Dick again. Maybe she would let him go if he told her the truth, “I’m not going to be outside all the time, I’m going to visit the neighbours.”

“Neighbours?” Tambu narrowed her eyes, “What neighbours?”
“The Waynes’,” Tim explained, “I met Dick yesterday and he said I could come over today,” he partially lied, “Please?”

Tambu still looked suspicious, “I have to meet this Dick,” she said, “I don’t want you to run off with strangers.”

Tim let out the breath he’d been holding, “Sure! I’m going to meet him after lunch at the wall today. You can come along and see him too.”

Tambu gave a hum and sipped her coffee. Tim could tell that she wasn’t entirely on board just yet, but she hadn’t said no, and as soon as she met Dick, it would be fine. Dick was charming and nice, and he’d be able to put Tambu at ease.

For the rest of the morning, Tim played quietly in his room, keeping one ear out for his mom or dad. They tended to sleep very late on the weekends, especially after they had a fight. Tim knew that they’d both be in a bad mood, but he couldn’t judge how bad until they woke up. Dad tended to stomp around in a huff and talk at anyone who’d listen, while Mom tended to be quiet and distant and drink a lot of expensive alcohol. Tim had gotten used to navigating both, often at the same time, but it was always better to just stay out of the way. They didn't usually come to his room, so he was pretty safe there.

All while Tim played—alternating between playing a game with his action figures and reading at his desk—he thought about what he would do with Dick when he went to see him. Last night he’d been so tired and scared, he hadn’t really had the energy to talk all that much. Dick hadn’t seemed to have minded all that much, but Tim had no idea what they would do later today. Tim didn't like not having a plan; plans helped him avoid problems and trouble. Dick didn't seem like he’d get mean if Tim messed up, but Tim had been wrong about people before. Hopefully his instincts were right this time and Dick was a good person, so Tim didn’t have to worry about making mistakes.

At around eleven, Tim heard the door to his parent’s bedroom door open. After a fight, his mom usually slept in the first guest room, though it was really more of her room at this point, so Tim was unsurprised to hear his dad’s footsteps come down the hall. Tim tensed slightly, waiting for his dad to leave the hall so he could go back to making his action figures come up with a plan to build a castle and rule over the toy kingdom.

Luckily, Jack wasn’t interested in Tim just now, and left the hallway without even stopping near Tim’s room. Tim let out a breath and went back to playing. He probably wouldn’t have to deal with either of his parents until dinner.

After Tambu made him some lunch, which was spicy and delicious, she walked with him over to the wall, where Dick promised to find him today.

They didn't have to wait long, as soon a handsome teenaged face peered over the wall, “Hi Tim!” Dick called, grinning widely.

“Hi Dick!” Tim called, “This is my nanny, Tambu.”

Tambu seemed surprised that Dick had actually showed up (or that he was real), “Hi there!” Dick said, pulling himself up to sit on the top of the wall, “I’m Dick Grayson, nice to meet you.”

Tambu raised an eyebrow, “Nice to meet you,” she said, “You met Tim yesterday?”

Dick quickly caught onto Tim’s fib, “Sure did. I was climbing the trees back here and I saw him from over the top of the wall. We talked for a bit, but I had to go. I promised we’d play today,” he
Tambu watched him for a minute, “Alright, but stay in the Drake’s yard,” she said, then turned to Tim, “Dinner is at six, alright? I’ll come out to check on you in two hours.”

“Okay,” Tim said, though he was hardly listening. He was going to get to play with Dick! He wouldn’t have to hide in his room all day!

Tambu gave one last look at Dick and then started walking back to the house. Dick smiled and jumped down from the wall, rolling into a somersault as he landed, ending up right in front of Tim, which made the boy laugh.

“So, what do you want to play?” Dick asked.

Tim and Dick proceeded to play for the next few hours, and Tim had the best day of his short life. He didn't really have many friends at school, so he never really got to play with anyone, so it was nice to finally have someone else to play with. Dick was also a really good listener, and whenever they took a break from playing, he’d listen to Tim and actually make him feel better. Tim never wanted the day to end.

Six o’clock finally rolled around, and Tim had to head back, “I don't want to go,” he said, leaning over and burying his face in Dick’s sweater.

Dick rubbed Tim’s back, “Aw, I know kiddo, but you have to go,” he said, but there was a strained note in his voice, something pinched in his expression.

Tim sighed deeply, “Dinner’s going to be rough,” he said, resigned to his fate.

“How so?” Dick asked.

“Well, they fought last night,” Tim said, sitting up, “So they’re going to be all tense and mean at dinner.”

Dick’s expression soured further, “Tim,” he said gently, “If you ever feel like you're in danger, I want you to run and come to my house, okay?”

Tim tilted his head, confused, but Dick continued on, “It doesn’t matter what time it is, you don't have to call before hand, you just come right over, okay?” he said, gripping Tim’s shoulders.

Tim nodded, still not sure what this was about, but wanting to make Dick happy, “Okay,” he said.

Dick smiled sadly and pulled Tim into a tight hug, “You’re a good kid Tim,” he said.

Tim buried his face into Dick’s sweater, happy for the attention even if he was still a little confused. He saw Tambu wandering over to them, no doubt to bring Tim back and have him wash up before they sat down to dinner. He squeezed Dick tighter, as if the boy could stop him from being taken.

He did have to go however, and he waved forlornly at Dick as Tambu lead him back inside.

“Did you have a nice time?” Tambu asked.

Tim squeezed her hand, “Yeah, it was the best.”
Tim was quickly washed and dressed for dinner by Tambu, and sat down at the dining table just in time for his mother and father to walk into the dining room. They came in from different ends of the room, and paused slightly when they saw each other. Janet recovered first, casting her chin up and walking deliberately to her seat. Jack grumbled a little and sat down at his own place at the table, opposite Janet, leaving Tim in the middle of them.

Tim tried to gauge their moods, hoping that they’d calmed down enough that they would have an uneventful dinner. Janet was, as always, impossible to read, with her closed off face and stiff posture. It was much easier to pick out Jack’s mood, and Tim could tell that he was still a little agitated. Not enough that he would start a fight, but enough that he’d react to Janet if she started something. Tim resolved to be silent, lest he accidentally trigger something that could set them off.

“So Tim, how was your day?” Jack asked suddenly, making Tim jump a little.

So much for staying silent, “It was fine, I went out to play in the yard,” Tim said, forcing himself not to fidget with his food.

Jack smiled, “That’s nice, it’s good for you to get some exercise,” he said, “It’s no good to be cooped up all the time. I can never stand to be cooped up for too long.”

Tim thought about all the trips his parents went on, “Right,” he said neutrally.

“One day, you’ll get to tour around,” Jack said, tucking into his dinner, “And you’ll be able to experience all kinds of things. When I was in Mongolia last year, we came across—”

Tim listened to Jack raptly, taking small bites of his dinner even though he was incredibly hungry. Playing with Dick all day had made him more hungry than usual, but he’d have to ask Tambu for more food later. At the other end of the table, Janet quietly ate her dinner, not seeming to pay either of them the slightest bit of attention.

Dinner wrapped up and dessert was served. Tim picked at his, not really caring for this specific dessert, which he knew his mother loved. He forced himself to eat half of it, knowing that his father would be annoyed if he wasted food. Jack seemed to be mostly absorbed in telling Tim about his trip to Fiji two years ago, and didn't really notice that Tim wasn't eat a lot.

Finally, the meal ended and Tim was released to Tambu. All in all the night hadn’t been that bad, and Tim didn't predict a fight between Jack and Janet tonight. As Tambu was getting him an after dinner snack, something so he wouldn't go to bed hungry, she sat down on the bed next to him.

“So your parents are heading to Argentina soon,” she said, “They haven’t been there in a while.”

“When are they going?” Tim asked, munching on the sadza she’d made for him.

“Either next week or the week after, just after you start school,” Tambu said, “So it’ll get quiet at home again.”

Tim hummed, “I guess,” he said, handing the empty plate to Tambu.

Tambu looked down at him, “Will you miss them?” she asked.

Tim looked up at Tambu and said nothing. As much as he hated it when his parents fought, he hated it even more when they left for months on end. It got too quiet at home, with no one to talk to except Tambu, and Tim was fully aware of the fact that she was only there because his parents were paying
her. She was very nice, much more so than some of the other nannies he’d had, but she would move on in a year at most.

And Tim had to admit, he did miss his parents when they were gone. Even though they fought all the time and could yell and send him to bed without dinner, his dad liked to show him the neat things he brought back from their trips, and let him sit in his office while he worked, if he promised to be quiet. Sometimes, if he was really good, they would take him out with them, and they would see things like operas and plays and go to fancy parties. Janet loved art museums, and she’d often take Tim along with her to them, and they would spend hours wandering through the halls of the galleries, hand in hand and looking at the paintings and sculptures. If she was in a very good mood, she would explain the different paintings, the kinds of materials used and what the images meant. It was one of Tim’s favourite things in the world to listen to her talk about paintings and art.

Tambu must have read something on his face, because she smiled sadly at him, “It’s only supposed to be for two months this time. They’ll be home in time for Christmas holidays,” she said, “Won’t that be nice?”

Most of his parents trips ended up getting ‘extended’ for several weeks, so Tim was pretty confident that he would either only see them just as Christmas came around, or not until after New Years, “It would be nice,” Tim said. He didn’t really remember a Christmas spent with his parents, though he was sure he must have had at least one.

Tim didn’t see his parents for the rest of the night as Tambu readied him for bed. She tucked him into bed and told him a story from her home country, and even patted his head before she left, “Goodnight Tim.”

“Goodnight Tambu,” Tim called. He found himself wondering what Dick was doing at the moment. He wondered if Bruce tucked him in at night, or kissed his forehead like he was sure his mom or dad must have done at least once. No, Tim decided, rolling over, Dick is much too old to be tucked in.

“Do you think Tim will be okay?” Dick asked as he adjusted his cape.

Bruce looked up from the computer, “Did he say anything?” he asked.

Dick shook his head, “No, not really,” he said, “He actually seems to love his parents a lot.”

“Ah,” Bruce said, leaning back in his chair, “It can be like that sometimes. They may be abusive, but they’re still his parents. He depends on them for security and protection.”

“It’s awful,” Dick said, “You should have seen him today. He’s so conscious of other people, and he’s only six! He should be making up imaginary friends and playing games, not thinking about how best to avoid making his parents mad.”

Dick turned and looked imploringly at Bruce, “There has to be something we can do.”

Bruce sighed sadly, “I wish there was, chum,” he said, “But there’s nothing we can do yet. We have to accumulate more evidence.”

Dick grumbled and crossed his arms, “It’s stupid,” he said.
“I know it is,” Bruce said, “But the Drake’s aren’t like the usual abusers we deal with. They’re rich and powerful, and so far we haven’t gotten any proof that they’re physically abusing Tim. As it stands, we’d never be able to have Tim removed from their custody.”

Dick tapped his foot in annoyance, “But we can’t just leave him with them. What about the broken glass? That’s domestic violence!”

“Inadmissible, we only have Tim’s word to go on,” Bruce said. He could see Dick was growing more and more agitated and stood up, walking over to him and pulling him into a hug, “I know you’re upset, I am too, but we can’t do anything yet.”

Dick grumbled and pressed his forehead into Bruce’s collarbone (he was starting to get so tall), “He’s just a little kid,” he said.

“I know,” Bruce said, patting Dick’s back, “We’ll keep an eye on things and hope we can get something concrete.”

Dick let out a sigh and finally sagged into the hug. Bruce understood his frustration, but there was nothing they could do without trespassing into illegality. Bruce wondered if he’d be able to place bugs in the house and resolved to consider it at a later time.

“Alright, finish suiting up,” Bruce said, pulling back, “Cobblepot is out on bail and he’s going to start planning something soon.”

“They’re always planning something,” Dick said, but he seemed a little more cheerful now.

Bruce smiled, “It always seems that way, doesn’t it?”

At the end of the night, after they’d patrolled the city and successfully planted a couple of bugs in the Iceberg Lounge, Bruce sat at the computer for a few minutes after sending Dick up to bed. He brought up any information he could about Janet and Jack Drake, hoping to find something he might be able to use.

Jack Drake was the owner of a successful company, but he had little to do with the dealings of it, and was more interested in globetrotting for his archeological work. In fact, Janet seemed to be the mastermind behind the company, and Bruce could see that the company’s profit margins had spiked the year after Janet and Jack had gotten married. Other than that, they seemed relatively clean; a few parking tickets on Jack’s end, but no arrests or ties to anything illegal. The Drakes seemed to be one of the few business leaders in town that didn’t have any mob connections of any sort. Normally, Bruce would applaud this, but in this instance it worked against him. He needed something that might be useable in order to remove Tim from their custody.

Bruce sighed, realizing that he was probably getting ahead of himself. Tim had run away in the night and showed a lot of signs of coming from a broken home, but that didn’t mean that removing him from his parents was what was best for him. Family counselling was probably a better first step, though he didn’t know how he would get the Drakes to go to something like that.

“Some late night homework sir?” Alfred asked, coming up to Bruce’s side with a mug of tea (peppermint, to help relax him).

“Just looking into some things,” Bruce said, taking the mug, “The Drakes are surprisingly clean, I think by virtue of just not being in town enough to get involved in anything.”

“How lucky for them,” Alfred drawled, his opinion of the Drakes already coloured unflatteringly, “And nothing international? They do travel a lot.”
“Nothing that I can find,” Bruce said, “They either cover their tracks better than the League ofAssassins or there’s nothing to find.”

“So they’re only regular, run of the mill awful people. Delightful,” Alfred said, “And the boy?”

“Hospital records are clean,” Bruce said, pulling them up, “No suspicious broken bones, or strange‘falls’ or anything like that. He’s not being physically abused, or else they’re very good at hiding that too.”

“Well, that’s something to celebrate,” Alfred said, obviously relieved.

Bruce hummed, “I’m going to keep an eye on things, but it’s going to be difficult. The Drakes areupstanding citizens and wealthy too. The only person we have to tell us what they’re doing is Tim, and he’s only six.”

“Six year olds are hardly taken at their word in court,” Alfred agreed, frowning deeply, “Perhaps we can speak to the nanny.”

“Nanny?” Bruce asked, “What nanny?”

“Master Dick mentioned that Tim had a nanny,” Alfred said, “Perhaps we can speak to her.”

“That might work,” Bruce said, “It might give us a little more insight into the situation. We’ll have to be careful though, we don’t want to scare her off or have her run to the Drakes to tell them what we’re up to.”

“A fine line to tread indeed sir,” Alfred said, “But one I think can wait until you’ve have a nights rest.”

Bruce yawned, feeling the exhaustion weighing on his shoulders, “You’re probably right Alfred. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight sir,” Alfred said. Bruce tapped a few commands and shut the computer down, though not before saving what he’d already gathered on the Drakes. It might take a while, but he was determined to make sure that Tim Drake was well cared for, no matter what.

Chapter End Notes

This was a little shorter than the last chapter, but I had trouble extending it without making it too awkward. It’s alright though, I managed to be happy with it.
Part I Chapter iii: Construction

Chapter Notes

I’m free for the holidays! I’ve got around two weeks or so to just do nothing but write or whatever I fancy. I hope to get at least two or three chapters of this done with the time, as well as presents for my friends.

WARNING: Use of the g*psy slur in this chapter, both out of hostility and innocence.

WIN A FIC! Find the reference and win a 1k fic! Just answer this question in the comments: What is the movie that they watch in this chapter? Comment below with the right answer (first come first serve), and I’ll write you a 1k fic of whatever you like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Over the next few months, Tim made himself an almost semi-permanent fixture at Wayne Manor. At first, he and Dick only played in the Drake’s yard, but as Tambu became more comfortable about Dick, they migrated into the Wayne’s yard, which was much bigger and much nicer to play in. For one thing, Alfred allowed them to run around through the gardens, provided that they didn’t actually run in the flower beds. Janet and Jack didn’t let Tim play in much of the yard, even when it was out of season and they weren’t throwing garden parties. Alfred even enlisted their help with tending to the garden, which at this point in the year meant getting everything ready for winter.

“Careful with the twine,” Alfred said, holding the burlap wrapping down so Dick could tie the knot. Tim was in charge of cutting the twine once the knot was tied.

“I got it,” Dick said, sticking out his tongue in concentration. He’d complained about being co-opted into what was much too close to chores at first, but Tim had been so happy to be asked to help that he hadn’t resisted.

Dick finished tying the knot and Tim stepped in with the cutters, clipping the twine and feeling a rush of satisfaction over being so helpful. Alfred and Dick surely wouldn’t send him away if he made himself useful.

“Just a few more, and then we can go inside for hot cocoa,” Alfred said, unwinding more burlap from the roll.

“How come we have to wrap the bushes?” Tim asked. Mrs. Mac never liked it when he asked too many questions, but Alfred never seemed to mind.

“It’s so the frost won’t kill them. We’ll also have to replace the mulch to keep the roots from dying,” Alfred explained, “Gotham is unreasonably wet and cold. It’s hard to keep anything alive in this climate.”

“Would have thought an Englishman like you would be used to the wet and cold Alfie,” Dick chuckled, grinning wide. If Tim ever talked to an adult like that, he’d get sent to his room.

“You are quite the comedian, Master Dick,” Alfred said, but he was smiling slightly, so Tim didn’t think Dick was in trouble.
They finished wrapping the last of the shrubs and made their way back inside. Tim glanced over at the bins that he’d hidden behind and trotted to keep up, making sure not to swing the clippers around.

Dick gave a dramatic groan as they got out of their coats and boots, “It’s so cold out,” he whined, but then he perked up, “Do you think we’ll get snow soon?”

“It’s quite possible that we will,” Alfred said, giving Dick a pointed look until he hung up his coat properly, “Which is why it’s important that we have the garden prepared before it’s too late.”

Dick went back to groaning, “Gardening’s boring though.”

“I don’t mind helping,” Tim said, perhaps a little too loud. His parents had been gone for three weeks now and it was so quiet at home, he sometimes forgot what volume was appropriate.

Dick smiled anyway and ruffled Tim’s hair, “I know you do, Timmers,” he said, “Come on, let’s go grab the marshmallows before Alfred can take them.”

“You will each get three marshmallows, maximum,” Alfred called after them sternly as Dick took Tim’s hand and trotted them through the house. He would have run, but Tim’s legs were very short.

Bruce looked up at them as they came into the kitchen, “Hello boys, did you have a nice time helping Alfred?” he asked.

“Yeah, it was alright,” Dick said, taking a running leap and landing perfectly on one of the counter stools. It teetered a little, and Tim saw Bruce’s hand go out to steady it before it tilted back, no worse for wear.

Tim climbed up on the stool next to Dick, much more cautious. Alfred came into the kitchen just as he was settling himself on the stool, and Tim had a moment to worry if he should have waited and offered to help Alfred first. Alfred didn’t seem to take notice of his dilemma and went about preparing the kettle for cocoa.

“Would you like some cocoa as well, Master Bruce?” Alfred asked, “We three have worked up quite a thirst, and you’re welcome to join us in quenching it.”

“Alright, if the boys don’t mind,” Bruce said, looking to Dick and Tim, and Tim could see just a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“We don’t mind, right Tim?” Dick said, bumping Tim with his elbow. Tim shook his head, but didn’t say anything. He knew he didn’t need to be, but he was a little intimidated by Bruce.

Maybe ‘intimidated’ was the wrong word? ‘In awe of’ probably fit a little better. Bruce Wayne wasn’t like any adult Tim had ever met. He was tall and quiet and stoic, but he wasn’t cold or dismissive like other adults. Much like Alfred, he never got annoyed at Tim, and seemed pleased whenever Tim came around, happy to answer any of Tim’s questions. Tim never felt like he was in the way or annoying when he talked to Bruce. Bruce even played with him and Dick sometimes, when he didn’t have work to do and Dick could coax him into it. Tim had never known any adult that played, unless they were nannies, but they were paid to play with the kids they looked after. Bruce just seemed to like playing with them.

Four mugs of hot cocoa were produce, three marshmallow’s in three of them and one without. When Alfred’s back was turned, Bruce scooped two marshmallows out of his mug and put them into Tim and Dick’s mugs. Alfred wasn’t fooled in the slightest, but he only gave Bruce a withering stare while Bruce pretended to be oblivious. Dick giggled at the interaction while Tim hid a smile in his
The four of them chatted while they sipped their hot cocoa. Tim noticed it was beginning to get dark and he should be going home, but he didn't want to leave. He didn't want to go back to his big empty house with just Mrs. Mac and Tambu for company. The clock rang and he sighed, setting his empty mug down.

“Goodness, is that the time?” Alfred said, “Master Timothy, we should get you home before Miss Tambu comes looking for you.”

“Okay,” Tim said with a slight sigh. He started to get down, but Dick leaned forward.

“Aw, can’t he stay for dinner?” he whined, “It’s not like they don't know where he is.”

Tim froze and looked up at Bruce, who was sharing a look with Alfred. Something passed between them and Alfred glanced at Tim, “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to call and ask,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Tim asked before he could stop himself. He clamped his teeth together as everyone looked at him.

“Of course we’re sure Tim,” Dick said, throwing an arm around his shoulders, “We’ll always want you around.”

Bruce was looking down at Tim curiously, “You’re not a bother Tim. We like having you around.”

Tim flushed at having been found out so easily. Alfred gave him a kind pat on the shoulder before walking off to the phone. Dick smiled down at him and hugged him close while Tim could hear Alfred speaking with Tambu.

“Miss Tambu said that you’re welcome to stay for dinner, or the night if you so wish. She seemed quite eager to let you stay over,” Alfred said.

Tim noticed Bruce frowning, but he quickly explained, “Tambu likes to go out when she can. She has friends in the city.”

Bruce hummed, “I suppose she is quite young,” he said, though he didn’t look happy about it.

Tim felt like he needed to defend Tambu in her absence, “She’s a lot better than Marjorie from last year,” he said, “She was mean.”

“Oh?” Dick asked, “How so?”

Tim shrugged, “She just wasn’t nice.”

This time, Tim didn’t catch the look Bruce and Alfred shared, but he could feel the oppressiveness of the room bearing down on him. Luckily, Dick sensed his discomfort and saved him, “Hey, it’s going to be just like a sleepover!”

Tim looked up at Dick, “A sleepover?” he asked. He knew what they were, but he’d never had one before. He didn't have any friends at school, so he never got invited to any.

“Yeah, we can stay up late, play games, and tell ghost stories,” Dick said, grinning brightly.

“Dick, what about your homework?” Bruce asked, and there was a particular cadence to his voice that Tim couldn't quite decipher.
Dick bit his lip, like he was suddenly undecided about doing his homework. Tim didn’t know a lot of teenagers, but from what he’d learned from TV, they didn’t usually like their homework, “Maybe I could skip it?” Dick said, “Just for one night?”

Bruce raised an eyebrow, but he was relaxed, “Alright. I suppose there’s no harm in missing one night.”

Dick lit up and hugged Tim again, “This is going to be fun!” he declared.

Tim couldn’t help but be swept up by Dick’s enthusiasm, “Yeah!” he said, curling into the hug. He’d never met anyone who gave as many hugs as Dick; he almost felt a little spoiled getting so much affection for having earned so little of it.

Bruce chuckled and finished his mug of hot cocoa, “Don’t get into too much trouble, Alfred’s already grey enough as it is.”

“Yes, because a sleepover is what’s going to give me more grey hairs at this point sir,” Alfred said, and he didn’t roll his eyes in anyway Tim could see, but it was implied in his tone well enough.

Dick laughed and Tim let himself get comfortable. He never felt like he needed to be on guard the way he did at home. Sometimes he wished he never had to leave.

Dinner was a lot more fun than Tim thought it would be. Bruce and Alfred stuck around, and the food was so delicious that Tim forgot it wasn't polite to ask for seconds at a guest's house. Alfred didn't seem to mind though, and even seemed happy that he wanted more. Everyone spoke and engaged in conversation, and Tim was encouraged to participate, rather than just listen like he usually did.

After dinner was where the real fun began though. Dick roped Bruce into a game with them. They played a few boardgames first, but Dick didn't really have the patience for them and suggested they play something else after only a few rounds.

“Why don’t you pick something Tim?” Bruce asked, “Since we picked the boardgames.”

Tim thought for a moment and suggested the first thing that came to mind, “How about hide and seek?”

Bruce smiled, “Sounds fun,” he said.

Alfred came up with some straws for them and Bruce drew the short one, which meant that he was ‘it’. He started counting and Tim and Dick took off into the house in different directions. Tim saw Dick duck into a room and start climbing on something, but Tim knew his own strengths. He didn't run, but he walked as quickly and quietly as he could, until he found a part of the house that didn't seem as well-trafficked. He ducked into a room and saw that it was a bedroom of some kind, a guest room probably. He checked the closet and saw that it was empty, but there was a big box under the bed. As gently as he could, Tim tried to wedge himself behind the box, putting it between him and the door as much as he could without moving it. If the room didn’t look disturbed, he would probably be left alone.
Tim waited for a long time, listening to the quiet of the house. It wasn’t the same kind of quiet like at home; there was a different quality to it, like it was resting or sleeping, breathing deeply like it was alive. At home, the quiet was cold and still, like a dead thing, or some kind of inanimate thing that had never been alive in the first place.

Tim was starting to doze off he was hiding for so long. He blinked awake when he heard someone in the hall. Keeping his breathing steady, Tim looked around to see if there was something else he could disguise himself with. He noticed a hole in the bottom of the boxspring and crawled over to poke his head in. It would be a tight fit, but Tim could probably crawl inside and lay flat on the wooden beams of the underside.

Quietly as he could, Tim managed to crawl in just as someone opened the door. Tim couldn’t see who it was from inside the boxspring, but the footsteps sounded like an adult. Bruce—as Tim figured it was him—walked around and checked the closet first, then Tim heard him kneel down. Tim held his breath as Bruce checked under the bed. After a minute, Bruce stood up and left the room, giving it another check before he left.

Tim let out a breath and relaxed. He smiled to himself a little, pleased with himself for having found so great a hiding place. He sometimes heard Alfred worrying that Tim was too small for his age, but Tim couldn’t help but feel proud about it. If he were any bigger, he’d never fit into the boxspring.

Another hour or so passed and Tim was starting to feel a little cramped. He wondered if he shouldn’t just come out and let Bruce find him, but he was worried that he might ruin the game. He was going to need the bathroom soon, and he was getting really bored where he was. He was preparing to crawl out of the boxspring when he heard someone in the hall.

“—swear I saw him go down this way,” Dick was saying, “He went passed me when we were running to hide.”

“I checked down here, I didn’t see him,” Bruce said, “I checked every room.”

“Are you certain he didn't double back?” Alfred asked, “Or maybe found somewhere small to hide?”

“I checked everywhere,” Bruce said, and he sounded a little concerned. Tim bit his lip and started to climb out.

“Tim!” Dick called, “The game’s over! You won!”

Tim wiggled out of the boxspring and climbed out from under the bed. He went to the door and peeked out of it, “I’m here!” he called.

Bruce, Alfred, and Dick all turned in the hall, a little startled by his sudden appearance, “There you are!” Dick cried, trotting over and pulling Tim into a tight hug, “Where the heck did you hide?”

“In the boxspring,” Tim said, “There was a hole in the fabric and I crawled inside.”

“Seriously?” Dick asked, and Tim showed them where he’d hidden.

“I'll be damned,” Bruce said, “I didn’t even see it.”

“I think this is the first time someone has beaten you at hide and seek Bruce,” Dick said.

Tim shrank a little. He hadn’t meant to show up Bruce. Adults usually got annoyed when you were better than them at something, even on accident. Tim expected Bruce wouldn’t want to talk to him anymore, but maybe he’d still let him play with Dick?
Bruce turned to look at him and gave a half smile, “You’re pretty stealthy kid. Good work.” He gently laid his hand on Tim’s head and gave his hair a ruffle.

Tim smiled, glad that he wasn’t in trouble, “So, what does he win?” Dick asked suddenly, “He won hide and seek, so he should win something.”

Bruce thought for a moment, “Why don’t you pick the movie Tim?” he suggested, “That seems like a reasonable prize.”

After some hemming and hawing over Bruce’s movie selection, they all sat down in the media room, which was basically it’s own little theatre. Alfred got them some popcorn and they settled in to watch an animated version of *Treasure Island* in space. Dick insisted that they all curl up under a blanket together, so Tim basically ended up squashed between Bruce and Dick, half in Dick’s lap and leaning back against Bruce’s broad chest.

“The animation is really good,” Bruce commented. His arm was resting over the back of the seats, like he was encasing them with his body. It was strangely nice, though Tim usually didn’t enjoy being crowded up by adults.

“I like the designs,” Dick said, “The cyborg John Silver is a nice touch.”

Tim drifted off somewhere around the time the giant crab guy was launched into space, resting back against Bruce’s chest and feeling his slow, even breaths under his cheek. Fingers combed gently through his hair and he let out a long sigh of contentment. The next thing he was aware of, he was being carried over a strong shoulder, gently swaying as whoever was carrying him walked down the hall. A warm hand was rubbing his back gently, as though trying to soothe him back to sleep. Tim hummed softly and turned to bury his face into Bruce’s neck.

“He’s so cute when he sleeps,” Dick said, climbing into bed next to Tim where Bruce had lais him down, “You know I always wanted a little brother?”

Bruce stifled a noise of surprise, “Dick, I know you’re really excited, but don’t get any ideas. As much as I’d like to take Tim out of his current situation, I don’t think that’s what’s going to happen.”

“Why not? His parents are awful,” Dick said.

“They’re neglectful, but they technically aren’t doing anything wrong,” Bruce said, “They leave him with a nanny when they go on their trips, and so far there’s been no evidence of abuse directed at him,” he explained. “That doesn’t mean they’re good parents, not even close, but it’s not enough to have Tim removed.”

Dick grumbled and looked down at the sleeping child next to him, “It’s not fair though. Parents shouldn’t act like his do.”

Bruce sighed, “I know,” he said, reaching out to stroke Dick’s hair, “But the only thing we can do at this point is offer him a place away from home where he can feel safe and cared for.”

Dick grumbled again, but didn’t say anything else. Bruce knew how he felt, but there really was nothing they could do. Tim’s home life was crap, but the Drake’s were not actually breaking or violating any laws regarding child care. Even if Social Services were called, and they weren’t bribed or blinded by the Drake’s social standing, they would most likely give Jack and Janet a warning at most. Bruce hated it, but he couldn’t do a damn thing.

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Bruce promised, “If something comes up, you can bet that we’ll help him. Until then, we just make sure Tim’s got somewhere to go.”
“I know,” Dick said, “It just sucks that we have to wait around for something to happen.”

Bruce frowned, “Yes, it does.” If something happened to Tim, he would do his best to help, but the tricky part was waiting for it to happen. If or when it happened, Tim might be traumatized, or hurt badly if things went haywire. Bruce knew he’d never forgive himself if something happened to this child.

“Get some sleep Dick,” Bruce said, “Enjoy your night off.”

Dick flopped down on the bed, “I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep so early. I’m used to staying up way later and having a lot more excitement before bed.”

Bruce chuckled, “I’m sure you’ll manage. Goodnight Dick.”

“Night,” Dick called, pulling the blankets up over himself and Tim. He pulled Tim close and tried to fall asleep. It was harder than he’d admit, not in the least because he was aware that Bruce was out there all on his own.

Tim ended up spending most of his time at Wayne Manor over the months, even when his parents were around. He didn’t stay overnight that much, but it was such a short trip home that he never really minded, especially because Dick always brought him home. He even spent Christmas Eve with them, though he stayed at home for Christmas in case his parents called. They didn’t, but Bruce did to wish him a happy holiday. The same happened on New Years.

For some reason, Tim didn’t tell his parents about going over to the Wayne’s. He didn’t really know what they would say; he didn’t think they would be mad per se, but for some reason Tim thought that they might not let him go over anymore if they knew. So Tim kept where he went everyday a secret, and he made Tambu promise not to tell either. She was sceptical at first, and kept telling him that he should just tell them and they wouldn’t be angry with him, but she never said anything to Jack or Janet.

“Alright, this is your stop,” Dick said, dropping him down from his back at the line of trees near Tim’s house, “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, of course,” Tim said, stepping forward and giving Dick a hug. “I’ll come by after school.”

Dick smiled, hugging Tim back just as tight, “I’ll wait here by the wall for you.”

Tim nodded and then ran back to the house, trying not to slip on the snow on the ground. It was going to be dinner soon, and he needed to wash up before he sat down. Tambu met him at the door.

“You are a silly boy, acting like you have something to hide,” Tambu said, “I’m not going to keep your secrets forever.”

“I know Tambu,” Tim said, handing her his coat and running to go upstairs to his bathroom. Tambu had already laid out his outfit for dinner.

Tim managed to sit down just as dinner was being served, “And where were you all day?” Jack asked, mostly sounding like he was teasing.

“Not near the Wayne property?” Janet said, “I don’t want you pestering them.”

Tim felt his heart sink as his fears were confirmed, “I wasn’t,” he mumbled, taking a bite of dinner and using it as an excuse to stop talking.

Janet watched him for a long while, and Tim tried not to squirm under the scrutiny, “I mean it Timothy, I don’t want you hanging around that house,” she said.

Tim shrank in his seat, pretending to be very interested in his dinner so he wouldn’t have to look up at his mother. The food clung to his throat when he swallowed, but he did his best not to show that he was upset.

“Now honey, that’s a little harsh,” Jack said, “Besides, that boy is a teen. I’m sure he wouldn’t be interested in playing with Tim. Better things to do with his time.”

Janet huffed and took a sip of wine, “You can never tell, not with those gypsy types.”

“Janet,” Jack said, rolling his eyes, “That’s unnecessary, don’t you think?”

The two of them started to argue and Tim tuned them out, focussing on his dinner. He’d known that they wouldn’t approve of him hanging out with Dick, but it was another thing to hear it out loud. He just wanted a friend, what was so bad about that? And what was a ‘gypsy type’ anyway? If Dick was one, then they certainly couldn’t be bad at all.

Jack and Janet argued all through dinner, and Tim had to sit and listen to them the whole time, even through desert. Once he’d finished as much as he was able to stomach listening to them fighting, he was released to Tambu’s care. She got him upstairs to bed as quickly as possible, away from his parents yelling.

“Don’t pay them any mind Timothy,” Tambu said as she was shampooing Tim’s hair, “In my home in Zimbabwe, my father and mother would yell all the time. He even used to hit her. Your dad never hits. That’s lucky.”

“I guess,” Tim said, closing his eyes as Tambu rinsed his hair. He couldn’t hear them from the bathroom, but he was certain they were still yelling. If they weren’t they’d just wind themselves up and start yelling later.

Tambu sighed, helping him out of the tub and wrapping him in a towel. She didn't say anything while he dressed into his pyjamas. They were silent as they basically tiptoed down the hall to Tim’s room; the house was quiet, but Tim could feel the pressure in the air. They were going to have a hell of a fight tonight.

“It's snowing out,” Tambu said when they reached his room. Sure enough, Tim could see the snow drifting down in small flakes through his window. February was fast approaching, so this would probably be one of the last big snowfalls of the year.

As Tambu was setting up his bed for him, Tim checked to see that his chair was close to the door, just in case he needed to wedge the door shut. It seemed like it was going to be a nasty fight, and Dick and Bruce told him not to go out in the snow at night. Neither of his parents had ever tried to come into his room when they fought, but Tim liked the extra layer of protection.

Tim crawled into bed and laid down, “Goodnight Tambu,” he said flatly, ready to at least try and get some sleep.
Tambu let out a long sigh and stroked his hair, “You shouldn’t worry,” she said, “The two of them fighting has nothing to do with you. Trust me.”

Tim nodded, but he didn't really buy that. They had started fight because of him, because he was hanging out with Dick and they didn’t want him to. Tambu seemed to sense his mind and gave him a sad smile.

“They would find something to fight about no matter what,” she said, “It has nothing to do with you.” She paused for a long time, “I won’t tell them about your friend Tim, I promise.”

Tim looked up at Tambu, a little surprised. Her dark eyes were incredibly sad, and Tim wondered if she was remembering when her parents fought. He wondered if she had had anyone to protect her when it happened.

“Thank you Tambu,” he said. Tambu gave him another sad smile and finished tucking him in. She switched off the light and left the room.

As soon as he was sure she was gone, Tim got up and wedged his desk chair under the doorknob. Just as he was crawling back into bed, the yelling started downstairs, starting out soft and then growing in volume.

Tim shivered pulled the covers over his head, trying to block them out. He pulled Joe out from under his pillow and held her close, wishing he was one of those people that could just drop off to sleep.

The yelling got louder and Tim finally gave up. He wasn’t going to sleep until they stopped, so he crawled out of bed and went to his window to watch the snow. The tree outside his window had shed all its leaves, and Tim could see through the naked branches. In the distance there was a faint glow which Tim now knew was a light on at Wayne Manor. Tim sighed and rested his cheek on the sill, wishing he could fly like a bird through the snow and wind and find himself in a nice warm place with people who cared about him. If he just followed the light in the distance, it would be a very short trip.

Tim managed to slip away the next day after school and get to the wall before Dick got back. He waited for several minutes, but Dick didn't show. Tim was about give up and go back inside when he heard shuffling on the other side of the wall.

“Tim?” Bruce called, “Are you there?”

“I’m here!” Tim called, “Where’s Dick?”

Bruce’s face appeared over the top of the wall, “He’s back at the house. Hold on, I’ll come over and get you.”

Tim waited patiently for Bruce to leap over the wall and take him over, “We should make you a little ladder or something so you can get over the wall yourself,” Bruce said as he secured Tim on his back.

“How would we hide it from mom and dad?” Tim asked.

Bruce was quiet for a moment, “I suppose we could put it at the end of a rope. You pull the rope and
the ladder comes down.”

“Wow, that’s a good idea,” Tim said, “My parents would never see it from the house or even the
garden.”

Bruce smiled and hauled them both over the wall, landing almost silently in the snow on the other
side. He carried Tim through the garden and into the house where Alfred was waiting for them to
take their coats and boots.

“You’ll find Master Dick in the Television room,” Alfred said, “Be careful though, he’s rather tired.”

“Is he sick?” Tim asked, handing Alfred his coat.

“He broke his ankle,” Bruce explained, “So he’s a little tired because his body is diverting energy
into healing.”

“Oh,” Tim said, “That makes sense. How’d he get hurt?”

“Slipped on some ice,” Bruce said, taking Tim’s hand and leading him through the house.

Dick was indeed in the TV room, his leg casted up to the knee and propped up on some pillows. He
looked pretty tired, like he hadn’t slept much, and Tim could see that he had a bruise on his cheek
too. Dick looked up when they came in and smiled brightly.

“Hey Timmy,” he said, sitting up a little more, “Sorry I didn’t come get you, I slipped on some stairs
yesterday and took a tumble.”

“Stairs?” Tim asked, hopping up on the couch next to Dick, “Bruce said you slipped on ice.”

“Oh, uh...” Dick looked a little panicked for a second and glanced at Bruce, “I was outside and I
slipped on the icy steps.”

“They didn’t seem icy to me,” Tim said, looking at Dick’s cast, “Can I sign it?”

“Sure,” Dick said, pulling a Sharpie from his hoodie pocket, “I tried to get Bruce to sign, but he’s a
party pooper.”

Bruce rolled his eyes, “I’m sure you’ll survive.”

Tim giggled, taking the sharpie and leaning over the cast. It was fiberglass instead of plaster, which
made it harder to write on, but Tim took his time. He drew a little smiley face next to his name.

“Looks good Tim,” Dick said.

“Thanks,” Tim said, settling in next to Dick to watch TV, “Did it hurt?”

“Mm-hm, it did,” Dick said, “But I’ve had worse. Don’t worry about it too much. I once dislocated
my shoulder when I was in the circus pulling a dumb stunt.”

“What kind of stunt?” Tim asked, “Like your somersault?”

“Kind of,” Dick said, and he went on to explain the kind of move he had been attempting at the time.
It evolved from there to Dick telling stories from his circus days, travelling around with his parents
and putting on shows across North America. Tim curled into his side and listened intently. He hadn’t
been to a circus since that time he saw Dick perform, and his only experience had been less than
great (the show itself had been wonderful and Tim would never forget it, but he was still to afraid to
go to another show). As Dick was talking about travelling, Tim was reminded of something he asked his teacher earlier that day.

“Dick?” he asked, “Are you a gypsy type?”

Tim knew immediately that he’d done something wrong. Dick stiffened beside him and Bruce sucked in a breath. Tim could feel his stomach heat and his throat constrict, and he was about to start apologizing when Bruce laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Tim, who taught you that word?” he asked gently, like he wasn’t mad but Tim knew he must be because Tim just made a mistake.

“Mom,” Tim answered softly, hunching in on himself, “She said that’s what Dick was. I asked my teacher and she said that it was a word for a group of people who travelled around a lot.”

Bruce glanced at Dick, who still looked hurt, but more angry now, “Tim, we’re not mad at you,” Bruce said, “But that was not a very nice word. It’s a very mean name for an ethnic group called Roma.”

“I didn’t know!” Tim said, “I didn’t know, no one told me.”

“And that’s why we’re not mad at you Tim,” Bruce said, rubbing Tim’s back to calm him down, “But it’s a very mean word and you shouldn’t use it anymore. The proper term is Roma.”

Tim nodded and sniffled, “I’m sorry,” he whimpered, “Please don’t send me away.”

“No one is going to send you away Tim,” Bruce said, “But I think you should say sorry to Dick.”

Tim hiccuped and turned to Dick, who was sitting stiffly beside him. Tim bit his lip and took a deep breath, “I’m sorry Dick. I didn’t mean to make you hate me.”

Dick looked over, and his eyes still looked hurt, but he reached for Tim to pull him close, “I don’t hate you Tim, no one hates you,” he said, “That wasn’t a nice thing you said, but you didn’t know.”

Tim buried his face into Dick’s hoodie, “I’m sorry.”

“I know you are,” Dick said with a sigh, “I’m not mad at you.”

Bruce laid a gentle hand on his back, “No one is going to send you away Tim. Everyone makes mistakes.”

Tim nodded and tried not to cry any harder. He was sure they were angry with him, but they weren’t yelling, so that was good at least. They hadn’t told him if he was going to be punished or not for this, but if not this, then they’d find something later to punish him for. Tim whimpered and squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to break out into wails of sadness. If he started making noise, they’d definitely get angry with him. He tried not to think about how it could all be ruined now, and Dick would stop inviting him over. Tim snuggled deeper into Dick’s hoodie, as though trying to absorb the last little bit of affection he could before they no longer wanted anything to do with him.

**Chapter End Notes**

This was more filler than the other chapters, but I’m trying to establish the relationships
that are building here. Filler isn't always a bad thing.
Second to last chapter of Part I guys! Next chapter is when it really hits the fan! I might take a short break from writing this for just a few days, maybe, since there's something else I want to write quickly. We'll see what happens.

Fic Prize! Find the reference and win a 1k fic! This chapter's contest: find the reference to Oscar Wilde! I think this one is a little harder than the last two, but I think someone who knows about him should catch it. Hint: it's not necessarily a literary reference.

If you have won the contest before, please refrain from participating for the rest of the fic. Let other people have a chance to win and that way everyone has fun.

Winter began to fade and spring started to peek its fragile head out into the cold and damp of Gotham. Tim now spent as much time as he could at Wayne Manor, spending time with Dick and Bruce and Alfred. Tambu came over sometimes as well, though she usually used the free time to go into the city and see her new girlfriend. Tim was surprised she'd been his nanny for so long, but he didn't really mind since she kept his secret.

Bruce ended up making him the ladder he'd talked about. There were two ladders, one on either side, but the one on the Drake's side of the wall had a hook and a stick to pull it down or put it up when he went home. Dick had taught him how to drop down from the wall in a safe way so he wouldn't hurt himself. He also taught Tim a few acrobatics moves, as well as some self-defense moves, just in case.

“Straighten your wrist more,” Dick said, “Or you’ll hit wrong and snap your wrist.”

Tim did as instructed, “Like this?” he asked.

Dick stepped forward and moved his feet further apart, “Bend your knees a little, so you’re harder to knock over,” he said.

Tim smiled and did the motion Dick showed him again. It was a simple move meant to stun an attacker so he could get away and get help, but still felt really cool to learn.

“Perfect,” Dick said, grinning, “You’re getting pretty good at this stuff.”

“Really?” Tim asked, pleased, “You think I could learn more?”

“Maybe when you’re older,” Bruce said from the doorway, having stopped to watch them, “I think the basics are good enough for now.”

“Aww, but I’ll be seven soon!” Tim protested, “That’s old enough!”

Bruce laughed, “It’s still March. July is still a ways away,” he said, coming into the room and ruffling Tim’s hair.
“But once I am seven?” Tim asked, hopeful.

Bruce hummed, “Maybe, we’ll see,” he said, “It’s getting late, you should get going home soon.”

Tim sighed, “Fine,” he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow Dick.”

“See you,” Dick said, giving Tim a quick hug, “You’re still coming over for my birthday on Thursday?”

“Of course!” Tim said, smiling up at Dick, “I’d never miss it!”

Dick smiled and gave Tim one last squeeze before letting him go so Tim could go home. Bruce walked Tim out to the back door, where Alfred was waiting with his coat and boots. Tim put them on as slow as possible, prolonging his stay as much as he could. Bruce secretly wished he didn’t have to send the boy home, but he knew he couldn’t keep him.

“Do you want me to walk you to the wall?” Bruce offered.

“No, I can do it on my own now,” Tim said, “Thank you Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce gave a small smile and patted Tim’s soft black hair, “You’re welcome Tim. Be safe getting home.”

“I will!” Tim called over his shoulder as he dashed out into the evening. It wasn’t as dark in the evenings as it used to be, but it still got pretty cold past six. And as always in Gotham, it was perpetually waterlogged, so Tim had to be careful on the wet ground.

Tim climbed over the wall and hid the ladder. His parents weren’t supposed to be home until next week, so it probably didn't matter, but he didn't want to risk it. If he got sloppy, he ran the risk of forgetting and his parents seeing it from the garden and finding out. Tim didn't think they would see it, but he didn’t want to risk it.

Tambu was waiting by the back door for him when he got there, “Hurry inside, your parents came home from Bialya early.”

Tim felt a cold spike of fear run through him. How long had they been home? Had they asked where he was? Tim wiggled out of his coat and boots hurriedly and handed them to Tambu, who likewise stuffed them in the closet as fast as she could.

“They’re still in the foyer. Hurry!” Tambu hissed, giving him a little shove. Tim ran as fast as he could to the other end of the house.

As it turned out, his parents were just coming in the door. Jack saw Tim come barrelling around the corner and smiled, “Hey Timbo!” he said, kneeling down and spreading his arms, having mistaken Tim’s panic for enthusiasm.

Tim rolled with it and ran to his father’s arms, thoroughly enjoying the way Jack picked him up and spun him around, “You guys came back early,” Tim said, snuggling into his father’s neck.

“You missed us kiddo?” Jack asked, setting Tim down so he could take off his coat, “We had to cut our trip short, there was a bit of trouble in the country.”

“There was a military coup and our permits got revoked,” Janet said, “If we had stayed, we might have been killed.”
“Janet,” Jack said, “He doesn't need to know that.” He turned back to Tim with a big smile on his face, “How about we take a little vacation, huh? All three of us, for the week?”

“Really?” Tim asked, “The whole week?”

“Sure,” Jack said, still grinning, “We can stay in the townhouse and spend time together.”

“Jack, we’re going to be busy,” Janet said, “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“So? We can bring Tim along to the office,” Jack said, “He has to learn how to run it eventually anyway. Don’t be a spoilsport Janet.”

Tim approached his mother, looking pleadingly up at her, but not hugging her like he did with his father, “Please mom? I promise I’ll behave.”

Janet looked down at him and Tim did his best not to fidget. Her expression softened after a minute and she let out a sigh, “Alright,” she relented, “But you have to be on your best behavior, okay?”

“I will!” Tim said, feeling the excitement surge. A whole week with his parents! This was going to be the greatest!

Tim suddenly felt a wave of guilt. Dick’s birthday was on Thursday; if he spent the whole week with his parents, he wouldn't be able to go and see him. He had really been looking forward to spending Dick’s birthday with him, and he knew Dick would be upset with him if he couldn’t come. On the other hand, Tim never got to spend so much time with his parents. Maybe Dick would understand if he called him? He’d ask Tambu to help him with the phone.

Jack ruffled Tim’s hair, “Why don't you run up and get a bag packed and we’ll head over in a few minutes?” he said.

Tim nodded and dashed up the stairs, though he could still hear his mother complain about not being able to rest before they were off again. Tambu was waiting for him at the top of the stairs.

“I started getting your suitcase ready,” she said, “You need my help?”

“I’ve got it Tambu,” Tim said, “But um…” he bit his lip.

“Yes?” Tambu asked.

“Can you call Dick for me?” he asked, “If I’m in town all week, I might not be able to go to his birthday on Thursday.”

Tambu smiled, “I’ll call and let him know what’s going on,” she said, “You better get packing, you don’t want to keep your parents waiting.”

Tim nodded and went into his room where Tambu had already laid out his suitcase on the bed. Some clothes were already folded inside of it, but it was mostly underwear and socks. Tim was fairly sure he had some clothes at the townhouse, so he didn't think he’d need a whole lot of stuff. He put some more clothes in, and then a few books, Joe, and some other things he figured he’d need. Despite knowing he was probably going to miss Dick’s birthday, he was really excited to spend time with his parents. He never got to spend a whole week with them.

Tim double checked to make sure he had everything and then zipped up his suitcase. Tambu helped him get it downstairs and to the door, where his parent’s suitcases were still sitting. Jack and Janet came back into the foyer as Tambu was helping him into his coat and boots (the nice ones that he
kept at the front door, since his regular ones were at the back).

“All set?” Jack asked, grinning brightly.

“Yup!” Tim said, bouncing on his heels in his excitement.

Jack laughed and leaned down to scoop Tim up into his arms, “Alrighty then!” he said, “Let’s go!”

Tim giggled and snuggled into his father’s neck. He smiled at his mother over Jack’s shoulder and was relieved when she smiled back. Sometimes he thought that his mother didn't like him very much, but in moments like this, he figured that she must love him at least a little.

As they got in the car, Tim looked back towards the house and noticed that Tambu was picking up the phone. He sighed and decided to enjoy the time with his parents and not think about it until he got back. Dick would understand, he was nice like that.

The next week was one of the best of Tim’s short life. He spent the whole time with either his father, his mother, or both of them together. Jack took Tim to a few natural history museums that were displaying some of his finds and explained what they were and how he’d found them. He took Tim to lunch and told him stories from his travels, which Tim enjoyed immensely. Jack once took Tim to the Drake Industries office, where everyone was nice to him and smiled at them both as they toured around.

Janet took him to art galleries and they spent a long time looking at sculptures. She brought Tim along when she went to help one of her friends open an art show. Tim did his best to help with the preparations and even made friends with the workers, who gave him the nickname ‘Principito’ and sent him on little errands for them. A few of the catering staff slipped him some extra hors d'oeuvres. Even his mother’s friends were charmed by how polite and helpful he was. One of them, a rail thin and towering woman who Tim was sure was the owner of the gallery, gave him a green carnation to put in the buttonhole of his nice suit.

“Don’t you just look dashing?” she trilled, running a long fingernail down his cheek. She smelled a little strange, but seemed nice enough, “Those eyes are so beautiful. So clear and ancient.”

Tim wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but he was pretty sure she was complimenting him, “Thank you miss,” he said.

The lady smiled vaguely at him and teetered away on her impossibly tall high heels. Tim watched her go for a moment before returning to his mother’s side.

The best part of the week, however, was spending time with both his mother and father at the same time. They spent a few nights in to have dinner, ending the evening sitting around reading and chatting quietly. Several times Tim sat in his father’s office with him while he worked, playing quietly or reading and just enjoying being in his father’s presence.

One night, they decided to go to an opera. Tim didn't really care for them that much, he could never see what was going on on the stage and they lasted so long, but he knew his mother loved them, so he never complained. They went out to a nice dinner and stayed to mingle in the lobby with a few of his parents friends after the opera was over. By the end of the night, Tim was rather sleepy and Jack ended up carrying him home.
On the last night they were staying at the townhouse, Tim stayed up late in his room, sitting at the window. His mother complained about the city noise keeping her up, but Tim loved being in the city. He loved to keep his window open at night, and would sometimes sit by it for a few hours, watching the city roll by underneath him, or on the rare clear nights, watching the stars glitter in the distant sky.

Tim was about to call it a night and crawl into bed when he saw a dark shadow across the street on a rooftop. He looked again, and he was certain he saw the flutter of a long black cape billowing in the wind. Tim sucked in a breath and leaned closer, trying to see better. It was gone in a moment, but Tim was certain of what he’d just seen.

“Batman,” he whispered, suddenly wide awake again. Tim pressed his nose to the glass and tried to see where the fabled protector of Gotham went. Some people said he was a myth, but Tim had always wanted to believe. The idea that someone was out there, looking after everyone in the city, keeping them safe and protected, made Tim feel calm inside.

In the morning, Tim woke up still sitting at his window, having fallen asleep at it trying to see if he could spot the Dark Knight once more.

Tim wasn’t able to slip away from his parents right away even after they came back from staying in the city. His dad especially seemed to want to spend more time with him. After a while though, Tim could feel his attention waning as he ran out of things to do with Tim and got bored. Eventually, Tim was certain he’d be able to slip away and not be missed for the day until dinner.

“Tambu, did you call and say why I wasn’t there on Thursday?” Tim asked as he carefully put Dick’s present into his backpack.

“I did call them,” Tambu said, “I said you were going to be in town and wouldn’t be able to go over. Mr. Pennyworth was very understanding.”

“Good,” Tim breathed, relieved that Dick knew he hadn’t just forgotten about him. It was such a terrible feeling, to be forgotten by someone you cared about.

“Remember that dinner is at six,” Tambu said, “You have five hours to play before you have to come back and get washed.”

“I know, thank you Tambu,” Tim said. He shouldered his bag and Tambu took him to the back door to help him get his coat and boots on.

Tambu ruffled his hair, “Have fun,” she said, smiling softly at him. Tim had noticed that she was starting to have a sad look in her eyes when she looked at him.

“I will,” Tim said, smiling brightly to show that he was happy and she had no reason to be sad for him. The sad look only deepened, and Tim couldn’t figure it out.

“You’re a good boy Tim,” she said, “Don’t ever believe different.”

Tim tilted his head in confusion, “I won’t?” he said, but it came out like a question, “I have to go. I need to give Dick his present.”

“Alright, get going,” Tambu said. Tim gave her one last smile before running out into the back yard.
Going along the path he knew well by now, Tim noticed the little green buds on the ends of the trees, letting the world know that spring was well on its way. As Tim was pulling the ladder down, he heard the chirp of a bird and stopped to watch a robin fly overhead. Smiling at the thought of winter finally being over, Tim climbed the ladder and headed up to the Manor.

Tim rang the bell at the back of the house and waited. The Wayne Manor was a very big and sprawling house, so it could take a while to get from one end to the other. Tim didn’t mind, he could be patient.

The door opened and Alfred smiled down at Tim, “Well hello there my boy, it’s been a while.”

“Sorry,” Tim said, stepping inside and taking off his coat, “My parents took me into the city.”

“Yes, miss Tambu called,” Alfred said, taking Tim’s coat, “Did you have a nice time?”

Tim nodded eagerly, “Yeah! We hung out and I went to a gallery and an opera!”

“It sounds like a wonderful time,” Alfred said, smiling, “Come along, Master Dick is in the study.”

Tim nodded and pulled the present out of his backpack to bring to Dick. He’d worked very hard on it and he was excited to give it to the older boy.

Dick was doing his homework in the study, sighing and huffing over it like he was being personally victimized by the math problems presented to him. He looked up when Tim came in and smiled, “Hey Tim!” he said, immediately getting out of his chair and coming to hug the younger boy, “How have you been?”

“I’m alright,” Tim said, hugging Dick back tightly, “I’m sorry I missed your birthday,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dick said, “I was out most of the day with my friend Wally anyway.”

Tim had heard Dick mention Wally a few times, but he’d never met the other teen. He pushed the wrapped present into Dick’s hands, “This is for you,” he said.

“Thanks Tim,” Dick said, taking the gift. He tore through the wrapping quickly and pulled out the handmade gift, “What is it?” he asked, turning it over to try and figure it out.

“It’s an electric card!” Tim said brightly, “We were learning about electricity in class and the teacher showed us how currents were made. So I looked up how to make one and I made you a card!”

Tim reached over and took the flat cardboard to lay it down on the table. He carefully connected the end of the wires to the battery he’d glued to the back and smiled as the card lit up, spelling out ‘Happy Birthday Dick’ in coloured lights.

“You made this?” Dick asked, astounded as he watched Tim fiddle with the card, “That’s amazing Tim! Wow!”

Tim blushed, “It wasn’t that hard,” he said, “I found some instructions online and just copied them.”

“Still, this is amazing,” Dick said, picking up the card and examining it, “Let’s go show Bruce and Alfred.”

Dick took Tim’s hand and led him out of the study, holding the card carefully. They found Bruce in his office, pouring over papers. Tim initially balked and tried to turn around, knowing that it was bad to disturb someone when they were in their office, but Dick just barged right in.
“Hey Bruce, Tim’s here,” Dick said, “Look at what he made me for my birthday!”

Bruce looked up, and he didn’t look angry at all at being interrupted, even setting aside what he was working on as they came in, “What’s that?”

“Electric card,” Tim said, “I found a tutorial online and adapted it.”

Bruce took the card and looked it over, “You made this all on your own?” he asked.

“Tambu brought the supplies,” Tim said, twisting his hands together and looking down at his shoes.

“This is very good Tim,” Bruce said, “I’m impressed.”

Tim flushed under the praise. He didn’t really think it was that impressive, the tutorial had been mostly about making your own battery out of homemade stuff, but Tim couldn’t get it to work with all the lights, so he’d used a regular AAA battery instead. All he really had to do was connect the copper wire to the coloured lights.

“We should put it up somewhere!” Dick said, bouncing on his heels, “Like on the mantle or something.”

“That’s a great idea Dick,” Bruce said, “We’ll find a place later, once you’ve finished your homework.”

Dick groaned dramatically, “Aw come on! Tim’s here. Can’t I do it later?”

“Do it now and then you won’t have to do it later,” Bruce said, “If you actually do it instead of being dramatic about it, you should be finished in a half an hour max.”

Dick grumbled and turned to leave. Tim hesitated following him; if Dick was going to go do his homework, then he probably shouldn’t disturb him. But he probably couldn’t stay in Bruce’s office. Although, he hadn’t been dismissed by Bruce either, so he didn’t know if he was allowed to leave. He stood awkwardly, shifting on his feet and trying to decide where to go.

“Tim?” Bruce called, “Do you need something?”

“No sir,” Tim answered automatically. Bruce raised an eyebrow and stood up from his desk.

“Why don’t we go to the library and read a little while Dick finishes his homework?” he suggested, “I’m sure we’ll find something you’ll like.”

Tim nodded and let himself be led to the library, Bruce’s calloused hand gently holding his. Tim liked the Wayne’s library; it was a lot bigger than the library they had at home, and he was allowed to look at any book he wanted, rather than one small little shelf near the back (which he had finished reading ages ago). There were lots of comfy chairs and sofas to sit on and read, with big tall windows to let the light in.

Bruce led Tim around and waited for him to pick a book. Tim chose something he felt was a little under his level of reading, but he’d learned that adults preferred it when he didn’t read such advanced books.

“Are you sure you want to read this one?” Bruce asked, “I would have thought you’d prefer something a little more complicated.”

“This is fine,” Tim said, even as he glanced at some of the other books on higher shelves.
Bruce noticed his line of sight, “How about this one instead?” he asked, pulling a book from the shelf.

“*To Kill a Mockingbird?*” Tim asked, “What’s that about?”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” Bruce said, putting Tim’s choice of book back and leading Tim to one of the sofas. They sat down together and Bruce flipped to the first page and started reading.

Tim sat next to Bruce on the sofa and followed along as he read aloud. An hour later, Dick came and joined them, cramping Tim up between Bruce and himself. Bruce solved this by pulling Tim up onto his lap and continuing to read to them both. Tim tensed for a minute, but he soon relaxed and leaned back into Bruce’s strong chest. It wasn’t as soft and cushiony as Jack’s chest, seeing as Bruce was much more muscular, but Tim didn’t mind. He enjoyed the deep rumble of Bruce’s voice as he read and the warmth of his chest under his cheek.

Eventually Bruce closed the book and told the two boys to go run and play for a while. Tim was reluctant to leave the safety and comfort of Bruce’s arms, but he also wanted to run and play with Dick for a while before he had to go home. They found a nice spot on the mantle for Tim’s card and went out to play tag in the gardens. After a while they tired themselves out and went back inside to have some cocoa.

“Dick, I have to tell you something,” Tim whispered once they were sitting with their cocoa.

“What?” Dick asked, smiling and leaning in so he could whisper to.

“When I was in town,” Tim said, glancing around to check if anyone was listening, “I saw Batman across from my house.”

“You did?” Dick asked, and his eyes were bright and he was grinning ear to ear, “What did he look like?”

“He had bit pointy ears and a long black cape,” Tim said, demonstrating with two fingers at the side of his head what the ears looked like, “He was right across from the townhouse on the roof. I swear he was looking right at me!”

“Wow,” Dick said, “That’s amazing.”

Tim nodded, “All the adults think he’s just made up, but I always knew he was real,” he said, “I know I saw him.”

“I believe you,” Dick said, reaching out to pet Tim’s hair, “It must have been really cool to see him.”

“It was,” Tim said, “Maybe one day you can come to the townhouse with me and we can look for him together.”

Dick laughed, “Yeah, maybe one day,” he said, and there was a glint in his eye that he always got when he played a prank on someone. Tim didn’t know what the prank was, but he made sure he kept an eye out for the rest of the day.

Janet was sorting through the mail for the day when she noticed a nice envelope mixed in with the
rest. It looked like an invitation, but it wasn’t one she recognized from any of her usual friends. Curious, she grabbed her letter opener and sliced it open. Her heart jumped into her throat when she realized it was an invitation to a gala hosted by Bruce Wayne.

In the last six years, Janet had done her best to avoid Bruce Wayne as much as she could. It was easier than she’d feared at first, what with Jack’s wanderlust taking them around the globe for most of the year and Bruce Wayne being something of a recluse. Janet had become meticulous about the guest lists of the functions she attended. If Wayne was there, she was not, and she could usually convince Jack not to go either. Janet had even changed most of her style as well, making her mostly unrecognizable from the slightly dusty ‘Lynn Fisher’ that Bruce Wayne had met all those years ago in Jaipur. Even if they did meet, he probably wouldn’t realize who she was.

Still, Janet made it her prerogative to never be in a room with Bruce Wayne. Her biggest concern would always be that their properties were right next to each other and one day Tim would wander over and meet Bruce Wayne. If Tim befriended Bruce’s ward, he might insist on them all meeting and getting to know one another. It was something Janet couldn’t risk; it would destroy her life.

Janet looked around her office and thought about the life she had. It seemed glamorous on the outside, with all the parties and the traveling, but it was held together by very fragile thread. If she made the wrong move, it could all come tumbling down around her. If Tim was discovered to be Bruce’s child and not Jack’s, she’d be cast out on her ass. Her friends and connections would turn their backs on her and she’d be cut out of the company that she’d worked so hard for. Despite the fact that she basically ran Drake Industries now, the courts would shut her out and she’d be left with nothing of the company she’d spent years working for.

Jack was a good man, but he was a sweet, stupid, romantic fool. She’d married because it was expected of her to get married and pop out babies, and she’d married Jack because he was sweet and stupid, too sweet and stupid to beat her the way her father had done to her mother. Jack had loved her, loved her for being clever and cutting and cold, but he’d become resentful of the way marriage hadn’t softened her, hadn’t made her into the pretty little wifey-girl that all his friends had. She hadn’t dulled, and he’d gotten tired of getting cut on her sharp edges.

Janet stared down at the invitation. A personal invitation from Bruce Wayne himself was nothing to turn your nose up at, especially in the Gotham elite circle. She stared down at the delicate signature, probably made with an expensive fountain pen and high quality ink. Nothing but the best for a Wayne.

Slowly, Janet reached for her purse, eyes still on the invite, considering it, considering her life. She pulled her lighter out of her purse and gently dragged her empty coffee cup towards her. With a deep breath, she flicked the lighter and lit the corner of the invite, holding onto the paper until the flames singed her fingers. She dropped the burning paper into the cup and put the envelope in with it.

Slowly, Janet got up from her chair and walked down the hallway to Tim’s room. It was late, and Tim had been put to bed hours ago by Tambudzai. As quietly as she could, Janet stole into his room, watching her son sleep soundly. There was a book open on his lap, like he’d fallen asleep reading. To Kill a Mockingbird, she noticed, so advanced for a boy of six. She gently picked up the book and set it aside on the nightstand, tucking a bookmark between the pages.

If Tim was revealed to be Bruce’s son, Jack would turn them both out. He was a sweet man, but a man of principle, and he’d never raise another man’s son as his own. Bruce was also a good man, and he’d take Tim in, love him even, but there was no telling what would happen to her. The courts would side against her, a woman who had a baby who was not her husband’s, and she’d be cut out of the life she’d worked too hard to maintain.
If she were a more romantic woman, she might have done it, might have come out to the world and told Jack and Bruce and Tim, and then let them decide what was to happen and gone away to live her life the way she wanted to. She could leave behind Gotham and travel the world on her own, like she’d always wanted to. But Janet was a realist, not a romanticist, and she knew it could never be so simple. Her fairytale wasn’t going to come for her, and that was just tough titties for her, wasn’t it?

With a sigh, Janet left Tim’s room, quietly shutting the door and making her way to her own bed. She spared a glance at Jack’s room, the one she used to sleep in with him. Janet wondered for a moment what he might do if she went to him now, if she crawled into his bed and snuggled up to him the way he loved and she tolerated at best. The romantic fool would welcome her back with open arms probably, kiss and her cuddle her and try to make it all better. Jack had never grown out of the idea that if you loved something hard enough, you could fix it, heal all the hurts and make all the pain go away. Janet had watched her mother die slowly, smothered by the love she had for her husband, right up until she’d died of a brain hemorrhage from a ‘fall’ down some stairs.

Janet turned and walked into her room, closing the door quietly, but firmly, behind her.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to go into Janet's psychology a little. She wasn't really in the comics much outside of a few issues and then flashbacks of her, so it's pretty easy to make shit up about her. I kind of like to imagine her as being a bit of a tragic figure, having married and had a baby because that was what women of her social class did, not because that's what she wanted out of life. She just sort of ended up trapped in her own life and tried to make the best of it. At least that's how I like to imagine it for this fic.

I also wanted to get into how Tim's parents aren't all bad all the time. They're not good parents, but that doesn't mean that they don't love Tim. Abusive relationships aren't always all nastiness all the time, there's often parts that are nice in between the nastiness. So I wanted to show that, yeah, Tim's parents are shit, but there's still reasons why Tim loves them.
As Gotham warmed into summer, Tim and Dick were back in the garden helping Alfred with his flowers and shrubs. Dick groaned and complained the entire time, but Tim, as always loved to be helpful. Dick’s complaints mostly dried up when he saw how much Tim was enjoying helping Alfred.

“Be careful not to get any of the fertilizer on the leaves,” Alfred instructed gently, “Or you’ll smother them.”

“I won’t,” Tim said, carefully patting the fertilizer around the base of a rosebush. It was leafy and green now that the cold had left.

“Why even plant things that take so much work?” Dick asked, “Why not just have plants that take care of themselves, like trees? We could have a tree garden.”

“There are plenty of trees and wildflowers on the property, Master Dick,” Alfred said, “If you’d like to go enjoy them, you are welcome to.”

Dick grumbled and Tim giggled. He’d come to love Alfred’s wit and sarcasm, and even tried emulating him where he could. He’d actually gotten in trouble at school for insulting another student, but the teacher had been so amused by the insult that he only had to stay in at recess for one day.

They went around with the fertilizer a little more, but Tim was starting to get a little dizzy under the heat. Warm weather wasn’t uncommon in Gotham at all, not the way some people might think, but it was often accompanied by an almost oppressive amount of humidity, giving the air one breath the consistency of soup. Helpful brochures were often passed out in the summer months advising people to drink lots of water and pointing out the symptoms of heat stroke. It was almost frightening how quickly heat stroke could happen in the height of Gotham summers, especially to small pets and young children.
Tim did his best to keep his headache from bothering anyone, not wanting to ruin the nice day everyone was having. As his head started to pound however, he started to get a little more clumsy with the fertilizer.

“Careful,” Alfred admonished as Tim accidentally poured too much out of the bag, “That’s alright, we’ll scoop some back up. Not to worry.”

“Sorry,” Tim mumbled, reaching up to wipe sweat out of his eyes. He sat for a moment, trying to get his bearings.

“Tim?” Dick put his hand on Tim’s shoulder, “You okay kiddo? You don’t look good.”

“I’m okay,” Tim said, trying to smile even though his head was really starting to hurt and he just wanted to crawl into some shade and lie down.

A cool hand pressed to his forehead and he sighed and leaned into it, “Oh dear,” Alfred tutted, “Let’s get you inside out of the heat.”

“But we’re not done,” Tim protested, even as he was scooped up into Alfred’s arms and carried back to the house.

“It can wait,” Alfred said, “First we need to get you out of the heat.”

Dick trotted along beside them, “You should have said you weren’t feeling well Timmy,” he said, a slight frown on his face.

“Didn’t want to bother anyone,” Tim mumbled, giving up and resting his head on Alfred’s surprisingly strong shoulder. The swaying wasn’t doing his head any favours and was actually starting to make him feel nauseous.

“You’re not a bother, my boy,” Alfred said, rubbing his back gently. Bruce had obviously seen them coming from the house and was there to open the door for them as they approached.

“What happened?” he asked, worry etching itself into his face.

“Heat exhaustion, it seems,” Alfred said, stepping inside. Tim breathed a sigh of relief as they got out from under the sun and into the cool interior of the house.

Tim had a weird sense of deja vu as he was carried to the kitchen and set down on the counter. A glass of juice with ice and a little straw was put in his hands and he took a few sips of it, his stomach protesting even that.

Bruce knelt down in front of him, “Tim? Are you alright?” he asked.

“Can I lie down for a while?” Tim asked, putting his juice aside.

Bruce nodded and scooped Tim up with one arm, grabbing the juice with his free hand. Dick followed along nervously, reaching out to take Tim’s hand in his.

“You’re okay Timmy,” he said, trying to smile like he wasn’t worried, “You’ll be just fine in a few minutes.”

Tim groaned and buried his face into Bruce’s neck, stomach starting to clench threateningly. He barely had time to make a warning noise before he threw up, a lot, all over Bruce’s shoulder.

“Whoops,” Bruce said, sounding more shocked than angry. Tim didn’t really register it as he began
“I’m sorry!” he wailed, trying to sit up and wiggle out of Bruce’s grip, tears streaming down his face, “I didn’t mean to!”

“Hey, hey,” Bruce tried to calm Tim, holding him tighter so as not to drop him, “Tim, it’s alright. I know it was an accident. It’s okay, calm down.”

Tim continued to cry and sputter out apologies, but he stopped struggling. Bruce rubbed his back and did his best to soothe Tim as they brought him to one of the guest rooms. Bruce gently sat him down and started to remove his dirty clothing.

“Dick, can you run and grab something for Tim to wear while we wash his clothes?” Bruce asked. Dick nodded and darted out of the room. Tim continued to sniffle and rub at his eyes, wishing he could stop being such a baby about everything.

“I see we’ve had an accident,” Alfred said, not unkindly, as he came into the room with a basin of cool water and a few washcloths.

“Sorry,” Tim whined helplessly.

“Not to worry lad,” Alfred said, laying one washcloth across Tim’s neck and dabbing at his face with another, “When Master Bruce was a lad, about your age, he ate an entire half of a strawberry pie and utterly ruined the carpet in his father’s study. I spent the better part of a day tearing out the carpet and scrubbing the wood underneath.”

“Thank you Alfred,” Bruce grumbled, “Can we leave out my embarrassing childhood stories?”

“Whose embarrassing childhood stories?” Dick asked, coming back into the room with an old shirt and a pair of shorts.

“Nevermind,” Bruce said before Alfred could say anything. The elderly man rolled his eyes and helped Tim dress.

“Now, why don’t you lie down for a minute,” Alfred said, “Master Dick, could you fetch some mouthwash?”

“Can do,” Dick said, dashing out again. He returned a moment later with a bottle of mouthwash.

Tim swished out his mouth and laid back down on the bed. Alfred took the washcloth from his neck and laid it over his forehead, “Just rest for a minute, and we’ll see if you can’t have a bit more juice in a bit.”

Tim sighed and closed his eyes, still feeling awful. Tear’s still spilled down his cheeks, but no one seemed to be mad, at least not yet. Bruce carefully removed his shirt and handed it and Tim’s clothing to Alfred. He sat down on the bed and gently rubbed Tim’s shoulder, getting him to sit up after a few minutes to sip some more juice. After running to get Bruce a clean shirt, Dick crawled up onto the bed next to Tim.

“I’m sorry,” Tim mumbled again.

“It’s alright, it’s not your fault,” Bruce said calmly, “No one is mad at you.”

Tim sniffled and tried to relax. The cool of the room was very nice, and the comforting presence of Bruce and Dick soothed the twisting anxiety in Tim’s chest. After a while, he drifted off to sleep.
Tim woke up some time later, still feeling hazy, but not ill anymore. Dick was laying against him, dozing lightly. On Tim's other side, Bruce sat up in bed, reading quietly. He glanced up when Tim started to move around.

"Feeling better?" Bruce asked, setting down the book.

"What time is it?" Tim asked, sitting up and rubbing his eyes groggily.

"It's past seven," Bruce said, "We tried to get a hold of Tambudzai, but no one answered the phone."

"What!" Tim jolted upward, making Dick grunt as he was shifted, "I have to be home for supper!"

"Alright, alright," Bruce said, quickly getting out of the bed, "Don't panic, we'll take you home. Are your parents home?"

Tim thought for a minute, "No, they're not," he said, relaxing a little. Tambu was probably out with friends and that's why she didn't answer. His parents had said they would be home soon, but that could mean they were coming home next week for all Tim knew.

"Okay then, we should be fine," Bruce said, "Alfred has your clothes, we'll get you home in just a few minutes."

Tim nodded and got off the bed. Dick yawned and followed, "Feeling better kiddo?" he asked, ruffling Tim's hair.

"Yeah," Tim said, smiling a little. He did feel better now that his panic had subsided. The chance that his parents were home was very slim, so he didn't think he'd get in trouble.

Dick smiled and pulled him into a hug, "You excited for your birthday?" Dick asked, "It's in two weeks, right?"

Tim nodded, "Yeah, I'll be seven," he said.

Dick grinned, "You should come over if you can. Alfred makes the best birthday cake."

"I'll try," Tim said, just as Alfred came in with Tim's cleaned clothes.

"Here we are, all washed and pressed for you," Alfred said, handing Tim his folded clothes.

"Thank you," Tim said, taking the clothes and hastily making his way to the bathroom to change. He emerged a minute later, dressed and ready to go.

"I'll walk you to the wall, okay?" Dick said, "Just in case you start feeling sick again."

Bruce followed the two of them to the back of the house, "We'll see you soon Tim," he said, kneeling down to wrap Tim in a hug, "Get some rest at home, okay?"

Tim leaned into the hug and tried to wrap his little hands around Bruce's broad chest, "I will," he said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

Bruce smiled and leaned down to press and gentle kiss to Tim's forehead. Over the months, he had
to admit he’d become extremely fond of the boy. He’d come to look forward to spending time with him almost as much as he enjoyed spending time with Dick. Seeing as the boy tended to come over as much as he possibly could, he had plenty of opportunity to see him.

“I should get going,” Tim said, putting his light hoodie over his arm instead of putting it on, “Or Mrs. Mac might start asking questions.”

“Alright, get going,” Bruce said, “Be careful at the wall.”

“We will Bruce, don’t worry,” Dick called over his shoulder. He scooped Tim up and situated him on his back, “Ready?”

Tim wrapped his arms around Dick’s neck and held on tightly, “Ready,” he said.

Dick smiled and took off running, much to Tim’s delight. He laughed as Dick jumped over hedges and rocks with ease, all the while keeping a good grip on Tim. They reached the wall in no time at all and Dick let Tim down.

“Alright, you got it?” Dick asked, watching carefully as Tim climbed up the ladder.

“I’m good,” Tim said, “I’ll see you tomorrow Dick.”

Dick smiled up at him, “I’ll see you tomorrow Timmy.”

Tim smiled and climbed over, carefully stowing the ladder with the hook. He ran back to his house as fast as he could, the anxiety that he’d missed dinner coming back. Tim tried to remember that his parents weren’t home, that they wouldn’t be home for several days, but he could never predict when they came home. They almost always came home later than they said they would, but weren’t they already late by several days? Tim tried to put it out of his mind.

Tambu wasn’t at the back when he came in, “Hello?” he called. Maybe she was in the kitchen making something to eat? Or still out in the city? She loved to spend as much time as she could with her girlfriend, but never let the other woman come to the house for fear that they’d be discovered, so Tim had never met her.

Tim felt a sense of dread come over him, feeling that something was wrong. As quietly as he could, Tim crept through the house, listening for anything that might alert him to danger. Slowly, he tried to make it up to his room; if he got there, he could wedge the door shut and be safe from whatever was wrong with the house.

“Where the hell have you been?”

Tim stifled a yelp, head whipping around to see his mother standing in the hall, eyes hard and angry. Behind her, Jack was pacing around, huffing and puffing the way he did when he was angry.

Tim felt the colour drain from his face, “I was playing,” he lied in a very small voice. His shoulders hunched and he curled up, trying to make himself smaller.

“Straighten up and look at me,” Janet ordered sharply, and Tim jerked he obeyed so quickly, “Tell me where you were until seven o’clock at night, and don’t you dare lie to me.”

“I was playing,” Tim said again, because it wasn’t a lie, technically.

Janet stared down at him for a long time, “Playing with who?” she asked, voice tight.
Tim winced, knowing he was caught, “Dick,” he said.

“What with?” Jack asked, coming up behind his wife, steps loud like a giant to Tim’s ears.

“Dick Grayson,” Tim said, “From our neighbors house.”

Janet sucked in a sharp breath, “Is that where you were? Over at Bruce Wayne’s house?”

Tim felt tears sting his eyes and he looked down, nodding. There was no way to say that wasn’t what he’d been doing. He knew his mother didn’t want him to go over, and while he hadn’t lied to her specifically, he hadn’t told her the truth either. He was in so much trouble right now.

Jack grumbled and went back to pacing around, “You have any idea how worried we were? We come home and you and Tambu are gone, no note, and then Tambu comes home from partying it up like a hussy in town and you’re still nowhere to be found. Do you know what that does to a parent Tim? How could you do this to us?”

“I’m sorry,” Tim said, “But Dick and Mr. Wayne are really nice! We play games and have a lot of fun!”

Janet struck out, her palm stinging across Tim’s cheek, his head snapping to the side with the force of it. It happened so quickly that Tim didn’t register it at first, but then his cheek bloomed with pain. He didn’t have time to make a noise before Janet grabbed his arm and dragged him into the living room.

Tambu was sitting on the couch, head down and cheeks wet. She looked up as Tim was dragged in, her eyes meeting Tim’s. A look passed between them and Tim felt his heart pound. They were both in a lot of trouble, and something really bad was about to happen.

“Tambu, hold him down,” Janet ordered, swinging Tim around so he crashed into the couch, the wind knocking out of him.

“Ma’am?” Tambu asked shakily. She’d obviously just been yelled at as well.


Tambu whimpered and grabbed hold of Tim, putting her hands on his shoulders, which felt more comforting than holding him down.

Janet turned to her husband, “Jack, give me your belt.”

Jack balked, “Janet, is this really necessary?”

“Oh for God’s sake!” Janet cried, stomping over to Jack and removing his belt herself. She turned back to Tim and Tambu, something vicious in her eyes. Tim whimpered and tried to curl back into Tambu.

“Hold him down over the ottoman,” Janet ordered. Tambu hesitated, glancing down at Tim. She grimaced and gently guided him to lay over the ottoman that he wasn’t allowed to sit on.

“Don’t struggle,” she whispered, “It’s only worse if you struggle.”

Tim whimpered, already shaking as Tambu pulled up his shirt and exposed his bare back. Janet gave no warning, and he yelped loudly when the belt struck. He couldn’t get a breath in as Janet lashed out again and again.

“Don’t you ever disobey me like that,” Janet hissed, “If you ever try and speak to that boy again, this
is going to feel like *love tap*!"

In her fury, Janet’s grip on the belt slipped a little and she let go of one end, the buckle end. The metal whipped out and dragged across Tim’s back, slicing into his flesh. Tim cried out and began to wail, but Janet had already dropped the belt. Tim curled up to get away from her, but Tambu held him down firmly. He managed to look over his shoulder at his mother.

Janet was panting, face flushed and her hair a mess. The belt lay at her feet where she’d dropped it and Jack stood a ways behind her, hand to his mouth. Janet took a shaky breath and stood straight, pushing her hair back.

“Go upstairs to your room Tim,” she said, sounding much calmer now, “We’ll discuss your punishment in the morning.” She turned and left the room.

Tim whimpered and tried to get up, but his body wouldn’t move. With a sigh, Jack came over and gently lifted Tim into his arms, where he sat limply, sniffling and shaking.

Jack sighed again, “Next time, just listen to your mother, alright?” he said, taking Tim up to his room, “Hey, come on now, stop with the crying. Big boys don’t cry.”

Tim sniffled loudly and tried to choke down his sobs, even though all he wanted to do was run back to Wayne Manor and cry into Bruce’s shirt. Jack took him to his room and laid him down on his front on the bed. He paused to look at the long red gash along Tim’s back and let out a sigh.

“Well, you certainly learned your lesson though, didn’t you?” Jack said, and Tim knew he was trying to make a joke, trying to lighten the situation. Tim hiccuped and turned away from him.

With one last sigh, Jack stood up and left his room. Tim curled up on his bed and cried silently to sleep.

Janet sat on the floor behind her desk, frantically trying to light a cigarette. She hadn’t smoked in years, but she thought she deserved one after her ordeal. After a minute of flicking her lighter uselessly, she managed to get a flame and took a few nervous puffs. Leaning back against the solid oak of her desk, she tried to process the last hour.

When she and Jack had arrived home and found neither Tambudzai or Tim anywhere, they had assumed that Tambu had simply taken Tim out to the park or library or something. But when Tambu had come home without Tim, they had started to panic. Tambu had insisted that Tim was over at a friend’s house, but she had refused to name the friend. When Tim had come home and revealed that he was over at *Bruce Wayne’s* house, Janet had lost it.

Running the hand not occupied with the cigarette through her hair, Janet tried to piece together what had happened next. She’d gotten so angry, so afraid of being found out, she’d done what her father had done to her when she disobeyed orders. She’d always thought she’d never resort to physical violence, but here she was, cowering behind her desk like she was a child hiding from her drunk of a patriarch.

She’d send him away, she thought. Away to a boarding school or a summer camp or something. Somewhere where he could get into contact with Bruce and she wouldn’t be able to lash him. It was the middle of summer, most programs were halfway through, but enough money could be tossed
around until a spot opened up.

A commotion out in the hall made Janet jump a little. She could hear voices speaking at an increasing volume, one of them sounding quite upset. Janet finished her cigarette and shakily got to her feet, composing herself as she walked to her office door.

“What’s going on out here?” she asked, cool and haughty as she stepped into the hall. She wondered if her eyes were red.

In the hall, Jack had a gentle hand on Tambudzai’s arm, trying to coax her into calming down, while Tambudzai was cringing away from him, eyes a little wild. She glanced over at Janet, and the older woman could see fear in them.

“I am calling the police on you!” Tambu cried, even as she was shaking, “It’s not okay to beat a child like that in America! It’s not how things are done here!”

“Now Tammy, why don’t we all calm down a minute,” Jack said (he had never bothered to learn how to say her name properly), “There’s no need to get the police involved.”

Tambudzai jerked away from him and said something that sounded nasty in Shona. Janet drew herself up and stepped towards her.

“I’m calling the police! I swear I am!” Tambudzai shouted, even as she cowered from Janet.

“You won’t call anyone,” Janet said, “Because even if you do, we’ll tell them that you were the one holding the belt. And then we’ll direct them to your immigration papers. I’m sure it wouldn’t take much to convince them that there’s something amiss with the paperwork.”

Tambudzai froze, “You can’t,” she protested, the colour draining from her face and making her look ashy.

Janet raised an eyebrow, “I damn well can and will,” she said, “So, you’re not going to call the police, and you are going to take your severance pay and leave. Jack, fetch my cheque book.”

“You’re firing me?” Tambudzai asked, “Where will I go?”

“I don’t really care where you go, so long as you keep your damn mouth shut,” Janet snapped, “Move in with your little dyke for all I give a shit, the one you thought you were hiding from us.”

Jack returned with Janet’s cheque book and a pen. Janet quickly scrawled out an amount on the cheque and tore it out of the book, “I’m sure this will be enough to convince you to keep quiet.” She turned the cheque around so Tambudzai could see the amount.

Tambudzai’s eyes bugged out of her head and Janet grinned slightly, knowing she had gotten her way, “Take this and start over, Tambudzai,” Janet said, not handing over the cheque just yet, “Forget what happened here today and do wherever you please.”

For a moment, Tambudzai hesitated, glancing up at Janet’s face, then down the hall to where Tim’s room was. She looked back down at the cheque, at the chance to start her life over, and quietly took the cheque hanging her head a little.

“Smart girl,” Janet praised, “Now, go and pack your things, and I’ll call a taxi for you.”

Tambudzai nodded and walked quickly off. Janet let out a long sigh and slumped a little. She could feel Jack’s eyes on her, but even so, his hand on her arm startled her a little.
“Why don’t you sit for a while?” he suggested kindly, lovingly, the way he used to when they were new together and she’d had a long day, “Have some tea?”

Janet regarded her husband for nearly half a minute, “Later,” she said, “I need to make a few calls still.”

“Anything I can help with?” Jack offered, taking his hand away.

Janet took a deep breath, collecting herself up again, “The taxi,” she said, “Call one and pay the driver in advance. Mrs. Mac is out, right?”

“Visiting family in Ireland,” Jack said.

“Good,” Janet said, *one person they didn’t need to hush*, “I’m going to look into some summer camps or something.”

“Summer camps?” Jack questioned.

Janet let out a long, slightly shaky sigh, “It’s… it’s better that way.”

Jack didn’t say anything, but Janet could still feel his eyes on her, watching her. A little piece of her, that damnable little piece that was still a little girl wanting to be cuddled and told she was good and smart and loved, wanted to lean into Jack, let him wrap her up in an embrace and make everything better. She steeled herself, put iron in her spine, unbreakable and strong, and turned to him.

“Go deal with the taxi,” she told him, “Be sure to be friendly to Tambudzai, but remind her to keep quiet.”

Jack watched her for another moment, then let out a sigh, “Yeah, alright,” he said. He walked down the hall away from her.

Janet returned to her office and sat down at her desk, in the chair this time. She pulled her laptop close to her and started researching summer camps that were still accepting applicants.

The next morning, Tim woke up late. He felt sore all over and his throat felt completely dry. His back felt stiff when he tried to move, and there was a line across it that felt like fire. Moving slowly, Tim crawled out of bed and went to his mirror. Twisting was painful enough to take his breath away, but he managed to get a decent look at his back. The bruising wasn’t as bad as he thought it might be, but the gash across his back had scabbed over badly and there was still some dried blood that clung to it and made it look even worse. It wasn’t a very deep wound, but it was jagged and painful.

Tim whimpered, tears pricking his eyes. Pulled off his shirt that had been left bunched up under his armpits and looked around. His eye caught on his desk chair, which he had left close to the door.

*If you ever feel like you’re in danger, I want you to run and come to my house, okay?* Dick had told him, back when they had first started to play together. Tim didn’t know if this counted, since the ‘danger’ was yesterday, but he really wanted to see Dick and Bruce and Alfred.

However, Tim realized with a shiver, seeing Dick and Bruce and Alfred was what landed him in this circumstance to begin with. He’d known he wasn’t supposed to play with Dick, but he went anyway.
He’d broken a rule and was punished for it, so it wasn’t really a ‘danger’ was it? If he tried to go see them again, he might be punished worse.

But hadn’t Bruce and Alfred told him it was okay to come to them if he was scared of his parents, even if they told him not to? Bruce had tried to explain something to him about kids and parents and how it wasn’t okay for parents to make their kids afraid of them, but Tim hadn’t paid too much attention at the time. Still, he remembered something like that and he figured this was enough.

Wiping his tears away, Tim stood up, out on a clean shirt, and went to the door, pressing his ear to it to hear if anyone was in the hallway. When he heard nothing, Tim crept out and made his way as quietly as he could for the stairs. When he passed Tambu’s room, he noticed that it was empty of Tambu’s things. Had she gone? Tim would have to consider that later, once he got out.

Tim was just about at the end of the stairs when he heard a door open behind him and froze. He turned around and saw his father coming down the hall.

“Hey kiddo,” Jack said, smiling brightly, “How’re you feeling today?”

“Fine,” Tim lied, trying to stand up straight, even as his back flared in pain.

Jack nodded, “Good good, you ready to pack?”

“Pack?” Tim asked. Was he being sent away?

“You’re going to a summer camp!” Jack said cheerfully, “For the whole rest of the summer before school starts.”

“Oh,” Tim said, not sure how to react. He’d heard of summer camps, and always thought they sounded like fun, but he couldn’t help but feel like he was being punished.

Jack kept smiling and reached out to take Tim’s hand, leading him back to his bedroom, “You’re going to have a ton of fun kiddo. It right on a lake so you can go swimming and kayaking, and you’re going to learn all sorts of fun things. It’s even tailored for smart kids like you!” He ruffled Tim’s hair and went in search of Tim’s suitcase.

“That sounds like fun,” Tim said tentatively. It did sound like a lot of fun; punishment wasn’t usually fun.

Once Jack had packed up a bunch of clothes for him (struggling to close it due to not folding it all properly), he took Tim’s hand again and led him back downstairs. As they passed the kitchen, Tim saw his mother at the island, hunched over a cup of coffee and head in her hands. She didn’t look up as they passed, even as Jack nattered on about all of the fun things Tim was going to do at camp.

Once Tim’s suitcase was stowed, Jack let Tim climb into the front seat of the car, which he was never allowed to do. Tim smiled a little as he buckled in. Maybe he’d been overreacting wanting to go to Bruce and Dick. His parents weren’t so bad, at least not all the time.

Jack talked as they drove along, even when he had the radio on. Tim was half listening to both, but more interested in watching the world pass by. He did perk up when he heard something strange on the radio.

“—reports coming in of several so-called ‘superheroes’ dealing with some sort of creature attack last night. Notable figures such as the Flash, Wonder Woman, and Superman all showed up to deal with the creature, along with several other superpowered individuals, including, according to official statements, Aquaman, a supposed Atlantean, Green Lantern, who’s gone on record claiming to be
from space, and the once thought to be mythical Batman. At present, there is talk of a superhero team in the works to deal with large scale catastrophes, but no official statements have been made yet. Critics of the idea of a superhero team have expressed concern that—”

“What is the world coming to?” Jack said with a sigh, reaching over and switching the radio to a different station. It was also playing a similar story, so Jack flicked through the stations until he found a station that was playing only music, “All these superheroes flying around and people will start to forget the real heroes on the ground, like firemen and the military.”

Tim stared at the radio, wishing he could turn it back to the news. He wanted to know more about this superhero team. If all the superheroes in the world worked together, Tim was sure the world would be better in no time at all.

Chapter End Notes

Summary of the Chapter: Tim is hanging out with Alfred and Dick in the garden when he gets struck by heat exhaustion. He’s taken indoors where everyone cares for him until he falls asleep. When Tim wakes up, its passed the time when he knows he should be home and he has to leave right away. When he gets home, he finds that his parents came home early and they find out that Tim has been going over to Bruce’s house. Janet beats Tim with a belt, leaving a gash across his back from her grip slipping. Tim is sent to his room, and Janet has a breakdown. Tambu threatens to call the police, but is bribed into silence by Janet and leaves. When Tim wakes up the next morning, he plans to go to see Bruce and get help, but Jack tells him that he’s going away to summer camp and they leave immediately. On the radio as they’re driving, the news states that the Justice League has formed.

I’m really bad at writing concise summaries (have been since I was a kid), but I think that’s all the important information.

So that’s the end of Part I! An interlude is going to come up next, followed by the beginning of Part II! Hopefully I can keep my writing streak going and get them up quickly.
EDIT: Here's the updated version of the chapter.

So this isn't much of a 'chapter' per say, but more like a bridge between Part I and Part II. I'm going to go into some more detail in the End Notes, with some justifications for how I wrote certain things and a more concise timeline, but narratively I think this is as good as I can make it without turning it into its own full section. If you have any questions about the timeline or anything, comment with your question and I'll try my best to come up with a good answer.

Bruce didn’t initially notice when Tim didn't show up over the next week. He was so busy dealing with the other heros and the aftermath of the attack with the giant creature that he barely had a minute to sleep, let alone check in to see if Tim had come by the manor at all. By the time he’d gotten things to a point that he could manage without constant vigilance and was able to finally go home and sleep, nearly a week and a half had gone by. He’d asked Alfred and Dick about Tim, but they’d admitted to not knowing where the boy had gone. Dick had tried to look into it, but his investigative skills weren’t exactly on par with Bruce’s yet.

Dick had of course been worried; he’d worried himself sick over not knowing where Tim had gone, and even tried to sneak around the Drake’s home to find clues, but he hadn’t managed to find Tim or Tambu, so he had no way of knowing what had happened. When Bruce came back and looked into it, he discovered that Tim had been sent away to a summer camp for the rest of the summer, and Tambu had been relieved from her position and had moved to Metropolis with her girlfriend.

“Is there any way to get into contact with either of them?” Dick asked, tapping his bandaged fingers on the back of Bruce’s chair. When he was extremely stressed, he chewed and picked at his fingernails until they bled, then chewed and picked at the scabs.

“I’ve tried to get into contact with Tambudzai, but she won’t answer any calls. I’m sure you could try to write a letter to Tim though,” Bruce said.

Dick nodded and immediately went off to write out a letter to Tim, getting Bruce and Alfred to write a section as well. They sent it to the camp, hopeful that their little friend would write back, but no reply ever came. Dick wrote several more letters over the summer, but nothing ever came of it. Either Tim was being blocked from receiving the letters, or he wasn’t writing back deliberately.

When the summer ended and Tim was set to return, Dick waited at the wall for a full three days, hoping that he would see Tim. Bruce could admit to himself that he was also hoping to see Tim again, but he eventually learned that Tim had been sent to a boarding school on the other side of town, and would remain there for the entire year.

Again, Dick tried to write letters, but as time went on and no letters returned, he got tired of writing and eventually stopped. Life went on and Dick and Bruce had other things to worry about. Bruce checked in once in a while, but it seemed like Tim was doing fine in his classes and even making friends here and there. According to school psychological evaluations—which Bruce hacked into to
read—Tim was still a bit of an introspective, reclusive introvert, but he was also doing well around children his own age. Evidently, Tim’s parents had decided that it would do Tim some good to be around children who were closer to his own age, and they didn’t seem wrong. Bruce still disagreed with the Drakes’ parenting methods, but they weren’t technically doing anything wrong, and therefore Bruce could do nothing.

The years went by, and Tim’s presence at the Manor faded into a pleasant if bittersweet memory. At some points, it almost felt like Tim had never been there at all, the only reminder of him being the constant presence of the electric card on the mantle, which Dick turned on every year on his birthday. Bruce caught himself wondering from time to time what happened to Tim, if he was happy and doing alright, but every time he thought to invite the Drake to the rare parties he threw, they never showed.

The summer camp turned out to be a lot of fun, Tim had to admit. He didn’t make too many friends at first, having arrived late and missed out on the usual clique forming that usually happened for little kids, but he did eventually find a place with the other outcast kids who didn't really have anywhere to go. It was also where he met Sebastian Ives for the first time, and they became good friends.

The camp itself wasn’t exactly what Tim had been shown on TV, but it was fun enough. He got to do a few cool things and honestly had a good time overall. For the first while he missed Dick and Bruce and Alfred dearly, but he was quickly distracted by everything else that was going on around him. Six year old attentions spans were somewhat limited, even for six year olds as smart as Tim.

After summer camp, Tim went home for a total of two days before he was shuffled off to a boarding school for young boys. His life became busy with navigating school and making new friends. He didn't really have time to think about Dick or Wayne Manor, and after a while, his seven year old brain just sort of forgot to think about it.

In fact, Tim forgot to really think about Dick and Bruce for years, not until he was nine years old and watching footage of Robin performing a quadruple somersault that Tim had seen before, performed by only the one person that could have possibly pulled it off and could possibly have all the resources to be Robin.

After discovering that Dick Grayson was Robin, and by extension Bruce Wayne was Batman, Tim became a little obsessed with trying to recall anything from that one year of when he was six that he spent nearly every day at Wayne Manor. He did manage to do some actual research into the technical side, matching up dates on Bruce Wayne’s whereabouts in comparison to appearances or supposed appearances of Batman, as well as looking into the sort of technology Batman used and the kind of technology Wayne Enterprises was developing, but a lot of his conclusions were drawn from that one year he spent practically living with Bruce and Dick. The strange injuries, the weird conversations, the odd hours that the house seemed to keep, all led Tim right around to the conclusion that Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson were Batman and Robin.

Of course, Tim had been blown away by this and was bursting to see Dick and Bruce again. But it had been three years since he’d spoken to Dick, and he was still at boarding school most of the year and summer camps or programs the rest of the year, so he couldn’t exactly rekindle the friendship he’d once had with Dick as it was. Still, Tim couldn't get it out of his head; he became obsessed with Batman and Robin and started cutting out newspaper articles and keeping up with anything that Batman was doing, as well as keeping a close eye on Bruce Wayne, though the stories about that
were mostly society gossip and pieces about his charity work.

Tim also tried to convince his parents to let him come back home for at least some of the year. He tried to convince them that, at nine and nearly ten years old, he was perfectly capable of spending the summer at home, looking after himself. Beyond that, a lot of the summer camps across the country were ones he’d become bored with. He complained about never being home to see them, and joked that he was away so much that he didn’t even remember what his own bedroom looked like. As he suspected, his mother was the hardest to convince.

“Ten years old seems a little young to be home alone,” Janet said on their monthly phone call. They were supposed to be weekly phone calls, but Jack and Janet were away often and couldn’t always call. Even ‘monthly’ was pushing it, since their calls tended to be more sporadic than a month-to-month schedule.

“But I won’t be alone, mother,” Tim protested, “Mrs. Mac is always around, and even when she’s not I can handle myself for a few hours.”

“Oh come on Janet,” Jack said, “We hardly see Tim between school and camp and expeditions, why not have him home for the summer? We can take the summer off from travelling and spend time with Tim for once.”

To convince them that he was mature enough to look after himself, Tim threw himself into his schoolwork, getting top marks and being the perfect little pupil in each class, even when it was difficult.

“...She sought to answer such arguments by the familiar if oblique method of finding the Gipsy life rude and barbarous; and so, in a short time, much bad blood was bred between them.” Mr. Valentine droned on in his nasal monotone, seemingly unaware that he was putting most of his class to sleep.

Tim tried hard to pay attention, but Valentine was absolutely grating on his nerves with his flat, nasal voice, his perpetually ending each sentence with the utterance of ‘right’, his jittery, almost frantic pacing around the classroom, and his inability to stir even the usual stilted discussion that other classes did. Tim had to break the monotony of the class somehow, and finally put up his hand.

It took Valentine a full two minutes to notice that there was a hand up, “Yes Drake?” he asked, getting an excited look in his eye. The sad thing about Valentine was that he seemed to want to encourage discussion, but only if that discussion went in the direction that he wanted it to go. The few heads that weren’t drifting off into dreamland also turned, eager for something else to happen.

“Sir, the word ‘gypsy’ is actually a slur,” Tim pointed out, picking the first thing to come to mind, “The actual word for the ethnic group is ‘Roma’.”

“Yes, but this is the way it’s written, right?” Valentine said, grinning in a weird, self-satisfied manner, “So we’ll just use gypsy instead, so no one is confused, right.” He went back to lecturing, and the spark of hope for some kind of discussion, or anything, to break up the dullness of the class fizzled out and died.

Tim sighed and resigned himself to letting his brain melt out of his ears. At least this was the last class he had for the day, and he could go back to his dorm and not have to do anything complicated after being put in a state of vegetation by Valentine’s droning.

Though it was tedious and downright frustrating at times, Tim finally got his way in the end, and the summer he was to turn eleven he was allowed to stay at home. However, just before he was let out
of school, he learned that Dick Grayson, now nineteen, had moved away from Gotham to Bludhaven to become a police officer. Tim’s hopes of rekindling their friendship were dashed before they even started.

Tim supposed he might have been able to go over and see Bruce if he wanted, but every time he started to walk over, the phantom pain of a belt buckle dragging across his back made him reconsider. Was it really worth it to just maybe be able to say ‘hi’ to Bruce? Tim wasn’t even sure he was still banned from going over, since Dick had left and he was mostly certain the only reason Janet took such exception to his going over was because of Dick (Tim didn't like to think about it, but he was pretty sure his mother’s objection was because she had some sort of racial prejudice against Roma). Even Bruce’s new adopted son (and new Robin) was much closer to Tim in age, and it would be much more appropriate for them to know each other, but Tim couldn't bring himself to climb over the wall.

Still, Tim couldn't let go of his obsession with Batman. Luckily, being home provided him with ample opportunity to see the Dark Knight in action (his father’s suggestion that they would spend the summer together had been forgotten almost as soon as it had been made). Tim could sneak out with much more ease than he had at the age of six, and he spent his nights trailing after Batman and Robin, snapping photos. It was a harder than he’d thought it would be, and most of the time he didn’t even get to see them.

Over the course of the summer, Tim was able to convince his parents that he was old enough not to need boarding school, and was instead able to go to a school in Gotham. Incidentally it was the same school that Ives went to, and they managed to rekindle their friendship. Tim would spend the next few years following Batman from a distance, all the while trying to work of the courage to go over and say hello, if only to be friendly and neighborly.

Tim kept his distance though, never being able to go up and re-introduce himself. He came close once, while in town and seeing Bruce’s new adopted son, Jason Todd, from a bit of a distance. He hemmed and hawed over going over to say hello for a minute, but by the time he’d decided to go up to Jason, the boy had moved on and Tim lost sight of him.

It wasn’t until Tim was thirteen and the tragic death of Jason that Tim finally met with Dick, and shortly thereafter Bruce. Witnessing Bruce spiral down into a grief-filled pit of brutality made Tim realize that he needed to do something, and he went to find Dick, to see if he could go back to being Robin for Batman. Because, as Tim had discovered during his four year obsession and over two years of following behind the dynamic duo taking photos, Robin was essential to Batman.

Initially, Dick hadn’t recognized Tim, and had accused him of being a stalker or a spy at first, but when Tim had finally mentioned his name that Dick had welcomed him back with a tight embrace.

“I can’t believe it’s really you Timmy!” Dick said, almost crushing Tim to his chest, “You got so big, I didn't even realize it was you!”

Tim wiggled in Dick’s grip, a little startled to be hugged so familiarly (how long had it been? About six years since he’d last seen Dick Grayson, nearly half of Tim’s lifetime), “It’s nice to see you again,” he said, muffled by Dick muscular chest, “But I really need your help.”

Dick pulled back a bit, but kept his arm around Tim’s shoulders, “Of course, whatever you need kiddo,” he said. He addressed Tim familiarly, like they had only just seen each other yesterday.

Tim explained what he’d seen, and the conclusion he’d come to. Dick, while sympathetic to his endeavor, had refused to go back to being Robin. Tim had begged him as much as he could, insisting that Batman needed a Robin, but to no avail. He did agree to go with Tim to see Bruce and try and
convince him to take a new Robin.

Bruce rejected Tim outright, refusing to take on another Robin. He refused to even consider the idea of a new Robin, and wouldn't listen to Tim when he tried to explain. Dick once again refused to go back to being Robin when Tim asked him again.

“Look, I know what you're getting at Tim,” Dick said, after they’d watched Batman leave the Cave, “And I agree with you, but I can’t go back to being thirteen again.”

In the end, Tim had finally donned a spare Robin costume himself and set out to assist Nightwing and Batman. He hadn’t set out for this, and he knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t just let Batman get himself killed, or worse. Tim had to do something, and he wasn’t going to sit by and be useless, even if that meant he had to become Robin.

Surprisingly, it was this that finally worked, and Bruce agreed to take Tim on as the new Robin. It wasn’t the solution that Tim had set out for, but he figured he only needed to be around until Bruce got back onto stable ground or a new, better Robin could be found. Until then, Tim dedicated himself to being the best Robin he could be.

Being Robin was more of a challenge than Tim initially anticipated. He hadn’t thought it would be easy at all, but he certainly hadn’t known about the full scope of what he was getting into at the time.

The first hurdle he had to contend with was the physical training he had to endure in order to even be able to do the work. While he wasn’t exactly out of shape, he wasn’t the natural athlete Dick or even Jason had been. Just putting on the basic muscle to be able to do the things required of a vigilante lifestyle was hard for Tim, and he struggled to gain the muscle mass at first. It took him weeks upon weeks of hard, dedicated work to gain the required muscle. Bruce and Dick had been skeptical at first, Bruce especially, but Tim had persevered and put on an impressive twenty pounds of muscle. And this didn’t even count learning how to use that newfound strength to fight crime.

Once Tim’s training was done, his life seemed to quickly spiral out of control. Bane, Azrael, the Obeah Man, his mother’s death, Ariana, Stephanie, the Clench, the Cataclysm, Young Justice, and a million other things seemed to come in quick succession, giving Tim hardly time to breathe.

Tim’s latest misadventure was apparently boarding school, for the second time in his life. His heroism had landed him on rocky footing with Jack, and so he was being sent to Brentwood Academy. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to deal with boarding school, but it would certainly make being Robin a lot harder. It was made a little easier having Alfred along to help at least.

Alfred picked up the ringing phone as Tim removed his soccer cleats, “Hello, how may I be of service?” he asked in his crisp British accent, “This is master Drake’s room.” He handed the phone to Tim, “Your father,” he said.

Tim took the phone, “Uh, dad?” he asked. At Jack’s inquiry about the strange British person who answered the phone, Tim lied smoothly, “Aw, that’s just one of the guys having a goof. He does a dead on English accent huh?”

“Well, nevermind that son,” Jack said, “I wanted you to be the first to know that Dana and I have decided to get married!”
“Whuh?” Tim balked, staring at the phone. He had to confess that he liked Dana, she was very nice, but he hadn’t expected things to move so quickly with her.

“And that’s not everything,” Jack said proudly, “We’ve also decided to try and have a baby. You’re going to be a brother!”

Chapter End Notes

This went by pretty fast, so I’m going to give a quick, bullet point timeline so you can see how things mesh up.

- Tim is sent to summer camp just before his seventh birthday, loses touch with Bruce and Dick.
- At age nine, Tim discovers that Dick=Robin and Bruce=Batman. Begins to do research into confirming his theory.
- At age ten, Tim starts campaigning to come back from boarding school and summer camp.
- Dick, age nineteen (Tim is about ten), becomes Nightwing.
- Shortly after, Jason becomes Robin.
- Tim, the summer he turns eleven, gets to stay home for the summer and begins following Bruce and Jason.
- After three years of being Robin, Jason dies. Tim is now thirteen to turn fourteen in summer.
- At age thirteen, Tim begins his Robin training.
- From there everything is canon with the comics. By the time he gets to Brentwood I think Tim is about fifteen.

I think this meshes up pretty well, it’s hard to get the ages specific since birthdays aren’t all on the same day and sometimes someone is 2 years older or 3 years older depending on the time of year (I mostly head canon that Jason is about 2 years older than Tim which I think is in line with both Pre52 canon and New52 canon. They’d be one year apart for a short time between their birthdays).

Also, though it seems harsh in the beginning for Bruce and Dick to just sort of forget about Tim (not really forget, but leave things lie as they are), you have to remember that it doesn’t seem like Tim has been abused. It can take a long time for anyone to realize that someone is being abused, especially if they’re not in regular contact. Before the belting Tim received, the only abuse he faced was emotional and neglectful, which are much harder to discern. Bruce, being away at the time, missed a very small window where he might have been able to find something amiss with Tim.

Also, before anyone says that Dick should have been able to figure it out, remember that, in the original comics, Dick wasn’t much of an investigator until he was Nightwing. All of the canon out there of Robin being his own investigator, or even having his own cases to work, come from Tim’s run as Robin. Dick as Robin was much more of a sidekick tagalong to Batman, as was Jason. It wasn’t until Tim became Robin that ‘Robin’ became a standalone character with his own comic series (which is really good you should read it) and became the mini-investigator that most people recognize Robin as today.
On one last note, everyone just sort of 'moving on' in the beginning isn't as mean as you might think. Have you ever had a friend move away and, at the time, it feels like your whole world is ending, but then as time goes on you just kind of move on and sometimes even forget about that person for stretches of time? This is basically what happened, especially to Dick and Tim, who are younger and therefore their brains are still growing, deciding which memories keep priority. Bruce also has a lot going on in his life, and thought he checks in from time to time, again he can't find anything technically wrong with Tim's situation and leaves him alone. Like I wrote in the fic, just because Bruce disagrees with the Drakes parenting method doesn't mean he has the right to interfere unless he has reason to believe that Tim is in danger.

Whoof, that was a lot. Anyway, I start classes tomorrow, so we're going to see how quickly this updates from now on. I have less classes this semester, but I'm also preparing to graduate, so we're going to see how much time I have to write.

Fun fact, Valentine is based off an actual professor I had, and Tim's conversation with him here is almost verbatim for a conversation I had (or tried to have) with him. On the plus side, I did make a good friend in that class, so that was something at least. Also fun fact, the IRL Valentine once said 'right' in class 400 times. How do I know this? I counted. I fucking counted.
Part II Chapter i: Turnaround

Chapter Notes

I’m surprised I did this so quick. I originally didn't have the middle part, but I found that the pacing was off if I tried to have the end part in the middle and have a section after it. It works much better this way. Though it did end up being a little bit shorter than some of the other chapters.

No contest this chapter, but the concession prize from last chapter is still unclaimed, so we’ll just count that as this chapter's contest.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Several Months Later

Once they were settled into the townhouse, Tim hoped he might finally catch a break. Sure, his father’s company had gone belly-up, but that didn’t mean they couldn't live comfortably for a very long time. Besides that, living in town made it much easier to be Robin, since he didn't need to sneak out of Brentwood every night. It was also to see Steph and Ives and just be a kid while in town. If Tim were completely honest, he was almost a little glad that they’d lost the company.

Tim felt really guilty for thinking that, but he couldn't help it. Though his dad worried, Tim didn’t mind losing the family home and a lot of the things that filled it. To Tim, the old place was just a strange mausoleum that he had conflicting memories of. His childhood home, but a place where he’d spent days and weeks and months sitting alone, waiting for his parents to call.

So Tim felt he was adapting well to life in the city, as an upper middle-class family with a fancy townhouse in one of the nicest parts of Gotham. Tim understood, now more than ever, that he was very lucky for what he had. A lot of people had much less than he did, and he should be grateful.

That didn't mean it was all flowers and honey however, and Tim still had his night job to deal with. He loved it, and the thought of having to give it up made him shiver, but it wasn't a walk in the park.

Tonight wasn't so bad though. Nightwing was over from Bludhaven helping him investigate a possible counterfeiting ring. They printed the fake bills in Bludhaven and then ran them out through the country through Gotham. The two of them were currently on a stake out, sitting on a roof and sharing a thermos of hot cocoa, courtesy of Alfred.

“This stuff’s just as good as I remember it,” Tim said with a contented sigh.

“Yeah?” Dick asked, smiling under his mask, “You used to have it all the time when you used to come over.”

“Mm,” Tim hummed. Most of his memories of Wayne manor were foggy at best, but a few things stood out. Alfred’s delicious hot cocoa was one of them, “It was the first thing I had when I came over.”

Dick glanced at Tim, “Yeah, I remember that night,” he said. He remembered seeing Tim, tiny and scared and desperate for affection, and immediately wanting to help him. Dick still had the impulse
sometimes to squirrel Tim away and keep him safe.

Tim just smiled brightly at Dick, oblivious to his thoughts. He glanced back down at the warehouse they’d been watching for the better part of two hours, “Has there been any movement?”

“None that I can tell,” Dick said, bringing up his binoculars to look again, “We might have to come back tomorrow.”

Tim groaned, “I hate it when the bad guys don’t keep a schedule,” he said, “I’m gonna be so exhausted if we have to come back to this tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah? Going out?” Dick asked.

“Dad wants to go fishing again,” Tim said, “I don't know why he’s so obsessed with fishing, but it seems like he wants to go out to the lake almost every weekend.”

“Sounds rough,” Dick chuckled, “But at least you get to eat a lot of fish.”

“We might, if we ever caught anything,” Tim said, “Dad’s really bad at fishing.”

“Didn’t Bruce teach you to fish though?” Dick asked, “That’s like, survival training one-oh-one.”

“Yeah, he did,” Tim said, and didn't elaborate. He didn’t like to talk about it with Dick or Bruce, but his father never really liked it when Tim outdid him at something. Even Tim catching a fish and Jack catching nothing could put Jack in a foul mood. It was much easier for them both to catch nothing than to try and deal with his father’s bad temper. Dick and Bruce were both amazing and he cared deeply about them, but they could be nosy about stuff that wasn’t their business, especially when it concerned his dad.

Dick could tell that Tim was trying to steer the conversation away, “So how goes the little sibling campaign? Any news yet?”

Tim shrugged, “They haven’t told me anything, but I don't think so yet,” he said, “But it’s only been a few months, and things have been kind of crazy lately.”


“Please don’t,” Tim begged, “Please, just don’t. That’s my dad and I don’t want to think about the whole … process.”

Dick laughed, “Man, I sometimes forget that you’re still fifteen,” he said, “It’s a perfectly natural, healthy thing that most adults—”

“No!” Tim cried, lunging at Dick to try and cover his mouth, “For the love of God no!”

Dick laughed and they wrestled for a minute before settling down (they were on a mission after all), “I thought you were excited to have a little sibling anyway?”

“I am,” Tim said, “But I’d really not think about how that’s going to happen.”

“You’re such a teenager,” Dick said, shaking his head. He noticed something out of the corner of his eye, “Whoops, looks like we’re in business.”

Tim leaned over the roof and watched as several men ‘snuck’ into the building below, “Time to go to work.” He stood and stretched, an important part of the process of kicking ass that a lot of people forgot.
Robin and Nightwing wrapped up the case fairly quickly, finding their evidence and kicking the bad guys butts with relative ease. Tim took a hit to the side that was for sure going to hurt in the morning, but otherwise things went down without a hitch. After getting Alfred to look at the already purpling bruise on his side, Tim returned home, climbed through his window, changed, and tried to get a few hours of sleep.

Tim woke up early, jarred awake by the screeching of his alarm. Groaning, Tim forced himself to roll out of bed and put on some clean clothes. He shuffled out of his room and went to the kitchen to make himself some breakfast.

No one else in the house was awake yet, so Tim had a while to relax. His side was, predictably, aching terribly from the night before, so he put a cold pack on the area to help. It was a little awkward to hold the pack under his arm, but he managed to make himself a bowl of cereal.

About an hour and a half passed before anyone else in the house woke up. Tim quickly stowed the ice pack and sat back down at the kitchen island just as his father walked in.

“Tim?” Jack asked with a yawn, “What are you doing up so early?”

“We were going to go fishing,” Tim said, “You kept talking about it all week.”

“Oh shit,” Jack said, scratching the back of his head, “Sorry kiddo, it totally slipped my mind that Dana and I have an appointment today. No fishing this weekend.”

“What kind of appointment?” Tim asked, internally relieved that he wouldn’t have to sit in a boat all day with bruised ribs trying to pretend that he wasn’t in excruciating pain.

“Never mind about it,” Jack said, “But I’m really sorry I forgot Tim, I know you were looking forward to it.”

“I’ll manage,” Tim said, smiling at his dad, “I think I might call Steph or Ives though, I’d like to get out of the house for a bit.”

“Sounds like a solid plan,” Jack said, reaching out and patting Tim on the back. The thump of his hand made Tim’s ribs scream, but Tim didn’t betray any pain.

Tim smiled at Jack and sat while Jack puttered around the kitchen, making coffee and talking at Tim for a while. Once Jack was settled with his toast and coffee, Tim got up and went back to his room, intent of getting at least a few more hours sleep before he started his day.

When Tim woke up again, the house was empty, his dad and Dana gone without a note. Tim was pretty used to this, so he just hung out at home for a bit before he called his friends. A quick busride and Tim was at the mall, looking around for a certain blonde. He was still looking when his eyes were suddenly covered from behind.

“Guess who?” Steph said, and Tim could feel her grin on his ear.

Tim laughed and turned to wrap his arms around Steph’s waist, “Hey,” he said, “Long time no see.”

Steph giggled and leaned in to kiss him, “We saw each other two days ago, remember?”
“Yeah, but that was work,” Tim said, though he leaned into the kiss, “Have you seen Ives?”

“Not yet,” Steph said, “Weren’t you supposed to be going fishing with your dad today? You mentioned it on Thursday.”

“I thought I was, but he had an appointment or something,” Tim said, “So it turns out I’ve got the whole Saturday free.”

“Sounds like a fun time,” Steph said, snuggling into his shoulder as they walked, “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I was thinking we could hit the arcade,” Tim said, “Than maybe catch a movie later. You want to get lunch somewhere later?”

“Are you paying?” Steph asked.

Tim chuckled, “I may have downsized, but I’m still comfortably middle class. I can treat you to lunch. I’ll even buy your movie ticket.”

“What a gentleman,” Steph laughed, “Come on, I think I see Ives.”

Ives waved to them from the entrance of the mall arcade, “Hey Tim!” he called, “Thought you were spending the day with your dad?”

Tim bumped his shoulder with Ives, “Dad and Dana had some kind of appointment,” he said, “So I’ve got the day off. Come on, let’s waste it playing video games.”

“I call Skullcrusher Rampage III!” Steph called, bouncing into the arcade and leave Tim and Ives to follow.

“That girl is something else man,” Ives said, “Where’d you even find her?”

“On a rooftop,” Tim answered, “The first time she met, she lovingly caressed my face with a brick.”

“You have weirdest sense of humor,” Ives said as they got in line to get some tokens.

“Thanks,” Tim said, handing several tokens off to Steph when she came back to him. He didn’t mind paying for her stuff, he had an allowance and she had to scrape together enough coins to get bus fare.

“So how you been man?” Ives asked as they found a game to play, “It seems like forever since we’ve hung out on a Saturday.”

“Been busy,” Tim said, “And my dad always wants to hang out on weekends.”

“Sounds nightmarish,” Ives said with a shudder, “If I had to spend all that time with my old man, I think my skull would burst open.”

Tim chuckled, “Charming imagery,” he said, “It’s kind of nice actually. We never really used to hang out, so it’s a nice change of pace. I just wish he hadn’t picked a time when I’ve got a shit-million other things to be doing. I’m so exhausted.”

“I can imagine,” Ives said. They went quiet for a while, before Ives coughed, “Hey Tim? Your dad, he never … he wasn’t the one who hurt you, right?”

Tim and Ives had met for the first time many years ago, when Tim had first been sent to camp. It had also been just after Tim was whipped with a belt and had a big, bloody scab across his back. Ives
had been the one to help him clean and bandage it. He’d asked Tim a few times what had done it, but Tim had never told him.

“No, my dad never hit me,” Tim said, holding back a sigh.

“Okay,” Ives said, going quiet for several moments, “But you, if he is, you could tell me man. I’d like, help and stuff.”

“How kind of you,” Tim said, only just suppressing an eye roll, “Seriously, my dad never hit me.”

“Okay, so who was it?” Ives asked, “And don’t try to double-talk bullshit me man, I had to sneak into the medical cabin for you.”

Tim snorted, “I’d hate to see what you call a racket if that’s what you call ‘sneaking’,” he said. Ives said nothing, determined to have Tim answer, “It wasn't my dad,” he said softly.

“So … your mom?” Ives asked.

"Your mom," Tim laughed, nudging Ives.

Ives rolled his eyes, "Dude, I'm trying to be serious here."

Tim shrugged, “I barely remember what she was so mad about. I think I came home late for dinner,” he lied, but it was close enough to the truth, “She just laid into me with a belt. Then I got sent to camp the next day.”

“Yikes man, that’s really shitty,” Ives said, “You ever tell anyone?”

Tim shook his head, “No one, except for you just now,” he said.

“Does your dad know about it?” Ives asked.

“I think he does,” Tim said, “I think I remember him there. It’s all a really big blur Ives. I don’t remember too much.”

“So your dad was there, but he didn’t do anything?” Ives asked, “That’s still kind of shitty man.”

Tim shrugged, “Whatever, it was like nine years ago now,” he said, “Not a lot I can do about what happened.”

“Still, sorry about your mom,” Ives said, “My mom spanked me like, once, and we both cried.”

“It was only the one time,” Tim said, “It’s not like she was beating me every night. I hardly saw her enough in person to even get in trouble.”

Ives hummed, clearly unsettled but not sure how to proceed. Tim took the opportunity to change the subject, “So how’s the job going?”

Ives groaned, “Oh God, let me tell you man,” he said, and Tim settled in for a dramatic story, “So last week this one kid like, got food poisoning or something, and they started getting diarrhea and vomiting in the ballpit. And we were full up, so there was like twenty kids in the pit, so it starts this chain reaction of barfing. Soon the ballpit is like a pond of kid barf and balls.”

“Oh gross,” Tim said, though he was laughing already at Ives’ gross tale of woe from working as a child’s mascot at one of those party restaurants. It was nice to hear that at least some of his friends had normal lives.
It wasn’t that Tim didn’t appreciate Ives’ concern for his well being, he was actually quite touched, but it felt wrong to accuse his mother of being abusive only a few years after her death. Tim loved her, for all she’d been distant and he’d hardly known anything about her, and it felt wrong to accuse her of being a bad mother when she couldn’t defend herself. Still, Tim did his best to hide the scar on his back from Bruce and Dick, and when that failed, he gave them some bullshit story about falling out of a tree one year at camp. They probably suspected something, but if they did, they never said anything to him about it. It wasn’t really any of their business anyway.

And the truth was that he did almost remember nothing of that night. It had been such a chaotic night, he couldn't recall exactly why Janet had been so mad at him. He figured it was because he came home late, though he also remembered that she didn't like him hanging out with Dick either. Was it some combination of the two? Tim couldn’t remember exactly, but it didn't matter now. It was nine years ago, so there was nothing to be done about it.

They stayed at the arcade until they’d exhausted their coins, then migrated to the food court to find some lunch. Steph curled her arm around Tim, smiling at him. They were nearly even in height, though Tim was hoping that he’d grow a few more inches by the time his birthday rolled around. It was sometimes an advantage to be underestimated by the thugs he beat up, but sometimes it was annoying to talk into Dick or Bruce’s chin.

“So what movie are we seeing?” Steph asked, already munching on her lunch that Tim had bought her.

“Up to you guys, I don’t really care,” Tim said, relaxing back into his seat. His ribs were aching again and he was glad for the chance to sit.

Ives and Steph started debating, then started arguing, over what movie to see while Tim quietly ate his lunch. He noticed someone out of the corner of his eye and looked to see Dick and Barbara out and about, ladened with a couple shopping bags. He waved and managed to catch Barbara's eye. She waved back and said something to Dick, who turned and started walking over, Barbara following.

“Hey kiddo, how are you?” Dick said as he reached the table, sitting down next to Tim, “It’s been a while.”

“Hi Dick,” Tim said, smiling. It was more or less known that he’d stayed with Bruce while his father had been in a coma, and Dick was publicly known as Bruce’s adopted son, so the two of them pretended to have a passing acquaintance when they bumped into each other in public.

“Hi Tim,” Barbara said, wheeling herself into the space that Ives cleared for her, pushing the chair out of the way (from the few times he’d met Barbara, Ives had a bit of a crush on her), “How are you?”

“I’m good. I’ve got the day off, so I was going to see a movie with my friends,” he said.

“You want to join us?” Steph offered eagerly. She loved to spend time around other vigilantes, in or out of costume.

Dick glanced at Barbara, “I don’t mind, a movie sounds fun.”

“Which theatre?” Barbara asked, “There’s only a couple that are fully accessible.”

They discussed the logistics of going to an accessible theatre and looked up which movies were playing at them. Tim got in on it and finally, after nearly half an hour passed, they made a decision to
go to the closest theatre (it was at least semi-accessible, so Barbara could at least get into it without trouble, though she’d have to sit in the aisle or leave her chair in the aisle) and see a new release that had just come out.

They were walking to the theatre when Dick broke off to corner Tim, “How’s your ribs?” he asked.

“Sore as hell,” Tim said, “But I’ll live.”

“Good. Bruce tell you to take the night off?” Dick asked.

Tim shook his head, “He said to take it easy, but I can work some lighter stuff tonight. There’s some investigation on the computer that I can do.”

“Alright, but no patrolling,” Dick said authoritatively, “I thought you’d be fishing today anyay.”

“So did I, but dad had an appointment,” Tim said, “He just forgot to tell me about it.”

“He does that a lot,” Dick commented.

Tim rolled his eyes, “He’s just a forgetful person,” he said, “Like you’ve never forgotten something until last minute.”

Dick hummed, and Tim resisted the urge to try and explain more. It would just be counterproductive. Bruce and Dick were already suspicious of Jack for some reason, and Tim defending him only made it look worse. Jack could be forgetful and a bit of totalitarian, but he was only trying to look out for Tim. Tim was grateful to have a dad who cared so much, even when it got annoying when his dad didn’t listen to him or made decisions for him. Tim knew he was lucky; he saw what kind of dads were out on the streets, beating or exploiting their kids. Jack wasn’t like that, so Tim didn’t have anything to complain about.

Jack liked to think of himself as a simple man, who only wanted what was best for his family. He wanted to provide the best life possible for his son and wife, as was his duty as a man and head of the family. Jack had taken it hard when his company had collapsed, but he felt eternally grateful that Dana had been there to help him see that it wasn’t all bad. There was still good to focus on; his wife, his son, and the prospect of adding to the family.

Just as soon as they figured out why Dana wasn’t getting pregnant.

In the few months since they’d started trying to have a baby, Dana had shown no signs of being pregnant. She’d been to the doctor, and even started taking fertility drugs, but to no avail. It was only two months ago that Dana had finally suggested that Jack be tested as well.

“Why should I get tested?” Jack asked, looking up from his paper, “We know that I’m just fine. I have Tim.”

“Of course honey,” Dana said, reaching out and patting his arm, “But, you did have an accident, remember? You were paralyzed when we met. Do you think that, maybe, it might have affected you?”

Jack had huffed at the idea at first, but Dana, sweet and kind Dana, had worn him down to the idea
of getting tested, so now they were off to the doctors today. They’d both decided to be tested at the same time, just in case, and Doctor Osland wanted them both to come in to discuss the results.

Jack liked Doctor Osland most of the time, she’d been the physician that Janet had gone to her whole adult life, so he felt he could trust her. He sometimes thought she could be a little brusk, especially for a woman, but she was very efficient. He trusted her medical opinion at least, so when Dana had suggested testing, he’d suggested Doctor Osland.

They showed up early at Doctor Osland’s office, just as she’d asked them too. While they waited, Jack perused the many pamphlets that were shelved in a little spinning case, trying not to be reminded of Janet.

Janet had been the most beautiful woman he’d ever known, and he knew the moment he met her that he wanted to marry her. At first, he’d been charmed by her sharp wit and apparent coldness, fancying that he could perceive a sweet, warm person under her layers of protective armor. He knew the stories about Janet’s father, that he was a drunk with a temper, even though Janet never talked about it. Jack had known he was saving her from that awful man’s house, taking her in and giving her life she deserved, where she didn't have to wear her armor anymore.

Sadly, Janet had never learned to let go of her armor, no matter how much Jack tried to help her. Jack had tried for years to get her to let her guard down and be the sweet woman he knew she could be if she just opened herself up. Until the end, she’d been uncompromising and austere, and while that was great for managing a business (which was probably, if Jack let himself admit it, the reason Drake Industries had stayed afloat for so long), it wasn’t so great for being a devoted wife and mother.

It was probably why Jack had fallen so hard for Dana, who was sweet and kind and caring and everything a wife and mother should be. Jack knew that, when they finally had kids, she would be a wonderful mother, and in time Tim would see her as a loving step mother. Jack wasn't so audacious as to think he could ever replace Janet, but Tim, and any future children, deserved a good mother.

“Mr. Drake?” the young receptionist called, “Doctor Osland will see you now.”

“Thanks sweety,” Jack said, smiling brightly at the girl. She gave him a tight smile in return and quickly returned to her filing. Jack wondered if she was having a bad day or something.

Jack and Dana were quickly seated in Doctor Osland’s office, Osland herself greeting them at the door, “The results of the tests are in, and there’s something I wanted to speak to you both about.”

“Is there something wrong Doctor?” Dana asked, squeezing Jack’s hand. He squeezed back to comfort her.

Doctor Osland pressed her lips together and pulled out a few sheafs of papers from her files, “With you, Mrs. Drake, there’s nothing wrong. You’re perfectly capable of conceiving and carrying to term.”

“So what’s the problem?” Jack asked.

Doctor Osland looked at him over her half-frame glasses, “The test results for you, Mr. Drake, show some issues.”

Jack felt something cold slide down his spine, “So it’s me?”

Doctor Osland nodded, “I’m afraid so Mr. Drake. We’ve run a few tests and determined that you have Klinefelter's Syndrome, which is an extra X chromosome in your genetic makeup.”
Jack let out a breath, “So I won’t be able to have kids with Dana?” he asked. He felt devastated, but strangely numb. He’d been dreaming for months of the chance to start over with Dana, to get it right this time and be more involved in his child’s life. Now he was never going to get the chance.

“What I’m saying, Mr. Drake, is that you can’t have children,” Doctor Osland explained, “At all. Ever.”

Confusion took over the swirl of emotions, “What do you mean by that?”

Doctor Osland sighed and looked him in the eyes, “What I mean is, you were never able to have children, Mr. Drake. It is impossible for you to have impregnated anyone.”

Jack blinked, “There must be some mistake,” Jack said, “I have a child. I have Tim. You’ve met my son.”

“Indeed I have,” Doctor Osland said, “But Mr. Drake, are you entirely certain that Tim is yours?”

Hot anger bubbled up in Jack’s stomach, “What the hell are you implying? Are you accusing Janet of sleeping around behind my back? How dare you!” he snapped, voice rising in anger.

“Jack, please calm down,” Dana pleaded, “She’s only doing her job.”

Doctor Osland seemed unimpressed by Jack’s outburst, “I would suggest getting a paternity test done, to be sure. I don’t mean to disparage the memory of the late Mrs. Drake, but I have a duty to be honest you. Reviewing your tests, it’s highly unlikely that you’re Timothy’s biological father.”

Jack growled and stood from his chair, “You’re a lying hack! You goddamn quack bitch!”

“Jack!” Dana cried, putting her hand on his arm to try and soothe him.

Doctor Osland narrowed her eyes at Jack, “Mr. Drake,” she said sharply, “If you don’t calm down, I’m going to have to have you removed from my office.”

Jack snorted, “No need, we’re leaving,” he hissed. He grabbed his coat and stormed out of the office, leaving Dana to run after him.

“Jack, wait!” Dana called, trotting to catch up to him, “Jack please, calm down.”

“How can I be calm?” Jack snarled, “That woman back there accused Janet of sleeping around. She said my son isn’t mine. Who the hell does she think she is?”

“She’s a medical professional,” Dana said with a slight huff, “And you were very rude to her.”

Jack grumbled, but his anger was starting to fizzle by the time they got to the car. It simmered all throughout the quiet drive home, where Jack finally sighed and sank into his chair in the living room. Dana approached him and perched herself on the arm of the chair, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll get a second opinion,” Dana said, “Doctor Osland might have been mistaken. We’ll find an answer Jack.”

Jack let out a long, draining sigh, “Right, you’re right,” he said, smiling up at her, “There has to be some other explanation. We’ll find out what’s really going on.”

Dana smiled back at him and leaned down to kiss him. Jack sighed contentedly and tried to put his mind at ease.
Getting into Jack's head was really difficult for me, since he's not a character type that I usually write from their perspective. I kind of imagine him as a mostly benign (remember that 'benign' doesn't mean 'harmless') character with some outdated ideas about gender and what men and women should be like. It's really hard for me, a female lesbian person, to try and step into that entitled male mentality because it's the exact opposite of what I believe in. With Janet I could kind of sympathize with her (or at least relate a little, being female myself), but a male perspective like Jack's makes no sense to me. So this was an interesting chapter in that it sort of forced me into a thought box that was so outside of what I normally deal with.

Also, writing Tim in this chapter was kind of interesting. Trying to justify Jack's behaviour and Janet's behaviour seems weird, especially for someone as smart as Tim, but I think it makes sense. I actually put a bit of myself into Tim here, the way I used to think about my own parents. I've grown up past that kind of thinking now, but I remember what it was like. If you're struggling with your relationship with your parents, I'd recommend "Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents: How to Heal from Distant, Rejecting, or Self-Involved Parents" by Lindsey C. Gibson. It's available for order off Amazon.
Another chapter! This one is far less exciting I think, but Tim does get a chance to talk to more people in this one. This one ended up being a little bit shorter than usual, but I already had trouble extending it to the length that it is. Hopefully by next chapter we have more stuff going and I can get it done faster. I might need to take more time with it though for health reasons. I lost my glasses and looking at a screen for too long will give me a headache.

WIN A FIC! Spot the reference and win a 1k fic from me! Any characters from any fandom are welcome! This chapter's test is a little harder, since I'm not giving you a quote or anything to look for. I do have a hint though; it'll be much easier to find if you know your feminist literature.

In the weeks that followed, a second opinion turned into a third, a fourth, a seventh, and Jack was finally forced to admit that Doctor Osland had been right. Jack was unable to have children. Some of the more specialized doctors they saw said that there were treatments that might allow Jack to have children with Dana, but when questioned on whether or not he could already have children, the resounding answer was no, it wasn't possible.

So how did Tim happen?

Jack wouldn't face it at first, refusing to believe that the boy he'd called his own and lovingly raised wasn't his. The more he looked at Tim, however, the more he was faced with the truth. Tim was nothing like Jack, nothing like any Drake in the family. Jack had assumed that Tim just took strongly after his mother, but more and more Jack could see things that didn't add up. Tim's fine black hair was in neither family, and Jack had never known any of his relatives to lightly freckle the way Tim did in the sun. He'd always thought Tim's blue eyes were from Janet, but the colour was a lot brighter than Janet's had been. All of this led Jack to finally admit that something was amiss.

He still refused to admit it though, and kept trying to find different explanations for Tim’s divergent genetics. Finally Jack couldn't stand it anymore and had to take drastic action. One day while Tim was out, Jack quietly snuck into his room and found his comb on his dresser. He took a few hairs and some of his own and sent them away for a paternity test to find out once and for all. He even paid for a rush job with the lab.

When the result finally came in, Jack sat in his chair for an hour, staring at the words ‘not a match’ stamped on the result form.

Jack Drake was not Tim Drake’s father.

That begged the question though; who was?

Jack found himself obsessing over the answer, hitting the wine and whiskey and bourbon and any alcohol he could get his hands on, in increasing volumes. He withdrew from both Tim and from Dana, not wanting to be in anyone’s company. He tried to think of anyone in Janet’s life at the time.
of Tim’s conception that might have been the culprit. Around the time Tim would have been conceived, they were in India, and Jack couldn’t think of anyone who it could be (he didn’t want to sound racist, but Tim didn’t look Indian at all).

The only solution Jack could find was to go through Janet’s diaries, something he’d promised himself he would never do out of respect for Janet’s memory. If she slept around, Jack thought to himself as he brought another box of diaries home, Then she didn’t deserve the respect.

Jack took a swig from the wine bottle at his elbow and pulled the top off of the storage box he’d taken from the storage garage they’d rented to keep a lot of things that wouldn't fit in the townhouse, most of them being Janet’s old things that he couldn't bear to be parted with at the time. He cursed when he realized that, once again, all of the diaries were out of order. Janet had always kept them in order, but when he’d packed them all up to move, he’d messed up the order. He was trying to find the year that Tim had been conceived, hoping that Janet wrote it down somewhere. She’d always been so meticulous about her diaries, so Jack was sure that he could find out who the father was in the diaries.

Of course, there was the question of what Jack would do once he found the father. Dana had tried to comfort him, saying that it didn’t matter that he wasn’t Tim’s biological father because he’d raised and loved the boy as his son for fifteen years. Jack appreciated Dana’s effort to comfort him, but she didn't understand that it was his pride that was hurt. Jack had no heirs, no real children. Janet had lied to him; she must have known, or suspected at least, that Tim wasn’t his.

Jack grumbled and started sorting through the diaries, trying to find one from around the time Tim was born, or when he was younger. One of them might have a clue or reference to the right person. Already he’d found a few lines in a couple diaries that hinted that Tim wasn’t Jack’s. The more he found, the faster Jack finished his bottles of liquor.

“Dad?” Tim called cautiously from near the entrance to the living room, “Can I stay over at a friend’s place tonight?”

Jack looked up at Tim, watching him for just a moment. This stranger’s child who he’d raised as his own boy. The more Jack thought about it, he didn't know this child at all. What did he like? What did he spend his time doing? When did he get so tall? Who did he resemble in his family? Who the hell was this kid?

“Dad?” Tim called again, shifting uncomfortably under Jack’s gaze.

“Do whatever,” Jack said, reaching for the bottle again, “Go have fun.”

“Okay,” Tim said, though he hesitated in the door for a while. He finally left Jack without another word.

Jack pulled out another diary and started flipping through it, looking for mentions of Tim. Janet had been meticulous about her own life, but she’d hardly included anything about anyone else. There were mentions of names here and there, but hardly any meditations. Jack felt himself getting frustrated again and picked up the bottle of wine again, only for it to be pulled away.

“Jack, that’s enough,” Dana said, setting the bottle down on the counter, “You’re going to drive yourself insane if you keep going like this.”

Jack sighed, “I need to know Dana,” he said, pushing aside the diary. There was nothing useful in it.

“And what will knowing do?” Dana asked, “I understand that you're angry, and you want to unload
that anger onto the person you feel responsible, but what happens after? What are you going to do to this man, if you can even find him?"

Jack ran a hand through his hair, “Fuck, I don't know Dana,” he said, “I just want to look him in the eyes. I want to know who the hell fucked my wife.”

“Oh Christ,” Dana snapped, pacing around the kitchen a few steps, “What does that matter? I know loved her and you feel betrayed, but you didn’t own Janet. Whatever decisions she made were a reflection on her, not you.”

“You just don’t get it,” Jack grumbled, leaning over and reaching for the bottle again. He pulled out another diary.

Dana threw up her hands, “I’m going out,” she said, “I can’t stand you when you act like this.”

Jack said nothing and continued his search through the diary. He barely heard the door slam as Dana left. The answer was here somewhere, he just had to find it.

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Bruce looked up as Tim came into the Cave, eyes down and brows furrowed they way they did when Tim was thinking hard about something. He went to the training mats and started his exercises, his face remaining the same all through his warm up. After watching him for a few minutes, Bruce stood up from the computer and went to the mats.

“Why don’t we spar for a bit?” he suggested. Bruce was a little sore from a nasty tumble the other day, but he could push it down; to help Tim he could push it away.

Tim looked up at him, as though startled by his presence, “Alright,” he said, though he still sounded a little far away.

Bruce quickly went through a warm up and joined Tim on the matts. Though Tim still looked preoccupied, his focus shifted to the present moment, falling into a perfectly practiced fighting stance. Bruce struck out first, an easily blocked strike, and they fell into step with one another.

When Tim had first started as Robin, Bruce had had his doubts, many doubts. Both Dick and Jason had been a year younger than Tim when they started, but they’d had their entire lives to build their skills, whether it was Dick’s acrobatics or Jason’s street knowledge. Tim had been small, skinny, and rather unathletic, and Bruce had wondered if Tim would even be able to make the cut physically, no matter that he’d proven himself to be an adept detective. Tim had surprised him though, pushing past his limits and breaking Bruce’s doubts. He didn’t have Dick’s instinctual grace or Jason’s brute force, but he made up for it by just seeming to think faster. He had to plan each movement, but he did it on the fly so well that it hardly mattered. Another thing that impressed Bruce about Tim.

Speaking of impressing Bruce, Tim was keeping up with Bruce’s sparring pace, a far cry from what he’d been when they’d first started. Tim had had to fight against his natural timid instincts when fighting, his first response to aggression being to back away, protect himself. Once he’d trained that instinct out of himself, he’d started throwing himself into the fight too early, some sort of latent built up aggression. Now he’d found his balance, and even though he probably had a million thoughts in his head, he was reacting to Bruce’s strikes.

He was only reacting though, not taking many strikes himself. Bruce finally stopped going easy on
Tim and started challenging him. Tim kept up for a minute, but finally he left himself open and Bruce took him down.

Tim landed on the matts with a grunt, sprawling out and going loose so as not to hurt himself. Bruce stood over him for a minute, “You want to tell me what’s on your mind?” he asked.

Tim let out a long sigh and got up, “Nothing,” he said, deflecting. He walked over to the rack of practise weapons and pulled down the bo staff, but he didn’t do anything with it just yet.

Bruce pressed his lips together, wondering what he should do. He wanted to help Tim, offer him whatever he needed, but Bruce tread a fine line with Tim. On one hand, Tim was his Robin, his partner, and they had to have a bond of trust between them. One the other hand, Tim was unlike the other two Robins before him, and they didn't have the same relationship. Dick and Jason, while they’d both been adopted after losing their real parents, had still been his children; Tim had a father, and he didn’t need Bruce stepping all over that.

Tim wasn't his son, and he couldn't act like his father.

After a long moment, Tim sighed again and put the staff back on the rack. He ran his hands through his hair and sat down on one of the benches that lined the training area. Bruce walked a few paces towards him, but didn't sit next to him on the bench.

“I think something’s up with my dad,” Tim said eventually, “He’s been going through Mom’s old things,” he paused and wrapped his arms around himself, “And drinking a lot.”

Bruce frowned, “Has he tried to hurt you?”

Tim snorted, “God no, he’d never hurt me,” he said, like Bruce had suggested that Jack might turn Tim into a frog or something, “He’s just been acting weird.”

“Can you tell why?” Bruce asked, taking Tim’s willingness to engage in conversation as permission to sit next to him.

“Not really,” Tim said, “I think it has something to do with Mom, and maybe all the appointments Dad and Dana had just a while back, but neither of them will talk to me about it.”

“Do you want me to do anything?” Bruce asked. He new Jack well enough to at least ‘bump into him’ and be friendly enough to invite him to lunch or somewhere he might be able to get him to talk.

Tim shook his head, “No, I’ll figure it out,” he said. He smiled up at Bruce, “Thanks for offering though.”

Bruce gave a small smile back, “Of course,” he said. If this were Dick or Jason or even Cassandra, he might have hugged them or put a comforting hand on their back or shoulder, but he didn't think he could do that with Tim.

Bruce thought back to nine years ago, when Tim had first found his way to Wayne Manor, deathly afraid of his parents fighting. Bruce had never asked why Tim had suddenly gone to camp and never replied to any of their letters, though he suspected it had something to do with his parents. To be honest, Bruce got a sour taste in his mouth every time he spoke to Jack, even when they talked pleasantly. Something about Jack just put Bruce on edge: not enough for him to suspect Jack of anything nefarious, but there was something about him that Bruce had never fully trusted. He never gave anything away though, knowing it was best for Tim’s sake that he play nice.

Still, Bruce didn't feel comfortable just leaving things alone, “Are you staying the night tonight?” he
asked.

Tim nodded, “I asked my dad if I could stay at a friend’s place. It was weird, he didn’t even ask which friend.”

Bruce hummed and tried not to frown too deeply at that, “I wouldn't worry about it for the rest of the night,” he said, “Finish up with your routine and then we’ll start getting ready for patrol.”

“Alright.” Tim stood and went back to the weapon rack to retrieve his staff. Bruce went back to the computer and quietly pulled up an old file entitled ‘Jack Drake’. He started a new header and quickly put down ‘possible drinking issues’. He cared too much for Tim to leave him in the hands of someone who might hurt him.

Bruce closed the file quickly and went back to working on the case he’d been trying to crack when he’d stopped to help Tim. He found his mind drifting back to the boy still going through his training routine on the mats. Tim was a remarkable young man, and Bruce was happy that he’d gotten to know the boy again after years of forcing himself to keep his distance. Tim had been a welcome presence at the Manor for nearly a year, a sweet and shy child in desperate need of positive attention. Bruce did worry about Tim though; on the surface he seemed like he’d simply matured into an independent teen, but Bruce could detect an undercurrent of something concerning. He hadn’t been able to pin it down at first, but now he could tell there was something strange in Tim’s attitude. He was self-sacrificing to a fault, and yet somehow believed himself to be useless or disposable. He’d stubborned his way into being Robin, all fire and spirit and ‘you need a Robin’, but he still believed that at any moment Bruce would kick him out. Bruce wondered sometimes if he shouldn’t have just called social services on Jack and Janet all those years ago, and maybe gotten Tim into a home where he was more encouraged.

It was too late now, and Tim wouldn’t appreciate Bruce interfering too much in his personal life. Bruce would keep an eye on things, but for now he just had to let Tim work on it on his own. He was glad that Tim was going to spend the night tonight at least; Bruce had seen far too often what could happen when a father got drunk and angry around his children.

Patrol was mostly quiet that night, and Tim was glad for it. He didn't think it would be a good idea to get into anything more complicated than a mugging while he was so distracted. As it was, he nearly missed a thug with a gun behind him and only noticed when the man let out a cry as a black shadow dropped on him.

“Batgirl,” Tim said, standing up from where’s he’d ziptied the other thugs, “Thanks.”

Cassandra stared at Tim, her mask betraying nothing of her face. Tim had been wary of her at first, but she’d proven herself a reliable ally, and even a good friend at times. At the very least, she was a good listener.

Cass walked towards Tim and tapped his forehead, “Worried,” she said.

Tim sighed, “It’s nothing,” he insisted, “Just some stuff at home.”

Cass tilted her head, “Talk?” she asked.

Tim checked the time; he and Bruce had split up to cover more area just a while ago, and it was still
fairly early, “I’ve got a few minutes,” he said.

Once Tim and Cass found a perch high enough to keep an eye on the city below and stable enough to support them, they sat down and went quiet for a while. Cass waited patiently for Tim to start talking. It was nice to talk to Cass, she was good at both listening and keeping secrets.

“I think I did something to upset my dad,” Tim said after a few minutes, “He’s drinking a lot and going through my mom’s stuff. He’ll barely look at me, even when I try to talk to him.”

Cass frowned, and Tim felt a little bad. The things David Cain did to her far outstripped whatever Tim was dealing with with Jack, so he probably shouldn’t be complaining.

“Nevermind, it’s stupid,” Tim said, starting to move. Cass caught his arm and made him sit back down.

“No,” she said, “Not stupid.” Cass went quiet a moment and Tim could tell she was trying to pick her words, “Hurt hurts.”

Tim sighed, “I know. I just wish I knew what the hell I did to make him so mad at me.”

Cass hummed and Tim waited patiently, “Not mad at you?” she suggested.

“I don’t know, he and Dana seemed okay for a bit,” he explained, “But then they started to fall apart. They had a bunch of appointments and stuff, but they wouldn’t tell me what for.”

Cass frowned again and rolled her shoulder. Tim was getting better at reading her, and he could tell she was as stumped as he was.

“I could probably look into as Robin, but that seems so wrong,” Tim said, “He’s my dad, I should respect his privacy.”

“Real ones share,” Cass said firmly.

Tim sighed, “I know how you feel about that, but it’s different in my family. Dad loves me, he just doesn’t want to bug me with his problems most of the time.”

Cass shook her head, adamant in her stance, “Ask?” she suggested.

“I don’t think that would work,” Tim said, “He’d just dodge the question or deflect or something. He wouldn’t tell me outright.”

“Batgirl?” Cass offered, putting a hand on her chest.

Tim smiled, “That’s nice of you to offer, but no thanks. I can figure it out on my own.”

Cass nodded and gently leaned into Tim’s side. Tim let out a sigh and leaned back into her, and they stayed that way for a while. It had taken Tim a while to figure out how to interact with Cass, since she had such issues with communication, but he’s figured out that letting his actions do most of the talking was the best way to get across his feelings.

They sat for a while, looking down on the city from their perch. They would have to go soon, but for now it was just nice to sit. Tim let out a long content sigh and Cass looked up at him from resting her head on his shoulder.

“I don’t even know why I’m so upset about it,” Tim said softly, “It’s not like I’m not used to my dad ignoring me.”
Cass was quiet for a long time, and Tim wasn’t expecting her to say anything until she spoke, “More than one way to hurt.”

Tim was about to ask her what she meant by that when his comm pinged to life in his ear, “Robin, *Batman is requesting backup for a possible bank heist,*” Barbara’s voice said into his ear.

“Copy that Oracle, I’ll be there in a minute,” Tim said, standing up, “Batgirl is with me, should she come?”

“*There’s nothing else pressing that I can see, so go for it,*” Barbara said. She rattled off the address of the bank and where Batman was waiting for them, “*You kids have fun now.*”

Tim laughed, “Thanks Oracle,” he said. He clicked off his comm and turned to Cass, “Want to go beat some people up?”

Cass smiled under her mask and nodded. Within minutes, they had swung across town and met up with Batman at the sight of the robbery. It looked like just some common thugs trying their hand at stepping up into more lucrative business, but it could still go south in an instant if they weren’t careful. Tim tried to shake off his funk and focus on the work ahead of him. Batgirl and Batman couldn’t be expected to pick up his slack, Tim had to carry his own weight.

The three of them snuck over to the roof of the bank, silent as shadows. Batman laid out their plan and they moved quickly. Tim slipped in through a small window and stayed overhead, following along above the crooks. There were five of them, three standing guard and two working the vault open. Tim pulled out a smoke grenade and dropped it, which was the signal for the other two to strike.

There was a flurry of activity as the two of them took out the five disoriented thugs. Tim stayed up and ready to join if something went wrong. Having the three of them in the firefight would just make them easier targets, so Batman had instructed him to hang back unless it got hairy. Tim didn’t feel that put out, Cass could have taken all the thugs out with one hand behind her back, but he couldn’t help but feel that Bruce might be trying to coddle him a little. He knew Tim was having a bad day, and maybe he was trying to help by sort-of benching him in a way, but Tim didn’t want Bruce thinking he needed to be treated like a kid.

The thugs went down and Tim came down from the rafters, “That’s everyone?” he asked.

The screech of tires made them all jolt, “Getaway car,” Batman said, “Damn, missed it.”

They all scrambled to the back; the car hadn’t left the back alley by the time they got there, having jammed itself into a tight spot with little room to maneuver. The driver saw them and tried to peel out of the alley again, this time with less regard for the paint job. Tim sprung forward, using a dumpster as a springboard and landing on the back of the vehicle. The driver panicked and lurched forward, sending Tim sprawling backwards over the trunk, landing hard on his back as the car sped away.

“Robin!” Batman called, running up to him, “Are you alright?”

Tim groaned and sat up, “Fine, bruised but fine,” he said, “Placed a tracker on the rear of the car.”

Batman helped Tim up, “Good work,” he said, “Try not to scare me like that though.”

Tim smiled and nodded. He turned to Cassandra, “Coming Batgirl?”

Cass shook her head, “Handled,” she said, “Call?”
“If we need to, we will,” Batman said, “Be safe out there.”

Cass nodded and then slipped into a shadow, disappearing like she’d never been there. Tim tried to see where she went, but to no avail. He turned to follow Batman back to the Batmobile instead. They’d have to follow the getaway car at a distance, but they could follow to tracker from the console in the car, so they wouldn’t lose it. Hopefully Tim had placed it properly so that it wouldn’t fall off with the driver’s panicked tearing through to streets.

They found the would-be bank robbers hidey-spot promptly, the driver too scared to think to try and lead them off track. Batman and Robin parked the car some distance away and quietly snuck into the crook’s den. It was a crumbling old building that looked like it had been built sometime around the turn of the century. The inside was just as dilapidated as the outside, and Tim wrinkled his nose at the mildew smell that permeated everything. Worst of all was the what was probably the ugliest yellow wallpaper Tim had ever seen in his life pasted over every wall in the house. It was a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. It looked greasy and unclean to the touch, like Tim’s clothing would be smudged yellow if he touched it. The pattern was sprawling and flamboyant, committing every artistic sin Tim could name, and if he stared at it for too long, Tim was sure he could see the figure of a woman behind the atrocious pattern.

Ignoring the wallpaper and the feeling of creeping women watching him, Tim followed Batman through the house down to the basement where the driver and two more thugs were yelling at each other. A quick sweep of the place made sure that the basement was only accessible by the stairs or by the cellar door, which was locked from the outside. Batman got into position and signaled Tim. They waited a few beats and then sprung in together.

The fight was over almost before it started, the thugs scrambling so hard to get away from them that they crashed around the clutter and tripped themselves up. Tim landed on one thugs chest, knocking the wind from him before springing away. Batman was working on one thug and Tim didn’t see the other. He looked around, trying to spot him. He saw movement by the stairs as the last thug tried to get out before they could stop him.

“Hey!” Tim called, taking a step before pain bloomed along his side and he was knocked over. The thug he’d landed on had caught his breath a lot faster than Tim had anticipated and found a baseball bat to hit him with. Tim went down gasping as the two thugs scrambled up the stairs and away.

“Robin!” Batman called for a second time that night, “Are you hurt?”

Tim gasped a few more times, trying to force his lungs to work. Batman put a gentle hand on his shoulder and gingerly felt along where the bat had hit, feeling for broken ribs. The pain made Tim suck in sharply and he began to breath again.

“Sorry,” Tim panted out through gritted teeth, “Let them get away.”

“It’s alright Robin,” Batman said, “We’ve got enough of their friends, one of them will talk. Can you sit up?”

Tim groaned and slowly sat up. His ribs throbbed, but he couldn’t feel anything grinding or crunching, so nothing was broken. Bruce would insist on X-rays just to be sure anyway, and Tim was glad he was spending the night.

“Let’s head back,” Batman said, gently pulling Tim up so he was standing.

Tim swayed on his feet, “I’ll be alright,” he said.
Batman made a noise in his throat and led Tim up the stairs and out to the Batmobile. He helped him inside and buckled him in before calling Gordon to come pick up the robbers, then drove them back to the Cave.

Tim sagged against the seat as they drove, trying to keep his breathing even and controlled. He tried not to think of how he seemed to be screwing up all over the place lately. Cass had to save his bacon early, he’d let two crooks get away, Batman didn’t seem to trust him anymore, and his dad was mad at him for something but Tim couldn’t even think of anything he did that might have made his dad angry at him. The absolute fustercluck that had been Tim’s day weighed on his shoulders and Tim could feel tears sting his eyes. Tim fought to keep his breathing steady, even as little sobs threatened to escape.

“Tim?” Bruce asked, “Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

Tim sniffled, “No, I’m fine,” he choked. He sucked in a breath and tried to force down his emotions. What would Bruce think of him if he saw him bawling like a child over something as stupid as this?

The rest of the drive home was quiet, and Alfred was waiting for them when they got back. Bruce pulled back his cowl and helped Tim out of the car, silently supporting him as they went to the medical bay. Tim sat down on a gurney and gently started to remove the top of his uniform, trying not to jar his ribs.

“Let us help you with that lad,” Alfred said softly, seeming to sense Tim’s heightened mood. Tim let his hands drop and let Alfred and Bruce fuss over him like he was a six year old with heat exhaustion again.

They eventually got Tim under the X-ray machine and determined that his ribs were not broken, but badly bruised. They wrapped Tim’s ribs and gave him some painkillers, with instructions to rest up for tonight and take it easy tomorrow.

“Before you go up to bed Tim, I want to talk to you,” Bruce said as Tim came out of the locker room.

“What about?” Tim asked, walking over, “A case you want me to check?”

“No Tim,” Bruce said, and he seemed a little stilted, like he didn’t know how to proceed, “I’ve been thinking about it, and why don’t you take a little time off from Robin?”

Tim felt his throat constrict. So Bruce was disappointed in him for messing up, “I-I’ll do better next time,” Tim insisted.

Bruce just looked down at Tim sadly, “That isn’t what this is about Tim,” he said calmly, “You’ve been going through a rough time lately with you family, and I’d hate to see you get hurt because of it. You’re stressed and distracted, and that’s okay.” He put a hand on Tim’s shoulder, “It’s perfectly normal to get stressed Tim, this isn’t meant to be a punishment. I just want you to take a couple days off and rest.”

Tim hung his head, feeling stupid and ashamed of himself. No matter how Bruce tried to justify it, the bottom line was that Tim messed up and this was a punishment. If he didn’t get his head together, Bruce would take Robin away entirely, and then what would Tim do with himself?

Maybe it would be better if Tim wasn’t Robin anyway. What was so great about plain old Tim Drake anyway? If Tim was out of the way, someone better could be Robin. It wasn’t like Tim didn’t have a normal life that he could go back to at any time he wanted. He could figure out what he did to
make his dad so angry at him and maybe even pull his grades up, spend time with what friends he had left.

Tim tried to shake off those thoughts; he was too tired to examine them right now, “I’m going up to bed,” he announced. He turned away from Bruce and headed up the stairs.

Alfred and Bruce watched him go. “He seems sullen tonight,” Alfred commented, “He didn’t even want any cocoa.”

Bruce pressed his lips together, “Something’s been going on with his father;” he said, “Tim says he’s been drinking and going through his mother’s old things.”

“Oh dear,” Alfred said, “Perhaps some sort of late onset grief? Mr. Drake did seem to get over his wife’s death fairly quickly.”

“Maybe,” Bruce said, “Tim thinks it’s something he did to make Jack angry.”

“Poor thing,” Alfred sighed, “He’s much too insular for his own good. He makes everything out to be his own fault.”

Bruce went over to the computer and sat down at it, pulling up the file he had on Jack Drake, “Tim said that Jack and Dana had gone to several appointments together a few weeks back. It might have something to do with that.”

“Are you going to pry into Master Tim’s private life?” Alfred asked, and he didn’t seem angry or pleased, but rather neutral.

Bruce leaned back in his chair, “I don’t know,” he said, “I want to make sure Tim is safe, but I don't want to overstep my bounds with him. He’s always tried his best to keep us out of his family business, and I don’t want to act like I’m trying to be his father.”

Alfred hummed, “From what we’ve seen of Jack Drake, the boy probably needs someone to act like his father, because that man surely isn’t.”

Chapter End Notes

And there we are! Nothing as exciting this chapter, but I find if something BIG happens every chapter, it can actually take away from the story. Adding a ‘slower’ chapter here and there can help the story breath a little, let things sink in.

A note on Bruce's attitude towards Tim; so I've been reading some old-ass comics from the 80's (before I was born), specifically old comics where Tim is present. I've heard a lot through the comics fandom grapevine and one of those things is that Bruce treated Tim harshly in the early days of his Robin career. However, having gone back and read Tim's early appearances, I have to say I find that to be unfounded bullshit. Bruce was actually really supportive and caring of Tim, he even tried to investigate the Drakes at one point because he thought that them leaving Tim alone for so long was weird. He wasn't the same as he was with Dick or Jason, but not only had he just lost Jason recently, but he adopted Dick and Jason, not Tim. Remember, when Bruce first adopted Tim years later, it was pointed out that he took on a much more paternal role with Tim almost immediately. So I incorporated a little of that here, having Bruce be caring
towards Tim, but aware that he's not Tim's father (lol) and he can't act the same way he did with Dick and Jason.
Part II Chapter iii: Filicide

Chapter Notes

It's 2am as I post this, but dammit I want to get this POSTED. I'm super sleepy and my eyes won't focus because I don't have my glasses, but this is an important chapter and I wanted to get it finished.

WIN A FIC! I think everyone knows the drill by now, but here we go. Find the reference and win a 1k fic from me! This chapter's contest; find the famous quote from a short story about Wall Street, and name both the short story and the author for full points. Try to figure it out without google, but you won't be penalized if you do. As always, those who have won before, please let others have a chance to guess first. If a week has gone by and no-one has guessed it right, try your hand.

WARNING FOR CHILD ABUSE IN THIS CHAPTER.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim woke up the next morning aching all over. Landing on his back and then getting a baseball bat to the ribs made for him feeling like he was one big bruise. For several minutes, Tim didn’t move, just let the throbbing pain consume him, distracting him from how badly he’d messed up the night before.

Eventually, Tim had to either get up or pee the bed, and he didn’t want to put Alfred through washing that, so he slowly rolled off the bed, glad for the tight bindings around his chest keeping him from moving too much. After a short pit stop at the bathroom, Tim put on some fresh clothes and went downstairs.

Alfred was already laying out breakfast, but Bruce looked like he had only come down moments before Tim had. He took a sip of his coffee and absently patted Tim on the head. Tim was used to this by now (let it be known that Bruce Wayne was not a morning person) and just sat down at the table, pulling a plate of breakfast towards himself.

“How are you feeling this morning Master Tim?” Alfred asked, coming around to his side and pouring him some orange juice.

“Sore, but what’s new?” Tim said with a sardonic smile. He noticed that Alfred put a few painkillers next to his glass of juice.

“Would you prefer to stay home from school today?” Alfred suggested.

“No,” Tim said, taking the pills and gulping them down with juice, “I’ve had too many absences lately, I’m worried they’ll call my dad if I miss more.”

Alfred gave a nod, “In that case, I will drive you to school.”

“You really don't have to do that Alfred,” Tim said, “I don't want to make you to go out of your way.”

“That’s very kind of you Master Tim, but since I offered, I would not consider it out of my way,”
Alfred said.

Bruce, more awake now, noticed Tim seemed to be gearing up for another protest, “You’re not an inconvenience to us Tim,” he said, voice still a little rough with sleep, “We like having you around.”

Tim pressed his lips together, wondering what to say to that. A part of him wanted to be flattered and pleased, but another part of him felt guilty. Robin was Batman’s partner, but that didn’t mean that Tim Drake got to be Bruce Wayne’s responsibility, no matter how fond his memories of spending time at the Manor when he was six were. Tim knew he shouldn’t covet Bruce’s attention, but he couldn’t help but want it so badly.

“Thanks,” Tim said quietly, not knowing what else to say. He finished his breakfast slowly and went back upstairs to get changed for school.

As he was changing, he took a moment to look at himself in the mirror. In the few years since he’d been Robin, the physical changes had been significant. He was taller, more muscular, carried himself differently, and was a lot more scarred. The criss crossing pattern of scars running over his body were numerous, varying shades of pink and white. They almost made the scar across his back fade away.

Tim turned to get a better look at the old scar. It had never healed right, and remained ugly and jagged and a little blotchy in places. He sometimes looked at it and thought of his mother, wondering what had compelled her to punish him so harshly that day. He’d barely spoken to her after that for years. They’d never gone to another art gallery together, something Tim had sorely missed. Sometimes he’d wander past a painting in the Manor and try to discern the techniques, wondering how Janet would explain it to him.

Shaking his head, Tim finished dressing and went back downstairs. When he got to the bottom, he heard Bruce and Alfred talking quietly. As silently as he could, he crept up to listen, keeping just out of sight.

“—orried about him,” Bruce was saying, “Maybe I should investigate Jack?”

“I’m afraid I can’t be any help here sir,” Alfred responded, “Master Tim has asked us to stay out of his personal business.”

Tim heard Bruce sigh, “I know, but I can’t help but feel like something is very wrong here. I don’t want to leave Tim in danger.”

“Do we know if Jack will hurt the lad?” Alfred asked, and Tim felt something cold run up his spine.

“We don’t,” Bruce admitted, “But our only other option is to wait around and let something bad happen. I don’t want to do that.”

“Should we call the police?” Alfred said, “If we suspect something might happen, it might be enough for an investigation.”

There was a long pause and Tim held his breath, waiting for Bruce’s decision. He bit his lip, wondering what he even wanted Bruce’s answer to be. Of course he loved his father and knew that Jack would never hurt him, but there was some little part of him that looked at Jack sometimes and wanted to run scared. He felt horribly guilty about it, but sometimes it was exhausting to just be around Jack. Even when Jack was in a good mood, Tim felt himself draining in energy after a while. Maybe some time away from his father would let him figure it out?

“I want to call the police,” Bruce said, “But I have to trust Tim. He says things will be okay, and I
have to respect his boundaries, even if I don’t agree.”

Tim let out the breath he’d been holding. A swirl of guilt, relief, and shame mixed together in his stomach and threatened to make his breakfast reappear for a moment. He took a few deep breaths to steady himself, then turned the corner.

“Alfred? I’m ready to go,” he said, doing his best to seem like he hadn’t just been listening in.

“Alright,” Alfred said, “I’ll be down in the garage in a moment.”

“Just a second Tim,” Bruce called, getting up, “I want to talk to you.”

Tim stood and waited, wondering what Bruce wanted to ask him. Bruce stopped in front of Tim and hesitated a moment, before putting a gentle hand on his shoulder, “You’re sure you want to go to school? That hit last night was pretty bad.”

Tim gave a bit of a smile, “I’ll be fine,” he said, “Besides, you have to have a parent call you in sick, and I don’t want to have to lie to my dad again.”

Bruce nodded, but Tim knew he was thinking hard, “Do you want to come by tonight? I don’t want you going out as Robin right now with your ribs, but I can always use an extra set of hands in the Cave.”

Tim bit down on his first instinct to say ‘yes’, “That’s alright. I think I should maybe try and spend some time with my dad,” he said, “I haven’t hung out with him in a while, so I think that might be what’s bugging him.”

Bruce made a noise in his chest, which Tim had come to understand was an indication of displeasure. He wished he could assuage Bruce’s fears; Jack was his dad, and Tim was sure that he’d never hurt him. After all, it had been his mother behind the belt, and Tim wasn’t sure if Jack had even been there for that. Jack was having some troubles right now, but Tim was his son, and he had a responsibility to his family as well. Tim was sure that if he just spent a bit more time with Jack, whatever was bothering him would either come to light or fade away. He’d use the few days off from Robin to try and bridge whatever problems Jack was having and then things would go back to normal.

“I’ll be fine Bruce, you don’t need to worry about me,” Tim said, smiling up at him, “I can take care of myself.”

Bruce didn’t seem convinced, but he nodded and squeezed Tim’s shoulder, “Alright,” he said, “Have a good day at school. Take it easy on your ribs.”

“I will,” Tim said, “Thanks.” He pulled away from Bruce and turned to head to the garage. Bruce watched him go for a moment, then headed upstairs to get ready for work.

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School went by fine, though Tim had to touch up his painkillers at around noon (he mentally thanked Alfred). He saw Ives and hung out with him, though his friend remarked that he looked tired. He even managed to see Stephanie for a bit after school, though she also noticed that he seemed drained.

“I’ll be fine,” tim reassured her, “I’ve got a few days off to rest anyhow, so I’ll catch up on some
“Sleep.”

“Good,” Steph said, “You look like you need it, Boy Wonder.”

Tim rolled his eyes, “Thanks,” he deadpanned, “See if I take you out on a date this Friday.”

“Have I told you lately how handsome you are?” Steph cooed, batting her eyelashes at him, “Those dark circles just bring out the blue in your eyes.”

“You think you’re funny,” Tim said, grinning at her, “I’ll text you?”

“You better,” Steph said. She gave him a quick kiss and then they had to part ways. Tim had to get home and see if there was anything he could do for his father.

The house was quiet when Tim got home, and he wondered if his dad had gone out. He looked around for a minute and tried not to count the empty bottles on the counter. His dad was sitting on the couch, several more boxes of Janet’s things piled around him, mostly consisting of her diaries. Tim wondered what Jack was even searching for.

“Hey dad,” he called, “I’m back.”

“Yeah,” Jack said, acknowledging Tim, but not seeming to care otherwise.

Tim shifted on his feet, suddenly unsure of what to do. He cautiously approached the couch, “What are you looking for?” he asked.

Jack didn’t say anything, but reached for a bottle of whiskey on the coffee table, “Don’t worry about it,” he grumbled, and Tim could tell he was in a testy mood.

“Maybe I can help?” Tim offered, smiling and wishing his father would look at him.

Jack let out an irritated sigh, “Just go to your room Tim,” he ordered.

Tim deflated, “Okay,” he said softly, slinking off like a dog with its tail between his legs. He’d never seen his dad like this, and he didn’t know what he should do.

Jack didn’t even turn to look at Tim, continuing his search through Janet’s diaries. Tim wondered what it was that he was searching for. Maybe he just missed her? Tim would try asking later, when Jack wasn’t in such a foul mood.

It was nice to lie down finally after a such a long day though. His ribs ached and he wanted to just sink into his soft bed and sleep for a week. Tim let out a sigh and wondered if he could just nap until dinner. His phone vibrated in his pocket and he took it out, seeing that he had a text from the Young Justice group chat.

Is everyone going to be at the tower this weekend??, Cassie had written.

Bart’s response was almost immediate, 4 sure!!!!!!

Might have some chores in the morning, Conner texted, But I’ll probs be around after 10 or so.

Tim smiled; the four of them had set up a group chat some time ago, just after they all joined the Teen Titans. It was only the four of them in the chat, the last of Young Justice that were still active (hence the name of the chat). There was a larger Teen Titans chat, but it was mostly reserved for scheduling and official Titans business. The Young Justice chat was more for just the four of them to keep in contact during the week.
Might come if my ribs feel better, Tim texted, Took a bad hit last night.

Ouchie, how bad? Bart texted almost seconds after Tim had sent it.

Shit yu good?, Conner wrote.

Bad enough to get benched for a couple days, Tim wrote, Nothing broken, but sure hurts like a mfcker.

Yikes, Bart wrote, along with a string of frowny emojis, Feel better Rob.

Thanks, Tim texted, It’s honestly not the worst I’ve ever had.

Considering what we do, that’s not comforting, Cassie wrote, We’ll try to take it easy this weekend.

Yu want me to bring some of Ma’s cooking to the tower to make you feel better?, Conner offered, Or I could bring it to Gotham.

Thanks, but you know Batman won’t let you in the city, Tim pointed out, No metas.

Yeah well, that’s his problem, Conner wrote.

Tim snorted, You know he could take you out right? He’s Batman.

So? My buddy needs comfort food, Batman can deal, Conner wrote.

Tim felt his chest warm a little. He and the others may have gotten off to a rocky start in the beginning, especially him and Conner, but now he could honestly say they were all some of his best friends.

That’s so sweet of you I think I just got a cavity, Tim wrote.

That’s me~, Conner wrote, and Tim could feel his teasing grin, Sweet as sugar.

Alright you two, save the bromance, Cassie texted, Before you make me barf rainbows.

Lol Cassie’s jealous, Bart wrote, Rob’s getting all of Superboyfriend’s attention.

From there the chat disintegrated into petty name calling and good natured teasing. Tim jumped in with a few witty quips of his own, but eventually he signed off, citing that he was going to take a nap. They said their goodbyes and Tim stowed his phone on his dresser before relaxing onto his bed.

As he was drifting off to sleep, Tim looked out the window. From the angle he was at, he could just see the rooftop where, so many years ago, he’d thought he’d spotted Batman. It was probably a coincidence, Tim had never asked Bruce about it, doubting he’d remember, but sometimes Tim liked to think Batman had been checking in on him. It was a comforting thought, the idea that Bruce had been watching over him even when he hadn’t known he was Batman. With this in mind, Tim drifted off into sleep, comfortable despite the ache in his ribs.

Tim woke up a few hours later with a jolt that jarred his ribs painfully. He almost thought that was what had woken him, but then he realized he could hear yelling from beyond his door. Jack and
Dana were arguing, from the sounds of things, but Tim couldn’t pick out what they were yelling about.

Something glass shattered and suddenly Tim was six years old again, sitting up in bed and listening to his mommy and daddy fighting downstairs. Shutting his eyes tightly, Tim flopped down on the bed and covered his head with a pillow, trying to block out the sounds of them fighting. Why did they always have to fight?

But no, that wasn't right, Jack and Janet had always fought, but Jack and Dana never fought. Dana wasn’t a confrontational person by nature, and was more likely to walk away from a shouting match than engage. Tim pulled the pillow over his head tighter and tried not to think about it too hard. Something else shattered and Tim jolted up, wrenching his ribs painfully.

Tim looked to the door, then looked to the window. He wished he wasn’t benched and had an excuse to leave, so he didn’t have to listen to the yelling and the throwing things around. They were in a townhouse with neighbors, maybe they’d get a noise complaint and they would be forced to calm down. Tim hoped something like that happened, he didn’t want to have to listen to this all night.

There was a thump of something heavy falling, then a door slamming. Tim could hear footsteps stomping around the rest of the house and suddenly felt dread well up in him. Spying his chair tucked away at his desk, Tim quickly got up and wedged it under the doorknob, just like Dick had showed him so many years ago. Tim crawled back into bed just as something thudded on his door, making him jump.

The knob rattled a few times and Tim could hear his father cursing on the other side. He wondered for a minute what to do, if he should open it or stay inside. He was certain his father wouldn't hurt him, but he was drunk and pissed off and Tim didn't want to have to deal with that right now. His stomach swirled with guilt, but he didn't think he had the energy to try and calm Jack down right now.

Jack snarled and cursed at Tim’s door for a few more minutes before angrily stomping off to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. Tim breathed a sigh of relief before crawling back under the covers. His stomach growled at him, but there was no way he was going to venture out right now. He’d just have to wait until morning to get something to eat.

After a few hours, the jittery anxiety had dissipated from Tim’s limbs and he started to relax again. It was probably nothing, Tim decided, just Dana confronting Jack about his recent obsession with Janet’s diaries and Jack getting belligerent because he’d been drinking too much. By the time morning came around, Jack would be sorry and Dana would forgive him and everything would go back to normal. Tim resolved to not think about it for the rest of the night and to just go back to sleep. It would all be better in the morning.

Just as Tim was drifting off, something caught his eye from out the window. Tim turned just in time to see a figure standing on the roof, with two pointed ears and a long black cape billowing in the wind. Tim smiled, the feeling of safety and warmth overcoming him and letting him drop back off to sleep.

When Tim woke the next morning, he could feel the tension in the house. Gingerly, Tim got out of bed and went to his door, listening to the sounds on the other side. He could hear movement, but
there was no yelling or talking at all. Tim put his chair back at his desk and slowly opened the door, walking out into the hall. Nothing seemed amiss at first, but the air was as tense as a plucked bowstring. Tim slowly made his way down the hall.

Jack was nowhere to be seen, but the wreckage from last night was apparent. Glass from empty bottles of alcohol littered the floor, and a stack of boxes had been knocked over, which was probably the cause of the thump. Neither Jack or Dana seemed to be around, so Tim started to pick up the glass and tidy things up.

Tim had managed to get most of the glass when he felt movement behind him. He looked up to see Dana standing near the door, dressed to leave and a rolling suitcase next to her. She noticed Tim and stopped pulling on her coat.

“Oh Tim, I didn't know you were home,” she said, and Tim could see that her eyes were a little red.

“I came home yesterday,” he said, “Did you and Dad have a fight?”

Dana bit her lip and glanced to the hall, “Something like that,” she said, and seemed unsure of her next move. She looked over at Tim, “Hey, you want to come meet my friend Caroline? I’m going to stay with her for a bit while she recovers from a fall.”

The excuse was thin, but Tim could see there was something else that Dana wasn't saying, something she maybe didn't know how to say, “I would prefer not to,” Tim said, “At least not until I get this mess cleaned up, if you can wait.”

Dana glanced towards the hall again, “I don’t think I can kiddo,” she said, “You sure you don’t want to come along?”

Tim regarded Dana, taking in her nervousness and eagerness to leave. He let out a sigh and smiled at her, “It’s okay Dana,” he said, “You can go. I'll be fine.”

Dana’s face pinched, but Tim just continued smiling at her. He didn't blame her for wanting to leave and take some time for herself. She’d kind of been thrust into this whole mess with his dad, so Tim could understand her leaving. Jack had gotten together with Dana so quickly after Janet’s death and the trauma of being kidnapped, and he probably hadn’t had time to process either, and it was only now coming up to the surface. Jack had probably thrown himself into the relationship out of some misguided need to give Tim a mother figure or something, so really it was Tim’s fault she was in this mess. He didn’t blame her for wanting to bail.

Glancing one last time at the hallway, Dana finished putting on her coat and went to the door, “Sorry Tim,” she said softly, then left.

Tim stared after her for a moment, wondering what she meant by that. Sorry she was leaving? Sorry about the mess she made? Sorry for fighting with his dad? Tim mulled over it as he continued cleaning up the mess of glass. He wished now that he’d tried to talk to her a little more, at least to try and understand the situation some more.

Jack woke up a while later, stumbling out of his room in the clothes Tim had seen him in last night. He clutched at his head even as he stomped around. He stopped in the kitchen when he saw Tim there, making some mac and cheese from a box on the stove.

“Hey dad,” Tim said, smiling at him, “Dana went over to her friend’s place.”

Jack stared at Tim for a long time, his gaze so intense Tim might have called it glaring if it weren’t his dad. Tim shifted on his feet, starting to get uncomfortable. He wanted to ask what he’d done, but
he felt that if he opened his mouth, the anxious calm would break and something terrible would happen.

After a few minutes of staring at Tim, Jack went to the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of vodka, taking it back to the newly cleaned living room. Jack never drank vodka straight, so something must have really been bugging him. Tim quickly and quietly finished making his breakfast and left the house as soon as he could. He would be early for school, but at this point he’d rather sit outside in the Gotham damp than spend another minute skirting around Jack. He’d try again this evening when he came home.

That evening and the next morning passed in a similar fashion. Tim tried to figure out what was bothering Jack, only to be brushed off entirely. Jack actually seemed to get more irritated whenever Tim was around, so he tried to keep his distance. He stayed in the house though, just in case. He didn’t really know what to do, if he should call someone or not. Bruce would probably let him stay at the Manor as long as he liked, but it felt embarrassing and silly to admit that he was scared of his own dad.

The only time Tim felt like he wasn’t standing on eggshells was at school, but that couldn’t last forever. He might have gotten away with going over to Ives place for a bit, but apparently his parents had guests over, and Tim didn't want to intrude. Steph had an exam to study for, so that was out too. He considered briefly calling Conner or Bart, but decided against it. He’d see them that weekend, no need to come off clingy.

Still, Tim walked through the door of his own home with a bit of trepidation. Jack’s mood seemed to be getting worse and worse even in the last handful of days, and nothing Tim did was helping. Tim found himself wishing that Jack would take a trip or something, something to get him out of the house and hopefully relax him. At the very least, it would give Tim a breather.

Tim made his way inside and quickly went to his room, not ready to face his father just then. For the first time, Tim found himself wishing they still lived at the old house, with its sprawling halls and rooms, and plenty of places to hide in. It had also been in close proximity to the Manor, and that had always been a comfort to Tim, even long after he’d stopped visiting.

Eventually, Tim had to venture out into the house. He’d finished all his homework, finished reading the book he’d been meaning to finish for weeks, and even played video games on his computer until his eyes hurt. It was after dark, and Tim’s stomach complained at him loudly to feed it. With a sigh, Tim left his room.

Jack was in the kitchen this time, sitting at the island as he went through yet another stack of diaries. Tim was really hungry, so he tried to be as unobtrusive as possible as he went to the fridge to look for something to eat. There wasn’t really anything aside from sauces and leftovers that had long past the point where it was safe to eat them. Tim shut the fridge and glanced back at his father.

“Dad?” he asked cautiously, “We need to get groceries soon,” he said.

Jack looked up from his work, “Right,” he grunted, “Whatever.”

Tim’s stomach growled and he absently rubbed it, “Can I order in tonight?” he asked. It would be the fifth night in a row, but it was better than starving.
Jack grunted and waved a hand vaguely at him, “I don’t care what you do.”

Tim felt a hot surge of anger bubble up, “Oh sure, because why should now be any different,” he grumbled resentfully, turning away and making for the hallway.

Tim heard his father move, but he was too distracted by his empty stomach and his still aching ribs to react to it. He turned just slightly enough to see the bottle just before it shattered against his temple.

Tim dropped to the ground, dazed from the pain in his head and the sharp smell of whiskey in his nose. He blinked a few times, trying to clear his eyes of the alcohol. Something dropped down onto his hands, the only thing he could see clearly, mixing with the alcohol that was soaking him. Tim’s ears were ringing, but he could hear his father yelling at him, standing above Tim.

“—talk to me like that!” Jack howled, “I’m the man of this house! I won’t be disrespected in my own house!”

“Dad,” Tim croaked, trying to get his feet under him. He couldn’t make up or down of anything.

“Don’t call me that!” Jack screamed, reaching out and grabbing a fistful of Tim’s hair and wrenching his head backwards. Tim gasped in pain, but he saw out of the corner of his eye Jack raise the broken bottle again.

Tim reacted just in time, his Robin training kicking in. He twisted and bucked in Jack’s grip, wrenching his hair, but getting out of the hold. Tim finished the movement by catching Jack’s hand and disarming him of the bottle, yanking his hand around so he dropped it. Jack yelped as his wrist strained and Tim backed off, panting hard.

“You little shit!” Jack snarled, charging Tim.

Tim scrambled backwards and darted away faster than Jack could catch him. He ran to his room and slammed the door, wedging it shut with the chair just as Jack crashed into it. He twisted the knob and pounded on the door ineffectually, but Tim still backed up to the farthest wall to get away from the door.

“Open this door!” Jack bellowed, “Open up this door and get the hell out of my house!”

Tim’s heart pounded as he paced around his room, trying to make sense of what just happened. Jack continued to howl at his door, making it shake on its hinges. Tim realized one of his eyes wouldn’t open, that something hot and wet was running down his face. When he put his fingers to where the bottle hit, his fingertips came back bloody.

I have to get out, Tim thought frantically. He went to the window and opened it. He wished he had his bag with him, or his uniform, but he’d left his bag in the kitchen and his uniform was at the Manor.

The Manor, Tim thought, If I go there, Bruce and Alfred can help. Plan in mind, Tim crawled out of the window and climbed up towards the roof. It was slower going than usual, since he couldn’t seem to open his eye and his head was still pounding from the blow. He finally made it to the roof and started running over the familiar rooftops of Gotham, leaving his father behind to rage against a door to an empty room.

Tim made his way towards the Manor slowly, conscious of the fact that he might be concussed and that he was still bleeding. As he picked his way across the rooftops, he tried to mull over what had just happened.
What *had* just happened?

Tim’s father had just attacked him with a half empty bottle of whiskey, all over Tim mouthing off a little. Sure, Tim probably shouldn’t have tested Jack’s temper like that, but Jack had never *attacked* him before. Jack’s usual method of punishment was taking something of Tim’s for a while to teach him a lesson. Tim could recall several times where he’d gotten his camera, his TV, his computer taken away over something relatively minor, only for Jack to forget that he’d taken it while he was away on a trip. Tim had usually just taken them back after a while, after he was sure Jack had forgotten about it.

This was much different.

Tim hopped over a gap to the next roof and botched the landing. He went sprawling and groaned as he hit the cement, his head threatening to spin right off his shoulders. Tim hauled himself up, but he was swaying so bad that he stumbled right over and landed on his butt. Taking a few deep breaths to try and calm himself down, Tim scooted backwards until he hit the edge of the concrete wall around the roof.

Resting his back against the wall, Tim tilted his head up and tried to make sense of what had become of his life. He squeezed his eyes shut (the one that wasn't already swollen shut), and felt the tears begin to stream down his face. His ribs ached as he began to sob, but once he started, he couldn’t seem to stop.

Chapter End Notes

So this is a chapter that I’ve known was coming since the start, and a lot has been building to this. This chapter ended up a little shorter, but I didn't think there was anything I could do to extend it.

I do want to say that, while I understand Dana’s behaviour, I don’t really condone it. Not her leaving, she was very smart to do that, but leaving Tim in a situation she knows is dangerous. Bruce and Alfred suspect that there's something wrong, but they don't know for sure. Dana on the other hand, has a more first hand awareness of the situation. She tried here to get Tim to come along, but really she should have called the police or Social Services or something. Kids, no matter how mature, cannot take care of themselves.
Part II Chapter iv: Acknowledgement

Chapter Notes

I'm surprised I got this done so damn fast. Like shit. Especially since I stopped to teach myself how to knit halfway through writing this. Damn.

No contest this chapter since the last chapter's contest is still active. To reiterate, find the famous line of dialogue and give me the short story and the author it belongs to. Let me know in the comments what it is and you'll win a 1k fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim wasn't sure how long he stayed curled up on the roof, crying his eyes out, but he became aware of another presence on the roof almost the instant it landed. He tensed and looked up, but he couldn't make himself move into a defensive position.

A black figure melted out of the shadows, “Are you alright kid?” came a feminine voice, and Catwoman stepped close enough for Tim to see her.

Tim relaxed; he had a hard time keeping track of where they were at with Catwoman, whether they considered her and ally or an enemy, but he was pretty sure that right now they were on good terms. Selina knew about their identities at least, and hadn’t ratted them out or sold the information, so that was something.

“Robin? Is that you?” Selina asked, stepping even closer, “What are you doing out here without your cape?”

Tim sat up a little straighter and was about to tell her what had happened (or a version of it), when he heard her sharp intake of breath, “Who did that to you?”

Tim brought his hand up to his eye that was still swollen shut. He could feel the dried blood on his face and wondered what he looked like right now. Selina crouched down in front of him and looked straight into his eyes, her intense gaze pushing the will to lie right out of him. Tim hung his head a little.

“My dad,” he said softly, almost hoping she wouldn’t hear.

Selina took a deep breath and stood up, “Come on,” she said, “I’ve got a place nearby. We’ll get you cleaned up.”

Tim looked up at her, a little startled. He knew they were on good terms, but he didn't think that she would offer her own place up for him to go to. Selina held out her hand for him to take, and Tim noticed something in her eyes, something sad and far away when she looked at him. He took her hand and let her pull him up. Placing her hand on his shoulder, Selina led him away and over the roofs, moving silently through the night.

They arrived at a rooftop and Selina led him down a fire escape to a window. Quickly picking the lock, Selina led him inside and instructed him to sit on the couch while she went off to the kitchen.

“This is your place?” Tim asked, looking around. It was a little smaller than what he expected a
world class thief to live in.

“It’s a safe house mostly,” Selina said, pulling off her goggles and hood and working on her gloves, “I have a couple across the city just in case I need to hide out for a while.”

Tim nodded, “Smart,” he said. He was pretty sure Batman had a few of those around, but they rarely needed them.

Selina came back to the couch with a first aid kit. She sat down on the coffee table in front of Tim and gently reached out to tilt his head to get a better look at his face. She sniffed a little, “Your dad’s a whiskey fan, hm?”

Tim pressed his lips together, but he knew it was useless. He absolutely reeked of expensive alcohol, “Yeah. He likes the nice kinds.”

Selina let out a hum and opened the kit, taking out some tweezers, “You’re lucky you know.”

“Lucky?” Tim asked.


Gently, Selina brushed back Tim’s matted bangs to get a better look at the wound. Tim could see that far away, sad look in her eyes again, only this time he was close enough to see a shade of anger underneath it. He wondered what was going through her head at that moment.

Selina brought the tweezers in and pulled something out from just above Tim’s eyebrow. Tim winced, but didn’t flinch away. Selina dropped the shard of glass onto a little tray she’d taken out of the kit and went back to pull another piece out.

“Looks like you took in in the eyebrow mostly,” Selina said, “Lucky again. One of the thickest parts of the skull is the brow ridge.”

“I really don’t feel all that lucky,” Tim said, feeling the warm blood flowing down his face again as the glass was removed.

Selina hummed, “Your dad ever try to get at you before?” she asked.

“No,” Tim said, “This was the first time this has ever happened.”

“You know what set him off?” Selina asked, giving the wound another once over before setting the tweezers down. Tim counted nine shards of glass.

Tim didn’t answer for a while as Selina cleaned the wound, flushing it with saline to get out any smaller shards of glass that might be stuck. She gently dabbed the area with a numbing gel before preparing a set of sutures.

“It was my fault,” Tim said quietly, “I knew he was in a shitty mood and I still mouthed off at him. It was stupid of me.”

Selina stilled, looking back at Tim with that look in her eyes again. She set down the needle and sutures and gently took Tim’s face in both of her hands, her thumbs stroking along his cheeks in an almost loving manner.

“Whathever’s in your head right now about all this being your fault,” she said, and her voice was soft
in volume but firm in tone, “Forget it. It’s not your fault. It’s *never* your fault when your parent hurts you. They are the parent and you are the child. It’s their responsibility to look after you, not the other way around.”

Tim looked at her, and to his shame, he felt more tears roll down his cheeks. He closed his eyes and tried to look away, but Selina held him in place, gently rubbing away the tears. Tim sniffled and finally relaxed into the touch. How long had it been since he’d been treated so gently by an older woman? Had his mother ever comforted him like this?

“I just,” Tim choked, “I Just don't know what happened,” he said, “Everything was fine until a few weeks ago and then he just went off the rails.”

“Whatever it was, it wasn’t your fault,” Selina said, “Trust me, it’s not your fault.”

Tim sniffed and nodded, trying to calm down. Selina wiped his tears away again and retracted her hands to pick up the needle and sutures, “This is going to pinch a bit,” she warned.

Tim nodded and let Selina work, trying not to flinch too hard as the needle pierced his skin. The numbing gel had done a good job, but he could still feel it a little. Selina worked silently, stitching up the cuts as quickly as she could and then taping a bandage over the area when she finished.

Selina dropped the used needle into the tray with the bloody glass shards and stood, “You want something to drink?” she offered, walking off to the kitchen again, “I’ve got some soda or tea I think. There’s also always water.”

“I’m alright,” Tim said, though his throat did feel a little dry.

“Water it is,” Selina said, “I think there are some crackers in the pantry, but there’s not a lot of food here. Might be some canned soup or something.”

“You don’t have to,” Tim said, “You’ve already done more than enough.”

Selina stared at him from the kitchen and shook her head. She pulled a can of mushroom soup out of the pantry and checked the label, then set about preparing it on the stove. She made a detour to bring Tim a glass of water and an ice pack.

“For the swelling,” she said, “Your eye should be fine, but you’ll need to get it checked anyway.”

Tim took the items, “Thanks,” he said, holding the ice pack to his head and sipping the water.

Selina nodded and headed back to the kitchen, “So what now bird?” she called as she stirred the soup, “Who do you want me to call?”

Tim stalled answering for a moment, sipping his water. He didn’t really want to drag Bruce into his problems, but he didn’t really have anywhere else to go at this point. Ives would insist on calling the police and Steph would just call Bruce anyway, regardless of what he asked her.

“Bruce I guess,” Tim said. He had been heading there anyway.

Selina nodded, “Good choice,” she said. She dished out a portion of soup into a bowl and crumbled a few crackers into it. She set it on the coffee table in front of Tim and removed the tray, “Eat as much as you can, I’ll call the big bad Bat to come get you.”

Tim snorted, but picked up the bowl, “I don't think I’ll ever get you and Bruce’s relationship,” he said.
“You’ll understand when your older,” Selina chided, but she was grinning at him.

Tim smiled back and felt a little lighter. He took a few bites of soup as Selina picked up the phone. He was still uncertain about what had happened, or what was going to happen next, but at least he felt a little less alone.

Alfred glanced up as the phone rang. It was too late to be a social call, and Batman was already out patrolling the city. It was the house line, so it was most likely not Bat related at all. Curious, Alfred picked up the phone.

“Wayne Residence, how may I help you?” he said crisply into the receiver.

“Hello Pennyworth,” Selina’s voice drifted through, “Is Bruce in?”

“I’m afraid not Miss Kyle,” Alfred said, wondering what she was doing calling the house and not just finding Bruce directly, “Is there something you’d like me to pass on to him?”

“Yes, you can tell him he needs to come get his bird,” Selina said, and despite her playful words, her tone was serious.

Alfred felt his spine stiffen a little, “If you’ve done something to that boy, Miss Kyle.”

Selina snorted over the phone, “If by ‘done something’ you mean ‘stitched his face back together’, then by all means, finish that threat,” she said, “He’s sitting on my couch eating soup if you want to talk to him.”

“Is he alright?” Alfred asked. Had Tim gone out as Robin without telling anyone?

There was a pause over the phone, “His father attacked him with a whiskey bottle,” she said flatly, “At least a half full bottle, if the smell on him is anything to go by.”

“Dear Lord in heaven,” Alfred said, “What happened?”

“You’ll have to ask him that. I doubt he’ll tell me,” Selina said, “Tell tall dark and broody to come get his bird and get him somewhere safe.”

“I will, thank you Miss Kyle,” Alfred said. Selina gave him the address and then they hung up.

Alfred quickly made his way down to the Cave to radio in to the Batmobile.

“Agent A,” Batman greeted, “Something wrong?”

“I’ve just received a call from Catwoman sir,” Alfred said.

“What did she want?” Batman asked, sounding almost amused.

“She says she has Master Tim with her at a safe house,” Alfred said, “Apparently Mr. Drake attacked him with a whiskey bottle sir.”

There was a screech of tires over the comm, “What?” Batman snarled, and Alfred felt sorry for whatever criminals Batman encountered when he was in a mood like this.
He did not feel sorry for Jack Drake though. That man deserved whatever came to him.

Alfred relayed the information he’d been given by Selina, “She said that Master Tim seems alright for now, but I’d hurry sir.”

From the ambient roar of the engine and the squeal of tires over the comm, ‘hurrying’ would be an understatement, “I’m on my way. Batman out,” he said, probably through gritted teeth, then hung up. Alfred leaned back in the chair, silently listing all the reasons he was an idiot for not calling Social Services years ago when he found a scared little boy behind his bins in the dead of night.

Bruce tore through the streets of Gotham, leaving the Batmobile on the loudest setting possible. There were several settings that either muffled or amplified the engine noises in the Batmobile, depending on if he wanted to follow someone stealthily, or if he wanted to scare the shit out of someone. Right now, he wanted the city to part like the Red Sea for him so he could get to where he needed to be as soon as possible. He noticed several cars swerve out of his way as he sped through the streets. He was certain he’d seen Calendar Man out of costume scrambling up a fire escape, terror in his eyes.

Good, Bruce was looking to send someone scrambling for cover tonight at least.

He arrived at the address Alfred had given him and hopped out. It was a little apartment complex, on of those older ones at one point had been a large townhouse, but had been converted into apartments. Bruce went around to find the window of the right apartment and climbed up the side of the building. What shape would Tim be in when he found him? Bruce’s heart pounded as he thought of all the ways someone could be hurt with a bottle, broken or intact.

Bruce reached the right window and peered in; he nearly melted with relief when he saw Tim, sitting up and looking completely coherent on the couch, talking with Selina. They both looked up as his shadow covered the window, and Bruce could see the bruise already spreading from under the bandaged taped to the side of Tim’s head. Selina got up and opened the window to let him in.

“I have a door you know. All you had to do was knock,” she said, standing back to let him through.

“Tim, are you okay?” Bruce asked, immediately going over to Tim and gently tilting his head so he could get a better look at the injury.

“I’m alright,” Tim said, letting Bruce handle him, “Selina fixed me up.”

Bruce glance at Selina, who was already moving through her apartment, “Thank you, Selina,” he said.

Selina waved her hand vaguely, “You can owe me for the medical supplies,” she said, “Anyway, you better get your bird somewhere safe where you can growl and breathe fire at anyone who comes near.”

*I might just do exactly that*, Bruce thought. He felt absolutely sick with anger; anger at Jack for doing this, and anger at himself for not preventing this.

“Come on Tim, I’m taking you back to the Cave,” Bruce said, leaving no room for arguing. Tim nodded and got up, and Bruce could see that he was moving a little slow. Concussion or just sore?
Maybe he was just emotionally drained and lethargic.

“Take the stairs this time,” Selina said, “No need to risk slipping on the fire escape.”

“We came in from the window,” Tim pointed out.

“We traveled by roof. He came by car,” Selina countered, “You could hear that thing from across the city.”

Tim chuckled and Selina smiled at him; Bruce felt himself relax a little more. He wondered when the two of them had started getting along so well. Tim moved towards the door and Bruce followed, but Selina stopped him with a hand on his elbow.

“The man who did this, Tim’s father,” she looked up at him seriously, “You’re going after him, right?”

“Yes,” Bruce answered, “He’s not getting away with this.”

Selina let out a long breath, “Good,” she said, “Let me know if I can help.”

Bruce nodded and covered her hand with his. He knew her history, not all of it, but enough to know how seeing Tim like this might affect her, “Thank you Selina,” he said softly.

Selina smiled at him, but he could still see the haunted look in her eyes, “Get that kid safe, okay?” she said, “He’s sweet, that one. You always seem to find the good ones.”

Bruce’s mouth twitched, “This one found me,” he said, “Goodnight Selina.”

Bruce gave her hand one last squeeze before heading down the stairs. Tim was waiting for him near the back door, shoulders slumped and looking exhausted. Bruce put his arm around Tim’s shoulder and led him outside to where he’d parked the Batmobile. He waited until Tim was properly strapped in and then drove off, this time at a much calmer speed and with the engine on a quieter setting.

Tim slumped over in his seat and Bruce tried to keep his eyes on the road, though all he wanted to do was check over every inch of Tim for injuries. Bruce’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel, thinking about Jack Drake and all the ways he wanted to tell the bastard off. What the hell was wrong with him, if he thought that striking at his own son with a whiskey bottle was okay? Bruce was already mentally calculating the best lawyers in the city for custody cases.

 Mostly, Bruce was just angry . How could he have let this happen? He was Batman for crying out loud! How the hell was he supposed to keep the city safe if he couldn't even keep his partner safe from his own father? Bruce gritted his teeth, wishing he’d just called the police like his instincts had been telling him to do for months. He should have called the police that night nine years ago.

They arrived at the Cave, Alfred waiting anxiously for them. Bruce steered Tim towards the medical bay, even when Tim insisted that he was fine, he just wanted to change and get some sleep. Once Tim was sitting on an exam table, Bruce pulled back the cowl and looked at Tim fully for the first time.

“What happened?” he demanded, willing his hands not to shake.

Tim bit his lips and looked away, “It was nothing,”

Bruce bit back a sharp retort, “This doesn’t look like ‘nothing’ to me Tim. What happened?”
Tim hunched in on himself, wrapping his arms around his chest and squeezing, trying to make himself smaller. Bruce took a deep breath and sat down next to Tim on the table.

“Tim, I know you're upset right now, but you have to tell us what happened,” he said softly, laying a gentle hand on Tim’s shoulder, “Let us help you.”

Tim looked up at Bruce, eyes wide and scared and Bruce’s heart broke for him. Tim’s face crumpled and he leaned into Bruce’s side, his entire body trembling as he restrained tears. Bruce wrapped his arm around him fully and pulled him close, letting him sob against his chest for a while.

“I don't know what happened,” Tim said in a watery voice, “He just went crazy.”

“Walk me through it,” Bruce said, rubbing Tim’s back. Going through the different steps out loud could help on an investigation, so hopefully the familiarity would put Tim at ease.

Tim let out a long breath, “I came into the kitchen and he was sitting there with another diary. He was drinking.” Tim seemed to calm a little, treating it more like a case and distancing himself, “I went to the fridge, but there was no food.”

Tim went on to explain the entire scene right up until Selina had found him on the roof. Bruce paid close attention, trying to figure out the cause of all this mess.

“And he’s never been violent with you before?” Bruce asked.

Tim shook his head, “Never, not once.”

“Even when you were younger?” Bruce tried.

Tim tensed and bit his lip, “No, he wasn’t,” he said, but there was obviously something else there.

“Tim?” Bruce prompted, hoping Tim would elaborate.

Tim shifted and wouldn't look at Bruce, though he stayed pressed close to him. After a while he sagged against Bruce with a sigh and closed his eyes, “When I was little,” he said, so quiet Bruce almost didn't hear him at first, “My mom … she beat me with a belt once, and I think Dad just stood there and watched.”

“With a belt?” Bruce asked horrified, “When was this?”

“The last day I saw you,” Tim said, “I came home that day and they were already home and Mom got really mad for some reason and beat me with a belt. Then I got sent to camp.”

Bruce fought down a growl, “And your father just watched?”

“I don't remember that well,” Tim said, “I think so. He knew about it, he took me to bed after.”

Bruce took a few deep breaths to calm down, “Alright,” he said, “Thank you Tim, I’m proud of you for telling me.”

Tim sniffed a little and nodded into Bruce’s collar. Bruce held Tim close and stroked his hair, rocking him gently to try and soothe him. Alfred waited patiently close by, ready to examine Tim’s head.

After a few minutes, Tim finally sat up, “I’m fine,” he said, wiping his eyes quickly, “I’m going to be okay.”
Bruce let out a hum and let Tim go, letting Alfred come in and start inspecting Tim. He stood up and took a deep breath of his own, trying to come up with a plan in his head.

“Miss Kyle did a fair job of your stitches,” Alfred said, “You don't seem to have a concussion either.”

“I don't feel dizzy at all,” Tim said, “Just exhausted.”

“Well, to be safe, why don't you stay awake for another hour or so?” Alfred said, shining a light into Tim’s eyes to check the dilation, “Just to be perfectly certain.”

“I can manage that,” Tim said, offering a tired smile.

“Do you think you’ll have the energy to talk to the police tonight?” Bruce asked.

Tim looked up, “The police?” he asked.

Bruce pressed his lips together, “Tim, we need to call the police,” he said, “This isn’t up for debate.”

“But—!” Tim started to protest.

“Tim,” Bruce said firmly, “Your father attacked you with a whiskey bottle. If you didn’t have any training, or if you’d been just a little slower, you might not be here right now. We’re calling the police.”

Tim looked like he wanted to protest more, but Bruce gave him a stern look, leaving no room for argument. Tim hung his head, “I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“My lad, you are not the cause of trouble here,” Alfred said gently, putting away his examination tools, “The fault rests squarely on your father’s shoulders, not yours.”

“Well I must have done something,” Tim said, “People don’t just randomly go nuts like that. He must have had some reason.”

“And we’ll find out what that reason is,” Bruce said, “But I guarantee that it in no way is your fault.”

Tim sighed, “Fine,” he said, though he didn't sound convinced (just how bad had Jack been treating this poor boy?), “Can we call the police tomorrow though? I’m too tired to talk to anyone else.”

Bruce nodded, “Alright, but we are calling them. And Social Services too. I’m not letting you stay in Jack’s custody if there’s even the slightest chance he might hurt you again.”

Tim made a disapproving noise, but didn't say anything else. Bruce took that as acquiescence and turned to go back to the computer. He was going to dig up anything he could on Jack Drake and figure out what the hell was going on if it was the last thing he did.

As he went to the computer, Bruce passed by Jason’s monument, and he felt a pang of guilt almost overcome him completely. He’d vowed never to let another Robin get hurt, and here he was, almost failing a second time. If Tim had been a second slower, if Jack had been just a little faster, Tim could have much worse than a coupe stitches in his head. The kind of damage a broken whiskey bottle could do didn't bear thinking about right now.

I’m sorry Jason, Bruce thought, I nearly failed you a second time.

Shaking off the guilt and shame, Bruce sat down at the computer and pulled up Jack Drake’s file. He was going to pull out every piece of dirt up on this wretch of a man if it was the last thing he did.
Jack grumbled and threw another diary to the side, “Useless,” he hissed. He must have gone through a hundred of them by now, but he still had no clue who the man was. Janet had kept a detailed record of every person she’d ever met, but there was no mention anywhere of whoever it was that conceived Tim with her.

If Jack could just find the right diary, he was certain he would find the name. If he could find the diary from the year Tim was conceived, he would find the name, he was sure of it. Janet might have never mentioned the name again, but it would for certain be in the day she met him. Jack went to the box and started shifting through it again, wishing he still had more to drink.

Jack glanced to the hall, where Tim was still locked in his room. The mess of glass on the carpet was still there, along with a dried stain of what had been the last of the alcohol in the house. He could probably run to the store if he wanted, but he was so close to finding something in the diaries, he was certain of it.

Pulling out another diary, Jack checked the year and stilled. It was dated sixteen years ago, right around the time Tim would have been conceived. This was it! Jack let out a triumphant cry and started pouring over the diary, trying to find evidence of an affair, or a fling, or something.

Jack flipped through the diary until he hit November, when they’d been in Jaipur. Janet detailed the fight they’d had, her vow to finally leave him, leaving her wedding band on the dresser, walking out, and then … nothing. The next page seemed to jump to the middle of a new entry, with no explanation.

Jack blinked and flipped through the diary again, trying to make sense of it. She’d torn out the pages, Jack realised; Janet had gone back to her diaries at some point and torn out the pages concerning who the father was. Hastily, Jack flipped through the rest of the diary to see if she mentioned the name again. She must have known that the baby wasn't his when she found out she was pregnant, so she must have mentioned the name again. Jack came to several weeks later and saw that more pages had been ripped out.

“You bitch!” Jack shouted, throwing the diary across the room. All the searching, and it had all been for nothing. Jack still had no idea who the father was, and he’d wasted weeks of searching for it all to be for nothing. What else could he do, test Tim against every man that had been in Jaipur that day? Even if Jack had all the money in the world he wouldn't be able to accomplish that.

Jack slumped down on the couch and put his face in his hands, wishing for all the world he’d never found out about Tim not being his. He could have gone on, never knowing that the boy he was raising wasn't his own. It would have been better for everyone; he could have kept believing he had a son and Tim wouldn't have felt like this strange imposter every time Jack looked at him. He felt like the stupidest man in the world, like a cuckoo bird who raised a chick that wasn't it's own, leaving any real chicks to starve and die. The divorce papers from Dana had been filed that morning, which he’d found in his mailbox while Tim had been at school. Jack had nothing now, not even the hope of finding answers.

Jack sat there for some time, breathing deeply and trying not to feel the oncoming hangover. He needed to sleep it off or find another bottle of something. He didn't care what at this point, so long as he could numb the pain and not have to think about how he’d taken Tim into his arms, some strangers child, and treated him like his own. And the bitch knew the whole time! Janet must have...
known! Otherwise she wouldn't have gone to such lengths to conceal the name.

Groaning, Jack stood up, wobbling on his feet a little, and decided he was going out. He needed another bottle of something to drown himself in. He crossed over to where he’d left his keys, having to navigate around several boxes of Janet’s things. He bumped into a stack and knocked it over, scattering old junk all over the floor.

Cursing, Jack shoved it aside with his foot, trying to cross the mess. He stubbed his toe against a heavy photo album. Cursing, Jack picked up the album, intent on shredding it. It was an old family album, containing photos of Janet’s father’s family, as well as a lot of childhood photos of herself. She’d hated this album and shoved it away, hardly ever looking at it.

“Should have left you with your father,” Jack grumbled, “Maybe he could have beaten some sense into you.”

Jack was about to toss the album away when he noticed something sticking out of one of the pockets at the back. It wasn’t a photo, but the corner of an envelope, with something inside. Curious, Jack pulled it out; it was a letter of some kind, though it looked like it had been crumpled and flattened and crumpled again several times. There were multiple stamps on the envelope, pasted over each other like the letter had been held onto for several years, ready to be sent with updated postage. The last stamp was a decade out of date. The address on the front of the envelope was weirdly familiar.

Heart pounding, Jack tore open the envelope, hardly daring to think that this might be it. Jack pulled the letter out, noticing that it was in even worse shape than the envelope. One corner looked like it had been singed and then pasted over with new paper, like Janet had started to burn it and then changed her mind. Much of the text was crossed out in places, which was unlike Janet. Her neat script usually flowed smoothly without interruption. This looked like she’d written it with shaking hands, like she was drunk or nervous.

Jack rubbed his eyes, trying to clear them of the influence of alcohol, and read the first line. As his brain comprehended the words, he felt rage boil inside of him. He should have known, he should have known. It took all of his strength not to crush the letter in his hands, not to tear it to pieces. No, he’d need it when he went to confront the bastard. Jack stormed to his room, trying to remember the combination to his lock box where he kept his pistol. He glanced down at the letter again and seethed as he read the first lines.

Dear Bruce Wayne,

I am writing to tell you that you have a son. His name is Timothy Drake.

Chapter End Notes

Catmom to the rescue! I used Selina here because her father was also abusive to her, so I figured she’d be a sympathetic ear for Tim right now. On her knowing who the Bats are, I can hardly keep the canon straight with these guys, I can never remember when she knows or how she knows or what, so I’m just going to say that she knows and is keeping it to herself at this point.

We’ve got two or three more chapters of Part II left, and then we're going to move on to the last part of the story. Hang tight guys! Shit's getting real.
Part II Chapter v: Forsaken

Chapter Notes

I finished this in a bit of a rush, so apologies for any mistakes you find. I'll try to come back and fix them later. I have some stuff to say about this chapter, but I'll save it for the end notes.

WIN A FIC!! Y'all know the drill now, so I'll get right to it. Guess the literary reference and win a free 1k fic from me! Since the contest from chapter 10 is still open (c'mon guys, really?), I'm going to give you a hint; Firefighter. That should be enough to get y'all lazy butts guessing. For chapter 10, I'll also give a hint (or just give it away): The short story the reference if from is by the same author who wrote Moby Dick.

After another hour or so of observation, Tim was cleared to go upstairs and get some sleep. Tim all but dragged himself upstairs, looking like he hadn't slept in weeks. Bruce was tempted to follow him and keep watch over him until he fell asleep, but he settled with staying at home for now. Gotham seemed relatively quiet tonight, so he didn't feel too guilty. He did let Oracle know that he wouldn't be out for the rest of the night, though he dodged her line of questions as to why. She could probably find out enough on her own if she looked hard enough for answers, but she seemed to sense the sensitivity of the situation and left it alone.

Bruce changed out of his suit, but stayed at the computer, trying in vain to dig up anything incriminating on Jack. As he'd found in earlier investigations, there was nothing criminal about Jack Drake until now. He managed to dig up one arrest when Jack was sixteen for being drunk and disorderly, but other than that, there was nothing.

Remembering what Tim mentioned about Jack and Dana having a string of appointments some weeks back, Bruce tried to dig up what he could about them. To his surprise, he found that they were all with doctors and fertility specialists (he recalled something about Jack and Dana wanted to have a baby, but he hadn't really been that interested in the information). When Bruce hacked into Jack and Dana's test results, he was shocked with what he found.

"Jack has Klinefelter's Syndrome," he muttered to himself in almost astonishment, reading over the test again just to make sure.

Alfred came up next to him with a mug of coffee. "Are you certain?" he asked.

Bruce grimaced and searched through the tests from the other doctors. They all said the same thing. "Fairly certain," he said through gritted teeth.

Alfred frowned at the screen. "He can't be Timothy's father," he said softly.

Bruce ran a hand through his hair. "It doesn't seem likely," he said.

Alfred set the mug of coffee down at Bruce's elbow. "It could certainly explain Jack's change in attitude towards Master Tim. The timeline of these tests and Master Tim reporting a change in his behaviour matches up."
Bruce stared at the screen and tried to put a few different strings of thought together. Jack finding out that Tim wasn’t his biological son fit with what Tim had told him of the situation. Jack, from what Bruce knew about him, was a man of principle, and finding out that the child he thought was his actually wasn’t would cause him great grief. The grief had manifested as anger, and since the real target of anger, presumably Janet for being adulterous, was gone, he’d shifted the blame onto Tim. That anger had turned into obsession, which was then exacerbated by prolonged consumption of alcohol, finally turning into violence. Bruce hated him for it, but that didn’t mean he didn’t understand.

“If we sue for custody, I don’t think Jack will fight us that much,” Bruce said, “Knowing Tim isn’t his biological son.”

“How dreadful,” Alfred said, “That poor boy has no idea, does he?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Bruce said, wincing as he thought what this might do to Tim. He’d been spooked by Jack tonight, but that didn’t mean he didn’t still love his father. Learning this would shake him to his core.

“What do we tell him?” Alfred asked.

Bruce sighed, “Nothing yet,” he said, “Not until we talk to the police. Once they have our statement, they’ll go to Jack and get what they can from him. After that, there will be an investigation and the information will come to light.”

Alfred pressed his lips together. “If that’s what you think is best sir,” he said.

“We can’t compromise Tim’s statement to the police. He has to be honest,” Bruce explained, “If he knows that Jack isn’t his father, he might unconsciously change his statement and potentially compromise Jack’s arrest. We’ll tell him when he’s safe from Jack.”

Alfred gave a short sigh, clearly unhappy, but there was nothing else to be done. Bruce knew he came off as callous, but he had to do what was best. News like this would devastate Tim, and Bruce had to be sure that his testimony was authentic if he wanted to make sure Jack Drake got put away for child abuse.

Bruce switched the computer off and got up. “I’m going upstairs,” he announced. He wasn’t going to sleep tonight, but he could at least rest his eyes a little. Plus he wanted to check on Tim.

Alfred nodded and followed Bruce, stopping only to shut the lights off for the Cave. He glanced back at the computer one last time. “I wonder who his real father is,” he mused aloud.

“Does it matter?” Bruce asked.

Alfred glanced at Bruce, something soft in his eyes, “I suppose it doesn’t, no.”

Satisfied, Bruce continued upstairs and went to his study. He thought of his own father, and of Alfred and Dick and Jason. He knew better than to think family ties had to be necessitated by blood. Sheila Haywood had been Jason’s biological mother, and look what she’d done.

Once in his study, Bruce went to his desk and started searching through it. Somewhere he still had the card of the social worker who helped him adopt Dick and Jason, Clarisse McClellan. Bruce liked working with her, for all she was a little on the exuberant side, and he knew she would treat this case with the utmost professionalism as well as the most genuine sincerity. If anyone could get Tim out of Jack Drake’s custody, she could.
It was much too early to call her office, but he knew she checked her email first thing when she woke up, so he wrote a quick email to her letting her know that he needed her services. He also let Lucius know by email that he’d be needing his legal team as well. He was going to wrest Tim from Jack’s grip if he had to do it by force.

Once he’d finished writing his emails, Bruce got up and crept to the bedroom where Tim was already asleep. He silently opened the door and peered inside, watching Tim’s chest rise and fall as he slept, hopefully soundly. Bruce shut the door and crept away; he’d check on him again later.

Alfred was just going to get changed for bed when the doorbell rang, “What the bloody hell is it now?” he grumbled, pulling his suit jacket back on. He quickly made his way to the door and opened it.

“How may I—ah,” Alfred stopped when he saw who was behind the door, “Mr. Drake,” he said, putting as much vitriol as he could into the words.

Jack Drake stood at the door, looking a little wild and with slightly crazed eyes. When he grinned it looked more like a sneer. “Hi Alfred. That’s your name right? Have I recalled it right from the old days?” he asked, “We used to be neighbors remember? Can I come in?”

“I should think not,” Alfred scoffed, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave this property before I call the police.”

The ‘smile’ turned more fully into a snarl and Jack stepped forward. “Listen, I really need to speak to your employer,” he growled, “It’s important that I talk to him.”

“Leave at once,” Alfred ordered. He went to shut the door in Jack’s face, but Jack grabbed the door and wrenched it open. He pulled a gun from his belt and aimed it squarely at Alfred’s face.

“Take me to see Bruce Wayne right now, or I swear I’ll shoot,” Jack hissed.

Alfred glared at Jack and debated whether or not to just incapacitate Jack where he stood. Despite having been a butler for nearly forty years, his training with the Secret Service had never left him, and he could have easily disarmed Jack (and put him in the hospital while he was at it). However, he could see the tremor in Jack’s hands; he was jumpy and nervous, incredibly likely to shoot. Alfred had just finished waxing the floors by the door, and he didn’t look forward to having to repair a bullet hole.

“This way, Mr. Drake,” Alfred said, keeping his calm, even though he felt like ripping into Jack. He led the man through the halls and to the study, all the while completely aware of the gun aimed at his back.

Alfred brought them to the study where Bruce was most likely already going over plans to adopt Tim (or something along those lines). “Sir, Mr. Drake is here to see you,” he said smoothly, though the contempt in his voice was obvious.

Bruce looked up, and if he was startled by Jack’s appearance, he showed it for only a second. “I see,” he said.

Jack shoved past Alfred, nearly knocking him over in his haste to get into the study and face Bruce.
“Did you know?” he asked through gritted teeth.

Bruce eyed the gun in Jack’s shaking hand. “Why don’t you put the gun away and we can talk?” he suggested.

“You’ll talk right now, damn it!” Jack shouted, “Did you know!?”

Bruce pressed his lips together, “Mr. Drake, please put the gun down.”

Jack growled and Alfred reacted fast; grabbing Jack’s wrist, he twisted to the point of hearing bones creak. Jack yelped, squeezing his hand reflexively around the pistol. The shot was deafening, but thanks to Alfred’s quick thinking, the bullet sailed harmlessly through the window, shattering the pane but not doing much else. Alfred twisted harder, feeling viciously vindicated when he felt something give in Jack’s wrist. Jack cried out again and dropped the gun, which Alfred kicked away. He held Jack for another minute, considering twisting fully and popping the man’s shoulder out of the socket, but instead decided to drop him.

Bruce sighed and got up, coming around his desk to face Jack more directly. He picked up the pistol, a look of disdain on his face, and handed it to Alfred, who took it from the room, “Now that we’re all acting civilized, why don’t you tell me what you’re here for?”

Jack glared up at Bruce from where he was kneeling. “You’re a god damned rat,” he hissed.

Bruce glared right back, “And you’re an abusive coward who never deserved to have children in the first place.” He took a few steps towards Jack, looming over him, “If I have my way, you’ll never see Tim again.”

Jack stood and tried to stand eye to eye with Bruce, but couldn’t quite do it as he was several inches shorter, “You mother fucker, you do know, don’t you?”

Bruce was starting to get frustrated, “Know what?” he growled.

Jack pulled something from his pocket and shoved it at Bruce’s chest, “This! Why else would you keep undermining me and getting close to him? You knew all along!”

Completely confused now, Bruce took the object that had been shoved at him. It was a crumpled letter, which was several years out of date he noticed. Keeping his periphery on Jack, Bruce scanned the letter. His heart stuttered to a stop as he comprehended what was written, not entirely believing it at first, but then recalling the mild November day in Jaipur sixteen years ago that was outlined in the letter. It couldn’t be, but it certainly could be.

Bruce cleared his throat, “Mr. Drake, I had no idea,” he said, still scanning the letter. All the details were there. It was certainly convincing, and if it was true it made a few things make a little more sense.

“Bullshit you didn’t know!” Jack cried, “Why else would you be so damn keen to take him away?”

Bristling, Bruce felt his wits return to him, “I’m trying to take him away from you because you physically assaulted him,” he growled, “You’ve been a neglectful parent at best and an abusive one at worst. Biological father or not, that is not how you treat a child.”

Jack looked like he was about to lunge at Bruce when the door creaked open. “Dad?” Tim called in shock, “What are you doing here?”

He must have been woken up by the gunshot, Bruce realized. He tensed, not knowing how Jack
would react to seeing Tim now. They had assumed Jack had come for Tim, but Bruce knew now that he’d come to confront Bruce. He probably hadn’t even known Tim was at the Manor.

Tim looked a little worse for wear, with the bandage on his head contrasting sharply with the darkening bruise spreading from beneath it. Jack stilled when he saw Tim, and Bruce prepared to intervene if he did anything. For a second, Jack’s face softened, and it looked as though he might be contrite, confronted as he was by the sight of what he’d done to the boy that he’d raised as a son. After a second however, his face hardened and he turned back to Bruce.

“Just fucking keep him,” he snapped, then turned and stormed out the study.

“Dad, wait!” Tim called, trotting after his father. Bruce stowed the letter in his pocket and ran after Tim.

Jack could move fast when he was angry, and Tim didn't catch up to him until he was almost to the door. Tim reached out and grabbed Jack’s wrist, the same one that Alfred had snapped earlier. With a hiss, Jack wrenched himself away, stopping to turn and shove Tim back with force. Tim stumbled back and nearly crashed to the floor before Bruce managed to catch him.

“Dad?” Tim asked, sounding small and confused and lost.

Jack looked down at Tim for a few seconds, grappling with his internal conflict. The boy who he’d loved and raised for fifteen years, the boy who was not his son. Finally, he turned away from Tim. “You’re not my son,” he said, before walking out the door.

Tim froze at the words and watched in mute shock as his father abandoned him. Bruce felt his heart shatter for the poor boy and pulled his arm more tightly around him. “Tim?” he called softly, trying to gauge Tim’s mind.

After another second, Tim’s face crumpled and he began to sob. He turned to Bruce and buried his face into his chest, clinging to his shirt and wailing. Bruce wrapped his arms around him, fully encompassing the boy like a fragile child, and held him close while he cried.

The police arrived shortly after Jack’s departure, having been called by Alfred. Four officers came in, ready to face a crazed man with a gun, but finding only an upset child and two disgruntled men.

Alfred spoke to them first, relaying Jack’s arrival and his threats with the gun. He even handed the gun over to the police and led them to the study where the gun was fired. Bruce spent this time doing his best to calm Tim down so he could give a statement about earlier that day. Tim, always aware of duty, managed to curb his distress long enough to give a statement about Jack’s deteriorating mental state and his attack earlier that night.

“I think you’ve covered everything,” Bruce said after the officer had been questioning Tim for nearly forty five minutes, “We’ll fill in any blanks.”

Officer Bradbury glanced at Bruce, but gave a nod. “I suppose that’s fine,” he said.

“Thank you,” Bruce said, placing a hand on Tim’s shoulder and leading him away. “Why don’t you go back up to bed okay?” he suggested softly, “You’ve had an exhausting day.”
Tim nodded, but he said nothing and didn’t look up at Bruce. He silently walked up the stairs, movements slow and shoulders slumped, looking for all the world like he was going to pass out where he stood. Bruce watched him go, wishing he could do something to help.

“Mr. Wayne?” Officer Bradbury called, “We need to ask a few more questions.”

“Of course,” Bruce said, turning to the officer.

While he talked to the officer about what had transpired in his house, the letter burned in pocket. He didn’t know if he should tell the police about the letter, they certainly had enough evidence to remove Tim from Jack’s care without it. In the end, he said nothing. He’d need to examine it more closely anyway. Maybe he’d misread it? Or maybe it was a fake? Bruce had to investigate it further.

Finally, the officers left with promises to arrest Jack Drake should they find him. Alfred thanked them for their time while Bruce slipped into the library. He pulled the letter out and began to read.

Dear Bruce Wayne,

I am writing to tell you that you have a son. His name is Timothy Drake.

No, this is not a prank. My name is Janet Drake, though you would remember me as Lynn Fisher. We met in Jaipur over a year ago and spent the night together. It was a wonderful night. You rescued me from three men in an alley near the Hawa Mahal and we had lunch together. You knew I was married by seeing the tan line where I’d removed my wedding ring. I gave you a false name because we both live in Gotham and I wanted to protect my identity. I’m sure you know that our world is full of people who look down on women who sleep around behind their husband’s backs, much less women who get pregnant by men who are not their husbands.

After that night, I discovered I was pregnant. I originally intended to have an abortion, but my husband found out and thought the baby must be his. He begged me to stay with him, and I agreed, but our marriage has not improved the way he intended it to. I am not fit to be a mother. I don’t want this. I don’t know what to do. Help me.

It might be best if you take Timothy

I need your help

Please get back to me at your earliest convenience.

Janet Drake.

Bruce read and reread the letter, his mind working overtime to piece it all together. He remembered Lynn Fisher, and spending the night with her, but was that Janet Drake? He tried to recall Lynn’s face and put it next to Janet’s image in his mind. If you changed the hair and makeup, added a few years maybe, they had looked similar. He’d only met Janet Drake in person once, and only for a few minutes before she’d died. Aside from that, the letter got all of the details right, and he had no reason to think that Janet might have forged the letter. Jack couldn’t know the details of something like this to make it up, so that left Bruce to a conclusion.

The letter was real. Tim was his son.

Bruce Wayne was Tim Drake’s father.

Bruce sank down on one of the chairs, feeling like there was suddenly no air in the room. His chest pounded and his gut roiled, making him dizzy and jittery all at once. A confusing swirl of emotions
came over him and he didn't know if he wanted to bury his head in his hands or scream at the top of his lungs. Tim was his son. He was Tim’s father.

“Sir?” Alfred called, jolting him out his head, “Is everything alright?”

Wordlessly, Bruce held out the letter for Alfred to read. The elderly man took the letter and scanned over it. Bruce tried not to wince at Alfred’s sharp intake of breath.

“My word,” Alfred breathed, “Are you certain this is possible?”

Bruce ran a hand through his hair, “It’s completely possible. Unless she met a Lynn Fisher who told her about spending a night with Bruce Wayne in Jaipur sixteen years ago.”

“Goodness,” Alfred said, “Yet she never sent this?”

“Must have had second thoughts,” Bruce said, standing up and starting to pace around, “Maybe her marriage improved for a while, or she got cold feet, or something. I don't know.”

Bruce paced a little manically, feeling the tension creep into his shoulders. He felt like an idiot. A stupid, moronic fucking idiot. He should have realized, or at least suspected something was up when Janet seemed so against Tim being around them. He should have used protection that night, not been so utterly stupid. But no, if he had, Tim wouldn't be here, he wouldn't have been around to save Bruce from himself after Jason died. Who knows what might have happened to Bruce if Tim had stood in front of him, stubborn and clever, telling him he needed a Robin. Bruce had been so shocked to hear that, especially from a boy who he remembered as a tiny six year old who used to play hide and seek with him.

With a sick sense of realization, Bruce thought of all the years Tim had to endure being neglected and abused with Jack and Janet, and how he had been so close to rescuing him. If he had just dug a little deeper, forced the issue of meeting Janet face to face at least once, he might have realized. He might have been able to take Tim from that home. If Bruce hadn’t been so damn fucking incompetent and irresponsible he might have given Tim the loving family he deserved years ago.

“What do we do?” Alfred asked, watching Bruce pace around.

Bruce stilled and pushed his swirling emotions down, trying to focus on a plan of action. Actions were simple, he could make a plan. “We don’t tell Tim until we confirm the letter,” he said, “For now we continue working with the police and get Tim out of Jack’s custody. We keep this between us for now.”

Alfred grumbled, “Wonderful, because this house needed another secret.”

“Please Alfred,” Bruce ran his hand through his hair again, “Just, not yet alright?”

Alfred sighed, “Fine, but we must tell him eventually,” he said, “He deserves to know.”

“We will tell him,” Bruce said, “When we confirm that it’s true for certain.”

Alfred sighed again and set the letter down on a nearby end table. “I’m going to sleep,” he announced, “It’s been a long day, and I’m much too old to have to deal with this sort of thing at this hour of the night.” He got up and went to the door, calling over his shoulder, “I suggest you do the same Master Bruce.”

Bruce grunted and picked up the letter again, reading it once more. The confusing mix of emotions bubbled up again, making Bruce’s stomach twist. He didn't know if he wanted to feel happy or sad
or angry, or why he wanted to feel any of those emotions. He wanted to go out, work out his frustrations on the criminal underworld until the world made sense again. But light was starting to peek over the horizon, and by the time he was ready to go out, the sun would be rising. Shaking his head, Bruce folded the letter and put it in his pocket.

As quietly as he could, Bruce ascended the stairs to the bedrooms. He passed his own room and continued down the hall towards Tim’s room. He stopped just before the door and breathed, staring at the wood. In the quiet of the early morning, Bruce heard a noise coming from behind the door. Slowly, not touching the door, he leaned in and listened. Soft sobs could be heard, and Bruce had the mental image of Tim crying alone in the dark, unable to understand what happened and probably blaming himself.

Chest clenching painfully tight, Bruce lifted his hand to knock, then stopped. The letter seemed to be burning a hole in his pocket. With a sigh, Bruce turned and left the hallway, intending to head down to the Cave. They all kept a couple pints of their own blood frozen in case of medical emergencies; Bruce should be able to get a proper test from that.

Bruce must have stared at the readout for an hour, his eyes tracing every detail, going over the word ‘match’ again and again. There was no denying it now, now second guessing or suspicion. Tim was his son.

Tim was his son.

The conflicting swirl of emotions was back, this time with a vengeance. If Bruce had eaten that day, he was sure he would be getting a second look at his his stomach was twisting so tight. Bruce leaned back in his chair and tried to sort through the mess. He was happy, of course, elated even, to know he had a child, and he had every justification in taking Tim in and loving him like a real parent. Not that he hadn’t already loved Tim, but he had always restrained himself because he wasn’t (or thought he wasn’t) Tim’s father, and he couldn’t claim that relationship. Now, in one fell swoop, he could take Tim from Jack’s abusive custody and treat him like the son he’d been wanting to since getting to know the boy.

At the same time, a terrible guilt and sadness threatened to overpower that joy. He’d missed so much of Tim’s life, almost the entirety of it, and Tim had been left to be raised by two people who shouldn’t have been parents in the first place. He’d missed Tim’s birth, his first steps, his first day of school, his first everything. Not to mention that he had the suspicion that Jack and Janet hadn’t been around for those things either. They’d barely been around at all, which, if Bruce were honest with himself, was probably better for Tim than them being around to abuse him more directly.

Of course, none of this was taking into account how it would affect Tim. As much as it was entirely unhealthy for him, Tim loved Jack, and this would be difficult to process for him. On top of that was how it would change Tim and Bruce’s relationship. How would Tim see Bruce after he knew? As much as Bruce wanted to believe it would all be fine and they would form a father and son bond, real life was messier than that. Bruce didn’t know if he would be able to fix whatever damage might occur when Tim learned the truth, or heal whatever damage had already happened. It might take years to build a trusting relationship between them again.

Bruce groaned and ran his hands through his hair; he couldn’t keep this information from Tim, not for long anyway. Even if the police investigation didn't turn this particular stone over (the GCPD
wasn't the best in the world, but they weren't *that* incompetent), Tim was much too smart to keep secrets from for long. Trying to keep it from Tim would be an exercise in futility, no matter how careful Bruce tried to be.

This in mind, Bruce took the test and the letter and went upstairs to wash and change. Hopefully he’d come up with a good way to tell Tim while he was in the shower.

No ideas were forthcoming, and by the time Bruce had showered, shaved, and changed into fresh clothes, he was no closer to having any idea how he was going to tell Tim that he was his biological father. Despite not being hungry, Bruce made his way to the kitchen to put on some coffee. It was still early, but Bruce didn't think Alfred would be up to make breakfast this morning, not with all of the excitement from last night.

Bruce sat at the kitchen island and dug out his phone as he sipped his coffee. Clarisse had answered him and said that she would be over soon. There was also an email from his legal team, who were already reviewing the case against Jack Drake. Bruce knew he was incredibly lucky to have the wealth that he did, and he couldn't help but feel grateful that he could afford the best legal council that was available.

Finishing his coffee, Bruce headed back upstairs to check on Tim again before Clarisse arrived. He stopped outside of Tim’s room again, listening carefully for any movement. He heard nothing, so he carefully and slowly opened the door, ready to stop if he heard movement.

Tim was asleep in the bed, the covers disheveled and kicked down around Tim’s legs, like he’d been thrashing in his sleep from night terrors. He was clutching his pillow tightly, some wetness still seeping from his eyes even in fitful sleep. Bruce took hold of the blankets and gently tucked them up around Tim’s shoulder, pausing to gently stroke a lock of matted hair from Tim’s face. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but Tim did seem to relax a fraction in his sleep. Bruce watched him for another minute before silently leaving the room, shutting the door behind him softly.

Bruce puttered around the kitchen for a while, managing to eat an apple for breakfast. Clarisse came over for a short time to speak to him and give him the paperwork he would need to start filing to take custody of Tim.

“There’s something else,” Bruce said, pulling out the letter, “I didn't tell the police this, but when Jack came last night, he was upset about this.”

Clarisse read the letter carefully, “Is there any merit in it?” she asked, turning her dark eyes up at him. She was young, not even thirty yet, but her moon-pale face made her look like a teenager.

“Yes,” Bruce admitted, “I think it’s the truth.”

Clarisse pressed her lips together, “You’ll need to submit DNA test, but if it’s true, it could help your case,” she said, “Not that Jack has a strong case to begin with.”

They talked for a while longer before Bruce bid her goodbye with promises to come to her offices with Tim in a few days to speak with her again. He also promised to turn the letter over to the police as soon as he’d spoken to Tim about it. When she was gone, Bruce sagged with fatigue, wishing his brain would let him sleep for a while. The creak of the floor alerted him to Alfred’s presence as he came down the stairs.

“Is Tim up yet?” Bruce asked, knowing Alfred would have checked.

“Still asleep,” Alfred said, “I imagine he’ll sleep through most of the day.”
“Probably,” Bruce said. He was well aware of the effects of emotional exhaustion. When his parents died, he’d spent nearly three days in bed, either sleeping or crying or just laying there, unable to move or do anything but relive the moment over and over again.

“We’ll leave him for now,” Bruce said, “He’ll come down when he’s ready.”

Alfred nodded, “That sounds like it will be for the best, sir.”

Bruce glanced up the stairs where the bedrooms were, “I hope so.”

Tim did end up sleeping most of the day, coming down only well past dinner, looking disheveled and exhausted despite the sleep. The bruise from the whiskey bottle covered a good chunk of his face, radiating from above his eyebrow to around his eye and across his forehead. Just looking at it made Bruce’s face twinge in sympathy pain. Alfred checked the stitches down in the Cave; there was no sign of infection, but they gave Tim some antibiotics as well as a painkiller and an anti-inflammatory.

“Hungry?” Bruce asked, having hovered close by throughout the process.

Tim shook his head, “No thanks, I’m fine,” he said, smiling a little lopsidedly. The side of his face probably hurt too much to move.

“You may not feel hunger at the moment Master Tim, but it is important to keep your blood sugar up,” Alfred said, putting away his tools, “I’ll prepare you some light soup, so as not to upset your stomach.”

Tim knew better than to argue with Alfred on this front. “Okay, just not too much,” he said, “I don’t really feel like eating.”

Alfred nodded and laid a gentle hand on Tim’s shoulder, squeezing tightly before he left Tim and Bruce alone together in the Cave. A pointed look at Bruce reminded him of the letter still tucked into his pocket, and the conversation he needed to have with Tim. Bruce took a deep breath and tried not to wind his nerves up. Tim was already walking towards the stairs out of the Cave; Bruce strode after him, trying to think of how to start.

“Tim?” he called before he could psyche himself out of it, “I’d like to talk to you.”

Tim turned and faced Bruce, “What about? If this is about Robin, don’t worry, I wasn’t planning on going out tonight.”

“Not that,” Bruce said, and he lifted his hand to put on Tim’s back, though he hesitated for a moment, “It’s about your … it’s about Jack.”

“Did you find anything?” Tim asked, a little bit of life leeding back into him for a second. Bruce hated what he was about to do, but it needed to be done.

“Why don’t we go sit down?” Bruce suggested, “This is going to be pretty shocking.”

Tim frowned, but followed Bruce to the parlour, trusting him completely. Bruce had a sudden moment of realization that this was the same parlour that he’d first met Tim in, when the boy was
only six years old. He wished he could find a different room, but it was too late now, as Tim was already slouching on the couch, looking up expectantly at Bruce.

Bruce took a deep breath; he hadn’t come up with a good way to break the news to Tim throughout the day, so he was just going to start at the beginning. Pulling the letter and the test results from his pocket, Bruce began to explain.

Tim could hardly believe what he was hearing; he might not have if it weren’t for the papers in his hands. The letter certainly looked like it was his mother’s handwriting, and it was impossible to deny the test results. A dozen thoughts swirled through his head, so fast that Tim could hardly grasp one before it slipped away and another took its place.

“Tim?” Bruce called softly, “Are you okay?”

Tim looked up at Bruce, watching him for several seconds while he waited for Tim to respond. He shifted his weight nervously, and Tim realized he was deeply uncomfortable. Bruce didn’t do well with emotional conflict (hello dressing up like a bat and punching people), so this must have been torture for him. Tim wished he could put him at ease, but his voice seemed to have left him.

“Tim, I swear I didn’t know,” Bruce said abruptly, “I never met Janet after that day and the letter was never sent. If I had known I would have…”

Bruce trailed off, and Tim understood. What would Bruce have done? Tim was born around the time Bruce was just starting to concretely put Batman into practice. If Janet had come to him then, would Bruce have put aside his desire to protect Gotham to raise Tim? Would he have shuffled Tim off to be adopted by some other family? Tried to balance vigilantism and single parenthood? Bruce had adopted Dick a few years later, but not out of desire to be a parent at first, but rather out of a sense of parallelism between himself and Dick, who’d just lost his own parents in a similar way to Bruce. Tim had listened to enough stories from Dick to know that Bruce came to see him as a son later, but would the same have happened to Tim? Would he have taken Tim in as his son?

“It doesn’t matter what I would have done,” Bruce said finally, “What matters is what happens now.”

Tim nodded, but still said nothing, his voice stuck. Bruce slowly came over and sat next to him, but didn’t try to initiate any contact. Things were still too tense right now.

“I know you love Jack,” Bruce said softly, “But you have to understand that it’s not safe for you to be in his care anymore. Maybe in time, we can work out a joint custody system of some kind, but for now I think it’s safest if you stay with me.”

Tim looked over at Bruce, almost surprised, but wondering why he would be. Bruce was looking at Tim sadly, “You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he said, “If you’d prefer to stay with a friend for a while, I understand completely. But, long term, I’d like you to live with me. I’d like you to be…”

My son, he didn't say, but Tim heard anyway. Bruce stared into his eyes, as though searching Tim for something. Tim felt the muscles in Bruce’s arm twitch, like he was about to move to hug Tim.

“I…” Tim croaked hoarsely, “I’d like to be alone for a while,” he said, “I need to think about this.”
Bruce moved back, the tension broken, “Alright,” he said in an exhale, like relief(?), “Take all the time you need, okay? I’ll be around for a few more hours tonight, but don't feel rushed at all.”

Tim nodded and put the letter and the test down on the couch next to Bruce’s hip, then got up and left the room. He went up to his room, the guest room that had been reserved for him since he’d started coming to the manor. Had it only been two years, nearly three, since he’d come back to this house? Tim sat down on his bed and stared at the wall, trying to make sense of everything.

But none of it made sense. Or all of it made sense? Bruce being his biological father seemed like something out of a wild fantasy (hadn’t he once guiltily thought how nice it would be to live with Bruce and Dick when he was a child? To be a part of their family instead of his own?), but the more Tim thought about it, the more connections seemed to come together. Jack’s rejection of Tim, his threatening Bruce, and going back even further, Janet’s strange aversion to him being close to Dick, even to the point of a violent outburst. It was all so crazy, but it made so many things fall into place about Tim’s life.

Feeling his heart begin to pound, Tim bolted up from the bed. He had to get out, he had to leave, sort himself out. Too many things were happening all at once and he needed to put some distance between himself and the situation. Hastily, Tim packed a bag with some clothes and essentials. Whatever he didn’t pack he could buy. Tim scribbled a quick note to Bruce and Alfred and left it on his pillow where they would find it, then headed down to the garage. Luckily he didn’t run into either Alfred or Bruce on the way, and he wasted no time in climbing on one of the smaller motorcycles and speeding away into the night.

Chapter End Notes

So there's a lot going on in this chapter, but I really didn't have any other way to put it. All the scenes themselves were so short that piecing them together was the only way I could get a full chapter out of them. I'm not sure if I like the way it flows from a narrative standpoint, but I think dragging it out into another chapter would fuck up the flow even more. So I'm going to leave it like this and hopefully next chapter we have some time to process what happened.
Part II Chapter vi: Apprehension

Chapter Notes

Damn this chapter got long as shit. A lot happened though, so I had a lot of ground to cover. A couple of other chapters were shorter, so this makes up for that I guess. Warning for a lot of swears in this chapter.

CONTEST TIME!!! Win a 1k fic of whatever you like by finding the reference. First come first serve, and please, if you've won before, let someone else try their hand, that way it's all fair. This chapter is actually a video game reference! Guess the video game that gets played in this chapter and comment below with the answer. Good luck!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was an hour and a half motorcycle ride to Bludhaven, and it started raining when Tim was about thirty minutes from the city limits. It started as a light drizzle, but quickly picked up until the water was coming down in sheets. By the time Tim reached Dick’s apartment, he was soaked to the bone, shivering and dripping large puddles everywhere. His fingers were so stiff from the cold that he had trouble forming a fist to knock.

Dick opened the door with a smile on his face, “Tim! Hey kiddo how are you?” he asked, ushering Tim inside, “Oof, you like something the bat dragged in. Hang on, I’ll get you a towel.”

Tim stayed where he was while Dick ran off to get him a clean towel, not wanting to drip all over Dick’s apartment. He stared at the growing puddle around him, mind a blank. He jumped a little when a towel was thrown over his head.

“Hello, earth to Timmy,” Dick teased playfully, “You were off in space just now. What’s up? Did Bruce send you here on a case?”

Tim shook his head and started drying off. He hadn’t realized how cold he was until he was starting to warm up in Dick’s apartment. He wrapped the towel around himself and tried not to shiver.

“Does this have anything to do with that hell of a shiner you got?” Dick asked, stepping close to Tim to examine him, “Who gave that to you? Riddler? Penguin? Looks like you got hit with something.”

Tim reached up to touch the bruise on his temple. The bandage must have fallen off inside the motorcycle helmet. He was lucky it didn’t fall into his eyes and blind him. He traced over the stitches with a finger, wondering if the numbness was from the cold or because he wasn’t registering the pain.

“Tim?” Dick laid a hand on his shoulder, his playfulness melting away to concern, “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

Tim looked up at Dick, thinking of everything that had happened in the last two days. Had it only been two days? It felt like it had stretched out into a week. Dick’s concern grew and he looked like he was about to start asking questions.

“Can I crash here for a while?” Tim asked suddenly, cutting off any question Dick might have asked,
“Just for a day or two? I promise I’ll keep out of the way.”

Dick started to look a little distressed. “Of course,” he said, “You can stay as long as you like.”

Tim nodded and trudged more fully into the apartment now that he wasn’t so drippy. Dick followed him.

“We can either share the bed or I can take the couch,” Dick said, “You want anything to eat?”

“I don’t mind taking the couch,” Tim said softly, trying to smile at Dick. From Dick’s expression, it wasn’t a very reassuring smile.

“You’re taking the bed. Don’t argue,” Dick said firmly, “At least have some tea or something, you must be freezing.”

“I’d really just like to go to sleep,” Tim said, rubbing his eyes. He’d never felt so exhausted in his life, “Can I just sleep for a bit?”

Dick nodded, clearly unhappy but not about to start pushing Tim, “You can have a shower if you want. You need clean pyjamas?”

Tim held up his soaked backpack, “Yeah I think mine are drenched,” he said.

“Take anything you need from my drawer. I have to head out to patrol in an hour or two, but you know how to get in contact with me right?” Dick said.

Tim nodded and headed for the bathroom, glad that Dick wasn’t trying to force the issue. He really didn’t want to talk about what happened just yet, not even with Dick.

One hot shower later, Tim was dressed in an old T-shirt and some sweatpants of Dick’s. They were huge on him, but they would do for sleeping. Dick was already putting his soaked clothes in the washer.

“You sure you don’t want any tea or soup or something?” Dick asked, “It won’t be as good as Alfred’s, but it’ll be warm.”

“I’m just going to crash Dick, thanks,” Tim said, heading towards the couch.

Dick leaped up and started pushing him towards the bedroom. “Take the bed Tim, I’m serious,” he said, “It’s a lot more comfortable than the couch.”

“I don’t want to put you out,” Tim protested, even though he didn’t have the strength to resist Dick’s nudging.

“It’s a big bed Tim,” Dick said, “We’ll both fit. You’re not putting me out.”

Soon Tim was tucked into Dick’s big comfortable bed. Dick stood at the edge, hands on his hips, as though daring Tim to wiggle out of it and try to sleep on the couch again.

“Now sleep,” Dick ordered. His stance slackened and he sat down on the edge of the bed, “You need me to stay tonight? I can skip patrol.”

Tim sighed and sank into the soft cotton sheets. “I’ll be fine Dick, I really am just going to get some sleep,” he said, “You can go ahead and go on patrol.”

“If you’re sure kiddo,” Dick said softly, reaching out to stroke a lock of damp hair from Tim’s face,
“I’ll stay until you sleep at least.”

There’d be no budging him, Tim realized, so he just nodded and relaxed, trying to sleep. Dick continued to stroke his hair until exhaustion finally claimed him. Tim fell into a fitful slumber, his dreams plagued by whiskey bottles and the image of his father’s receding back.

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Dick stayed with Tim until he had to get ready for patrol. He was nearly out the window when his phone rang. Dick went back to pick it up, glancing at the caller ID, “Hey Bruce.”

“Is he with you?” Bruce asked in lieu of a greeting. He sounded a little frantic.

“He’s with me,” Dick said, “He’s sleeping right now. What the hell happened to him?”

Bruce let out a sigh of relief, “There was some trouble with Jack. Tim left a note, but I wanted to make sure he got to you okay.”

“He’s fine. Drenched, but fine.” Dick leaned against the counter, “What happened with Jack? Did he freak out about the bruise on his face or something?”

Bruce paused for a long time, “Jack was the one who did that. He hit Tim with a whiskey bottle.”

“He fucking what?” Dick snarled, jumping up straight, feeling the hot rage shoot up his spine.

Bruce gave Dick a brief rundown of what Jack had done; by the end of it, Dick was pacing back and forth, trying to keep his footsteps light so he didn’t disturb Tim.

“That son of a bitch,” Dick growled, wishing he could go out and find Jack right now and make him see the grave error of his ways.

“The police are investigating as we speak,” Bruce said, “I think it would be best to leave it to them for now. But if you see Jack…”

“I’ll let him know that he’s not welcome,” Dick promised.

Bruce grunted and they let things pause for a moment. “Is there anything else you’re not telling me?” Dick asked. He could *sense* that there was something that Bruce was hiding.

“I don’t think it’s something for me to say,” Bruce said, and Dick could just imagine him shift uncomfortably on the other side of the phone, “Has Tim said anything?”

“He went straight to bed,” Dick said, “He barely spoke a few words. I didn’t even know that his dad was the one who hit him.”

Bruce hummed, “I’ll leave it to him,” he said, “I don’t think it’s something to be said over the phone anyway.”

“Okay?” Dick said. Since when was Bruce so savvy of politeness when it came to information? He usually told or didn’t tell based on whether or not it was relevant for the other person to know it or not. Hadn’t he basically outed Tim to Steph without his permission not too long ago?

“Just… keep an eye on him, alright?” Bruce asked, and Dick was warmed by the concern in his
"I will," Dick promised. He glanced at the clock, "I’ve got to get started on patrol, but I’ll call you later, okay?"

"Alright," Bruce said. They said their goodbyes and then hung up, no ‘be safe’s exchanged, but Dick knew better than to expect one. It was expected of him to be careful, to come home safely, because the alternative was unthinkable.

Dick put down the phone and sighed, running his hands through his hair. He glanced back at the bedroom and felt his stomach turn over. He should have known there was something wrong with that house the minute he saw Tim. No child should be that scared of his parents. But he’d been blinded by the Drake’s wealth and means and Bruce’s reassurances that nothing could be done. He should have fought with Bruce harder to get Tim out of that house, before any of this could have happened. Dick knew it wasn’t realistic, but he couldn't help but be angry at himself for not doing anything. Knowing Tim’s family was terrible wasn't the same thing as knowing they would hurt him like this.

Groaning, Dick decided to put it aside for now and focus on his work. Taking a quick detour to the bedroom to check that Tim was still soundly asleep, Dick finally stowed his escrima sticks and went to the window. He’d stick close to home today, just in case.

Tim wasn’t sure how long he slept, though he was sure at some point he woke up long enough to register Dick crawling into the other side of the bed. He also had the vague recollection of Dick crawling out of bed again at some point, but he immediately fell back to sleep. When Tim finally woke up, pale light was pouring through the windows. Tim sat up and rubbed his eyes. He felt groggy and lethargic, like he was trying to move through water, and his head felt heavy and achy. Stiffly, Tim finally got out of bed and went to the kitchen for some water.

Dick was up and pouring coffee; he looked up at Tim and gave a relieved smile. “Morning sleepy head, I was starting to get worried,” he said.

“What time is it?” Tim asked, rubbing his eyes again. There was so much crust in them.

“About seven AM,” Dick said, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and filling it in the tap.

Tim raised an eyebrow, “Really? I thought it would be way later.”

“Seven AM Monday morning ,” Dick clarified, handing the glass to Tim, “You slept right through Sunday.”

Tim groaned, “God, no wonder I feel like shit,” he said, sipping his water, “I’m going to miss school.”

“I think that’s excusable,” Dick said, coming around the kitchen island to sit with Tim, “Bruce called.”

Tim stared at something vague on the wall, not turning to look at Dick, “What did he tell you?”

“Not much,” Dick said. He reached out to brush the bruise on Tim’s face, “He told me what your
“He say why he did it?” Tim asked, keeping still and taking another sip of water.

“Does that matter?” Dick asked, voice climbing in pitch, “Tim, he attacked you and threatened Bruce with a gun. There’s no excuse for that.”

“No, I know that.” Tim said, shifting uncomfortably, “But it wasn’t all just him. There’s a lot going on here.”

“Tim,” Dick said, sounding sad, “Look at me and tell me if you’d accept that answer if someone else gave it to you.”

Tim took several moments to turn to Dick; Dick was staring right at him, deep blue eyes penetrating and sad and kind. Tim tried to force the words up, but the more he forced it, the more he felt his eyes sting with tears.

“Oh baby,” Dick soothed, reaching out to pull Tim into a hug, “Come here, it’s okay.”

Tim buried his face into Dick’s shoulder and sobbed, everything coming crashing down at once. He wasn’t sure how long he cried, Dick murmuring soothing platitudes and stroking his hair, but when he finally managed to calm down and sit up, Dick’s shirt had a sizable stain.

“Sorry,” Tim sniffled, wiping his eyes, “Sorry, I—”

“You don't have to be sorry Tim,” Dick cut him off, rubbing his back, “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“Your shirt,” Tim pointed out.

“Will wash,” Dick said, standing up, “Now, you need to eat something. You want me to try and make some eggs or something or are you okay with cereal?”

Tim smiled slightly, already feeling a little lighter. “Cereal is fine,” he said.

“Good, because that’s about the extent of my cooking skills,” Dick said, smiling back.

In a few minutes he presented Tim with a bowl of Crocky Crunch, complete with freshly sliced bananas and a glass of orange juice. Tim took a few tentative bites at first, but once the food hit his stomach he discovered he was starving and finished the bowl in just a few minutes. He gulped down the orange juice just as fast.

“Feel better?” Dick asked.

Tim nodded; it was true, he did feel a lot better. He could probably still crawl into bed again and sleep for another few hours, but he could probably get up and do something just as easily.

“Good,” Dick breathed a sigh of relief, “Now, you want to tell me what happened? You don’t have to if you don't want to, but I’d like to know what I’m dealing with.”

Tim sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, okay,” he said, not feeling too confident, but know it was pointless to keep it to himself. Maybe Dick would have some insights or something.

They sat down on the couch and Tim started to explain what had happened. Dick had gotten the gist of events from Bruce, but not everything. He listened attentively until they got to just before Tim left to come to Bludhaven.
“Wait, back up a sec,” Dick said, “Bruce is what now?”

“My biological father,” Tim said, and wasn’t that so weird to say? “He did a paternity test and everything.”

“...Okay,” Dick said, looking like he’d just had the rug pulled out from under his entire universe, “That’s... something I guess.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of why I freaked and came here,” Tim said, “Everything just happened so fast, I panicked.”

“I get it,” Dick said, “Not like, completely, but I get you freaking out. That must have come as quite a shock.”

Tim groaned and ran his hands through his hair, “Tell me about it. I had no idea.”

“And Bruce had no idea either?” Dick asked.

“Not until Da— until Jack showed up with the letter,” Tim said, “He was just as shocked as I was.”

“And after all the lectures I got about protection,” Dick grumbled to himself. He looked over at Tim again, “So what now?”

Tim shrugged, “Well, Bruce wants to take me in. I think he was going to try to do that even if it hadn’t come out that I was his... even if we hadn’t found out.”

“Sounds like him,” Dick said, “What about you?”

“I have no idea Dick,” Tim said, “This is all so sudden. I don't know what to do, or even think of the whole situation.”

Dick reached out and rubbed Tim’s back, “It'll be okay,” he said, “You can spend a few days here and think things out. Bruce knows where you are and I think school and your friends will understand needing some time off.”

Tim sighed, “Right,” he said, “You sure it’s okay for me to stay?”

“Of course,” Dick said. He glanced at the clock, “Listen, I have to go to work, but feel free to stay here. There’s not a lot of food in the fridge, but I’ll leave some cash if you want to order in.”

Tim nodded and smiled, “Thank’s Dick. That’s nice of you.”

Dick smiled and ruffled Tim’s hair, “Don’t worry about it, okay?” He glanced at the clock again, “I’m going to be late. Text me if you need anything, alright?”

“Alright,” Tim said, “Good luck at work.”

“Thanks,” Dick said, smiling again. Within a few minutes, Dick had packed his bag and was out the door, leaving Tim alone.

Tim sagged on the couch, rubbing his eyes again. He probably shouldn’t go back to sleep, having slept a full day and change, but he really didn’t feel like doing anything. Sighing, Tim got up and headed to the bedroom to retrieve his phone. At the very least he could let his friends know where he was.

He had over a dozen messages from Steph, and nearly as many from Ives. A few other friends had
left messages as well, and there was also a few notifications from the Young Justice group chat, probably wondering where he’d been all weekend. Tim went back to the couch to start answering messages.

He answered his other friends first, working himself up to looking at Steph and Ives’ messages. They’d demand a little more detail than just ‘I’m fine, don’t worry. Tim finally got to Steph, feeling guilty for leaving her to worry. She was his girlfriend, he should have more consideration of her feelings.

_Did you see the news this morning??_ Steph’s last message read.

Tim heart leapt into his throat and he scrambled to turn the TV on and flip to a news channel. Expecting some big battle that he’d missed where one of his friends had gotten hurt, he was surprised to find everything normal. He flipped through a few news channels before something from an entertainment channel caught his eye.

“—op story today is the illegitimate child of billionaire socialite Bruce Wayne. This morning the story broke in the Gotham Goggle, a tell-all by celebrated archeologist Jack Drake, concerning one Timothy Drake. Mr. Drake claims that his son, Timothy, is actually the child of Bruce Wayne, born of an affair between the late Janet Drake and Mr. Wayne some years ago. Mr. Wayne has not made himself available for comment, and Mr. Drake has had an APB put out on him due to an altercation at Wayne Manor. The police have advised that Mr. Drake has become dangerous and even violent, and warn the general public to steer clear. Furthermore—”

Tim groaned and put his head into his hands. There went quietly figuring things out; now all of Gotham and their mother would know about it, and it wouldn’t be long before the word got out to the rest of the world. The Gotham Goggle was little more than a gossip rag, but it wouldn’t take that long for the story to be validated. Maybe he’d spend a few more days with Dick than he’d originally planned. He picked up his phone and answered Steph’s text.

_Just saw it. It’s true. I’m in Bludhaven right now trying to figure things out_ , he sent, unsure of what else to send.

Steph answered quickly, _Shitballs, you okay?_

Tim smiled, _I’m alive_ , he wrote, _But I’ll be out of town for a few days. I need to think about some stuff._

_Totes understandable. You need anything?_ Steph asked.

_I’ll be fine, thanks tho_ , Tim wrote back, _I just have a lot to think about._

_I’m a little jealous tbh. Wish my dad wasn't my dad_ , Steph texted.

Tim rolled his eyes, _But would you want Bruce as your dad?_

_Statement retracted_ , Steph wrote, _But seriously, you okay?_

Tim sighed and wondered what to write. After probably way too long, he texted, _I will be._

Steph seemed to take that as it was meant to. They texted for a little longer before Steph had to get to class. Tim reassured her one last time that he’d be fine and he’d text her again soon. After a quick text to Ives to tell him much the same and ask him to pick up his homework for the next couple of days. That just left the Young Justice chat to deal with.
Sorry I didn’t show this weekend. Stuff happened, he wrote, I might be out for a while.

Tim puttered around the apartment for a while, eventually settling on some TV to watch. Nearly an hour went by before his phone pinged; Tim picked it up, dreading what he might find.

Dude, just saw a story saying Bruce Wayne is your dad. WTF? Conner wrote, Some elaborate prank?

Tim groaned and tried to prepare to have to explain, Not a prank.

The chat went quiet for a moment, then it exploded.

What the fuck????? WhAt tHe fUcK??????? Conner wrote.

Areouyseriousomgyougoodwhatthappenedtelluseverythigishereallyyourdadorareyoumessinwithustimserious Bart texted, typing way too fast for his phone to keep up.

Okay, explain? Cassie wrote.

Tim quickly gave them a run down of what had happened, knowing that they wouldn't leave him alone until he did.

So now I’m at Dick’s place for a couple of days thinking about stuff, Tim finished.

Holy shit, Cassie wrote, You gonna be okay?

I will be in a few days I think, Tim texted, Just have to think about some stuff.

How’s that going so far? Conner wrote.

Tim raised an eyebrow, What’s that supposed to mean?

Buddy, I know you, Conner wrote, You are the MASTER overthinker. You’re doing one of two things; thinking about it so hard your brain is about to explode or trying so hard NOT to think about it your brain is about to explode.

He’s got a point, Bart texted, You tend to go a little overboard on the thinking Tim.

Tim sighed, What else do you want me to do? I’ve got nothing to do BUT think about it. Or not think about it.

How about we come over? Conner suggested, We could help distract you.

Yeah!! It’s been forever since we all just hung out! Bart chimed.

You could probably use the company Rob, Cassie wrote.

Don’t all of you have class? Tim asked.

Don’t you? Cassie pointed out.

We can skip. I know Ma and Pa won’t mind, Conner wrote, Shit, Clark practically encouraged me to skip class for kicks. I think they’d be happy I skipped to keep my buddy company in his distress.

Class is boring anyway, Bart wrote, You need some company.

And before you make the dumbass excuse about getting to Bludhaven, Cassie wrote before Tim
could finish his text, *Two of us fly and the other can break the sound barrier in his sneakers.*

Tim felt his chest warm. He knew he was lucky to have such amazing friends, *Let me text Dick first. It’s his place.*

Tim switched to texting Dick, *Cassie, Conner, and Bart want to come over. Is that okay?*

Tim had to wait several minutes for Dick to reply. He was probably busy at the police station, *Tell Bart to bring his own food.*

Tim laughed, *That’s mean to speedsters,* he wrote. Switching back to the group chat, he texted, *Dick says to bring your own snacks.*

*Rude,* Bart wrote, *Be there in a flash!

*Ugh, Bart,* Conner wrote, *Why do you have to be like this?*

*See you in a bit Tim,* Cassie wrote. Tim made sure they all had the address and sat down to wait.

Bart arrived first, predictably enough, ladened with a backpack and two large bags full of snacks. He zipped inside and made himself at home almost the instant Tim opened the door, exploring the living room and kitchen in under a second (he’s learned enough self restraint to stay out of the bedroom). Cassie arrived a few minutes later, and Conner just a little after her, also with a couple bags of food (most of which looked homemade).

“How’d you get the shiner Rob?” Bart asked once they’d untangled themselves, “Thought you said you got smacked in the ribs, not the face?”

Tim’s good mood fizzled a little, “Later,” he said, “Distract me first and then I’ll tell you.”

“Sounds good,” Cassie said before either of the boys could protest and demand the story, “What do you want to do?”

Tim shrugged, “Dick probably won’t mind if we play some games.”

Several hours later saw the four of them spread out in front of the TV, the food distributed amongst them as they took turns looking for pirate treasure in a video game. Currently Cassie was trying to scale a cliff.

“Fucking climb Nate, you stupid bugger,” Cassie grumbled.

“I always thought it was hilarious that this guy had the same name as you Tim,” Conner said.

Tim huffed, “‘Drake’ isn’t an uncommon name,” he pointed out, slowly munching through his
second slice of pie. He’d eaten a good portion of the snacks, hungrier than usual from his depression nap.

“Are you gonna keep your name?” Bart asked, sitting on the floor in front of the TV, watching Cassie navigate the beautifully rendered digital environment.

Tim blinked. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Your last name, are you going to change it?” Bart asked, not turning around, “To ‘Wayne’?”

Tim took a deep breath, not sure how to answer. Conner leaned over and flicked the back of Bart’s head. “Leave him alone, he doesn’t want to talk about it yet,” he said.

The conversation lulled a little after that, the four of them relaxed as they watched Cassie play. She tried to make a jump, but apparently it was in the wrong direction that the game wanted her to go, so despite the fall being completely realistically survivable, the character died.

“Fuck!” Cassie swore. She tossed the controller at Tim, “Your turn.”

Tim took the controller and started playing. As he played, the words started to bubble up in his throat. “I don’t know if I’ll change my name,” he said, “Everything happened so fast, I barely had time to process one crisis before the next one happened.”

“Which crises?” Cassie prompted.

Tim made the character swing from a vine, “Well, there’s the whole ‘Bruce is my dad’ thing. That was like the final nail in the coffin in a really shit two days. He came to the Manor with this letter my mom wrote when I was born saying that Bruce was my real dad. And yeah, my dad, Jack, he came to the Manor with the letter and a fricken gun and tried to shoot Bruce. Then he said I wasn’t his kid and just fucking left.”

Tim gritted his teeth as he came to an area with enemies that he had to shoot, “He just straight up said, ‘you’re not my son’ and then walked out. Like he hadn’t raised me since I was a baby. And of course the whole thing that started this was him coming out of nowhere and trying to kill me. Yeah, this thing on my face was him hitting me with a whiskey bottle because I mouthed off at him. Like, who does that? I mean, he’s never really been around and there was that one time he let mom beat me with a fucking belt, but who the hell attacks their kid like that? Their own kid? Because fuck what everyone says about blood making family, fifteen years don’t just go down the toilet because of a paternity test. Genetics doesn’t mean he’s not my fucking dad.”

The character on the screen let out a cry as he died, the screen going grey as he collapsed. Tim realized that his eyes were blurring; tears dropped from his cheeks onto his hands and the controller. Cassie, Conner, and Bart were all watching him, silent and looking a little distressed. Slowly, Conner reached out and pulled Tim into a gentle hug. Tim collapsed and cried for the second time that day, this time silently letting the tears fall. Cassie rubbed his back soothingly while Bart rested his head on Tim’s knee. Tim, surrounded by the people who cared about him, their silent support creating a cocoon around him, felt all at once incredibly vulnerable and completely protected.

After a long time, Tim sat up and rubbed his eyes, “I’m okay,” he said, “I’ll be okay.”

Conner nodded solemnly; his eyes flicked up the stitches in the side of Tim’s head and he frowned, “You want us to do anything?”

Tim shook his head, “Bruce is working on it,” he said, “You guys don’t have to worry.”
“Don’t have to,” Cassie said, “But we’re gonna anyway.”

“That’s what friends do,” Brat said softly, “We’re always gonna worry about you Tim. Worry and care are two peas in a pod.”

Tim laughed a little, “Yeah, you’re right,” he said, wiping away the last of his tears, “God, I’ve been crying so much. I feel like a baby.”

“Crying is good for you!” Bart said, bouncing up a little, “It releases all the stress hormones in your brain and makes you feel better. That’s why sad tears look different under a microscope than happy tears.”

Conner squinted suspiciously, “Sounds fake,” he said.

“It’s true!” Bart insisted, “I’ll prove it!” He leapt up and was gone with a gust of wind. Five seconds later he reappeared, “I don’t know where the Bludhaven library is.”

Tim burst out laughing, “I really love you guys,” he said. He stood up and stretched, “Come on, I’ll take you to the library and Bart can prove Conner wrong.”

Cassie chuckled and stood as well, taking the controller to save the game and turn off the console and TV, “Any excuse to make Conner look stupid, right?”

“I feel attacked,” Conner huffed, crossing his arms, “You’re all ganging up on me.”

They exchanged a few more teasing remarks and left the apartment, Tim stowing his phone, wallet, and the spare key in his pocket. It felt good to walk around outside in the marginally fresh air. Bludhaven had a slightly sunnier disposition than Gotham, though the sunlight was tinted weirdly from all the pollution in the air. Tim didn’t mind, it was nice to just be moving around and chatting with his three closest friends. Maybe he’d go for a jog later.

They walked all the way to the library, which took about half an hour at a leisurely pace. Bart went searching through the scientific inventory of books while Tim and the others found a table to sit at. Tim stretched out, letting the ache seep out of his bones, leaving him feeling lighter and clearer headed than he had when he arrived.

“Here!” Bart exclaimed, slamming a large book full of scientific journals down on the table, heedless of the ‘shushes’ that were hissed at him.

They all poured over the article Bart turned to. Conner grumbled, “Okay, so I’m wrong. Big deal.”

“Is anyone surprised?” Tim teased.

“You can be replaced,” Conner huffed, “I’m replacing you with gerbil.”

They all giggled, trying to keep quiet. They began to debate the article and rib each other again when Tim noticed something out of the corner of his eye. A dark shape melted into the shadows just as Tim tried to look. Something crawled along Tim’s spine.

“Guys, I think we should leave,” he said, whole body tensing.

“What did you notice?” Conner asked, the rest of them following Tim’s lead. Cassie reached for her belt, which was actually her lasso wrapped several times around her.

Tim didn’t have time to elaborate on his instincts when a hissing noise came from behind them.
Within seconds, the library was filled with smoke. Tim lost sight of his friends and started coughing violently as his oxygen was cut off. He barely had time to register hands on him as he lost consciousness.

Dick had just finished filing the paperwork on an arrest for public urination when the calls started coming in. A gas attack of some kind at the library, all available units needed. Dick felt his heart stutter, instinctively knowing that something was very wrong.

The ambulances had arrived just a few minutes before the police and were bringing people out of the library. Many were unconscious, some not breathing, and a few starting to come around. The gas was some kind of knockout drug, Dick realized, designed to put people to sleep quickly. Dick was about to head into the fray when he noticed a familiar mop of red hair amongst the paramedics.

“Bart!” Dick called, loping up to him, “What happened?”

Bart coughed a few times, “Some kind of attack,” he wheezed, “Tim noticed something and then the gas was everywhere.”

“Where’s Tim?” Dick asked, feeling cold dread flood down his spine and settle in his toes.

Bart shook his head and Dick turned to see if he could spot Tim or the others. Cassie was lying down in the back on an ambulance, oxygen mask over her face. Conner was helping the paramedics bring people out, apparently not affected by the gas. Dick went over to him.

“Superboy, where’s Tim?” he demanded, slipping into Nightwing a little.

“I don’t know,” Conner said through gritted teeth, “I turned my back for a second to try and see where the gas was coming from and when I turned around he was gone.”

“Gone? Gone where?” Dick prompted. Was he still lost in the building?

Conner deposited the two people he was carrying into the care of a paramedic. “He’s gone,” he said, “He’s not anywhere in or around the building. I checked five times.”

Dick let out the breath he’d been holding, trying to make his brain work. He looked up at the library, where the gas was still filtering out of windows and doors, “This was deliberate. This wasn’t an attack on the library. This was a distraction.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Conner asked.

“It means someone wanted Tim specifically,” Dick said, “It means we’re fucked.”

Tim came around slowly, throat feeling like someone had scrubbed it out with sandpaper and then made him swallow dry salt. Gentle hands tipped his head back and poured cold water down his throat slowly. Tim drank gratefully, too disoriented and thirsty to think of poison.
“Slowly child,” a familiar woman’s voice said, “We don't want you to drown. Not yet.”

Tim licked his lips and tried to piece together what happened and where he was. The library, the gas, hands, and now he was somewhere dark, not cold but not warm either, with a familiar(?) woman giving him water. Tim shifted and realized that he was tied down to a chair. The chair was cushioned and the rope was soft, so he wasn’t uncomfortable. Tim blinked a few times and picked his head up, trying to see who was with him.

Talia Al Ghul stood before him, tall and imposing, green eyes looking him over carefully. Tim jerked up a little, startled. He realized that it was only his chest that was tied, and his arms and legs were free. The knot was even at the front where he could reach it.

“Now that you're awake, I assume you’d like to know why you're here,” Talia said, watching Tim fumble with the knot.

“That’d be nice, thanks,” Tim said, trying to get his fingers to work. They slid on the smooth ropes.

Talia watched Tim struggle for a moment before taking a knife and quickly slicing through the ropes, the tip of the knife blade whispering against Tim’s shirt, “You’re here to meet your family, Timothy.”

“Family?” Tim asked, struggling to his feet. His legs felt unsteady. What the hell had he been drugged with.

Talia stepped aside and Tim noticed for the first time a figure behind her. When he first got a good look, his brain thought ‘photograph of Bruce as a child’ before he realized that it was an actual person. A boy of about eight years old, dark hair and green eyes like Talia’s, the spitting image of Bruce in old photographs.

The boy stepped forward and looked up at Tim, regarding him in a strange, almost indifferent manner, “You look shocked brother. Don't be. I imagined that you’d be taller.”

Tim blinked, “Um, what?”

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end of Part II! Next chapter is the start of Part III, the last stretch of the story. I had a lot of fun with this chapter, especially with Dick and YJ all taking care of Timmy. My boi needed some love.

A quick timeline in case anyone is confused: Friday night, Jack attacks Tim, Tim is picked up by Selina and then goes to Wayne Manor. Later Friday or early Saturday morning, Jack comes to the Manor and threatens Bruce. Saturday night, Tim leaves the manor for Bludhaven. Tim falls asleep Saturday night and continues sleeping all through Sunday. Monday morning he wakes up.
Part III Chapter i: Primogeniture

Chapter Notes

Here we are guys! Part III! You guys have all been so great and I'm so happy to be getting to the home stretch with all of you.

I wanted to take a minute to say thank you to all of the lovely people who leave comments here. A few of you have expressed happiness and even surprise at how quickly I write these chapters, but want to tell you that it's mostly because of you guys that I write so fast! I know it's old hat by now to ask for comments and feedback, but it really does motivate me so much when I get comments and feedback saying how much they love my writing. So this is me saying thank you for all of your support!

No contest this chapter because I forgot to put one in whoops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim blinked down at the child, “I’m sorry, what?” he said again.

The boy huffed and turned to Talia, “Mother, are you sure this is my brother? He seems simple.”

“That may be, my son,” Talia said, “But yes, this is your brother.”

The boy looked back at Tim and scoffed, “Tt, I have a hard time believing that.”

Talia raised a perfect eyebrow, adopting a haughty look, “Do you think I’ve been mistaken?” she asked.

“No Mother, of course not,” the child said quickly, “He doesn’t seem like much is all.”

“Okay,” Tim said, putting up his hands, “Someone back up and explain everything to me. Where the hell am I?”

Talia looked back at Tim, “I’ve brought you to a League of Assassins stronghold,” she said, “And it’s just as I said, I brought you to meet your family.”

Tim looked down at the boy again; he really did look exactly like old photos of Bruce at the same age. There really was no doubt to his parentage.

“My brother,” Tim said, not sure how to process what was happening.

The boy stood tall (as tall as he could, seeing as he was probably only around four feet high), “I am Damian Al Ghul,” he said primly.

“Right,” Tim said, “I’m um, Tim.”

Damian narrowed his eyes at Tim, clearly unimpressed. Talia began to walk away and Damian turned to follow her, leaving Tim to catch up. Opening a door, Talia led them into a stone corridor that was lit by torchlight.
“I have raised Damian in secret from his father for eight years,” Talia explained as they walked, “I have trained him to be the perfect heir to both my father’s empire and his father’s work.”

Tim glanced down at Damian, who despite walking straight and tall like a perfect little heir would, was holding onto his mother’s skirt like a child. Tim didn’t like where any of this was going.

They came to a door at the end of the corridor, which Talia unlocked and lead them through to a winding staircase. “Damian was to be the perfect heir,” Talia stopped and looked back at Tim, “Of course, that was assuming that he was the only heir.”

Tim blinked, “That’s why you kidnapped me? Some outdated inheritance laws?” He wanted to bash his head against the wall, “Lady, you’re nuts.”

“Bite your tongue!” Damian snarled, “How dare you disrespect her!”

“Calm, Damian,” Talia ordered, “He’ll learn respect soon enough.” She looked back at Tim and there was something in her expression for a half second, “I am well aware of the ancient quality of the laws that govern my father’s empire Drake. Believe me, if I could change them, I would have done so by now.”

Talia continued up the stairs, Damian shooting dirty looks over his shoulder as Tim followed them. Tim recalled that Talia was just as ambitious as her father, and probably more ruthless, but because she was a woman, had to occupy a very specific place in her father’s hierarchy. He almost felt a little sorry for her.

They climbed for a long time, enough that Tim was starting to wonder how tall the building they were in was. As they climbed, Tim noticed that it became warmer and warmer. They finally came to the top of the staircase, to another door. Talia opened it and Tim was nearly blinded by the light that flooded in. When his eyes adjusted, Tim sucked in a breath at the sight before him. The stronghold sprawled out before them, as large as a small village, the beautiful buildings with intricate designs and colours, gilded accents shining in the sun. A vast desert lay beyond the tall walls of the stronghold, stretching out in any direction as far as the eye could see. The main building was to their left, towering above everything else in sight, including the smaller building they were in that was little more than a single tower. Some sort of dungeon Tim had to assume. He’d probably been underground, which was why he hadn’t felt the heat until they’d climbed the stairs.

“There are over two thousand men here, and as many servants, all loyal to the Al Ghul’s,” Talia said, “Every inch of this hold is guarded and patrolled at all times. But even if you were to escape, the desert would claim you before you could reach help.”

“Right,” Tim said, squinting out at the horizon, already trying to come up with plans to escape or get rescued.

Talia raised an eyebrow at him, as though she could sense what he was thinking. She gestured for him to follow her and led them back down a staircase on the side of the building. For lack of anything else to do with the situation, Tim followed. They made their way down to the alleys and towards the main building. Whenever they encountered anyone, they would respectfully stop and wait for them to pass, bowing their heads. Tim felt their eyes following him, but there was no whispering. Knowing Ra’s, he’d probably have their tongues cut out if they whispered within hearing range.

They came to the main building and headed up the front steps and inside into a great hall. Tim was glad to be out of the burning desert sun; he wasn’t sure where they were, but due to the heat he suspected they were still in the northern hemisphere where it was still summer.
The inside of the main building was even more ornate than the outside, and Tim could probably have spend hours following the patterns and colours. He was so mesmerized by the beauty of the place that he almost didn't notice the Demon’s Head himself until they were nearly right in front of him.

“I see you’ve been busy, daughter,” Ra’s said, regarding the three of them with near indifference. His eyes cast over Tim as though he were transparent and Ra’s was more interested in what was behind him.

“Father,” Talia greeted, “This is—”

“I’m well aware of who this child is Talia,” Ra’s cut her off. He stepped forwards until he was right in front of Tim, his long robes sweeping around his feet, “This is the Bat’s other bastard child. The eldest child.” He looked Tim over again, looking almost bored, “He does not seem like much. I’m not entirely sure why you bothered, daughter.”

“If he is not much, then he will not last and that will be that,” Talia pointed out.

Ra’s hummed, “I suppose that is true enough,” he said. He looked down into Tim’s eyes, the pale green of his irises made steely in the light filtering through the tall windows.

*He’s trying to intimidate me*, Tim thought, and he was sick of it. He stared right back at Ra’s, not backing down because he was sick of everything right now. Tim let his annoyance be known in his gaze, even though it was probably going to get him smacked for disrespect. Or killed.

Ra’s raised an eyebrow, “Then again, there might be some potential in this one,” he said, “I suppose you mean to pit them against one another?”

“What better way to determine a true heir?” Talia said, “Have you not ever pitted two worthy candidates in battle against one another to determine the better?”

“Indeed,” Ra’s said. He regarded Tim for another moment before turning and walking away, “Do as you please daughter, but know that it is upon my indulgence that you do so.”

“Yes father,” Talia said, face unreadable. Ra’s disappeared around a corner with a flap of his robe and left them there. Talia looked at Tim again, “Come Drake, I will take you to your chambers.”

Tim’s ‘chambers’ turned out to be an entire suite, complete with a dining area, sitting room, a bathroom with a huge sunken bath that was nearly a swimming pool, and a bedroom piled with pillows and blankets and sheets that probably cost more than what the entire population of the continental US made in a year. Tim was used to wealth, but this sort of opulence made his head spin.

“If you require anything, there are servants at your beck and call,” Talia said, “You’re free to explore the compound before sundown, though I would suggest you rest. Dinner will be served to you in your chambers,” Talia explained, “Any questions?”

“Got a phone?” Tim asked, because for some reason he was incapable of shutting his damn snark off in tense situation.

Talia didn’t even blink. Without another word, she left Tim in the room, Damian following behind her. The child cast one last dirty look at Tim before mother and son disappeared from Tim’s sight.

Immediately, Tim took stock of his situation. His wallet and phone were gone, as well as all of his original clothing (even his underwear, which he tried not to think about too hard), and he was dressed in loose fitting pants and a kind of tunic thing, similar to what Damian had been wearing, but less decorated. Tim started to search through the room, not expecting to find his possessions, but
hopefully he’d turn up any cameras or bugs hidden in the room. He didn’t find anything, in fact he
didn’t find any modern technology at all aside from a modern toilet and sink. Tim glanced at the huge
french doors leading to the balcony and went to them. They were unlocked, so Tim stepped out onto
the stone balcony overlooking the whole compound. Judging by the position of the sun, it was
somewhere around later afternoon, which meant that he’d lost at least a day. Below, people milled
about, going about their day, and Tim noticed a few look up at his balcony. He went back inside and
went straight for his door, find that it was also unlocked. Outside in the hall, a huge guard dressed in
black was standing sentry, watching the door.

Tim looked at him for a minute, “So are you my bodyguard or just my guard?” he asked.

The man said nothing and barely even blinked. Tim waited another minute before receding back into
his room. They were obviously quite confident that Tim wouldn't be able to escape, what with their
seemingly lax security. It was almost as if they were daring Tim to try it, knowing that if they didn’t
catch him, Tim had nowhere to run but into the desert, which would mean certain death. No
technology meant no way to send a signal out for Batman to come to his rescue. Tim would either
have to wait for someone to find him or find some way to survive in the desert.

With a groan, Tim collapsed on the couch in the sitting room, closing his eyes and trying to make
heads or tails of what the hell was going on. So now not only was Bruce his father, but he also had a
half brother whose mother was Talia Al Ghul (geez Bruce, keep it in your pants). Talia had
obviously saw the news in Gotham, feared that her son would be replaced in the laws of succession,
and decided to kidnap Tim to kill him, but only after she proved that Damian was the greater heir. In
some twisted way, it made sense; since the Al Ghul’s were ruled by ancient laws, Tim being the
older son really was a threat to whatever plan Talia had for Damian.

Tim’s stomach rolled over when he thought of the boy, Damian, his younger half brother. Talia had
said he was eight years old, but already Tim could see that something was very wrong with Damian.
He carried himself stiffly like a warrior, and seemed to be completely loyal to Talia in an almost
brainwashed manner. If Tim had to guess, Talia wasn’t the most nurturing or loving mother around,
not to mention whatever ideas Ra’s was putting into the poor kid’s head.

A few hours later, someone knocked on Tim’s door. Tim prepared himself for anything, but it was
only the dinner Talia had promised. The servants kept their heads down, avoiding his gaze. They set
the food out and quickly left, bowing to Tim respectfully. Obviously they were trying to make Tim
feel as though he wasn’t a prisoner. Tim considered not eating, fearing poison, but he’d need his
strength and if they wanted to kill him they would have done so by now.

Tim was just finishing with his food (which was delicious) when he heard a noise from behind him.
He ducked out of the way just as a knife whistled past his head. He turned and saw a small figure at
his window, dressed in black and brandishing several throwing knives. The figure dashed at him and
Tim leapt up, dodging the attack. The black clad figure chased him for a while before Tim managed
to grab the fork from his table as a weapon and started fighting back. They tussled for a minute or
two before Tim managed to catch one of the blades and pin is attacker’s sleeve to the wall, tearing
away the mask as he jumped backwards out of range.

“Damian?” Tim asked, though honestly he shouldn’t have been surprised, “What the hell?”

Damian struggled to get his sleeve free, “You’re more competent than I gave you credit for,” he
snarled, “But it doesn’t matter. Whether it’s today or tomorrow, I will destroy you.”

Tim groaned and put his face in his hands, “Kid, I don’t even care about any of this. I just want to go
home.”
“Coward!” Damian cried, “Face me like a man!”

Tim rolled his eyes, “Kid, you’d have to actually be a man for me to do that, and we’re both a few years off from that.”

Damian growled and finally freed his sleeve. He charged Tim again, but Tim just dodged him, “Fight me!” Damian howled.

Tim groaned and kept avoiding Damian’s attacks, “Isn’t it past your bedtime?” he snapped.

Damian cried out with rage, about to attack again when the door burst open, “What is the meaning of this!” Talia shouted, striding into the room.

“I am claiming my birthright!” Damian cried, pointing his finger at Tim, “He is nothing but an obstacle in my way and I will eliminate him!”

“You sneak attacked me you little psychopath!” Tim shouted, though it felt strange to shout at an eight year old, “I want nothing to do with any of this!”

Damian snarled and said something in what was probably a dialect of Arabic, but he didn’t attack again. Tim suspected he wouldn't without his mother’s permission. Talia sighed and put out her hand.

“Enough Damian,” she said, “Your enthusiasm is admirable, but you will have your chance to face you brother tomorrow. Return to your quarters.”

Damian continued to glare at Tim, still tense for a fight. “Now Damian!” Talia ordered. Immediately Damian straightened and stomped out of the room. Tim could almost see the storm cloud above his head.

“Well he’s a regular chip off the old block,” Tim said, looking at Talia, “I don't suppose you you’re going to punish him for trying to kill me?”

“Overeagerness is not a punishable offence, at least not in this case,” Talia said, “If there are any consequences to his actions, he will know them soon enough.”

Tim rolled his eyes, “Because that’s not ominous at all.”

Talia narrowed her eyes at Tim, “Curfew is in an hour. If you wish to explore, I would suggest you do so quickly and then return to your room. Anyone violating curfew is liable to be executed on sight.” She turned and quickly marched out of the room. The sentry from earlier closed the door behind her, leaving Tim alone once again.

With a sigh, Tim decided to just go to bed. He’d need to be rested for whatever Talia had in store for him tomorrow.

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Damian continued to glare at Tim, still tense for a fight. “Now Damian!” Talia ordered. Immediately Damian straightened and stomped out of the room. Tim could almost see the storm cloud above his head.

“Well he’s a regular chip off the old block,” Tim said, looking at Talia, “I don't suppose you you’re going to punish him for trying to kill me?”

“Overeagerness is not a punishable offence, at least not in this case,” Talia said, “If there are any consequences to his actions, he will know them soon enough.”

Tim rolled his eyes, “Because that’s not ominous at all.”

Talia narrowed her eyes at Tim, “Curfew is in an hour. If you wish to explore, I would suggest you do so quickly and then return to your room. Anyone violating curfew is liable to be executed on sight.” She turned and quickly marched out of the room. The sentry from earlier closed the door behind her, leaving Tim alone once again.

With a sigh, Tim decided to just go to bed. He’d need to be rested for whatever Talia had in store for him tomorrow.

“The hell do you mean you lost it?” Bruce growled.

Barbara glared at him through her computer camera, “I mean that I lost the signal. Whoever took Tim must have ditched or destroyed his phone and wallet. I can’t track something that doesn’t exist anymore.”
Bruce growled and paced around, running a hand through his hair, “Where did you lose it?”

“Last time it pinged was two blocks from the library,” Barbara said, clicking at her computer, “Then the signal disappeared. They either ditched it or more likely destroyed it.”

When the news that Tim had been taken had reached Bruce, he’d thought that it was run of the mill kidnappers trying to extort Bruce Wayne for money by nabbing his newly found son. That had quickly been realized as a pipe dream as more information came through, or rather more information about how little information they had. The gas had dissipated quickly, leaving no residue on any surfaces or in the lungs of any of the victims, leaving people only with sore throats and mild to moderate coughs. Whoever grabbed Tim had been quick enough to evade a half Kryptonian, and smart enough to use a large public space to stage their attack and create panic.

Furthermore, this came only hours after the news had broken that Tim Drake was Bruce Wayne’s son. When Bruce had gotten the news that the Gotham Goggle had published the story, he’d tried in vain to squash it before it could reach more credible news outlets. It had taken off however, and now the whole world knew about the scandal. The only thing Wayne Enterprises PR team could do now was mitigate things into a more controlled fall and try to keep the media from going too nuts with the story. Bruce was refraining from making any public statements, but he given an address to his team to use.

The one upshot of the story breaking was that it was making getting the paperwork for taking custody of Tim all the easier, especially since Jack Drake seemed to have skipped town after giving his tell-all. The police were still looking, but Bruce was pretty sure Jack had bribed someone to look the other way and simply left the city. Some signed divorce papers had been sent to Dana Winters’ lawyer, and a storage unit rented by Jack had had its lease broken. Jack was cutting ties with Gotham.

Bruce had actually gone to the storage unit; since the lease had been broken, but most of the stuff had been left, the owner had the legal right to sell it. Bruce had probably paid much too much for what was mostly a pile of junk, but he’d brought home a photo album he’d found in one of the boxes. A framed photograph of a newborn Tim had found its place on the mantle, next to the light up birthday card Tim had made for Dick.

“Master Bruce?” Alfred called, “Perhaps it’s time to take a break and have something to eat?”

Bruce let out an annoyed breath, “Not now Alfred,” he said. He had to find out who took Tim.

“Of course sir,” Alfred said flatly, “And I went to all the trouble of making a delicious plate of nothing for you tonight. Now it shall all go to waste.”

Bruce grumbled and rubbed his eyes, “I think I could handle a sandwich Alfred, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll have it ready for you presently sir,” Alfred said, turning towards the stairs. He paused for a moment, “We will find Master Tim sir, if not by our own power, then by Master Tim finding some way to contact us. He’s a clever boy.”

“He’s probably smarter than either of us,” Bruce admitted, “In a few years, he’ll be the one giving us orders.”

“Of that I don’t doubt sir,” Alfred said, “He’s a remarkable child.”

Bruce hummed and sat down at the computer again, feeling a little better, thinking a little clearer. Whoever took Tim had resources, lots of them, so there was no way this was a simple ransom
kidnapping. Furthermore, it wasn't clear why these people had targeted Tim. Had the targeted Tim because he was Bruce Wayne’s son, or maybe because Tim was Robin? They’d wanted Tim specifically, but the reason for wanting him was unclear.

One thing was for certain, whoever had done this had a lot of resources, and Bruce knew of only a few people or organizations that had those kind of resources and would have an interest in kidnapping Tim. He turned back to the screen that Barbara still occupied; she was typing away at her keyboards, deep in concentration.

“Oracle, how well versed are you in the movements of groups like The Court of Owls, The Falcone’s, The Black Mask Gang, and the League of Assassins?” Bruce asked her.

“You want me to peek at what Lexcorp is doing while I’m at it?” Barbara asked.

“No, I don't think Luthor would do something like this. If it was him, he would have gone after Superboy,” Bruce said.

“Right.” Barbara tapped away at her computers for a few minutes, “I think we can cross the Falcone’s off the list. They’ve been busy, too busy to mount a kidnapping like this on such short notice. Plus, not really their style.”

“Worth a shot,” Bruce said, “What are they busy with?”

“Internal struggles,” Barbara said, grinning slightly, “Some kind of rat in the ranks. They don't know how all their movements are being reported before they can make them.”

The corner of Bruce’s mouth twitched, “I’m sure that must be very frustrating.”

“I assume so,” Barbara said, “I’m looking into the Black Mask Gang, but the other two are going to take longer. They’re smarter and older than any regular gang, so it will take some time and some footwork to figure out if either are behind it.”

“I can cover footwork,” Bruce said, pulling up his cowl. Alfred set a sandwich down for him and he ate it in a few bites, “I’m heading to Bludhaven to check the scene for myself.”

“I’m sure Nightwing got all the relevant information,” Barbara said.

“I’m sure Nightwing would appreciate you coming to his defence,” Bruce said, “Having more than one perspective on things can bring out new insights.”

“Right, because it’s not that you’re just a paranoid control freak who has to do everything yourself,” Barbara said, “That’s totally not the reason.”

“Batgirl will be taking care of Gotham tonight,” Bruce said, ignoring Barbara's comment. He’d learned to let a certain amount of willfulness go in the years dealing with children, whether they were his or not, “I’ll get back to you with whatever I find.”

“Alright,” Barbara said, “Good luck.”

Bruce gave her a nod and signed off. When he found out who took Tim, he wasn't the one that was going to need luck.
Tim slept lightly, despite the bed being the softest thing he’d probably ever slept on. It was probably less to do with the bed and more to do with the ever-present threat on his life that could manifest at any time. Needless to say, Tim woke up as soon as the sun started filtering through the windows.

Not long after Tim woke up, there was a knock at the door. Tim cautiously opened it, only to find a servant with breakfast and another with what looked like a medical bag.

“Many pardons for disturbing you sir,” the servant said, dipping his head, “If you would suffer to give me permission sir, I have been tasked with your medical evaluation.”

“Oh, alright,” Tim said, feeling a little awkward to be addressed in such a manner. The man was probably in his fifties, though he was hardly taller than Tim, and he wouldn't meet Tim’s eye, keeping his head bowed low.

Tim let the two servants into his chambers, the one with his breakfast quickly depositing his food in the dining room and the man with the medical bag following Tim at a close distance, out of arm's reach but still close enough to called into action at a moment’s notice. The other servant, a person of indeterminate gender who was maybe in their forties, bowed to Tim and then quickly left, leaving Tim and the man alone. Tim also noticed that his guard was still outside in the hall.

“Um, is there anywhere you’d like me to sit while you work?” Tim asked the servant.

“Whatever is most comfortable for you, sir,” the servant said, bowing again.

Tim sat down on one of the kitchen chairs and motioned the servant to start. The man worked efficiently and mechanically, pulling the stitches from Tim’s face and dropping a stinging solution that hissed when it came into contact with Tim’s skin. His movements were designed not to intentionally inflict pain, but they weren’t gentle either. Once he was finished with Tim’s face, he performed a cursory examination of the rest of Tim, stopping at his ribs. He took some sort of salve from his bag and rubbed it on Tim’s ribs, which made them ache terribly for a moment before the pain melted away.

When he’d finished with his examination, the man stepped back to the just-out-of-arm’s-reach distance he’d been at before, “I have finished sir. Is there anything else you would suffer to permit me to do?”

“No thank you,” Tim said, “This was plenty. Thank you very much.”

The man bowed again and stayed where he was. Tim realized after a moment that he was probably waiting to be dismissed. “Um, you can go,” Tim said, feeling incredibly awkward ordering around an older man.

With one last bow, the man picked up his bag and quickly left. Tim sighed and decided to put it out of his mind. There was nothing he could do about it for now, and he doubted there was anything he could ever do about it. Tim realized that that man had probably been taught from either birth or a very young age to be completely respectful and accommodating to those he perceived as his betters. That included Tim, so long as he was there as a ‘guest’ of Talia’s.

Tim finished his breakfast and quickly washed up, knowing it wouldn’t be long until Talia came to get him. Guessing correctly, Tim was just finishing dressing (in clothes that had been laid out for him) when Talia came into his room.

“You could have knocked,” Tim said, “What if I’d been naked?”

Talia’s face was impassive, “I have seen many naked men in my lifetime. You would not impress
“Ouch,” Tim said.

“Come,” Talia ordered, “The training grounds are waiting for you.”

Tim followed Talia, taking stock of the entourage of servants and assassins that came with them. Tim’s guard also followed, so Tim guessed that he was specifically assigned to him, rather than just there to watch his room. They made their way out of the main building and through the winding alleys to a large arena. Inside, Damian was already there, swinging a sword around and fending off attackers. He was quick and agile, dodging attacks and making strikes of his own sometimes within the same movement. He was obviously skilled, but Tim could see he was extremely aggressive, not holding back from slicing his opponent up. One attacker moved too slowly out of the way and Damian slashed him across the chest; blood sprayed out onto the sand as the man fell.

“Shit,” Tim swore, watching as the man was pulled out of the ring. He was still bleeding, so he wasn't dead, but that could change if they didn't get him proper medical attention. Tim stepped forward to help, but was stopped by Talia’s hand clasping his wrist.

“Sentiment will only get you killed all the faster,” she said, not looking at Tim.

Tim tried to struggle away, but Talia’s grip was like iron. The bleeding assassin was taken away, hopefully to be treated, but probably not. Damian didn’t even look or slow down, he just kept fighting off the other opponents.

“You’re teaching him to be a murderer,” Tim hissed at Talia venomously.

“It’s the League of Assassins,” she said, “I’m teaching him the ways of his family.”

“I think Bruce would disagree,” Tim said, finally wrenching his arm free. Damian finally felled his last opponent, thankfully without killing him, and sheathed his sword. He turned to glare at Tim, specks of blood on his cheek.

“Choose your weapon,” Talia instructed, then left his side to sit in a shaded area of the arena stands. Some distance away, Tim could see Ra’s already sitting, watching.

Tim glanced at the rack of weapons, noticing how many bladed weapons their were. It took him a moment, but he finally selected a staff, twirling it around a few times to get used to the weight. It was heavier than he was used to, but he could work with it. There was no way he was going to choose anything that might actually hurt someone, even if the little psycho was trying to kill him.

“Ha, this will be easier than I thought,” Damian sneered, drawing his sword again. There was still a bit of blood on the edge.

Tim rolled his eyes and dropped into a fighting stance. The two of them circled each other for a minute before Damian charged.

Now, Tim had a few advantages here.

Damian was incredibly skilled and bloodthirsty, that was true, and it was always a challenge to take someone out without hurting them too badly when they were doing their damnedest to kill you. However, Tim had seen what Damian fought like twice by now, and he had a decent judge of what his style was like; he was quick and agile and his size made him hard to hit, but he also fought like he was about a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than he actually was. This kind of made sense; teaching him to fight for his size would be inefficient because Damian would only outgrow any
fighting style like that in a very short amount of time. His size also meant that he didn't have quite the same reach that Tim did, especially since Tim was using a staff, extending his reach even more.

Tim wasn’t used to fighting smaller opponents than himself, so he had to dance around a little to avoid Damian at first. Damian had the home field advantage as well, so that was another point against Tim. Still, Tim wasn’t about to let the little brat gut him. On Damian’s next charge, Tim didn't bother with dodging, striking out with his staff in a lunge. He caught Damian in the shoulder, shoving him backwards, the sword slicing uselessly through the air. Tim followed through with the movement, pinning Damian to the ground on his back. He quickly put his whole weight onto Damian, pinning his arms with his knees and letting his weight settle on his chest so he couldn't take a full breath. Damian coughed and struggled, kicking uselessly with his legs. He just wasn't big enough to buck Tim off.

Confident he had Damian pinned, Tim looked to Talia. She was watching them intently, but Tim couldn't guess what she was thinking. She stood and put up her hand, ending the fight.

Tim got up quickly, hopping back out of Damian’s range. Damian scrambled up and grabbed his sword, fury in his eyes. He didn't attack again, but he did drop into a fighting stance once more.

“Again,” Talia called, and Tim had hardly a second to react as Damian came at him.

This went on for quite some time. Tim pinned or disarmed Damian every fight, but tried not to hurt him too badly. Damian grew more frustrated and angry each time, trying harder and harder every fight. They were both starting to get exhausted, but Tim knew that if he gave in, slipped up for even a moment, Damian would do more than just pin him. He had to win every time or he would be killed. Their battles got longer and longer as they both tired.

Finally, after countless fights, Tim pinned Damian again, on his back once more, staff at his neck, sword several feet away where it had been knocked out of Damian’s hand, and Tim's foot on his chest. The two brothers were both breathing harshly, the sun almost completely overhead now, cooking them under the heat. Talia got up and held up her hand to end the fight.

“That’s enough for today,” she said, then turned and stalked out of the arena.

Tim breathed a sigh of relief, his shoulders sagging with exhaustion. He stepped back from Damian, but not completely out of reach. He looked down at Damian and once again though of how much he looked like Bruce. Tentatively, Tim reach out his hand to help Damian up.

Damian looked at the hand like he’d never seen one before. He glared up at Tim and slapped the hand away, struggling to his feet and walking off. Tim watched him disappear out of the arena and sighed. Tim went to put the staff back on the rack and felt eyes following him. He turned and saw that Ra’s was still sitting in the stands, watching him.

Chapter End Notes

A few things:

I'm trying to walk a line between making sure Ra's and the League are all portrayed as they should be without racially coding them in a negative way. They're Arabic, but I don't want to play into stereotypes. The medical man I tried to make to be a very respectful servant type, but let me know if I (unintentionally) made him too
stereotypical. I'm also going to refrain from calling them 'ninjas', since ninjas are Japanese (one of the things that bugged me about the animated movie Son of Batman. Their Arabic!). I'm pretty sure Ra's has ninjas, and all sorts of other kinds of assassins, but it's like calling all hot tubs 'Jacuzzis'. Ninjas are assassins, but not all assassins are ninjas.

I know Damian kicked Tim's ass in the comics at first, but that was under a wildly different context. Tim wasn't expecting to get attacked then, and I don't think he was thinking that Damian was actually trying to kill him. Also, there's a fair bit of difference in size between an eight year old and a ten year old, but not as much between a fifteen year old and a seventeen year old in terms of overall percentage. In this case, even if we assume they're both a little on the small side (like I do), Tim's got a huge weight and height advantage over Damian here. Tim winning against Damian (especially knowing his life is at risk) is entirely feasible here.
Part III Chapter ii: Township

Chapter Notes

So I've decided to divide Part III into 2 parts and have 4 parts total. There's a natural divide in the narrative, so I think I'll have two shorter parts rather than one long part. So this is going to be a story of 4 parts rather than three.

WIN A FIC! Win a 1k fic by guessing the reference! Since this one is very famous, I'm not going to give a hint and I'm going to discourage using Google. It's pretty obvious where it is, so I'm going to let you guys have at it. Remember, if you've won a commission before, please let someone else have a go at it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next two weeks was spent in much the same manner as the first day; Tim and Damian would be made to fight from after breakfast to around midday, after which Tim was left to do as he pleased. The first day, mindful of his big silent escort, Tim wandered throughout the stronghold.

It was basically it’s own little village, though Tim could only find one servant’s barracks. He took note of the placement of buildings and what they were for. Grain storage, cold storage, armories (there were several), animal stables, a watch/bell tower, everything a self-sufficient desert settlement might need. Tim was sure that there was some sort of route through the desert that brought them supplies at least every so often, but he didn't find any garages of vehicles, so they had to come from somewhere else. That probably meant there was gasoline either in the compound or near it somewhere where a caravan could refuel. This was assuming they didn’t use planes to travel, which they might, in which case the fuel source could be much further away.

At night, Tim took note of the constellations, trying to memorize them in case he found a star map in the library (which was in the main building and huge . If Tim weren’t trying to escape, he could spend a decade going through just one section of the vast reservoir of knowledge). He also paid attention to the positions of the shadows at midday, confirming that he was in fact still in the northern hemisphere, but very near the equator. Tim scanned the horizon in every direction, but could see nothing but scraggy arid landscape. However, at dusk, when the sun was at a certain angle, Tim noticed a small outcropping of mountains resting just on the horizon, but only from his room or other high place.

On the third day, as an experiment, Tim walked out of the front gate. No one stopped him, and his escort followed him only about a hundred meters before stopping, even when Tim continued on. Tim continued walking for probably several miles, expecting someone to come after him, but no one did. After a while, he turned around and walked back, finding his escort waiting for him where he’d left him. The next day after that, Tim packed up as much supplies as he could and tried it again. As he was leaving the gate, a servant scurried out to meet him.

“Sir, I carry,” the little man said, gesturing to Tim's bag.

“No, that’s okay,” Tim said, trying to brush past him.

“Sir, I carry, Sir. Sir!” the servant trailed after him, insisting on taking Tim’s bag for him. He followed Tim past the 100 meter point, never trying to grab the bag, but keeping up with Tim a few
steps behind. After a while, Tim turned around and returned to the gate.

So he was ‘allowed’ to leave if he wanted, but if he took any supplies with him someone would try to follow. It made a certain amount of sense to be so lax with him he guessed, seeing as Tim would certainly die in the desert if he went out alone, and if he had supplies with him, someone would try to come along with him and then they would certainly die. Tim had noticed that all of the servants looked thin and slightly weak, probably kept that way so they didn’t have the option of running away into the desert, of their own will or by trying to ‘help’ someone like Tim.

So Tim was stuck until he came up with a plan. He tried finding any modern technology, but so far had found none. There did seem to be places that were off limits to him, but he hadn’t tried too hard to get into them just yet. He was still in the process of testing his boundaries though, so he’d establish what was considered ‘sneaking’ and what was considered ‘stealthy exploring’.

In the meantime, Tim was well taken care of. Food was abundantly available to him, he was provided with fine silks and cottons to be dressed in, and there was never a servant far away to wait on his beck and call (not that Tim made a habit of ordering them around much). He was initially puzzled by his guard, who didn’t seem to eat or drink or sleep or do anything aside from watch him every hour, but then one day Tim notice a miniscule scar on the man’s pinky finger that hadn’t been there the day before. The next day it was gone again, and Tim realized that it was actually two men, probably identical twins, made only to look like one man was watching Tim tirelessly. They never spoke to Tim, barely made eye contact, and seemed to have a strange policy on keeping him alive. They hadn’t come to his defense when Damian had attacked him, though Tim guessed that they’d sent someone to fetch Talia, but one day Tim was inspecting the brickwork of a building when something crashed above him. He was suddenly and violently jerked backwards just as a pot crashed where he’d been standing. The guard let him go quickly and went back to being stoic, but it was enough to let Tim know that he was to be kept alive. If he was to be killed, it was to be by someone’s will.

It was the 16th day, and Tim was fighting with Damian again. Damian had learned his fighting style by now, and Tim could see him applying that knowledge, but he was still much smaller and expending way too much energy trying to come straight for Tim. Tim’s usual tactic was to avoid Damian for a while, tire him out, then take advantage of his greater reach and exploit Damian’s weak points. The fights always ended up with Damian on the ground, pinned and at Tim’s mercy.

“That’s enough for today,” Talia called, “Damian, come with me.”

Damian growled and get up, gripping his weapon tightly in his hand. He shoved past Tim and marched after his mother. Tim watched them go and wondered if he should intervene. Whatever Talia had planned couldn’t be good.

Tim didn’t see Damian for three days after that.

The compound wasn’t all that big, and Tim had spotted Damian while he was exploring several times over the two weeks. He usually saw Damian from a distance, followed by servants or following his mother. One time, Tim had caught Damian in the library, sitting on one of the plush couches and reading. It had been so jarring to see him doing something so normal that Tim had stared at him for nearly a full minute. Damian had almost caught him at it, but Tim had slipped behind a shelf before he could be noticed.

When Tim finally saw Damian again, it was at his balcony in the evening. Tim was trying to get a sketch of the mountains he saw in the distance when he heard something drop onto the balcony from above. He whipped around to see Damian perched on the stone edge of the balcony.
“Where have you been?” Tim asked, relaxing since it didn’t seem like Damian was about to attack.

Damian stared at him for a minute. “Why do you leave me alive?”

Tim blinked, “You mean during our fights?” he asked, “Of course I’d leave you alive.”

“But why?” Damian asked, eyes narrowing, “With me out of the way, you’d be free to inherit our father’s work without contention. You don’t even try to physically harm me.”

Tim scoffed, “First of all, I’d never kill anyone. It’s against everything I stand for. Plus, you’re a kid, and I’m not going to hurt an eight year old. Lastly, I keep telling you guys I don’t have any interest in this weird obsession with inheritance that you have.”

Damian tilted his head, “Do you not want to inherit our father’s work?”

Tim groaned a ran a hand through his hair, “I really don’t know kid, I just found out Bruce was my dad two weeks ago. I’m still trying to process it.”

Tim hadn’t really had all much time to think about it, preoccupied as he was with escape. At night when he was in bed however, before he forced himself to sleep, the thoughts came to him unbidden. What was he going to do about being Bruce’s son, realistically? Once he got out, he’d have to face the world as the illegitimate son of Bruce Wayne, and he had no idea how that was going to affect his life. Not to mention how his relationship with Bruce was going to change. Of course that wasn’t even getting into all the stuff with Jack he’d need to deal with. Had Jack calmed down and come back to the Manor looking for him? Was he worried about Tim?

“Bruce?” Damian asked, “Is that our father’s name?”

Tim snapped out of his reverie and looked at Damian, “You don’t even know who he is?”

Damian dropped down to sit on the edge of the balcony instead of perch on it, “I was to be told of our father’s identity when I had earned it,” he said, “When I had beaten Mother in combat.”

“Yikes,” Tim said, “So you know nothing about him at all?”

Damian puffed out his chest, “I know that he is the best of all men,” he said, “He is brave and righteous, and he rules over his domain with an iron fist. He is strong and smart enough to impress even Grandfather. He is the best of all men in the world.”

What the hell had Talia been filling the kid’s head with? “I mean, I guess you could describe him like that,” Tim said.

Damian looked at Tim for a moment, “You work with him. You know our father.” It was a statement, not a question. It came out almost soft, like Damian was just a curious child.

“Yeah, I know him,” Tim said, watching Damian in the fading light. The light of the setting sun gave everything a pinkish orange glow.

Damian was quiet for a few minutes, then he hopped down from the balcony and went inside of Tim’s chambers to his sitting room. He sat down on Tim’s plush couch and looked expectantly up at him. “Tell me about our father,” he demanded. Aside from the rudeness, he looked like any other eight year old might, demanding a story at bedtime.

Tim realized sharply that Damian was eight years old, just a little kid. He’d spent his whole life under the thumb of Talia and Ra’s Al Ghul, getting taught only what they wanted him to be taught.
Damian was a victim of his circumstance, no more responsible for his own birth and upbringing than Tim was. Tim’s chest ached when he thought about what this kid must have gone through his whole life to become what he was.

Damian furrowed his brow at Tim, “Well?” he prompted.

Tim rolled his eyes, “Say please,” he said, even as he came to sit on the couch next to Damian.

“Why?” Damian asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s polite,” Tim said, “I’m your brother, not a servant.” Damian should probably say ‘please’ to servants as well, but baby steps.

Damian huffed and said nothing. Tim decided to let it go for now, “What do you want to know?” he prompted.

“Everything,” Damian said, “Tell me everything you know about him.”

“Okay,” Tim said, wondering where to even start, “Well, you look like him,” he said.

“Really?” Damian asked, a little wide eyed.

Tim nodded, “Yeah, you really look like him. If you see old photographs of Bruce from when he was your age, you look just like him.” He looked over Damian, “Except for around the eyes. You have Talia’s eyes. And you’re much darker. Bruce is very pale, like I am. Your nose is also a little different.”

Damian glanced down at his hands, which were a light, even brown from spending his days in the desert sun. Tim had gotten a sunburn on the third day. After he’d peeled, he had a spatter of new freckles, but his skin was only maybe a shade darker. If Tim took his shirt off, he was sure he’d blind someone.

“I’m told out father is stronger than all men. He’s never been defeated in battle,” Damian said, “Is this true?”

“Well, I don’t think he’s ever lost a fight in the way you’re thinking, but he’s certainly lost a few times,” Tim said, thinking of Jason’s monument in the Cave, “Winning and losing isn’t always so clear. Mostly Bruce has won though. He’s definitely one of the best fighters in the world.”

Damian huffed and sat straight, “Of course, he must be if Grandfather thinks so highly of him.”

Tim hummed, “Did your grandfather tell you that Bruce also refuses to kill?”

Damian blinked, “He does? Why?”

“Because that’s what he does,” Tim said, “He doesn’t fight to win, he fights to protect people.”

Damian frowned, as though this was a new concept for him (it might be, for all Tim knew), “So he does not kill? Ever?”

Tim shook his head, “Never, not even when it would be justified. He has a strong moral code that way.”

Damian was quiet for a long moment, “Tell me more about him,” he asked.

Tim settled back on the couch and thought for a while. “He’s very caring,” he said, “He doesn’t
always show it very well, but he cares very much for everyone in his life. He’s not so good with words, so you kind of have to read between the lines of his actions, which can be frustrating. He’s also very empathetic, so he’s embarrassed easily.” Tim’s heart ached for home, “Bruce is also very kind and gentle when he wants to be.”

“Kind?” Damian asked, tilting his head.

“Yeah like,” Tim thought around for a good story, “There was this one time, a few years back now, where there was the telepathic girl, and she was wreaking havoc in a city. Her powers were out of control because she was dying and she couldn’t stop it. So the whole Justice League is there to stop her from hurting anyone, and this lady from the government comes up and she has this device.”

“What does this have to do with our father?” Damian asked impatiently.

“I’m getting to that, shush,” Tim said, “So she has this device, and she says that if the girl dies on her own, she’ll release a telepathic shockwave and kill everyone in the city. But if the device was used on her, she’d die quietly. So Bruce says he’ll take it and he goes to confront the girl.”

“Did he use it? Did he kill her?” Damian asked.

“No,” Tim said, “He sat with her until she died on her own. He comforted her and convinced her to put back everything she’d made wrong with her powers. And then he held her hand until she passed away.”

Damian waited for a moment, “That’s it?” he asked.

“That’s it,” Tim said, “He just comforted her until she passed. Bruce never even intended to use the device on her.”

Damian blinked and seemed to contemplate this for a minute, “But she would have died anyway. Why not just make it quicker?”

“She was dying anyway, why not make her last few moments nice?” Tim pointed out, “Bruce would never kill anyone. No matter what.”

Damian looked like Tim had just told him the world was actually flat. He frowned and looked like he was concentrating hard, trying to figure it out. It would almost be cute if not for the subject matter.

“So it was… mercy?” Damian asked after a while.

Tim nodded, “Something like that,” he said, “Bruce is very merciful.”

Damian frowned, “If I find you are lying to me, I will not hesitate to strike you down.”

“Yeah, like that’s been going well for you,” Tim said.

Tim could almost physically see Damian bristling. “That means nothing! I will strike you down and take my place as rightful heir!” he shouted, leaping to his feet. In a huff, he stormed back to the balcony and started the scale the building, leaving Tim alone in his room.

“Crazy brat,” Tim said, getting up and starting to get ready for bed. As he shut the window and locked it, he couldn't help but think of Damian, and how his upbringing must have been horrible, but he didn't know anything different. He probably didn't even think it was wrong to be subjected to all the things he had to go through.
With a lurch in his gut, Tim realized he’d have to take Damian with him when he escaped. There was no way he could leave a child here, even one as annoying as Damian. It would be impossible to take Damian against his will, and tricking him would work for maybe two seconds, so there was only one thing to do.

Tim was going to have to befriend his little brother.

After three days of Tim being missing, an alarm went off in the Batcave, signalling that someone without authentication had entered. Bruce startled for a moment, but then he noticed it was Spoiler, and on her heels was Batgirl. He sighed and stood, not looking forward to the conversation he was about to have with the stormy looking blonde girl who was advancing on him.

“Spoiler—” was about as far as he got before Stephanie reeled back and slapped him hard across the face. It was surprisingly powerful for having come from a girl of maybe a hundred pounds, and Bruce actually stumbled back a step from the blow. Later he would tell himself that it was due to shock, but deep down he knew he was just lying to himself.

“You sonofabitch!” Steph shouted at him, “I should have been told!”

Bruce rolled his jaw, finding it surprisingly sore. “I’ve been preoccupied,” he said.

“Bullshit!” Steph cried, “You couldn’t have taken two fucking minutes to give me a call? A text? You know we’re dating! I deserved to know!”

“Stephanie,” Bruce tried, not sure how to react to the very pissed off young woman, “I’ve been trying to find him.”

“And I could be helping!” Steph cried, and now there were tears in her eyes, “I should be helping!”

“You’re not trained,” Bruce said.

Steph threw up her arms. “And who’s fault is that? You could have been teaching me from the start, but you keep refusing!”

“Because you’re too reckless,” Bruce said, starting to get annoyed now, “You’re going to get yourself hurt.”

“And not training me is the way to discourage me from getting hurt, is that it?” Steph accused, “You trained Tim and Jason and Dick, and they were just as likely to get hurt as me.” She paused and eyed him through her tears, “Is it because I’m a girl? Is that why you won’t train me? You wouldn’t train Barbara at first either.”

“No, dammit—! That’s not the reason,” Bruce cried, finally frustrated. Somehow this girl managed to get under his skin every time, “You’re not careful, you rush into things without thinking, and you won’t listen to orders. That’s why I won’t train you.”

They faced off for a while, both unwilling to back down before Steph shook her head. “This isn’t even about that,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye, “You should have told me that he was missing. I had to learn from Batgirl three days later. Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been?”
Bruce was about to make some other excuse when Steph stared directly up into his eyes, “You’re not the only one who cares. You’re not the only one who loves him,” she said, her eyes accusing.

Whatever excuse he’d been about to come up with deflated out of him. Bruce sighed and rubbed his eyes. “You’re right,” he said quietly.

That seemed to shock Steph, “What?”

“You’re right,” Bruce repeated, “I should have let you know. I’m sorry Stephanie.”

“Oh,” Steph said, clearly shocked by his honesty. She wiped away the rest of her tears and composed herself a little, “So, what do we do now? What are our leads?”

“You’re not helping with this,” Bruce said, “There’s a lot at play here and you could get hurt. I don’t want to be responsible for that.”

“So don’t be,” Steph said, walking past him, “I’m here of my own volition, and I’m going to butt in on this whether you like it or not. So either keep fighting me on it or give up and let me help.”

Bruce grit his teeth and was about to start telling her off again when Batgirl grabbed his arm. He looked down at her and she shook her head.

“Not a good idea,” Cass said, removing her cowl, “Not going to move.”

“Not a bad thing,” Cass said, looking to where Steph was already looking over the screens Bruce had up, trying to make sense of it all. “Not a bad thing,” Cass said, and there was something soft in her eyes, “Strong. Different.”

Bruce felt the phantom sting across his cheek, “Definitely strong,” he said, “She could get hurt.”


Bruce sighed, feeling his resolve crumble. “Alright, fine,” he said to both of the young women. Steph looked up, “Really?” she asked, the beginnings of a grin on her face.

Bruce grunted, “But you need to listen to me,” he said, “I can’t have you running off on your own. Do you understand?”

Steph broke out into a big grin, but Bruce cut her off before she could say anything. “I mean it, you need to do as I say,” he said, “If you want to be a part of this, you’re going to follow orders.”

Steph wrinkled her nose, but finally relented. “Fine,” she huffed, “But I am going to be a part of this. I want to help find him.”

“If you want to help, start by sorting through the police reports,” Bruce said, “You need to comb through every statement and every piece of evidence and sort it into things that are useful and things that aren’t.” He would probably have to go over it after, but it would keep her busy at least.

Steph nodded and he directed her to a table filled with the printed out files he’d gotten from the Bludhaven Police Department. She sat down and started reading, mouthing the words to herself as she did. Bruce caught Cass’s eye and she smiled at him. He sighed and shook his head, going back to the computer to continue his work. Cass came up next to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.
“Find him,” Cass said, squeezing his shoulder, trying to reassure him. Bruce gave a nod.

“I know we will,” he said. The alternative was too frightening to think about.

Ra’s looked up as a shadow passed in his periphery. People usually didn’t come to this part of the main building because they knew it was the section he used. He thought it might be a servant at first, but his servants knew better than to make their presence known without permission. When he turned to check who it was, he was a little surprised to see it was the Drake child, wandering around and inspecting things curiously.

“What are you doing here?” Ra’s called, startling the child a little. Was this child really the partner to Batman? No wonder the previous one had perished.

Drake looked at Ra’s, then glanced around and shrugged. “I’m looking for a way to escape,” he said.

Ra’s raised an eyebrow. He was certainly a brazen child, at the very least. “And you think it wise to tell me so?”

The boy shrugged again, “It’s not like you don’t know that’s what I’m up to,” he said, “Why bother lying?”

Ra’s regarded the boy, Drake, for a moment. “Indeed,” he said. Feeling curious, he gestured to the seat across from him, “Sit a moment.”

Drake’s mouth twitched slightly, like he was about to say something smart, then thought better of it. He cautiously walked over and sat down, watching Ra’s like one watched a chained beast. Ra’s motioned for a servant to come forward.

“What do you play chess?” Ra’s asked.

Tim still looked wary of him, “I do,” he said.

Ra’s made another gesture and the servant scurried off, returning in moments with a chess set. It was made of black and white marble, each piece intricately hand carved with gold and silver set into the pieces. Drake gently inspected one, going over the fine details with wide blue eyes. The servant set the board and disappeared. Ra’s made another gesture and two goblets were set out, a deep red wine poured into each.

“I’m underage,” Drake said, trying to put his hand out to stop the servant.

“Age is of no consequence here,” Ra’s pointed out.

Drake gave him a more stern look and pushed the wine goblet away from him, “I’ll abstain, thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” Ra’s said, sipping the wine. Alcohol no longer had much of an effect on him, but once the taste for fine wine was acquired, it was with you for life, however long that life might be.

Ra’s side of the board was white, so he moved first. Drake also moved, but Ra’s could see that he was far from a master, though he had some notion of strategy. The first game ended quickly, with Ra’s taking the win.
“You have some potential,” Ra’s remarked, “Though paltry as it is. It would take you many years to defeat me only once, and then it would only possibly be by luck.”

Ra’s could almost see the boy bristle, “Wanna bet?” he asked, curling his lip a little.

Intrigued, Ra’s gestured for the servant to set the board again. “And what would you like to wager?” he asked.

Drake hummed and thought about it, “I don’t suppose you’d let me bet to leave,” he said, “So I guess it’ll be a favour. Just something for my room I guess.”

“Interesting, and if I win?” Ra’s asked.

Drake shrugged, “I suppose I could do some sort of menial task. Shine your shoes, polish the silver.”

Ra’s almost laughed at the child. But then again, what would it cost him? Literally nothing, and maybe he could humiliate the boy some, knock him down a few pegs. He was certainly a confident little brat. “Alright,” Ra’s agreed.

Ra’s went to make his first move, but Drake stopped him, “Before we start, we play by what rules? How do I win the game?”

Ra’s raised an eyebrow, wondering if the boy was somehow mentally deficient, “You capture my king,” he said.

Drake nodded and then fixed Ra’s with a stare, “So, you’re around five hundred years old, right?”

“Yes,” Ra’s said, wondering what the boy was up to. He couldn’t possibly think he’d distract Ra’s enough to make a mistake in the game.

Drake continued to ask Ra’s questions throughout the game, all the while keeping his eye fixed on Ra’s, as though studying the colour of his eyes. He’d even make moves without breaking eye contact. It was honestly a little unsettling, Ra’s would admit, though it still wasn’t enough to make him slip up. Still, it was rather refreshing to have someone so interested in the history Ra’s had participated it. And it was a genuine interest Ra’s noticed, not artificial at all. Drake had a thirst for knowledge, and he could be flexible about where that knowledge came from.

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em,” Ra’s quoted, “A lovely sentiment perhaps, but false. True greatness tends to be bred into a person, and then must be honed in the most dedicated fashion. Otherwise you are simply left with wasted potential.”

“That could be, I wouldn’t know enough to dispute it,” Drake said, “But I think that there are some people out there who just occur randomly.”

“Is that so?” Ra’s raised an eyebrow. He took a sip of wine to wet his throat.

“I mean, that’s only a personal belief of mine,” Drake said with a shrug, “But I like to think that, if everyone had the same means, everyone could do something great.”

“And so all would be equal?” Ra’s asked.

“No, nothing so utopic,” Drake said, “But those who had potential and might not necessarily have the means to achieve it otherwise could get have the same opportunities as those who had all the means and then just waste them on being idiots.”
Ra’s actually snorted, “I suppose that’s fair enough, though a tad idealistic.”

Tim shrugged again, and for the first time, he looked down at the board. Ra’s followed his gaze and noticed they were at the end of their game, “It looks as though I have you in check,” Ra’s said.

“Looks like it,” Drake said, but there was something in his voice that made Ra’s look twice.

It took him a moment to notice that his king was missing.

Ra’s blinked and searched the board again. It hadn’t been taken in a move at all, he would have noticed. Had it been taken by mistake? Neither of them had been looking at the board much. Ra’s looked back up at Drake and noticed the little brat was smiling ear to ear.

“You—!” Ra’s choked on his anger. Cheating little sneak!

Drake only leaned back in his chair, relaxed and entirely smug. “You said it yourself, all I had to do was take the king,” he said, “You never specified how it had to be taken.”

Ra’s growled, “It was never implied that cheating was a viable option.”

“If cheating were a viable option, it wouldn’t be cheating,” Drake pointed out.

Ra’s didn’t even know what to do with himself. He glanced down at the board again and then burst out laughing. The sheer audacity! Drake had played the game beautifully, using Ra’s underestimation in him to every advantage. It was near masterful.

“Well done child,” Ra’s said, “Very well, I will gracefully accept defeat this time. Though you should know that I will not underestimate you further. What is it that you would like for your room?”

“A computer,” Drake said, standing up. He leaned over Ra’s, face serious but eyes still mirthful, “I want a computer.”

Ra’s hummed, “Very well. I will have a computer delivered to you shortly.”

Drake leaned back, smiling now, “Thanks,” he said, then turned and left.

Ra’s watched him leave, still almost in a state of disbelief. “Some are born great,” he mused aloud. He went to take a sip of his wine when he noticed something in his goblet. He poured the wine out over his hand and caught the object, holding it up to inspect it. The white king shimmered in the light, the red wine clinging to the white marble like rubies, like blood. Ra’s looked up again at where Timothy had disappeared.

“Fascinating,” Ra’s murmured.

When Tim returned to his room that night, there was a computer resting on a table waiting for him. It was a clunky, bulky thing straight out of the 80’s. Everything had been included, the keyboard and mouse and all of the connecting wires. Tim picked up the plug in for the computer, thinking about how the nearest outlet was probably a hundred miles away.

Chapter End Notes

I've always loved Steph for how little shit she tolerates, especially from Bruce. She's
stubborn and she's not afraid to tell Bruce to his face when he's being an asshole. I loved her as Batgirl and I'm so annoyed that they backtracked in N52. It erased so much character development not only to have Steph go back to Spoiler, but also have Barbara go back to be Batgirl and erasing her time as Oracle (not to mention the disability erasure).

A note; Ra's completely underestimates Tim here, and that's really the only reason he manages to beat Ra's. Tim could never pull this trick twice, but he's the type of person to use all the cards he can. Ra's is also starting to be intrigued by Tim at this point, so he lets him get away with things that he might not otherwise. If Ra's had taken Tim more seriously, he would have won, but that's really the brilliance of Tim. He knows people underestimate him and he uses that to it's full advantage.
Part III Chapter iii: Equivocate

Chapter Notes

This took a longer time than usual because I had a paper to write and a midterm to study for. It's reading week now, so I've got some free time. I should have the next chapter up sooner. This ended up shorter than usual because I couldn't find a way to make it longer. Also fuck knitting I'm going back to crochet.

Contest time! Find the literary reference and win a 1k fic! This one is also really obvious so no hints or anything. First come first serve, and if you've won before, please refrain from playing to give someone else a chance.

ONE LAST THING! EVERYONE SHOULD GO SEE BLACK PANTER! IT'S REMALLY GOOD YOU GUYS YOU SHOULD SEE IT!

Trigger warning for animal death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It became a kind of nightly thing, to Tim’s surprise. The morning after Damian visited Tim in his room, they fought from dawn to midday, just like they had every other day. However, that evening when the sun was just about set, Tim heard a noise on his balcony and turned to see Damian there. Tim opened the door to let him in, and Damian marched to sit on the couch.

“Tell me more about our father,” Damian demanded, but it was soft, like he was afraid Tim might refuse.

Tim didn’t refuse; he sat down next to Damian on the couch and began telling him about Bruce. Not only Bruce, but also Dick and Alfred and everyone in Bruce’s life. Most often the night ended with some story of an act of bravery and kindness on the part of Bruce or someone in his life.

“So he just took in a lowly street child?” Damian asked, “Despite his trying to steal from him?”

Tim nodded, “He knew that Jason needed a home, not punishment. So he took him in and raised him as his son. He even made him Robin.”

“Robin, that’s his partner, yes?” Damian asked.

“Yup. Right now I’m Robin,” Tim explained.

Damian raised an eyebrow, “He always makes his children Robin?” He’d heard about Dick by now as well.

Tim stalled on something to say. His first reaction was to say ‘no’, since Tim hadn’t been Bruce’s kid, but then that turned out to be a whole thing on its own, and he didn’t want to confuse Damian. “Almost always,” Tim settled on, “There’s also the Batgirls, and Spoiler.”

Damian came every night at sunset, and stayed until late. Tim found himself actually looking forward to their talks. More and more he could see how sheltered Damian was, how little he knew about anything that wasn’t anything to do with the League of Assassins. Tim tried to coax Damian to talk...
about himself, about what he liked and did for fun, though it was a little hard to get him to understand what Tim was trying to get at.

“I train under some of the greatest masters in martial arts,” Damian said proudly, “I am quite successful.”

“But do you enjoy it?” Tim asked, slicing some fruit for them to share, “Isn’t there something you prefer doing over everything else?”

Damian stopped and thought about it for a long time, “I look forward to when I get to paint.”

“You paint?” Tim asked, looking up.

Damian nodded, ducking his head a little, like he was shy. “I have been taught in many arts,” he said, “But… painting is the one I like most.”

Tim smiled, “I’d like to see your paintings one day, if you don’t mind.”

Damian looked up, and though he didn’t smile, Tim could see something soften in his eyes.

During their fights in the mornings, Tim still had to be careful. Though Damian seemed to see him as more than just a rival now, he was still trying to kill Tim at the behest of his mother. However, after two weeks of Damian coming to see him in the evenings to learn about Bruce, nearly a month since Tim was kidnapped, something interesting happened.

It was close to midday, when Tim and Damian were both getting exhausted and the fights were dragging on and on. If it weren’t for the imminent threat of death, Tim would find them almost boring. Maybe that was the reason why Tim let himself become distracted for a half second by a distant rumble. Trucks? Planes?

Tim tried to pick out the sound more clearly when pain sliced across his side. Damian had taken the opportunity of Tim’s distraction to breech his defenses and stab into his side. It wasn’t very deep, but it was painful and enough to cause Tim to stumble and fall back, landing on his back in the hot sand. Damian stood over Tim and raised his sword. Tim’s heart stalled in his chest, knowing he wouldn’t have enough time to block Damian if he swung. Damian held his sword in a perfect grip, his body positioned to swing the deadly weapon down where it would do the most damage and kill Tim quickly.

Then Damian hesitated.

It was small, just a split second, but it was enough for Tim to get his bearings and bring his staff up in a blind swing, knocking into the side of Damian’s head. Damian grunted and fell back, dropping his sword. Tim jumped up and pinned Damian to the ground, holding his wrists tightly and planting his knees onto Damian’s thighs. Their eyes met and Tim could see that they were both surprised by what just happened.

“Enough,” called Ra’s from the edge of the training ring. He’d never stopped any of the fights before, “That is enough for today.”

Tim breathed a sigh and sat back, hand going to his side to press to the bleeding wound. It was in a place that wasn’t too dangerous, but it would hurt like all hell for a long time. Two servants ran over and pulled Tim up, gently guiding him towards the side of the arena where a medic was waiting. As they stripped Tim out of his tunic, Tim looked to where Damian was having his head checked by a different medic under the watchful eye of Talia.
For Damian’s sake, Tim hoped she hadn’t noticed his hesitation to kill Tim.

That night, Tim waited on his balcony for Damian, watching the sun go down. When it became clear that Damian wasn’t coming, Tim looked up at the side of the building. Damian always came down on the left side of the balcony, so Tim was going to assume his room was in that direction. Mindful of the fresh stitches in his side, Tim began to climb.

Tim climbed up, knowing that Damian was probably at least a story or two above him. He’d explored a lot of compound, as well as the main building, but he was still a little unsure on where Damian’s room was. Climbing wasn’t as hard as he thought it would be though, and the worst thing was the wind that lashed at his hair and pelted him with sand every now and again.

As Tim climbed around the side of the building, he noticed a caravan of trucks on the other side of the wall. In the dark, Tim counted as many as fifty or so trucks, all of them being unloaded of supplies. Tim took note of it and resolved to find out more later. He had a different task at the moment.

Finding Damian’s room took some doing, but eventually, Tim found the right window, spotting Damian inside reading on his couch. Tim hopped onto the balcony and tapped on the window. Damian jolted and looked around, surprised to see Tim at his window. He got up to let him in, confusion painted on his face.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, closing the window behind Tim.

“I came to see you,” Tim said, “I was worried about you.”

Damian tilted his head, and Tim had to admit that it was pretty darn cute. “Why?” he asked.

Tim glanced at the bruise on Damian’s temple, small but dark purple and painful looking. The phantom pain of the whiskey bottle hitting him flared across Tim’s brow. He reached out and brushed Damian’s hair away from the bruise to look at it better.

“I didn't mean to hurt you,” Tim said, “I'm sorry.”

Damian stared up at Tim, green eyes searching and confused. Tim smiled down at him and went to the couch. “You want a story about our dad?” he suggested.

Damian deliberated for a moment, then came to sit next to Tim, looking eager and young. “Finish the story about the giant penny,” he demanded.

Tim raised an eyebrow and Damian gave an exaggerated eye roll and a sigh. “Please ,” he said.

Tim laughed, “Okay okay, where were we?”

They ended up talking long into the night, and by the end of it, Damian was slumping over on the couch. Tim stood and stretched, “Okay, bedtime kiddo.”

Damian grumbled, but got up and started walking to his bedroom. Without thinking about it, Tim followed, making sure Damian had tucked himself in. When Damian had settled down, Tim went to the window to climb out.

“Night Damian,” Tim called as he prepared to shut the window to Damian’s bedroom.

“Goodnight brother,” Damian called back.
Tim paused a moment, then, smiling to himself, he shut the window and started climbing down to return to his own chambers.

Things were not going as Talia had planned.

When Talia had first heard about the second bastard (or rather, the first, which was the main issue), she had made a decision to eliminate him as soon as possible. However, having discovered that the bastard was Tim Drake, the third Robin, she knew she had to be careful about how she went about it. Simply killing him wouldn’t do at all, since Bruce would surely trace it back to her and never forgive her. However, pitting the bastard against her own son would soften the blow, because Bruce would never hate Damian, his own child. He’d blame Talia, of course, but it wouldn’t be as vitriolic if she simply killed the boy herself. Giving the bastard a fighting chance was the best way to keep her plans on track.

But then the little bastard had to go and surprise her.

She wasn’t so surprised that he refused to hurt Damian, that she’d expected. Bruce was a man of infallible principle, and he’d pass that along to any of his proteges, his children or not. In fact, Talia had banked on the bastard to do his best to avoid hurting her son. She just hadn’t expected him to be so good at it. She initially hadn’t worried about it, figuring Damian would seize his opening when he could, but as time wore on, the chances of that wavered.

What was most concerning about this was that she had seen an opening that morning. Damian taken an inch and made a mile, striking Tim to the ground and injuring him, but he’d failed to run that mile. He’d hesitated to kill his brother, and victory had been snatched from him. Damian had never exhibited reluctance to take his kill before, and it concerned her. Her son was changing, diverging from her in a way she had to get under control quickly. Talia was certain that it was the influence of the bastard, and she’d do something about it if it weren’t for an even greater problem.

Right under her nose, the little bastard had not only gained Damian’s favour, but her father’s as well.

Insidiously, without Talia even noticing at first, the bastard had piqued Ra’s Al Ghul’s interest. Despite Talia’s assurance that the boy had nothing to offer except his bleeding corpse, Ra’s had apparently found something worthwhile in the child. Why else would he stop the fight between Tim and Damian when it seemed like Damian was finally winning? Talia had even seen Ra’s speaking to the bastard several times, even enticing him with gifts of finer clothes to wear and offering him larger chambers (both of which the bastard had the audacity to decline).

Presently Talia was looking for her father. She had to get to the bottom of this unprecedented interest in an otherwise worthless child. She found her father in one of his many sitting rooms, studying a text that was centuries older than she was.

“Father, I need to speak to you,” Talia said firmly, allowing for no argument.

Ra’s sighed, “I am busy daughter. Run and amuse yourself for a time,” he said, waving her away. Talia had to wonder sometimes if Ra’s forgot where he was in time, having lived so long.

“This won’t wait,” Talia said, “What is your fascination with the second bastard child?”

This caused Ra’s to look up, “You are speaking of the young Timothy Drake?” he asked slowly.
“You’ve shown interest in him that I’ve rarely seen, Father,” Talia said, “I’m curious as to why.”

“You’re worried if I aim to replace Damian with Timothy,” Ra’s elaborated cuttingly, “You’re fears are unfounded Daughter. Though Timothy is quite interesting, Damian is still my grandson, and for that he has a place in my empire. He will not be cast out. You worry too much.”

Talia scowled, “I am a mother, I worry,” she said, “I simply do not see the appeal in the child as you seem to.”

“Of course not, you’re too threatened to see it,” Ra’s said, “There is more than meets the eye with that child, I’m not surprised you don’t see it.”

Talia curled her lip, “Just because he is first born does not mean—”

“Blood has nothing to do with it,” Ra’s cut her off, “There is something unique about that child. He is… different.”

“Different?” Talia questioned, “Different how?”

Ra’s waved his hand, “It is not anything I could explain. He is simply different from you and any other I have encountered.”

“Damian is a more worthy heir,” Talia said, starting to get frustrated, “He has better training, better instincts, and he is not afraid to do what is necessary.”

Ra’s hummed, “That may be, but all those things can be trained into anyone,” he said, “What Timothy has cannot be trained into anyone, or bred or bought. It is something that comes along only by chance. Damian may make a worthy heir perhaps, but Timothy… perhaps Timothy might become a kindred spirit.”

Talia forced down a growl, “Whatever you’re planning won’t work,” she said, “He’s too loyal to his father. You won’t be able to buy him.”

“Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven,” Ra’s said, “I’ll find a way to bring him over eventually. I have influence, resources, and above all else, patience and time.”

He wasn’t going to listen to her, Talia realized. Whatever spell the bastard wove was insidious, snaring those around him almost without their noticing. But Talia noticed, and she was concerned over what it could mean for her plans.

“I take my leave Father,” Talia said, turning and leaving the room. She had to find something that would undermine the bastard once and for all. She had to find someone that wouldn’t fall under his spell.

Talia was certain she knew just the person for the job.

It was late in the afternoon, and Damian had some free time to do with as he pleased. Normally, he would go to his studio and paint, but he’d finished his last project and was in search of something new. He refused to admit that he wanted to find something that would impress his brother.

Damian wasn’t sure why he had become so invested in his brother’s opinion of him, but somehow he
wanted Tim to approve of him. It was stupid and childish, but Damian couldn’t help it. It didn’t seem all that hard to impress Tim at all, but nonetheless Damian sought it out. Gaining his mother’s approval was much more difficult, and therefore much more valuable, but still Damian found himself wanting to make his brother like him.

It was because Tim told him stories about their father, Bruce Wayne, Damian decided. Mother had restricted his knowledge of his father for so long, yet Tim gave the information freely. Anything Damian asked, Tim answered honestly. There were still things he kept form Damian, but they never had to do with Bruce himself. Damian had always been told that his father was a stern man, a warrior and the best of all men. He would never bow to anyone, not even Grandfather, and he had a great sense of duty and integrity. Tim told him that their father was all of those things, but more. Their father was kind, compassionate, and even gentle. He loved his family and could even be affectionate at times. Damian didn’t see how these things could exist within the same person, how one could be both strong and kind, but the way Tim spoke, the stories he told, made Damian believe it, contradictory as it was.

And of course, their father approved of Tim. Even before Bruce knew that Tim was his blood, he’d taken him in and trained him, made him Robin. In some dark corner of his mind, Damian had the pernicious thought that if he gained his brother’s approval, his father’s approval would follow.

But it didn’t matter because Damian wasn’t trying to impress Tim. He was just looking for a new painting project. That was all.

Damian wandered around through the alleys and streets of the compound. Tim had seemed interested in the buildings around them, so Damian was considering doing a landscape of the compound with a focus on the architecture. Damian had never really considered the buildings to be very important other than their function, but he supposed their designs were aesthetically pleasing.

Damian turned down a narrow alley, paying more attention to the brickwork than to where he was going when a mewl alerted him to the presence of a cat. There were many feral cats around the compound, tolerated as a way to keep pest populations down. Mostly they were left alone, but every once in a while, Damian knew that a few servants or assassins would get together and capture a cat to torture it, whether for fun or just out of boredom. Damian had never participated in any of these gatherings, not seeing the point to them.

The cat that Damian had encountered was young, a juvenile. It was the colour of sand, with brown-to-black stripes along its body and a creamy white tummy. It was quite a good looking cat, Damian noted, crouching down to get a better look at it.

“Bruce likes animals,” Tim said one night, “He always has, even when he says he doesn’t.” Tim laughed at a private joke of some sort that Damian didn’t get, “He has a particular fondness for cats.”

Damian watched the cat, staring into its bright green eyes. The cat watched him warily, ready to bolt should Damian become a threat. Cautiously, Damian reached his hand out to the animal, expecting it to run away. To his surprise, the cat came forward and sniffed his fingers, curious. Damian remembered he had some dried meat in his pocket for a snack and took some out, holding it out for the little creature. The cat gave the meat a sniff and then took it from his hand, giving it a little shake before devouring it. The cat looked up at him expectantly and Damian fed it another piece of meat.

Damian stayed there for some time, feeding the feral cat tiny strips of meat. He became fascinated by the animal, by the way it moved so gracefully and precisely, by its colours and patterns. Tentatively, Damian reached out and stroked the cat’s head. The cat tensed for a moment, then leaned into it, letting out the most wonderful rumbly noise Damian had ever heard. Damian stroked along the cat’s
back, watching as the cat arched its back into the touch and purred loudly, letting out a loud meow when he stopped. Damian marveled at the soft fur under his hands, wishing he could spend hours just petting this wonderful little creature.

“Damian,” Talia called from behind him, startling him. He jumped up and hid his hands behind his back, like he’d been caught doing something wrong.

“Mother,” Damian greeted, trying not to show his nervousness. He was an Al Ghul, he did not get nervous.

Talia looked down at the cat, which had sprung away a few paces when Damian jumped up. “What are you doing my son?” she asked.

Damian felt his shoulders stiffen, “Nothing Mother. I was looking for a new subject to paint.”

Talia raised an eyebrow, “I see,” she said. Quickly, she drew a throwing knife and aimed it precisely at the cat. Damian didn't cry out as the cat was struck, but even if he did, it was covered by the yowl of pain from the cat, struck in the hindquarters and pinned.

“Finish it,” Talia ordered.

Damian drew his dagger, but stalled as he stood over the poor creature as it hissed and spat at him, trying to get away. Damian leaned down and the cat swiped at him, lashing its claws across his hand as he reached for it. Biting his lip to hide the pain, Damian swiftly sliced the cat’s throat, killing it quickly and ending its suffering.

Damian stood and stared down at the body at his feet, watching the blood soak into the sand. Talia came forward and picked the little dead thing off the ground, giving it a shake to get the last of the blood out. She pulled her throwing dagger out and handed the body to Damian.

“Still life,” Talia said, “Many great masters would paint fresh kills to capture the effects of fur and feathers and such.”

“Yes Mother,” Damian said, cradling the lifeless body in his hands.

Talia patted his head, “Go on up to your studio. You should be able to get a sketch done by tonight at least.”

Damian nodded, looking down at the dead cat. Its fur was still soft under his fingers, but there was no delightful rumbling noise anymore. Talia led him back to the main building, Damian clinging with one hand to her skirt, the other holding the cat. All the way back, Damian stared at the scratch across his hand, bleeding slightly and stinging. A drop of blood fell onto his mother’s skirt, but he did not mention it to her at all.

Later in his studio, Damian sat in his chair with a canvas in front of him, the cat laid out on a little table with some flowers and fruit. It had been at least an hour since Damian had sat down, but he hadn’t made a single mark on the canvas. The light was fading fast and soon Damian would have nothing to draw by but candle light. Even the prospect of playing with light and shadow did not excite Damian at all. He just kept staring at the little dead cat, laid out so nicely against some white silk.

There was a sound behind him and Damian turned. Tim was climbing through the window of his studio, grim faced and silent. He slowly approached Damian, glancing at the cat laid out on the table.

“I saw what happened,” he said, walking up next to Damian, “I'm sorry about your cat.”
“It was just an animal,” Damian said, but his voice sounded hollow, “Just a dumb creature.”

Tim laid a hand on Damian’s shoulder and squeezed as he walked past to the table. Gently, Tim ran his fingertips over the soft fur. Then he carefully pulled the silk sheet out and wrapped the body in it like a shroud. He plucked a bright red rose bloom from the arrangement and turned back to Damian.

“Come on,” he said, gently tucking the cat and the flower into his shirt, “Let’s go.”

Damian got up followed Tim back to the window. Together they silently climbed down, careful not to be spotted by anyone inside. They finally made it to the lowest rooftop and hopped down, running across the rooftops until they found a secluded spot near the wall.

“Here, this will do,” Tim said, bringing the wrapped body and the bloom out. He knelt down and started digging in the sand. After a moment, Damian followed suit.

After a few minutes, they’d dug a deep hole together. Tim went to pick up the cat, but Damian beat him to it. Damian cradled the little body close for a moment, then gently placed in into the ground. Tim dropped the bloom in after it and they sat for a moment. Damian pulled out his dagger, considering it. It was a small dagger, perfectly made for him, with a mother of pearl inlaid on the handle. It had been a birthday gift from his mother. One of Damian’s earliest memories was plunging this dagger into the chest of a man, guided by his mother. Damian carefully laid the dagger over the body, making sure to place it gently. The scratch on the back of his hand throbbed sharply.

“It was just an animal,” Damian said sadly, “Just a poor creature.”

Tim sighed and brought his hand up to rest on Damian’s shoulders, thumb stroking the back of his neck. “I know,” he said, “I’m sorry.”

Damian let out a long sigh. Tim said nothing and stayed where he was, gently rubbing Damian’s back. The buried the cat in silence and then turned to head back to the main building, climbing up across the rooftops towards it. Tim hoisted Damian up to the first balcony so they could begin climbing. They climbed for a story or two before Tim reached over and tapped Damian on the shoulder.

“Race you to the top?” he said, smiling a little.

Damian raised an eyebrow, but Tim was already climbing fast. Not to be outdone, Damian hurried after him. He overtook Tim easily, being more familiar with the building. Tim laughed behind him and Damian stopped to look, only for Tim to grab his ankle and pull him down onto an empty balcony.

“Hurry up slowpoke!” Tim called, still laughing. Damian growled and hopped up, determined now to win.

They chased each other across the building for a while, tugging at each other’s ankles and poking each other in the sides. They were neck in neck for a while, then Damian managed to get ahead by yanking Tim’s pant leg, pulling both him and his pants down. Tim swore and dropped to the balcony to fix his pants. Damian kept his lead and before he knew it, he was at the top of the building watching Tim scramble up after him.

“I win!” Damian crowed, “I have defeated you!”

Tim pulled himself up onto the roof, panting and grinning. “Yeah you did. Good job.”

Damian watched his brother pull himself the rest of the way onto the roof and sit down, looking out
over the desert at the sunset. Damian sat next to him, his legs curled up to his chest. Tim patted his back.

“Feel better?” he asked.

Damian glanced at his brother without turning his head. “Yes,” he answered truthfully. He did feel better now.

Tim smiled and reached up to ruffle Damian’s hair. Damian swatted him away, but Tim only laughed and turned back to the sunset. They stayed there for a while, watching the sun go down over the vast empty desert. Damian glanced at the mountain range in the distance, thinking about how Tim planned to escape. He didn’t make a big secret about it, but the guards had been instructed to let him attempt it. The punishment would come after the crime. Despite knowing that Tim was what stood between him and his destiny, Damian didn’t want Tim to leave.

“Brother?” Damian asked softly, just as the sun was almost gone.

“Yeah?” Tim answered.

Damian stalled a little, not sure if he should say anything, “Do you think… do you think Father will like me?”

Tim looked to his younger brother. When he’d seen Damian play with the cat earlier, he’d had his first real, concrete glimpse of Damian as a child. Just a child, one who liked to make friends with stray cats, one who was under the thumb of a very controlling woman and pushed to do very horrible things, things he maybe didn’t even understand. Tim knew he had to do something soon.

“Of course he’ll like you,” Tim said, “You’re his son, he’s going to love you.”

Damian looked at him, “Does he love you?” he asked.

Tim’s voice caught in his throat. It was always hard to answer Damian’s questions about his and Bruce’s relationship. On one hand, he hadn’t really had a lot of time to figure out what Bruce thought of him as a son, not just a partner, but on the other hand he didn’t want to confuse Damian. Sometimes, it was better to lie a little.

“Yes,” Tim said, “Bruce loves all his kids. And he’s going to love you too.”

Damian curled up tight again, something Tim was noticing he did when he felt vulnerable and embarrassed. Tim decided to leave him for now and just watch the rest of the sunset.

As the dark started to settle around them, Tim got up and stretched. “We should get back before they wonder where we are.”

Damian nodded and got up. They slowly and carefully started to scale down the building, this time without the chasing. Tim stopped at Damian’s balcony for a few minutes, waiting for him to settle.

“Will you be okay?” Tim asked. He glanced at the red scratch across Damian’s hand.

Damian clenched his hand, making the scabbed scratch split and ooze blood. “I will be,” he said.

Tim smiled sadly and gave him one last hair ruffle, which Damian again swatted away, before descending to his own room. After the fight that morning and the chasing each other around across the building, Tim was tired. All he wanted to do was crawl into bed and sleep. He dropped down to his own balcony and went inside. He could probably do with a bath before bed, though he wondered...
about getting his injury wet. The same man from the first day had come by and dropped more of the hissing liquid into his wound, closing it, but the area was still tender and purplish under the skin.

Tim was still considering the merits of a hot bath when an arm wrapped around his throat, pulling him back against a solid chest and squeezing hard enough to cut off his air.

“Hello Replacement,” a voice hissed in his ear, “Nice to meet you.”

Tim struggled uselessly for a second in a panic before his training kicked in. He slammed his elbow back into a solar plexus and dug in until his attacker grunted in pain and loosened his arm. Tim jerked his head back and caught a chin, but it was enough to stun his attacker into stumbling back, leaving Tim enough room to duck out and strike out with a kick. His attacker blocked the kick and shoved at Tim’s leg, tumbling him over. Tim tucked into a roll and sprang up, ready to face his attacker head on. He looked up at his attacker’s face…

Only to come face to face with Jason Todd.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone was asking when Jason was going to show up. Here you go.

A note about Damian: he's a little different here than he was in the comics for a few reasons. Firstly, he's a fair amount younger than what we're familiar with, so I've tried to reflect that. His brain hasn't fully decided what it wants to be yet, so he's still at this very malleable stage of life. I'm trying to keep him in character, but he's a very hard character to write. He's also a very sensitive kid by nature, as evidenced by him finding the pearl for Bruce in the comics. He doesn't know how to express that sensitivity, and is under a lot of restrictions. He's also desperate for affection. Prickly pear or not, kids, all kids, crave affection and approval, which Tim is giving him, so he's naturally going to be drawn to him. Trying to write him as the young child he is while keeping with Damian's character is proving to be a very fine line indeed. Let me know how I did!
Part III Chapter iv: Strangulation

Chapter Notes

A lot happened while I was trying to write this, and it ended up taking me a while to sort this chapter out. Trying to get the pacing right for this chapter was something of a nightmare.

No contest this chapter because I forgot. Whoops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim dropped out of his defensive stance, not quite sure he believed what he was seeing. Jason was several years older than when he died, and he’d put on a consider amount of height and weight. There was a white streak in his hair that went all the way down to the root, standing out sharply against the black of the rest of his hair. But it was surely Jason, of that Tim had no doubt.

“Jason Todd?” Tim asked, completely confused, “How is this possible? You’re dead.”

Jason broke out into a wide toothy grin, one that sent shivers up Tim’s spine. “I got better,” he said.

Tim huffed out a breath and ran a hand through his hair, pacing back and forth. “This is incredible.”

“Excuse me?” Jason growled.

Tim kept pacing around, working himself up into a frenzy. “This has to have something to do with the Lazarus pits. It makes sense, seeing as you’re here, and alive. Ra’s’ doing? No, he wouldn’t be interested, must be Talia.”

“Hey!” Jason shouted, “You’re aware we’re in a fight right now, right?”

“Oh.” Tim stopped pacing, “Are we?”

Jason growled and lunged, moving incredibly fast for a guy his size. The next thing Tim knew, he was pinned to the wall by the neck, Jason leaning in above him.

“Listen here Replacement,” Jason hissed in a low voice, “When I got the call that you were here, I rushed on over to do one thing.” He leaned in closer, pressing his considerable weight onto Tim’s trachea, “I’m going to kill you.”

Tim tried to wiggle out of Jason’s grip, but he was strong, and Tim couldn’t catch a proper breath. “Ja… son,” he gasped, “W—what?”

Jason grinned again, and it was so unsettling, but Tim recognised the madness swimming under them now. “I want him to suffer,” he said, “I want him to watch as I take everything away from him. I want to take every mistake he’s ever made and shove it back in his face. I want him to hurt a thousand times worse than I did. And when he’s finally on his knees, beaten in every way, I’ll put a bullet in his head.” Jason growled and pressed harder on Tim’s neck, “That’s what.”

Tim gasped and tried to pry Jason’s fingers off his throat, but he couldn’t get any leverage. Jason was too strong. The older boy leaned in again, considering Tim. “Maybe I’ll cut your head off and send it
“to him,” Jason said, “Or round up you and Dickhead and all the rest and string you up for him to find. Or maybe I’ll just strangle you here and let him wonder for the rest of his short life.”

Jason squeezed harder and Tim’s vision began to go spotty. He was sure he was about to pass out when Jason suddenly let him go, dropping him to the floor. Tim gasped and coughed, his lung sucking in air desperately. He looked up at Jason, his mouth working but his throat not letting him form words.

“I think I’ll take some time to decide what I’m going to do with you,” Jason said, still grinning, “Nice meeting you Replacement.” Jason drew back his foot and slammed it into Tim’s gut. Tim had a moment of blinding pain before he passed out.

Tim woke up sore and stiff the next morning, still on the floor where he’d passed out. The only sign that Jason hadn’t been a vivid hallucination was the ring of bruises around Tim’s neck and the boot-shaped imprint on his stomach. Any attempt to swallow felt like fire in his throat, so Tim only managed some tea at breakfast. He didn’t know if he was still supposed to be at the arena after last night, but he made his way down anyway.

Going on a hunch, Tim looked to Talia when he came into the area. Sure enough, she seemed shocked that he was there. It was only for a moment, but he was certain of what he’d seen. However, it did mean that he missed the look of concern on Damian’s face until the boy was right in front of him.

“Brother, what happened to you?” Damian asked, looking at Tim’s throat. He narrowed his eyes. “Who attacked you?”

“I’m fine,” Tim rasped, barely getting the words out. “Don’t worry about me.”

Damian blinked, then huffed and crossed his arms. “I am not worried about you,” he said, “I am concerned for the security of this compound.”

Bullshit, Tim thought, but didn’t say; he’d cottoned on to Damian’s routine by now. The uncaring exterior was just that, an exterior. Damian was really just a child searching for something kind in the world and not knowing how to get it.

Tim was about to try and assuage Damian’s fears when he noticed an extra figure out in the stands of the area. Jason lounged in the stands, reclining in his seat and taking up as much space as possible. The white in his hair shone more brilliantly in the sun, and Tim could see that he was watching them intently.

“Damian,” Tim whispered, “Don’t look, but do you see that man in the stands?”

“Yes,” Damian said, tense and ready to attack should Tim give the word.

“I want you to be careful around him,” Tim said, “Never be alone with him if you can help it. He’s extremely dangerous.”

“I can handle myself,” Damian insisted.

“I mean it Damian,” Tim said, putting his hand on Damian’s shoulder, “Don’t go near him. If he tries
to get to you, come right to me. Got it?"

Damian huffed. “Fine,” he said unhappily, “I do not understand why you are so concerned for my well being.”

“It’s an older brother thing,” Tim said with a wry smile. He dropped it and became serious again. “Don’t go near him. Let me handle it.”

“Is he the one who hurt your neck?” Damian asked. His face twisted into a snarl. “I will kill him.”

“What did I just say?” Tim asked, his voice scratching horribly. “Don’t go near him. I mean it.”

Damian looked like he was about to protest more, but Talia was walking over. “Is there a reason you have delayed your battle, my son?” she asked, stone faced.

Damian turned to his mother. “Mother, Brother has been attacked. He cannot fight.”

Talia’s eyebrow twitched slightly. “His injuries are your advantage. Use them against him and win for once,” she said harshly.

Damian flinched and stiffened his posture. “It would not be fair Mother,” he said flatly, but quiet, like he was frightened of Talia. “If I am to defeat my brother and take his place as rightful heir, should it not be a fair fight? Should I not win of my own merit?”

“That hasn’t seemed to have worked for you so far, now has it?” Talia said. She didn’t snap, but she might as well have yelled at Damian for the way he hung his head. “You should take the win where you can Damian. Every advantage must be exploited to its fullest potential.”

“Yes Mother,” Damian said quietly, still hanging his head. Tim felt awful for the poor boy; he wished he could do something, but Talia wasn't someone he could just defeat. She was too strong for him to take on, and more than that, Damian still thought the world of her. For all her faults, Talia was still Damian’s mother, and Tim could sympathize with trying to love someone like that.

Tim was about to start moving into the ring when he noticed Ra’s coming up to them. “What is the meaning of all this?” he asked, clearly annoyed.

“Grandfather, Brother was attacked,” Damian said, pointing to the collar of bruises around Tim’s neck, “He cannot fight today.”

Ra’s leaned down to inspect the bruises. Tim wanted to cringe away, but he lifted his chin so Ra’s could see the mess of purple and yellow. “Indeed,” Ra’s said, turning to look at Talia. “I shall see that this breach of security is fixed. You have my leave to go.”

“Go as in go?” Tim asked, gesturing to the entrance of the arena.

“Go,” Ra’s said, waving them away.

Tim breathed a sigh of relief and pulled on Damian’s shoulder. He wanted to get them both out of there as fast as possible, away from Jason and Talia. Tim glanced back and noticed that Jason was standing now, heading for the opposite end of the arena. Tim ushered Damian to go a little faster.

Damian reached back and took hold of his brother’s sleeve. “Come with me Brother, I will show you my paintings,” he said, pulling Tim along in the direction of the main building.

Tim smiled a little. “Sounds nice. Maybe one day I’ll commission a painting from you,” he said.
Damian didn’t smile or look back at Tim, but he did grip Tim’s sleeve a little tighter as they walked. The entire time they walked back to the main building, Tim kept an eye glancing over his shoulder, looking for a lock of white hair against black in the sparse crowds of servants and assassins.

“You didn’t kill him,” Talia said when she found Jason later on the rooftop of the belltower, the second highest building in the compound.

Jason sighed. “I’m deciding,” he said, “I can’t just kill him, I need to figure out what to do with him.”

Talia struggled to hide her annoyance. “I would have thought you would leap at the chance to exact your revenge.”

“Well I need a plan,” Jason said, “It’s like with blowing up the car, I can’t. He has to know it was me.”

Talia bit down on a sharp retort; antagonizing Jason would be counter to her plans, and she needed Jason’s cooperation. Luckily, she had some experience leashing rabid dogs. She just had to find the right sort of morsel to get his mouth watering. Talia seated herself next to Jason and rested her hand on his thigh.

“We’ll think of something,” she said softly, “But we’ll need to think of it quickly. That one’s clever. He’s planning something of his own, and I can’t have him heading back to Gotham with what he knows.”

Jason shrugged. “If the brat takes out Ra’s Al Ghul, I won’t cry about it,” he said.

“And me?” Talia asked, “You would leave me in the dust and ruins?”

Jason let out a long sigh. “I appreciate everything you’ve done Talia, letting me know he was here and putting me on my feet, but you know I’m not Ra’s’ biggest fan. I know you’re strong enough to make it on your own, you don’t need him.”

Talia hummed. “That may be,” she said, “But I need time to wrest control of the empire from my father, and that will be complicated by any interference from that child.” Talia reached out and gently tugged Jason’s chin so he looked at her. “I’ve done so much for you, sometimes to my own risk. I should think I am owed a little bit of loyalty,” she said, stroking his cheek tenderly.

Jason looked up at her and leaned into the touch. “You’re right, I’m sorry,” he said, “I’ll see what I can do. I don’t think I’ve got everything I need, but I think I can move up some plans.”

Talia smiled. “I know I can count on you,” she said, pulling Jason in for a hug. “You’re going to do wonderful things Jason. I’ll help you with anything you need.”

“Thanks Talia,” Jason sighed, sinking into the embrace. “I think I need to do this on my own though. It’s just… this is personal.”

“Of course, I understand,” Talia said, “Just know that I’m here for you if you need me.”

Jason nodded and stayed where he was, drinking in the affection she was giving. Talia kept her body relaxed and stroked his hair, making sure not to make him uncomfortable. He was desperate for
motherly affection, and she would give it to him so long as he served her needs.

Tim sagged into his couch with a groan, feeling the weight of his exhaustion in every bone in his body. He wanted to just sink into his bed and sleep for a week, but he had way too much to worry about. With Jason on the loose, he had to keep an eye out for his own hide and for Damian. Tim didn’t have a clue what Jason was capable of, but he was out for blood, and that scared him. Jason had trained with Bruce and Dick and everyone that they had trained with, plus whatever Talia had been giving him. Jason Todd was probably the most dangerous man in the compound next to Ra’s and Talia.

Of course, there was the question of how Jason was alive. Tim had suspected it was something to do with the Lazarus pits, but that didn’t hold up. Ra’s guarded the pits with a vicious jealousy, and he wouldn’t care enough to try and resurrect Jason in one. As far as Tim knew, the pits could be used to restore a body to peak health, but not life to a corpse. Tim was missing a lot of pieces to this puzzle. Maybe it wasn’t really Jason? But he knew about Bruce and Dick and ‘all the rest’, so it had to be him. Tim had to get more information.

There was a knock on Tim’s door. Tim groaned and hauled himself up to open it; it was probably dinner. “Come in,” he said, opening the door.

“Thank you, my boy,” Ra’s said, sweeping into Tim’s chambers, an entourage of servants scurrying along behind him. They quickly set about setting up a dinner table, complete with a white silk and lace tablecloth, candles, and fancy plates.

“This all looks very romantic,” Tim said, “But I wasn’t aware we’d be having a date night.”

“I’ve come to discuss a matter of great import with you, Timothy,” Ra’s said, seating himself at the table and gesturing for Tim to take a seat.

“Does this ‘matter’ have anything to do with Jason Todd?” Tim asked, sitting down in the chair across from Ra’s. A servant laid out dinner for him, as well as poured him a glass of wine, which Tim ignored.

“You’ve already encountered him,” Ra’s said, glancing to the bruises around Tim’s neck, “He’s Talia’s little pet project.”

Bingo, knew it was Talia, Tim thought. “How did this happen? Jason Todd died.”

“Indeed he did,” Ra’s said, “By what my daughter has uncovered, he was dead for nearly six months.”

“So what happened?” Tim asked, “How did he come back?”

Ra’s spent the better part of the next hour explaining to Tim what they had uncovered about Jason’s mystery resurrection. The Lazarus pits actually hadn’t been responsible for Jason’s resurrection, as they had found him as a wandering vagrant on the streets of Gotham, mostly braindead from cerebral hemorrhaging. They actually had very little information on how Jason had returned from beyond the grave, but Talia had been looking after him since they’d found him on the street.

“If he had severe brain damage, how did he get better?” Tim asked, “You don’t just heal from severe
brain damage like that. It would take years. Decades. And that’s only if healing is an option.”

“Yes, young Jason’s prognosis was quite dire, there was little hope for him,” Ra’s said, “My daughter took it upon herself to heal him through other means.”

“The Lazarus pit?” Tim asked, “It can heal brain damage? I thought it made people go insane?”

“The pit has many effects, and heals all manner of ails. And as you might have noticed, Jason Todd is not the fresh eyed child he was,” Ra’s said.

The bruise on Tim’s stomach throbbed. “I noticed,” he said, “So why is he here now?”

“Again, my daughter’s doing,” Ra’s said, “I believe she is trying to orchestrate your death.”

Tim groaned. “Fantas-tic,” he said, “So why are you here, telling me all this?”

Ra’s looked at Tim and something changed in his eyes, making Tim’s skin crawl. “You’re different, Timothy,” Ra’s said, standing up, “I have never encountered one quite like yourself in all my years. Even your mentor is quite unlike you. You are… special.”

Stranger danger! Tim’s brain shrieked at him. “That’s… kind of you to say,” Tim said, trying to think of a way out of this without angering Ra’s.

Ra’s stood and slowly walked over to Tim, standing behind him and resting his hands on Tim’s shoulders. Tim had to fight not to throw him off. “I can protect you, Timothy, you need only give the word. My daughter is the one who brought you here, and so you are under her care, but promise loyalty to me and nothing will touch you.”

“Tempting,” Tim lied, “But I can handle myself.”

Ra’s hands tightened on Tim’s shoulders. “You should not throw my offer away so frivolously, but I commend your resolve. Know at least that my offer stands, for now,” he said.

Tim could feel the warmth of Ra’s fingers through his shirt. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, wishing he could crawl out of his skin.

Ra’s gave Tim’s shoulders one last squeeze before he let go and returned to his seat. “Are you well? You have barely eaten.”

“My throat’s still a little sore,” Tim said, “I’m not really in the mood for eating.”

“Of course, my apologies,” Ra’s said, “Shall I have something else brought for you? Something a little easier to swallow?”

“No thank you,” Tim said, hoping that it would inspire Ra’s to leave faster. The sun was going to set soon and he didn’t want Damian to be discovered coming to him, even though he didn’t think Ra’s would care too much. It wasn’t a risk Tim wanted to take.

Ra’s stayed another hour, pleasantly chatting with Tim, all the while dropping hints of what Tim might gain if he joined Ra’s. Tim artfully deflected him, but he knew he could only keep it up for so long. Eventually Ra’s did leave him, promising to keep an eye on him should something happen. Tim smiled uncomfortably and bid him goodnight, sagging against the door when he finally closed it behind him.

“Grandfather likes you for some reason,” Damian said, scaring the crap out of Tim.
“Holy shit!” Tim yelped, “Where the heck did you come from?”

“I was hiding in the bathroom,” Damian said, “Why does Grandfather like you so much?”

Tim groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know Damian, I really don’t,” he sighed. He looked down at Damian and smiled tiredly, “Let’s forget about it for now. You want another story about our father?”

Damian furrowed his brows, obviously concerned, but he nodded and followed Tim to the couches. Tim dropped down onto the couches with a groan, closing his eyes momentarily. He felt a soft touch at his neck and opened his eyes to see Damian leaning over him, inspecting the bruises.

“The healers can fix this if we go to their building,” Damian said, “At the very least they can ease the pain.”

“I’m fine Damian,” Tim said with a smile, “It’s just some bruising, it’ll heal on its own in a few days.”

Damian frowned harder. “It will be healed by tomorrow if you see the healers,” he said. He hopped up off the couch and pulled Tim up. “Come, I will take you to the healer’s building.”

“Damian, I’m fine,” Tim insisted, but they were already heading for the window. In truth Tim didn’t want them to be caught outside in the fading light by Jason, or having Jason waiting for him again when they came back.

Damian kept leading Tim away though, and Tim finally gave up and let Damian lead him out of the window and over the balcony. They hopped along the rooftops until they were nearly at the wall.

The healers building was in a quieter corner of the compound, just across from the arena. Tim noted there was a tight alley between the building and the wall and filed the information away for later.

The healers quickly saw to Tim, rubbing at least three different oils and salves on his bruised flesh. Tim had to admit, it did feel a lot better afterwards. Damian stood by all the while and snapped orders in a way that would have Alfred reaching for a book on etiquette to bonk him on the head with. When it was over with, Tim and Damian quietly made their way back to the main building under cover of darkness, hoping they didn’t run into any guards. They were out long past curfew.

“We should get back as quickly as possible,” Tim said, “I don’t want to find out what they’ll do to us if we’re out past curfew.”

“To us? ‘They’ will do nothing,” Damian said, “We are Al Ghul’s, we make the rules here.”

“You are an Al Ghul, I’m not,” Tim said.

“Regardless, we will come to no harm,” Damian assured.

Tim made a slightly unhappy noise, not truly convinced but willing to let it slide. They ducked around an alley so they could climb to the rooftops, only to nearly run into a guard.

“Halt,” the guard commanded, “You are out past curfew.”

Tim swore and pulled Damian behind him. “We were just heading back now,” he said, hoping Damian was right about them being Al Ghul’s.

“Those out beyond curfew without a legitimate reason are put to death,” the guard said, drawing his weapon. “What reason have you?”
Damian stepped around Tim and stood tall, lifting his chin and straightening his spine. “I am Ra’s Al Ghul’s grandson, I do not need to justify myself to you.”

“And he?” the guard gestured with his weapon to Tim. “He has no such protection.”

“Are you blind? He is my brother and he is with me,” Damian said indignantly, “Lower your weapon at once and let us pass.”

The guard didn’t lower his weapon and took a step towards Tim. Tim prepared himself for a fight when a gunshot rang out and the guard dropped, a bloody hole in their back. Out of the shadows Tim could see the glowing end of a cigarette. Jason Todd stepped from the darkness, a gun in hand.

“I’ve got plans for you Replacement,” Jason said, blowing out a cloud of blue smoke. “Can’t have you getting offed before I decide what I’m going to do with you.”

There was a shout from a few streets over. Jason whistled lowly. “Better get going. Don’t want to get caught out of doors at this time of night.” He grinned. “Who knows what sort of characters your might meet in the dark?”

Damian growled and made to lunge, but Tim grabbed his arm to stop him. “Let’s go, now,” he hissed. Tim didn’t look forward to dealing with this in the morning, but he’d prefer to live to see morning all the same.

Damian huffed, but obliged Tim. They scrambled up onto the roof and started tear-assing across the rooftops towards the main building. Thankfully it was a new moon, and they were shrouded in darkness.

“See ya ‘round Replacement!” Jason called after them. Tim grit his teeth and tried not to think of the thud the guard had made when he dropped to the sand, dead the moment the bullet hit his spine.

Bruce was certain the only reason he heard her before she arrived at his side was that Selina wanted him to hear her. He didn’t turn to her, keeping his eyes in his binoculars as he waited for Black Mask goons to start moving. They were breaking into the Gotham City Museum, which had a collection of West African artifacts on display, including several priceless masks that would fetch a pretty penny on the black market. Batman hated that he had to deal with this, taking precious time and resources away from the ongoing search for Tim. He had to be the one to deal with this though; with everyone spread as thin as they were, he was the only one available.

“Haven’t seen the Black Mask Gang around in a while,” Selina said, sliding up next to him. “I thought you might have had something to do with it.”

“The Black Mask Gang has been having some internal struggles. Someone meddling in jobs and bodies piling up. Could just be someone ambitious on the inside trying to climb the ladder, could be someone trying to sabotage someone else,” Batman said, trying to get a look at the guard who kept ‘casually’ walking by the back entrance.

Catwoman reached over and took the binoculars from him, peering through them to where he’d been looking moments ago. “I’ve been hearing that it’s someone on the outside, making trouble for all the gangs in Gotham. Nothing too noticeable yet, but some of the smaller fish are starting rumors,” she said.
“Any patterns?” Batman asked, keeping his eyes trained on streets, looking for larger vehicles.

“None that I could tell you,” Selina said, handing back the binoculars. “Just someone picking off people and jobs as they come along,” she said, “Seems more like an opportunist than a hunter.”

“Unless they're waiting for the right opportunity,” Batman said, turning the binoculars over in his hands.

They went quiet for a long moment, nothing but the wind disturbing them. Selina laid a gentle hand on Bruce’s arm, and though he couldn't feel the warmth of her hand through her gloves and his body armor, he reveled in the touch.

“How have you been holding up?” Selina asked softly, pulling her goggles up so she could look at him more directly.

“I've been busy,” Batman said, lifting the binoculars again.

“That’s not what I asked,” Selina said, “Bruce, I know about the boy. I know he’s your son.”

“It was on national television, I’d be surprised if you didn’t know,” Bruce said.

“Bruce,” Selina said sharply, “I know he’s missing.”

Bruce sighed and dropped the binoculars again. “We’ve been looking, but we haven’t done more than eliminate a few people from the suspect list,” he said, “It’s been over a month, and I still feel like I’m chasing my tail in the dark.”

“I think you're mixing metaphors,” Selina said, “If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know?”

Bruce looked at her, somewhat surprised. Selina shrugged. “I like the kid. He’s a sweet one. And… I really am worried about him,” she admitted, crossing her arms over herself and glancing away. “You remember that I was the one that found him when his not-dad went ballistic on him.”

“I remember,” Bruce said, “Thank you for taking care of him.”

“I’m not here looking to be thanked, I’m here to help,” Selina said, “I know you’re the best detective in the world, but I’ve got some connections I can pull and some favours I can call in.”

Bruce looked over to Selina, raising an eyebrow. Catwoman gave a shrug and a wry, sad smile. “I told you, I like that one. He’s smart,” she said, then chuckled a little, “You know, he actually reminds me of you.”

Batman turned away, looking back down to the street. Trying to get a lead on Tim was starting to be impossible, no matter where he looked. At this point, he’d take all the help he could get. He just wanted to bring his son home.

“Thank you Selina,” Bruce said softly, “That means a lot to me.”

Selina smiled and stepped close, standing right next to him as they watched the museum. Selina sighed deeply and rested her head on Bruce’s shoulder, knowing that she didn't need to say any more.

Finally, a large truck drove slowly past the front of the museum. Batman leaned down and got a better look at them through the binoculars, confirming that it was indeed the people he was looking for. He grabbed his grapple from his belt and stepped onto the edge of the building. He looked down
in surprise when Catwoman followed him.

Selina put her goggles back on and smiled up at him. “Why don’t we handle these morons together so you can get back to looking for your boy?” she said, “Besides, can’t let you have all the fun, now can I?”

Bruce smiled slightly and held his hand out for Catwoman to take. Selina slid her hand into his and he pulled her close, tucking his arm around her waist securely. Her arms circled his neck and he tried not to think of the whole of her body pressing against him. Batman fired his grapple and swung them silently over the street to the top of the Museum.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this chapter is mostly a lot of little pieces of things all put into one place. I promise the next chapter will be a little more consistent. There were other things I was going to include in this chapter, but I realized it would have rushed it way too fast if I had, so I had to pad it with other stuff. Hopefully I figure out what the hell I'm doing for next chapter.
Part III Chapter v: Compromise

Chapter Notes

I'm so surprised I managed to get this done as fast as I did. Especially since I rewrote a good chunk of it because I wasn't happy with it.

Contest time! Whoever guesses the reference wins a 1k fic from me! Remember to include the book and the author for the full win. Please refrain from googling the quote since it's pretty obvious where the quote is this time. Also remember to hold back from participating if you've already won a prize. Happy guessing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week passed, then two, a month passed and Jason continued to watch from the shadows, occasionally getting close enough to remind Tim that he was still there, waiting for him. He could see that it was starting to wear down on Tim, making him anxious and jumpy. Jason knew Talia wanted him to move faster, but honestly Jason was having too much fun just pestering the little brat.

Jason also wanted to get a measure of this kid’s abilities. He must have some skill if he was Jason’s replacement, so Jason couldn’t underestimate him. Surprisingly, it didn't seem like the kid was much of a fighter. He held his own, but it was clear to Jason that athleticism didn't come naturally to this kid. He fought like he thought of every move first, nothing instinctual like him or even Dick. It occurred to Jason after six days that this kid was smart, almost terrifyingly so, and that was probably how he’d gotten the job. Jason was going to have to be careful; he’d already showed his hand to the kid, so now he was prepared. A slip up on Jason’s part, but nothing that couldn't be worked around.

What was surprising about the kid was just how normal he seemed. Jason had spent nearly a year obsessing over his revenge on this kid, on Batman, but he hadn’t really watched him too closely. Now he was stalking the kid all the time, having nothing better to do in the compound, and it was almost jarring how normal this kid was. The kid wandered around, went to the library to read, napped in the middle of the afternoon, knocked over things when he wasn’t paying attention, and was just… normal. Jason hadn’t really thought about that, how the kid who replaced him must have also just been a kid, with his own personality. Jason hadn’t been Robin all the time, and neither was this kid.

It didn't matter though, Jason was still going to kill him. He just had to come up with the perfect plan.

Until he came up with something, he had to keep the kid out of harm’s way, which was particularly hard because the kid was a trouble magnet. He didn't exactly make it a secret that he was trying to devise a way to escape, but he was so brazen about it that made even Jason shake his head. Jason stalked along behind the kid as he explored nearly every room of every building. When the kid stumbled across some stored explosives, he nearly ran into some guards. When it seemed like the guards were going to run the kid through, Jason had to shoot both of them to give the kid an opening to escape. It wouldn't have pissed Jason off so much if the kid didn't keep getting into trouble like that at every turn.

Jason had almost settled on a plan around three weeks in. He was following Tim through the main building close to dinner when he saw Ra’s accost him. Jason ducked around a corner to spy on them without being seen (he was here as Talia’s guest, but he didn't want to come across Ra’s if he could
help it. He peered around the corner and watched as they talked. Jason was starting to get bored when he noticed Ra’s step closer to the kid and gently stroke his face. The kid’s whole body tensed and Jason could almost see him physically fighting himself not to take a step back, to shrug off Ra’s unwanted attention and make a run for it.

He’s a kid you pervert! Jason thought, gritting his teeth. Get away from him you sick freak!

If he was surprised by his own vicious anger, Jason told himself that he didn’t like anyone who touched kids, regardless of who that kid was. It had nothing to do with the kid himself. However, it did put him off his plans, and he didn’t attack him like he’d planned to that night.

Jason wandered behind the kid for a few more days, before Talia found him again, this time watching Tim and Damian ‘fight to the death’ in the arena. It looked more like sparring or play fighting to Jason, but he didn't mention that to Talia. She came up into the stands and sat next to him.

“If you do not have the nerve to kill him yourself, I’ll do it for you and hand over his corpse,” Talia said.

“I’m working on it,” Jason said. He’d been trying to come up with a plan, but nothing was really coming to him. Even when he did think of something, he somehow talked himself out of it, usually with the reasoning that it was too complicated to pull off or just didn't have the impact he wanted.

“Think of it faster,” Talia said, “My patience is wearing thin.”

Jason growled. “I’ll think of it when I think of it,” he said, “Back off.”

Talia grabbed his arm and dug her nails in. “You are only here because of me. You only have your mind because of me. You owe me his head.”

Jason gritted his teeth and ripped his arm out of her grip, turning to her and snatching her wrist, squeezing it hard enough to make the skin go white. “This isn’t about you. This is about him, so whatever beef you have with him isn’t my problem. Back. Off.”

If looks could kill, Jason would be back in his grave. Talia wrenched her wrist from his grip and struck him across the face. Jason knew better than to retaliate and just sat there. Talia stood and looked down at him.

“I would have thought you better than this,” she said, “I suppose I was mistaken.”

Jason took a few deep breaths and tried not to let his temper get the better of him. It wouldn't do any good with Talia, no matter how much he wanted to have a swing at her. It also stung a little, hearing those words from her. Talia had become such an important part of his life, he really did owe her a lot.

As if sensing his thoughts, Talia sighed and ran a hand through his hair, pulling his head against her hip. “I don’t mean to snap at you, and I don’t mean to be impatient,” she said, stroking his hair, “I simply worry you’re losing your resolve.”

“I’m not,” Jason protested, leaning into the touch. “I just can’t think of anything to do with him.”

“You can, I know you can, you just have to follow through,” Talia said, “You need to commit to a plan.”

Jason sighed, turning his head to watch the two young kids fight in the arena. “What’s the deal with him and that other kid anyway?”
“Nothing that you need to worry about,” Talia assured him, “Just concentrate on the boy who took replaced you.”

Jason felt the anger simmering again. “Yeah, I can do that,” he said, zeroing in on the Replacement as he dodged around the ring, avoiding the smaller kid’s strikes.

“Good,” Talia said, leaning down and placing a kiss on his forehead. “I know you’ll make me proud.”

Jason hummed and leaned into Talia some more. The place where she’d slapped him across his cheek stung a little when he pressed it to the cloth of her dress. Talia sat down next to him again and placed her hand on his chest.

“When you’ve finished with him, come by my chambers,” she said softly, “Good work deserves a reward.”

Jason nodded, leaning his head against her shoulder. From the ring, he could see the Replacement watching him.

Talia had anticipated that it would take some pushing to get Jason to go after Timothy, but she hadn’t expected him to be so reluctant to kill the boy that it would be like pushing at a wall. All of her plans were failing her, and she was running out of time and options. She wasn’t stupid enough to think she’d be able to evade the Dark Knight forever, and the longer she waited, the smaller her window of opportunity became. She needed the bastard dead, and soon.

At this point, she wondered if it wouldn’t simply be worth it to just slice the brat’s throat and be done with it. Her son and her father had both been won over by the bastard, and her dog seemed to have lost his nerve. She was quickly losing control of the situation and she needed to gain it back. It seemed like no matter what she tried she was just making things worse.

“Correct your stance Damian,” Talia said, watching Damian on the balance beam, standing one footed and holding up weights in either hand.

“Yes mother,” Damian said, keeping his breathing even. It was hot in the room, with water being poured over hot stones to create steam. Moisture clung to every surface, making things uncomfortable and restricting.

Talia watched Damian balance for another minute. His form was perfect and he was holding the weights with no signs of fatigue. “Add more weight,” she commanded an attendant.

Damian didn’t flinch as more weight was added, though his shoulders began to shake. This was about where he’d been stuck for the last few months, though he was improving. Damian took a few deep breaths and concentrated on his stance, trying to hold the weight. Talia guessed he might be able to hold it for quite a while before he had to drop them. He was improving fast.

But not fast enough.

“More weight,” Talia ordered again.

“Mother?” Damian asked, breaking his concentration slightly. A flash of worry crossed his face.
“Ma’am?” the attendant asked. They had been the same attendant throughout the entirety of this training and they knew how it worked.

“More weight,” Talia snapped, turning to the attendant. “Do as you're told or be flogged.”

The attendant pressed their lips together and added more weight to either of Damian’s hands. Damian began to pant, his shoulders shaking and his arms sagging, unable to take the added weight so quickly.

“More weight,” Talia said again, pacing along the side of the room, watching her son struggle.

“Mother, I cannot,” Damian protested even as more weight was added.

“You will,” Talia said, “Hold until the time is done.”

Damian groaned and panted, trying in vain to keep the proper stance and hold up the weights. Talia could hear his lungs wheeze from where she stood, she could see him drip with sweat as he tried desperately to hold on.

“More weight,” Talia ordered again.

No sooner than the weights had been added than Damian screamed and fell, dropping from the beam to the floor with a loud crash, the weights dragging him down hard. There was a pop as Damian’s shoulder dislocated, as he was unable to correct his fall with all the weight hanging off him. Damian bit his lip against the pain and curled up on the floor, gasping for breath.

Talia sighed deeply. “That’s enough for today,” she said, “Go to the healers and then to your chambers Damian.”

“M-Mother,” Damian called, shakily getting to his feet.

Talia turned her back to him. “Go to the healers and then return to your chambers Damian,” she commanded.

Damian coughed once, trying to clear his lungs. “Y-yes Mother,” he rasped. He wobbled passed her to the door and slowly made his way down the hall, the attendant following him should the boy need to be carried.

Talia sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She couldn't let up now, not when things were starting to fall apart. She had to regain control of her son, no matter what it took. Her father would be trickier, but she only had to stall him until she could wrest the empire from his grip. Jason had been pushed to move tonight, so hopefully her efforts would finally be fruitful.

Wanting to check on her child before retiring to her chambers, Talia set out for the healers building. She was nearly to the building when she heard hushed voices coming from an alley. Carefully drawing her dagger, Talia ducked around the corner to see who was speaking.

It was Damian and the bastard, hiding from prying eyes in an alley. Timothy was kneeling in front of Damian, a sad smile on his face as he said comforting words to Damian. He reached out to brush a stray lock of black hair from Damian’s face and the younger boy leaned into the touch. The sad look on the bastard’s face intensified and he gently pulled Damian into an embrace, which Damian readily sank into. Talia gritted her teeth and stormed back the way she came. Things could not continue as they were.
In the middle of the night, Jason made his way through the halls of the main building to where the Replacement’s room was. He slipped passed the guard standing outside and stole into the kid’s room. It was the dead of night, so he expected everyone to already be asleep. Quietly, Jason made his way over to the bedroom, pulling his gun from it’s holster. He would put a bullet in the kid’s head as he slept, nice and clean, then send the body back to Gotham in a coffin identical to the one he’d been buried in. Simple yet effective.

Making his way across the room to the sleeping kid, Jason put the safety off the gun and came around to the side of the bed where he could clearly see his sleeping face. It was a clear night, and the kid’s face was illuminated by the moonlight. He looked peaceful in his sleep, young and vulnerable. Jason held the gun at his side, tapping his finger on the side. It would be so quick to kill him like this, painlessly in his sleep. He wouldn't feel a thing and he’d go home in a comfy satin lined box. Jason’s hand remained at his side.

The kid began to stir in his sleep and cracked his eyes open; either Jason must have lost track of time or the kid had better instincts than he’d thought. The kid caught sight of Jason and bolted upright in bed, whole body tense and ready to spring if Jason made a move. He noticed the gun in Jason’s hand and looked up into his face. He didn’t seem afraid, which surprised Jason, but he seemed like he was thinking hard. They stared at each other for a while.

Eventually the kid seemed to relax. “Well?” he asked, “Are you going to do anything or are you just going to keep watching me sleep like a creep?”

Jason growled. “You think it’s a good idea to mouth off to the guy holding a loaded gun?”

The kid rolled his eyes. “Oh please,” he said, “I’m Robin, I mouth off to people holding guns all the time.”

Jason couldn't help but chuckle. “Fair enough,” he said, but he couldn’t help but think of that phrase. I’m Robin, he’d said. Jason felt the anger bubble inside of him and he lifted the gun and pointed it at the kid. “Time to go Replacement.”

The kid only scoffed at him again. “Really? You’re finally going to do it?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

“You think I won’t?” Jason growled, cocking the gun.

The kid stared straight into his eyes, piercing Jason with his gaze. “I think you’ve been here a month and you haven’t done shit,” he said, “I think you’ve done nothing but intimidate me and kill anyone who’s actually tried to hurt me. I think you don’t want to hurt me. Maybe something’s stopping you, or maybe you don't actually want me dead. Whatever it is, you’re not going to kill me.”

Jason blinked, somehow feeling like that one time Alfred had caught him stealing muffins. He growled and aimed at Tim’s head. “Is that so? Well, I think you're full of shit.”

Tim stared down the barrel of the gun and then back up at Jason’s face. “So, do it then. Even if I try to run, there’s not enough time for me to get away before you pull the trigger. At this range, I’ll die instantly, no pain. Honestly, in comparison to whatever Talia might do to me if she gets impatient, I’d prefer this.” He leaned forward and tapped his forehead against the muzzle. “So, do it.”

Jason honestly hadn’t expected this at all. Gritting his teeth, Jason put his finger on the trigger, his gaze held by the kid’s. In the moonlight they seemed to sparkle, a bright shade of blue that was
weirdly familiar. The kid took a deep breath and closed his eyes, handing Jason complete control of the situation.

Jason tried to command his finger to move, to squeeze and put it all behind him. He wanted to get it over with so he could move on and leave this cursed desert. Why had Talia brought him here? Why was the kid even here in the first place? With a snarl, Jason dropped the gun to his side, un-cocking it and flipping the safety on.

“Fucking shit kid, you’re crazy,” he said, shoving the gun back into his holster. “Do you have a deathwish?”

Tim opened his eyes and grinned a little. “Had a hunch was all.”

Jason snarled. “Wipe that smug grin off your face before I slap it off,” he said, “I could still kill you.”

Tim shrugged. “I could be killed any day now by Talia. She’s getting pissed that you’ve been taking so long. She’s taking it out on Damian.”

“Damian,” Jason said, “He’s the other kid here right? What’s his story?”

Tim looked up at Jason in confusion. “You don’t know? Talia didn’t tell you?”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “Is it relevant?”

Tim scratched the back of his neck. “I mean, I guess, but that depends on what you call relevant I suppose.”

“Whatever, I don’t care,” Jason said, running a hand through his hair and sitting down on the bed. “I need to figure out what I’m going to do.”

“About what?” Tim asked, sitting up more fully so he could sit next to Jason on the bed.

“About you,” Jason said, “I can’t just let you go, but I can’t bring myself to kill you. Yet,” he added last minute.

Tim was quiet a moment. “You… you could help us escape,” he suggested quietly.

Jason looked over at Tim skeptically. “Seriously?” he asked.

Tim shrugged. “Think of it as saving for later. It would be a lot easier to kill me in Gotham than it would be to transfer my body across the globe.”

Jason hummed. “That’s a fair point, but why should I help you?” he asked, “Why don’t I just leave you for Talia?”

Tim wraped his arms around himself, grimacing. “I suppose you could if you wanted,” Tim said, “But my only other option for protection is Ra’s.”

Jason thought back to when he’d seen Ra’s gently caress Tim’s face, his gut rolling over just at the memory. “Has he… done anything to you?”

“Not yet,” Tim said, “But it’s getting more and more uncomfortable to be around him. Honestly, I might prefer whatever Talia has in store for me.”

Jason should just let the kid be, leave him to his fate. What did he stand to gain by helping the kid? This was his enemy, the kid who took his place after Jason died. Why should he help him?
“You took Robin,” Jason said, voice low and threatening, “You replaced me.”

Tim blinked, “Oh well,” he shifted his weight a little, “Do you want it back?”

Jason’s mind blanked for a second. “What?” he asked.

“Robin,” Tim said, “Do you want it back?”

Jason stared at the kid in bewilderment, trying to figure out if he was serious or not. He actually seemed sincere, to Jason’s surprise. “What, you’d just give it back to me?” he asked incredulously.

Tim shrugged. “Well yeah, it was yours first. The only reason I have it is because everyone thought you were dead. If you want it back, you can have it.”

Jason turned that information over in his mind. He’d never thought that he could just have Robin back, he’d never thought to ask. Was that what would have happened if he had gone to Gotham right away? Would he just have been… welcomed home?

Shaking his head to rid himself of such fanciful thoughts, Jason turned back to Tim. “There’s still no reason for me to help you. Maybe I won’t kill you, but help you? There’s nothing in it for me.”

Tim hummed and seemed to think for a moment. “What if we made a deal?” he said, “You help me and Damian out of here, and I’ll do something for you?”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “And what could you possibly offer me?” he asked.

Tim tapped his finger, mind working quickly. “I’ll give up Robin,” he said quietly.

Jason turned to him, but Tim kept going. “You’re upset that I’m Robin right? So I’ll give it up. You can have it back or there’ll be no more Robin.” He took a deep breath. “If you help me, I’ll give up Robin.”

Jason watched Tim for a minute. “You’d give it up so easily?” he asked.

Tim sighed. “I wouldn't say ‘easily’, Robin is the best thing that ever happened to me, but I need to get Damian out of here.” He looked up into Jason’s eyes. “He’s only eight, and he’s been under Talia and Ra’s care his whole life. He needs to get out of here, somewhere safe where he can be a kid and have a real childhood. If he stays here any longer, who knows how much more messed up he’s going to be?”

Jason stared back into Tim’s eyes, trying to figure out if he really meant it. This kid was willing to give up Robin, even though he clearly didn’t want to, all to save a kid he barely knew and because Jason, who’d tried to kill him and admitted he still might, didn't like that he took his place. Jason had to admire his resolve.

With a sigh, Jason caved. “Fine,” he said, “I’ll help you and the other brat escape.”

Tim smiled brightly and Jason had to almost shield his eyes. “You’ll really help?” he asked, and jeez did he look like an eager kid in his pyjamas, like Jason had agree to tell him a story.

“Yes, Christ turn off the eyeballs will ya?” Jason grumbled, “I get you out of here, and you give up Robin, for good.”

Tim nodded and held out his hand to shake. “It’s a deal,” he said.

Jason rolled his eyes and shook the kids hand. “Yeah, don’t get too comfortable, I still might kill
you,” he said, “I’m not even sure how you got me on your side. I came in here to put a bullet in your head.”

Tim smiled. “There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me,” he quoted.

Jason couldn't help the corner of his mouth twitching slightly. “That’s not playing fair,” he said. “So? What’s the plan for escape?”

Tim stood from the bed and began to pace around. “I think I might have something, but we’re going to have to act really fast.”

“Yeah, I don't think Talia is going to like that you’re still alive in the morning,” Jason said, “She was really pushing for me to off you tonight.”

“It’s the caravan,” Tim said, “It comes in two days, and she’s smart enough to know that I’ll try to use it to escape.”

“Are you going to use it?” Jason asked.

“Yes, kind of,” Tim said. He stopped pacing and turned to Jason. “Come on, we need to talk to Damian,” he said, heading for the window.

Jason got up to follow. “We need his opinion? He’s eight.”

“He knows this compound better than either of us,” Tim said, heading out onto the balcony. “Plus, I need to get him on board with the whole escape in the first place.”

Jason took a moment to absorb that. “Are you serious?” he asked, “You don’t even have the little brat in on the plan to escape? You’re really flying by the seat of your ass, aren’t you?”

“I’m making it up as I go,” Tim said, starting to climb the side of the building. “Improvisation and all that jazz.”

Jason rolled his eyes and, with a sigh, Starting following Tim up the side of the building. They climbed for a while before Tim stepped down onto a balcony and knocked on the glass door. They waited a minute before a sleep ruffled child opened the window.

“Brother? What are you doing here at this time of night?” the kid, Damian, asked. He saw Jason and glared. “What is he doing here?”

“He’s with me Damian, don’t worry,” Tim said, “Come on, we have to talk.”

Damian glared at Jason for another second, but Tim pushed him inside and quickly close the window behind all three of them. Jason made himself comfortable on a chair and waited for Tim to convince the little brat to escape with them.

“How’s your shoulder Damian?” Tim asked, sitting down with Damian on a couch. “Does it still hurt?”

Damian shrugged one shoulder, the one that hadn’t been dislocated. “The healers did a good job. I should be better in a day or two.” He glanced back to where Jason was sitting. “What is he doing here Brother?” he growled.

Tim took a deep breath and decided not to mess around with subterfuge. “Jason has agreed to help
me escape Damian,” he said, “I need to get home.”

Damian looked up at Tim, hurt on his face. “You are going to leave?” he asked.

Tim reached out and put his hand on Damian’s uninjured shoulder. “I can’t stay Damian. The longer I stay, the more danger I’m in. I need to leave or I’ll be killed.”

“I can protect you,” Damian said, reaching out and clutching Tim’s shirt. “You do not have to leave.”

“I really do Damian,” Tim said, “But I’d also really like it if you came with me.”

“Come with you?” Damian asked, “Why?”

“It’s not safe here for you either Damian,” Tim said, “I want to take you to meet our father.”

Damian blinked in surprise. “Our father? You’re going to take me to him?”

“Yes, I’m taking you right to him,” Tim said, “But I need your help to get out of here.”

Damian cast his eyes down and shifted uncomfortably. “Mother told me I must earn the right to meet my father. Won’t this be cheating?”

“Damian,” Tim said, “You don’t have to earn the right to know who your father is. You have every right to know him, no matter what anyone says.”

“You kids finished? I thought we were going to discuss escape plans?” Jason called from where he was sitting. “I’m getting so bored I might just kill you both and be done with it.”

Damian glared at Jason over Tim’s shoulder. “I do not trust him,” he growled.

“Well he’s my best chance at getting out of here,” Tim said, “I need his help.”

“Then I shall come with you,” Damian said, “I cannot let you go with him alone.” He looked over at Jason. “Do you hear that? If you hurt my brother, I shall slit your throat!”

“Sounds like a fun time,” Jason said, giving Damian a nasty grin, “I don’t have an issue with two for one deals.”

Damian growled and started to stand, but Tim pushed him back down. “Enough, both of you,” Tim said, “We’re all going to have to work together for the time being, so we’re all just going to have to play nice .”

Jason rolled his eyes and Damian continued growling, but it didn’t seem like anyone was about to claw anyone else’s eyes out, so Tim would take the win. He got up and moved to the table. “Come on, let’s start planning.”

It was so small that Barbara nearly missed it. A little blip in the bureaucratic mess that was Bludhaven’s shipping records. If she hadn’t been looking specifically for blips she would have passed it off as nothing. She might not even have noticed this particular blip if not for the date and the location attached to it.
“Oracle to the Cave,” Barbara called through the comms, “I think I might have something on our missing persons case.”

“What did you find?” Bruce asked, immediately giving Barbara his full attention. They hadn’t had a breakthrough in Tim’s case in months. Every day felt like one day they let their window of opportunity get smaller and smaller.

“Could be nothing, might be something,” Barbara said, “A small freighter set out from Bludhaven harbor just a few hours after the attack at the library, heading for Syria, direct route.”

“What was the cargo?” Bruce asked, looking over the files Barbara sent him. He found the specific freighter she meant and started going over the details.

“It was listed as ‘glassware’, but it’s not hard to falsify cargo documents in the ‘Haven,” Barbara said, “They probably used glassware as a front so they could get a nice big ‘fragile’ sticker posted all over the paperwork. Fragile goods have special shipping protocols, so only certain people are allowed to handle the cargo.”

“Meaning less people to pay off,” Bruce said, “Bludhaven seems to be a very lively ‘glassware' shipping port, what makes this one special?”

“Bludhaven is a mess, but it still has some rules,” Barbara said, “To come and go in the ‘Haven harbour you need to file all the necessary paperwork at least a week in advance, so they can keep the schedules clean so boats don't crash into one another.”

“You’d think that would put a damper on illegal goods coming through the city,” Bruce said.

“The paperwork has to be filed, it doesn’t have to be truthful,” Barbara pointed out. “If you’re rich you can bump that down to three days, and if you’re rich and corrupt you can bump it down to twenty four hours, max.”

“And how long did it take this boat to come and go from Bludhaven?” Bruce asked.

“An hour, maximum,” Barbara said, “There was no record of this boat until just a half an hour before the library attack, and then it shipped out again a half an hour later. The biggest crime lord in Gotham couldn't buy that, much less Bludhaven. Whoever did this has serious money and connections.”

“Where did the boat go?” Bruce asked, tapping on the computer to see where the information trail led. The boat would have to have docked somewhere.

“The next record of it is in the Strait of Gibraltar, and then it finally docked in Syria in Borj Islam. From there, there are no records,” Barbara said, “I’ve got the name of the person who received the cargo, but there’s no guarantee that he actually has the cargo.”

“What’s the name?” Bruce asked.

“Rafiq Maleh, a known man in the global black market. If you need something transported in or out of the Middle East, he’s your guy,” Barbara said, “But he’s not very friendly to outsiders. I don’t think you’re going to get much out of him unless you get close enough to break a few fingers.”

Bruce stared at the name on the screen. “Sounds familiar,” he muttered, “I think I might have a way to him already.”

“Already?” Barbara asked, “You know a lot of black market shipping tycoons?”
“More of a friend of a friend,” Bruce said, already dialing. He had to wait a few rings before she picked up.

“I gave you this number for personal reasons, Batsy,” Selina purred over the speaker, “You better be inviting me over for a bite.”

“You know a man named Rafiq Maleh, black market shipping tycoon,” Bruce said, ignoring the playful tone. “I need a favor.”

Selina sighed. “I did say I’d help, didn’t I? Me and my fat mouth,” she said, “What do you need to know?”

Bruce gave Selina the rundown of what they were after. Selina agreed to even let him tap into the call so he could hear everything first hand.

“You ready lover?” Selina asked.

“Get a room,” Barbara grumbled.

“Make the call Selina, we’re listening,” Bruce said.

Selina sighed and then dialed the number. It rang a few times before a disgruntled voice came through. “You have any idea what time it is?” a gravelly voice hissed.

“Rafiq, is that any way to talk to a lady?” Selina said, “I’m hurt.”

“Oh, it’s you Kitty-cat,” Rafiq hummed, “What do I owe the pleasure?”

“I need a favor,” Selina said, “Some ‘glass’ of mine got mixed in with someone else’s shipment and I need to track them down. This would have been a few months ago. A boat by the name of ‘Eisheth’. Paper trail says you signed for the goods. Ring a bell?”

There was some shuffling over the line, probably sheets as Rafiq got out of bed. “Remember that one. Spooky gang, but enough money to put even the scariest of men to sleep comfortably. I would cut your losses Kitty.”

“I’ll decide what to do about my own business, thank you,” Selina said primly, “I just need to know where the cargo was headed.”

Rafiq sighed. “I’m not entirely sure Kitty,” he said, “It’s all smoke and legend about that crew. They pass through all the time, but no one talks about them. They’ve got even the meanest gangs hiding under their beds.”

“I don’t need the gang, I need a direction,” Selina insisted, “Can you give me that?”

“It’s a shame such a pretty thing like you is so much trouble,” Rafiq said, “I can’t tell you much, but there are rumors the cargo disappeared down the Demon’s Road.”

“Demon’s Road?” Selina asked, “Sounds cheery. Tell me more?”

“Sa black hole of goods what it is,” Rafiq said, “Enough supplies for a small town disappears into the desert. Trucks all start from a different town, but end up in one place.”

“Ominous,” Selina said, “What’s the place?”

“It’s nothing,” Rafiq said, “Just a legend. Probably just a pick up point for different gangs. I’m sorry
“about your ‘glassware’ Kitty, but it’s probably long gone.”

“That’s alright Rafiq, thank you,” Selina said. She exchanged goodbyes and then refocused on Bruce. “You get anything useful out of that?”

“Plenty,” Bruce said, “I think I might even have figured out who the kidnapper is.”

“From just that?” Selina asked, “He barely gave me anything substantial.”

“The clues are in the names,” Bruce said, “‘Demon’s Road’ is obvious, but ‘Eisheth’ is the name of a Jewish demoness said to eat the souls of the damned. The fact that the trail disappears into the Middle East is another clue.”

“‘The Demon’s Head’, ” Barbara said.

Bruce growled, feeling both anger and eagerness well up in his gut. He just got leagues closer to finding Tim. “Ra’s Al Ghul. The League of Assassins are the ones who took Tim.”

Chapter End Notes

It feels like Jason's development was a little rushed, but don't worry, he's going to get some proper character development soon. There's going to be one more chapter of Part III before the next part comes, so stay tuned for some big events soon. I should have the next chapter up really quickly since I've basically written it in my head already.
Part III Chapter vi: Escape

Chapter Notes

This chapter's a lot shorter than most, but I think it makes up for it in action. There's also a bit of jumping around in time as well, but it should be pretty obvious when's when and what's going on. I had quite a bit of fun with this one, putting a bunch of different strings together to make the great escape.

No contest this chapter. It would have been too awkward to wedge something in with everything that was going on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ra’s looked up as his door opened. He prepared to be annoyed, but was pleasantly surprised when he saw that it was Timothy that was coming to him. He was even dressed in the silk robes Ra’s had gifted to him months ago. The red and black really suited him so well.

“I need your help,” Timothy said, eschewing all preamble.

“Whatever is within my power,” Ra’s promised, trying not to show how pleased he was. “What can I assist you with?”

“It’s Jason and Talia,” Timothy said, “Last night… Jason came to kill me. He didn’t, obviously, and for a minute I thought I almost had him won over to my side, but I don't know if I can trust him.” He wrapped his arms around himself, and wasn’t he just the picture of childish vulnerability? “I really need your help.”

Ra’s rested his hands on Timothy’s shoulders. “Under my care, you will have nothing to fear, my child,” he said, “What is it I can help you with?”

Timothy glanced over his shoulder. Ra’s followed his gaze and saw the edge of a shape disappear around a corner. “Not here,” Timothy said quietly, leaning in so only Ra’s could hear him. “Come by my chambers after dinner and we can discuss it more then.”

Ra’s couldn’t help a smile creep onto his face. “An after-dinner date then?” he asked softly, reaching one hand up to gently tip Timothy’s face up to look at him. Such beautiful blue eyes.

Timothy nodded. “Something like that,” he said. He quickly pulled away. “I’ll see you tonight. I need to go.”

“Shall I call an escort for you? One that is not reporting back to my daughter perhaps?” Ra’s offered.

“No, that’s okay,” Timothy said, already walking towards the door. “Just show up close to sunset.”

“I shall not be late,” Ra’s said.

Timothy nodded and then left the room as quickly as he came. Ra’s resisted the temptation to follow Timothy. He had to be patient, lest he scare the child away. He had to be careful about how he drew the child to him, or he would take two steps back for every step forward.
So Ra’s waited until sunset, just as the child had specified. He made his way to Timothy’s chambers, wondering what the boy would ask of him. Whatever it was, Ra’s would do whatever he could for the boy. This might be his chance to take the child both from his daughter and from the Detective himself. If he played his cards right, the most interesting person he’d met in five hundred years would come to his side.

Ra’s knocked soundly on Timothy’s door and waited to be invited inside. For several long moments, there was no sound. Ra’s was about to knock again when he heard the crash of fine china hitting the floor and shattering. Immediately knowing something was wrong, Ra’s tried to force his way into the room, but the door wouldn’t budge.

Turning to the nearby sentry, Ra’s commanded, “Get someone to knock down this door!”

The sentry ran off to do his bidding. He may have been under the order of Talia, but Ra’s was the highest authority in the League. The sentry came back shortly with his twin brother and another heavyweight assassin. Together, the three of them broke the heavy oak doors down and rushed into the room, Ra’s hot on their heels.

At first it seemed like the room was empty, but finally Ra’s spotted two figures on the ground in the dining area. Timothy and Damian lay prone and unconscious on the floor, the remains of a meal scattered across the stone as well. Ra’s quickly went to Timothy started to examine him. His pulse was strong but slow.

“They’ve been poisoned,” Ra’s determined, “Get them to the healers, now!” he shouted at the sentries.

The sentries nodded and gently lifted the limp bodies of the boy and Ra’s grandson, careful to keep their heads supported so their throats wouldn’t close. Ra’s turned and examined the food. A decanter of watered-down wine spilled it’s contents onto the floor. Ra’s picked up a glass and sniffed at it, trying to determine what kind of poison had been put in the drink.

“He’s still alive,” Talia hissed, grabbing Jason’s sleeve.

Jason turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow. “So? He got away from me last night is all. You’ve seen how squirrely he is.”

Talia growled. “You were supposed to kill him,” she said, “Imagine my surprise when he walked into the ring earlier this morning unscathed.”

“Like I said,” Jason wrenched his sleeve from Talia’s grip, “He got away from me. I’ve got it covered for tonight, don’t worry about it.”

“So far, you’ve failed to inspire my confidence,” Talia said, “What makes tonight different?”

Jason grinned and pulled out a vial of some clear liquid from his pocket. “Gonna poison him. Can’t outrun poison.”

Talia regarded the poison. “What sort is it?” she asked.

“Not sure, something to put him to sleep,” Jason said, stowing the vial. “I just asked for whatever
Talia was already in her chambers when Jason burst in. “It’s done,” he said.

“Finally,” Talia breathed, glad for some good news at last. “You’re certain it’s done?”

“Put it in the drink,” Jason said, “He’ll pass out, and in a half an hour he’ll be dead.”

“Enough time for someone to find him and help him,” Talia pointed out, annoyed. “You could have used something more lethal.”
“Yeah, but none of the ones you have here are painless,” Jason pointed out, “I hate him, but he’s just a kid.”

Talia rolled her eyes. “No matter how much training I pour into you, you continue to be obstinate about children,” she said, “No matter, what’s done is done.”

Jason nodded, going quiet. Talia smiled at him and beckoned him to sit next to her on the couch, which he obeyed. Talia pulled herself close to Jason, putting a hand on his muscular thigh and trailing it inwards and upwards slightly.

A poor substitute for his father, Talia thought, But he will do for now.

Talia leaned up to kiss Jason when someone banged hard on her door. Grumbling, Talia got up and went to answer it. “What do you want?” she snapped at the servant behind the door.

“Madam, so sorry to disturb you, but I have come with dire news,” the servant said, bowing lowly. “Your son was found poisoned along with the other child. They’re being taken to the healers as we speak.”

Talia sucked in a sharp breath. “Thank you for telling me, I will be there shortly,” she said evenly.

The servant nodded and scurried away. Talia slammed the door closed and turned on Jason. “You idiot!” she shouted, “You were only supposed to poison the bastard!”

Jason huffed. “What, like I was supposed to know the other one would go over for dinner? You can’t blame me for this. You’re the one who kept pushing me to do it tonight.”

Talia growled and grabbed her cloak. “Stay here, I will deal with you later,” she snarled, already rushing out the door. Hopefully whatever poison Jason had used could be counteracted. Hopefully it wasn’t too late.

“So why does it have to be Ra’s that finds you?” Jason asked. They had been making plans for at least an hour now since getting Damian to their side.

“I’m here as Talia’s guest and she’s been trying to kill me,” Tim explained, “If anyone else finds me, there won’t be any guarantee that they’ll take me to the healers building. Ra’s is the only one I can trust that will try to save my life.”

“Alright, but we’re going to have to time this right, or the drug won’t have time to slow your heart rate,” Jason said.

“Will it be enough to convince them we’re poisoned?” Damian asked.

“Why poison you at all? Why don’t we just sneak out and grab a truck?” Jason pointed out, “You two sneak out all the time.”

Tim sighed. “We can’t leave any room for error. If we just try to sneak out, we could be spotted and caught. We need to make a big enough distraction to divert their attention.”

“And fake poisoning you is the way to go?” Jason asked, raising an eyebrow.
Tim grinned. “That’s just a way to get me and Damian to the healers building. Once we’re there, you’ll need to create a bigger distraction, leaving Damian and I to move around. They won’t think they’ll need to heavily guard two kids who have been ‘poisoned’,” he said.

“Okay,” Jason said, “But what’s the distraction?”

Talia arrived at the healers building just a few moments after her father and the two boys. Ra’s was already ordering the healers around, devoting much of his attention to the bastard instead of his grandson.

“What happened?” Talia demanded, coming around to the cot where her son was laid out. He was completely limp.

“They were sharing a meal, and the wine was poisoned,” Ra’s said. He seemed to realize something and turned to her. “This was your dog’s doing, isn’t it?”

Talia bristled. “You think I would have my own son poisoned? Absolutely not,” she defended.

“Maybe not intentionally,” Ra’s said, approaching her. “But you have been trying to kill Timothy for months. This reeks of your hand, daughter.”

“If you want to discuss this father, I would be happy to,” Talia said, “Just as soon as my son has been treated.”

Ra’s growled. “There will be nothing to discuss child,” he said, “Timothy has asked for my protection, and as of now, he has it. You will do no harm to him.”

Talia cursed internally and was about to retaliate against her father when a distant explosion shook the building. “What the hell was that?” she snapped.

Another explosion, closer this time, making the furniture shake. A few moments later, a guard came scrambling into the building.

“Sir!” he cried, “It’s the Batman!”

Talia cursed aloud this time. “We are under attack! Get everyone into position!” Ra’s shouted. Talia wished she’d thought to grab one her knives.

“You, stay with my son and let no one enter the building!” Talia ordered a few healers. They nodded and scurried around, trying to manage the chaos.

Talia followed her father out of the building. Several fires were already blazing in the distance; the armory and the watchtower were already ablaze, and another explosion went off in the main building. Talia and Ra’s ran for the main building, trying to catch a glimpse of the man responsible.

Talia noticed a shadow pass overhead, the tell-tale pointed ears and long black cape giving him away. “There!” she shouted, and immediately twenty guards followed her command. The shadow was gone by the time they got there, and another explosion went off near the arena.

“He’s got something planned,” Talia said, “He’s taking out strategic points.”
“Indeed,” Ra’s said, “Perhaps he is looking for his stolen child.”

“This is your impenetrable and unfindable fortress father,” Talia snapped, “If he is here and causing this much damage, it is not my fault.”

Talia knew she was playing with fire, testing her father the way she was, but she was in too sour a mood to think of the consequences just yet. Another explosion rocked the ground, this time followed by several other explosions.

“He’s gone after the storage units!” Ra’s shouted, “Stop the fire!”

They ran around for what seemed like hours, assassins and guards chasing after shadows with bat ears and servants scrambling to put out fires. Talia was never able to catch more than a glimpse of her Beloved, but she was sure he must have saw her through the flames. What exactly was he playing at?

Tim wasn't unconscious for very long. The drug was designed to work quickly and burn out just as fast. It was perfect for faking being poisoned and then getting back on one’s feet. The only drawback was that it kind of stunk, so they had to put it in alcohol to cover the obvious smell. Hopefully it wouldn't tip Ra’s off right away and they had some time to work.

Tim slowly cracked an eye open. He was in the healers building, just like he’d wanted. A healer had his back turned to Tim, searching through their vials and equipment. Tim wasted no time in leaping up and striking the healer precisely, making them drop to the ground, unconscious.

A yelp from behind him let him know that Damian was also up and had taken out another healer (non lethal, as agreed). Tim didn't bother checking on the kid as he rushed to incapacitate any other healer in the room. Once it was only Tim and Damian walking around, Tim turned to his brother.

“You okay? Any side effects?” Tim asked.

Damian shook his head. “My shoulder is aggravated, but I believe it is from rough treatment, not the drug,” he said.

“Think you can climb?” Tim asked, heading for the door.

“I will manage,” Damian assured him.

Tim gave him a quick smile before they headed out into the cover of darkness. Servants and assassins and guards scrambled around, looking for the caped crusader blowing up all their shit.

“Jason won’t be able to fool them for long,” Tim said, “Let’s move.”

They ran around to the side of the healer’s building, to the narrow alley that was budged up tightly to the outer wall. Tim checked on the supplies Damian had put there earlier in the day and then checked the explosives further down. He grabbed the detonator and crawled out of the alley, pulling the supplies with him.

“Ready?” Tim asked, putting the detonator in Damian’s hands. “On my signal.”

Damian nodded and put his finger on the trigger, waiting for Tim’s command. Tim scanned around
and waited for the right moment. Finally, the storage building went up, where all the explosives were being kept (which they had helped themselves to as well). The first explosion was massive, but it was followed by several smaller explosions.

“Now!” Tim said.

Damian hit the trigger and the explosives in the alley went off. They had been set up to blow a hole in the wall, not the building, but the roof still shook a little with the force of the explosion. As predicted, the explosives had blasted through the wall, leaving a hole big enough for two kids to get through.

Tim and Damian quickly brought their supplies through, moving as fast as they could and staying close to the wall. One of the other advantages the healers building had was that it wasn't far from where the caravan parked.

The trucks usually had guards stationed around them, but with ‘Batman’ running around, they had all been called away. Tim and Damian found a large enough truck and hopped inside, setting up their supplies.

“Can you not work any faster?” Damian asked, acting as lookout in case a guard had stayed behind.

“I’m working as fast as I can,” Tim said, trying to get the wires to cooperate. “These trucks aren’t a make I’m familiar with. All the wires are backwards.”

“Jason’s false cowl will not fool my mother and grandfather for long,” Damian said, “We need to move faster.”

“I’m almost… there!” Tim said, hooking the last wire up. He was about to turn the truck on when someone slammed a fist onto the hood of the truck. “Holy shit!” Tim yelped.

“You got this thing running yet?” Jason growled, shaking soot from his hair, “Because I’m all out of explosives.”

“You were supposed to meet us at the gate,” Tim growled.

“Cape caught fire, had to ditch it,” Jason said, “So? We in business or not?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” Tim said, finally turning the truck on. It rumbled to life. “Let’s get out of here.”

Batman must have had them on the ropes for only a few minutes, but with all the chaos it was hard to say how long it really lasted. Ra’s was starting to get truly annoyed when he finally saw the Bat’s cape catch a spark. The man hurried along the rooftops and dropped into an alley, nearly fifty assassins trying to follow him. Ra’s cursed their stupidity as they bottle-necked the alley, making it hard for anyone to get through.

It was nearly a full minute before Ra’s was able to get through. The cape lay abandoned on the ground, smouldering. Ra’s leaned down to pick it up and cursed.

“A fake,” he said, tracing the obvious stitch lines. The cape had been cobbled together hastily from bits of mismatched black fabric. Some of the seams were even coming apart. “We’ve been chasing a
“Decoy to what?” Talia asked, taking the cape. The singed thing fell apart in her hands as she held it up.

“Sir!” a sentry shouted, nearly colliding with another guard. “One of the trucks has taken off into the desert!”

Ra’s nearly started laughing as Talia began barking orders. “It’s an escape attempt!” she shouted, “Everyone get that truck!”

It didn’t take long for everyone to get out into the desert. The truck had a huge head start, but it was easy to follow, kicking up dust and rocks as it sped through the night. Ra’s got into the passenger side as Talia got behind the wheel. She put the vehicle in gear and sped off after the truck, almost the entire convoy following.

They chased the truck for a good fifteen minutes or so at top speed. The truck avoided boulders and ditches, but its movements were jerky and uncoordinated. Surely the boy was a better driver than this? He’d had his own car before, hadn’t he?

Suddenly the truck pitched over, falling into a long ditch. A few of the lead cars in the in chase fell into it as well, and Talia barely stopped in time. They got out of the truck and went to check on the wreck. There was no movement inside, and Ra’s worried that the boy might have truly injured himself.

Ra’s dropped into the ditch and peered into the shattered window. Nothing, there was no one inside. A second look revealed a computer, a bulky PC from the 80’s, the same bulky PC from the 80’s that Ra’s had given to the child as his winnings from their game, strapped to the front seat. It was hooked up with wires to both the truck and the dash cam, and though it’s screen was shattered from the crash, Ra’s could make out the words that had been written across it.

Gotcha! was scrawled over the screen. The computer must have been running some kind of program that let it avoid the rocks and ditches it came across in the desert, allowing it to go further into the desert than if the gas had just been propped down. The final ditch had been too big for it to avoid though, and now here they were.

“What the hell?” Talia growled, “Where is he?”

“I suspect he made his escape by some other means,” Ra’s said, climbed out of the ditch. “He’ll be long gone by now.”

“Fan out! Find him!” Talia ordered the men standing around.

“Do not bother,” Ra’s said, “You will only waste gasoline trying to find him in the desert. By the time we pick up the trail, he will have moved on to some other means of hiding.”

Talia growled and turned away from him, continuing to order around the men. Ra’s looked out into the vast desert, lit only by a sliver of a waxing moon.

“Well done Detective,” Ra’s said into the night.
“So all that fuss, and we ride out of there on camels?” Jason asked.

“Engines are loud and they need a lot of gas,” Tim said, “Camels are quiet and they’re perfectly suited to life in the desert. We ride out on camels.”

Jason grumbled and shifted in his saddle. “Yeah but they stink.”

Tim sighed; once he’d set up the truck to take off into the desert on its own, he and the others had doubled back through the hole in the wall and gotten to the stables. They’d saddled up four camels, three with saddles and some lighter supplies and one with heavier supplies, and then slipped out the front gate, heading towards the mountains Tim kept seeing in the distance. They had the whole night to get far enough for the horizon to swallow them up, but they still kept the animals going at a fast pace.

“How long until we reach the mountains you think?” Jason asked.

“A day and a half,” Damian answered, “I’ve ridden out to them before. I have never been completely through them though. I know of no paths through them.”

“We’ll figure it out when we get there,” Tim said, “Right now we just need to put as much distance between us and the compound. Hut hut!” he cried, urging the animal into a run. Jason and Damian followed his lead and they ran across the desert on stolen camels, leaving the compound behind them to burn.

Chapter End Notes

And there’s the end of Part III! Part IV will probably be the last part, but I have a fairly long epilogue planned that might have to be broken up into a few different chapters. We’ll see what happens.
Chapter Notes

So this took a bit longer than I thought it would, but I have a good reason(s). Real life has been a little crazy right now, and I've got several papers that need doing as well as graduation approaching fast. Plus I've come down with a cold at the same time. I don't think I'll be able to work on this as much for a while; I'm going to try my best to get another chapter out, but don't expect anything until April at least.

Contest time! Win a 1k fic from me by guessing the right answer! This time it's a history question! Who are the people that Damian named the camels after and what do they have in common with each other? Remember to try not to use google right away and give a full answer. The prize is first come first serve, but please PLEASE remember to give a full answer. I've had people give half answers first, then someone else gives the full answer later and I have to decide who to give the prize to, which is really stressful. So PLEASE remember to give both WHO THE PEOPLE ARE and WHAT THEY HAVE IN COMMON for the full prize. Half answers that are first are no longer going to be counted since I warned you this time. Also please remember to refrain from participating if you've already won a prize, just so everyone gets a chance to win.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So what’s the deal with you and the brat?” Jason asked as they packed up.

Tim looked up at Jason. They’d ridden all through the night and into the morning, but midday had gotten too hot and they’d decided to rest under a small outcropping of rocks in the shade. They’d managed to sleep for a while and ate a small amount of their rations, but as the sun began to fall and the desert cooled again, they were setting off once more. The mountains were in view by now, and they should be able to reach them on camelback by early morning.

“What do you mean?” Tim asked, deflecting.

Jason growled. “He calls you ‘brother’, Talia was really invested in your death, and you're fiercely protective of him. Clearly you’re related to him, but not on Talia’s side. What’s the deal?”

Tim sighed. “We’re paternal half-brothers,” he said, hoping in vain that it would be enough for Jason.

“And?” Jason asked, “Who’s the sperm donor?”

Tim concentrated on packing his supplies up and strapping it to his camel (which Damian had named Isabella). He didn’t know how safe it was to tell Jason that Bruce was his biological father. Jason had agreed to get Tim and Damian to Gotham, but their alliance was tenuous and could flip at any moment. Jason also didn’t make it a secret that he harbored some deep resentment of Bruce. Tim wasn’t entirely sure of the cause, though he could bet that it had something to do with his death and resurrection.

“We should hurry up, we don't know how close Talia is to catching up with us,” Tim said, avoiding the subject entirely.
Jason growled, but thankfully didn't push. He packed everything onto his camel (named Catherine by Damian) and they set out again. Tim knew he suspected something else was going on, but he hoped they could at least be to the mountains before Jason figured it out. It would be easier for Tim and Damian to lose Jason in the mountains than it would be to lose him in the desert, if it came to that.

Tim glanced over at Damian, who was riding on his camel, which he had named Elizabeth. After their initial escape, they had all been quiet, focussing on getting as far away from the compound as fast as possible, but after sunrise Jason and Tim had relaxed and started talking, discussing what their plan was from there. Damian had stayed quiet, and at first Tim had just thought he wasn't interested in talking about their plans. Now Tim noticed that Damian kept glancing behind him every few minutes, a look of consternation on his face.

“You okay Damian?” Tim asked quietly, bringing his camel up beside Damian’s. “Are you worried we’re being followed?”

Damian huffed. “Of course we are being followed. Mother has the League of Assassins at her disposal. They are probably tracking us as we speak.”

“Right,” Tim said, glancing behind him as well. All he could see was a vast expanse of desert. He turned back to Damian. “Is that’s what’s bugging you?”

Damian glanced behind them again, furrowing his brow. He looked over at Tim with concern. “Mother is going to be cross with me when she finds us.”

Tim’s stomach clenched a little. He didn't want to think of what Talia might do to Damian if she caught them before they could make it to Gotham. “When we get to our dad, he’ll protect you,” Tim tried to reassure him.

“Tt, I need no one’s protection,” Damian scoffed, turning up his chin. After a moment he glanced back at Tim. “Is he really powerful enough to protect someone from the League of Assassins?”

“He’s done it before,” Tim said, “He’s good at protecting people.”

“That is his main mission, yes?” Damian asked, “To protect people.”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Tim said, glancing back at Jason. They were talking lowly, but there was still a chance Jason might overhear. It wouldn’t take the world’s greatest detective to put two and two together from their conversation.

“Why?” Damian asked, “Why do other people matter so much to him?”

Tim hummed and thought about that for a minute. How to explain basic morality to an eight year old that had been raised by assassins his whole life? “Well, he lost the people he loved when he was very young,” Tim said, “So he knows what it’s like to hurt that way, and he doesn't want anyone else to have to hurt the same way he did. So that’s why he does what he does.”

“But why?” Damian asked again, looking frustrated that he wasn't getting across his meaning. “What do others offer him for his kindness and protection?”

“Nothing, really,” Tim said, knowing that there was no way he was going to be able to make Damian understand. “When we get to Gotham, you can ask him about it.”

“I shall do that,” Damian said, urging his camel faster, eager again to get to their destination.
Tim couldn’t help a small smile as he watched Damian ride on. He cast one last glance over at Jason, who was a few paces behind them, currently trying to get their fourth camel, to whom Damian had given the name Amina, to speed up. Their gazes met and Jason narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Tim would have to be careful about what he did and said around Jason. The older boy seemed to be fine now, but he was still a dangerous threat.

They rode for several hours, the sun setting to their left and the air rapidly cooling around them. They hadn’t had a lot of time to pack up supplies, but Tim had made sure that all three of them had a warm blanket for the cold desert nights. The blankets were surprisingly warm for how thin they were, and Tim suspected they were some kind of animal wool. Tim wrapped his around his shoulders as the temperature dropped, noticing that Damian did the same, but Jason didn’t.

“Aren’t you cold?” Tim asked him.

Jason blinked at him and then looked around and shivered, like he hadn’t noticed that he was cold before. He pulled his blanket out and wrapped it loosely around him. Tim had noticed him doing that, not seeming to feel something right away or until someone pointed it out. Tim would have to make sure he didn’t get hurt or anything without them noticing.

The mountains loomed above them now, and Tim could see the base of them from where they were. They were craggy and hostile looking, and went several miles in either direction. They would have to find a path through them or over them, since it would take way too long to go around and they’d be caught by the League before they’d be able to make it. Tim wasn't looking forward to having to go through potentially extremely dangerous mountains, but he was less looking forward to getting caught by Talia.

By the time they reached the foot of the mountains, the sky was beginning to lighten again. Tim resisted the urge to rub his eyes, knowing he’d only rub sand into them. He was tired and he’d love to sleep, but they had to at least find the beginnings of a path before they stopped.

“Damian, do you remember seeing any paths when you were here before?” Tim asked, his voice a little rough.

Damian looked up and down the line of mountains. “I do not recall any obvious ones,” he said, “Perhaps we should split up and look for a path?”

“Absolutely not,” Tim said, “It’s way too dangerous to split up.”

“Who made you leader anyway?” Jason growled, “You’re what, fourteen?”

“Fifteen,” Tim corrected, twisting in his saddle to glare at Jason. “And I’m the only one coming up with plans, so if you guys have any suggestions, I’m all ears.”

Jason looked up and down the line of mountains. The mountains themselves weren’t that tall, but they were sharp looking, full of twists and turns and cliffs and narrow passages. Navigating them was going to be extremely tricky.

“There has to be a path of some kind,” Jason said, “If Ra’s compound is less than two days away, then there must be other people around somewhere. I say we pick a direction and follow it until we find a wide enough path.”

Tim considered it a moment. “Okay, but which way do we choose to go?” he asked.

“Are you serious?” Tim asked, glaring a little. Damian huffed and urged his camel off to the east, making Tim turn to him. “Where are you going?”

“The mountains end closer in this direction than they do in the other direction,” Damian said, “Even if we don’t find a path, we’ll be able to go around them faster.”

Tim squinted in the direction Damian was heading. He did remember the mountain wall ending more to the east than it did the west when he’d been memorising them over the months. He dug through his bag and pulled out the sketch he’d done of the horizon from his room, and it seemed to support Damian’s claim.

“Alright,” Tim said, urging his camel forward after Damian, “Everyone keep an eye out for pathways through the mountains.”

Jason rolled his eyes, but followed them anyway. The light of the sun was improving their visibility as they searched, but they had to move slowly to get a good look at the mountains, which made Tim nervous. He checked behind them in the direction of the compound every few minutes, looking for dust clouds in the distance that would signal an approaching search party.

It was beginning to approach midday by the time they spotted something that looked like it could be a pass through the mountains. Tim got off his camel to inspect the wide mouth of the path.

“It looks like people have come through here before,” he said, looking at the packed down sand at their feet and the scrapes on the rock wall along one side of the path. “No telling how long ago though.”

“We could keep going around the mountains,” Damian suggested, “It would take longer, but it’s safer than going through a pass we’re unfamiliar with.”

“Surer, but not safer,” Jason pointed out, “We’re being tracked, and we want to lose our pursuers as fast as possible. Going through the mountain pass will get us farther away faster, and protect us from aerial sweeps.”

Tim looked down the path. On one side was a sheer wall of brown-to-black stone, and the other side was pitted with cracks and slopes and all manner of places to hide. He glanced to the east, trying to see an end to the mountains, but it stretched out of his sight still. With a sigh, he turned back to the other two.

“We go through the pass,” Tim said, “But we be careful about it.”

Having come to a decision, they moved forward into the pass. They stuck to the widest part of the path since it seemed to be the part that was actually used by travellers. Tim wondered who exactly was travelling these mountains, but put it out of his mind. Hopefully there would be something for them on the other side.

They didn’t travel for very long under the hot midday sun. After only a few kilometers into the path, they stopped under a shady outcropping and decided to eat and get some sleep. Tim found himself longing for home, his own bed and his bathroom. He wanted a shower, he wanted a home cooked meal, he wanted to see his family and friends again.

Tim stalled at that thought. His family, did he mean his dad or did he mean Bruce? He couldn’t really be sure anymore. He was bringing Damian to Bruce, but was he bringing himself to Bruce? Was his father—Jack—worried about him? Was he sorry for what he did? Tim still hadn’t processed the full implications of being Bruce’s son. He couldn’t deal with it right now, he had to get them to safety.
“Hey, you never answered my question,” Jason said, breaking Tim out of his head.

“What?” Tim asked, blinking in surprise, dislodging the intrusive existential crisis from his thoughts for the moment.

“Your dad,” Jason asked, “Who is he?”

Tim bit his lip, cursing the irony. He tried to think of an answer that would get Jason to leave him alone. “Why do you care?” he asked, deflecting.

Jason growled. “I’m saving both your asses, aren’t I? I should at least know why the hell I have to save you.”

Tim sighed. “It’s… complicated,” he said.

“It’s a name,” Jason said, “Why are you so worked up about it?”

“It’s complicated, okay?” Tim snapped, “A day before I got kidnapped by Talia, I found out my dad wasn’t actually my dad and I’m still processing it. My dad, the guy I thought was my dad, smashed me over the head with a whiskey bottle, tried to shoot Bruce, and then just flat out rejected me and fucked off. Two days later I’m in Talia’s clutches. It’s complicated.”

Jason went quiet for a minute, watching Tim continue to set up his blanket in the shade so he could lie down. Tim hoped that would be the end of it, but Jason spoke again after a while. “Your dad hit you often?” he asked, and his voice was quiet, soft almost.

“No,” Tim said, lying down and facing away from Jason. “Only the once.”

Jason laid himself out on his blanket, a ways away from Tim. “Whiskey bottle huh? Was it full?”

“Half full,” Tim said, remembering the smell of the expensive alcohol that had clung to him for ages afterwards.

“Lucky you,” Jason said, “Hard alcohol keeps the wound clean. Beer’s just stinky.”

Tim huffed out a little chuckle. “Selina said the same thing,” he said.

Jason turned to look at Tim’s back. “Selina? You mean Catwoman?”

“Yeah, she picked me up after it happened,” Tim said, “Cleaned me up and called Bruce to come get me.”

Jason was quiet for a while, so long that Tim wondered if he’d fallen asleep. “Bruce is your biological dad, isn’t he?” Jason finally asked.

Tim didn’t say anything, not really knowing what to say. Jason wasn’t stupid, he’d probably figured it out on his own. Talia’s obsession with Bruce was well known and long lasting, and it wasn’t a stretch to think that Damian was Bruce’s son, with the way he resembled him so much. From there it wasn’t hard to make the leap that Tim was also Bruce’s son. At the same time, Tim didn’t know his own feelings on the subject. He had so much on his mind, and acknowledging Bruce as his father wasn’t high on his list of priorities at the moment.

They all went quiet as they settled down to sleep. The heat was oppressive, but the shade provided some relief from the direct sunlight. They’d spread out over their blankets, but the sand got
everywhere, into every nook and cranny, making any movement feel grainy and coarse. Combined with the sweat that leaked from every pore, the sand created a crust over any exposed skin, half protective and half irritating. Water was too precious a resource to waste on washing, so they were stuck being smelly and crusty until they found a place to wash, which could be days away.

It didn’t take long for Tim to succumb to exhaustion and sleep however, even with the hostile environment and the thoughts plaguing his mind. He fell into a surprisingly deep sleep, his normally vivid dreams leaving him to rest. Perhaps it was simply the exhaustion, but Tim was grateful for it.

They awoke as the sun was starting to dip low in the sky, the mountains casting long shadows around them. Tim wondered if it would be safe to travel at night through the pass, but they’d brought a lantern with them just in case, packed on Amina’s back with the rest of the heavier supplies.

Before they set out, they stopped to eat some dried meat and fruit, as well as take a few sips from one of the waterskins they’d brought. It wouldn’t be enough to completely quench their thirst, but it would keep them from dehydrating. They quickly packed up and moved further into the winding, snake-like coils of the pass.

“Look at the scrapes,” Tim said, pointing to the tall, sheer wall on their left. “I think it’s partly to show the path.”

“So we follow the scrapes?” Jason asked, looking at the scrapes and reaching out to touch them. The rock was solid and hard, and didn’t scar easily. It would have taken a lot of effort to carve the long, patchy scrapes in the rock wall. It was possible that they’d been carved out over a long period of time, centuries even, and had stuck around even after the path fell out of use.

“We follow the scrapes,” Tim said, feeling hope bubble up in his chest. They could do this. They’d be able to pass through the mountains without getting lost.

The sun began to set and they lit the lantern, holding it in front of the lead camel. In some places the path was so narrow that they had to travel single file, Jason up front, Damian in the middle, and Tim bringing up the rear. The daylight faded and the desert settled into night, the lantern light their only guide through the stone path.

Near morning, the path widened considerably for a moment, and Tim could see it diverge. On one side, against the rock wall, was the continuation of the path, narrower even than what they’d had to squeeze through before, and on the other was a shallow ravine, jagged rocks at the bottom of an eight foot drop. They’d survive a drop into it, but they’d be sliced to ribbons by the rocks.

Tim dismounted and went to the edge of the ravine to get a better look. Jason and Damian joined him, peering down into the darkness. Tim kept an eye on Jason, wondering if he was thinking about pushing them in.

“Looks like we go around,” Jason said, looking to the narrow path on the side.

“Will the camels fit?” Damian asked.

“Maybe,” Tim said, “We’ll have to lead them on foot.”

Jason grumbled and extinguished the lantern; it was light enough in the opening through the top of
the rocks that they could see well enough to find their feet on the narrow path. “Stinky ornery assholes,” he muttered, “Why didn’t we grab horses?”

“Horses need more water and food than camels,” Tim said, grabbing Isabella's lead and pulling her toward the narrow path. “We need to conserve both.”

Jason continued complaining under his breath, taking Catherine and pulling her onto the narrow path. Damian followed with Elizabeth, leaving Tim to bring up the rear with Amina tethered to Isabella. It wasn’t the best set up, but it was the best they had.

Slowly, they inched along the path, careful where they put their feet. The ravine was about fifteen feet across, but the path widened again after about ten feet. The morning sun hadn’t quite penetrated the air, so they had to squint a little to see where they were stepping. Tim glanced up to check Damian and Jason for a moment. Damian was smaller than either of them and had no trouble navigating the narrow path, but Jason moved as slow as Tim did. Their camels suffered the most, hesitating with every step. At the very least, the stone under their feet was solid and didn’t feel like it was about to cave anytime soon.

Tim put his eyes back on the path, and he noticed something move in the dim light just ahead of him. He hardly had time to take a breath before Damian’s camel, Elizabeth, brought her hind left foot down on top of an Arabian Catsnake.

The snake reacted instantly, jolting up and biting Elizabeth on the ankle. The camel let out a bellow and jumped up, kicking her back legs out. Her hooves sailed over Tim’s head and narrowly missed Isabella’s nose. The panicked camel lost her footing on the path, her hindquarters sliding into the ravine and pulling the rest of her along with it. Tim barely had enough time to grab hold of Damian, who was still holding her lead and trying to calm her down, before he tumbled in after her.

“Are you okay?” Tim asked Damian, but his words were drowned out by the panicked and pained screams of Elizabeth, eight feet down into the ravine and thrashing wildly. Tim could see that she’d broken a leg and with every thrash she embedded herself deeper into the jagged rocks. Cuts opened and blood gushed out, and Tim was sure he could see a loop of intestine spill out from a wound in her belly.

“What the fuck happened?” Jason snarled, coming back for them, squeezing passed his camel.

“Damian’s camel stepped on a snake and got bit,” Tim said, still holding onto Damian. “She spooked and fell into the ravine.”

“Fuck,” Jason swore, looking down into the ravine where Elizabeth still thrashed. The other camels shifted nervously on their feet, starting to spook from the pained cries of their fallen sister.

“We have to help her,” Damian said, trying to wriggle out of Tim’s grip. “We have to get her out.”

Jason sighed and ran a hand through his hair; he looked towards Tim and Damian and grimaced. “You two get the rest of the camels to the other side. I’ll deal with this.”

Tim nodded solemnly. He urged Damian forward to take control of Jason’s camel, pulling his two camel’s along behind him. He kept an eye out for anymore snakes, but turned to look behind him just in time to see Jason pull out a large knife and carefully drop into the ravine next to the suffering animal.

Tim and Damian reached the other side of the ravine and waited for Jason to join them. Elizabeth’s screaming reverberated through the pass, even though they couldn't see her or Jason anymore. The
screaming stopped abruptly with a wet gurgle, the silence almost as loud as the screams. Damian sucked in a breath and made to step forward, but Tim stopped him.

“I know,” Tim said when Damian looked up at him accusingly. “There was nothing else we could have done.”

Damian huffed and shrugged Tim off, stomping off to fuss over the other camels, patting their sides and checking them for snakebites. They waited for several long minutes, Tim watching for Jason and Damian ignoring the silence around them.

Jason finally returned, carrying some of the supplies from Elizabeth’s back. He was splattered with blood everywhere, but his entire right forearm was soaked in it, probably because that was the hand he’d held the knife in. Jason dropped the supplies in front of Damian and started wiping himself off with sand.

“It was quick,” he said, his only conciliatory gesture as he poured sand over his soaked arm. The sand clung to the moisture and flaked off.

Damian said nothing and started digging through the supplies. Tim bent to help him, sorting out what they could still use and what was too damaged. He pulled Damian’s blanket out and gave it a shake; one corner was dark and discoloured with blood.

“You can ride with me,” Tim said, “We don’t have a third saddle.”

Damian nodded absently, setting aside the waterskin. It was cut open on one side, so they all drank the water left in it rather than let it go to waste. After splitting the supplies onto the three remaining camels, Damian joined Tim on Isabella’s back and they continued on.

They traveled through the mountains for another day and a half before the path opened up into a hilly region, sparse brush crackling under their feet. The camels immediately dipped their heads to sniff and graze at the prickly growth. Tim scanned the horizon and nearly cried with relief when he saw a plume of white smoke rising from a cluster of outcroppings.

“It’s a village,” he croaked, his throat dry, “Let’s head for it.”

“We sure that’s a good idea?” Jason rasped, rubbing his forehead. “Could be Talia’s camp waiting for us.”

“Doubt it,” Damian muttered, barely conscious as he leaned back against Tim’s chest. They were all exhausted and in desperate need of real food and shelter.

“We don’t have the option not to,” Tim said, “We make for it and hope for the best.”

Jason growled, but offered no further protests. The trip through the mountains had been mostly silent, with only a few words exchanged between any of them. Tim still couldn’t gauge Jason that well, and Damian was sulky and unhappy since losing his camel. Hopefully they’d feel better once they got to the village.

The trek to the village was blissfully short, though Tim suspected he might have blacked out from exhaustion once or twice. They arrived at the outskirts of the village, which wasn’t more than a few
scattered huts with some animals wandering around and some patchy gardens here and there. Immediately three women and a man came out to them, saying something in a language Tim couldn’t piece together. They pulled the camel down and gently helped Tim and Damian off her back. Hands tried to lift Damian from his arms, but Tim clung to his little brother. A few drops of water wetted Tim’s lips and he managed to open his eyes for a few moments before it all faded to black.

Tim came to an indeterminate amount of time later, still clinging to a passed out Damian. They were inside a hut, which was surprisingly cool. Jason was sitting up against the wall of the hut some distance away, eyes closed. Tim shifted and groaned and Jason’s eyes snapped open, his hand twitching toward his knife. When he saw it was only Tim, he relaxed with a breath sigh.

“How long have we been out?” Tim asked, sitting up. Damian stirred when Tim extracted himself.

“Bought a day,” Jason said, “I’ve been keeping an eye out, we don’t have anyone on our tail. Yet.”

“Shit,” Tim swore. A whole day’s loss of travelling could prove fatal to them, whether it seemed like they were being followed or not.

Jason tossed a pile of clothes at Tim. “The villagers have been kind to us anyway. They say there’s some train tracks a few miles away. We can trade our camels to stow away.”

“When’s the next train come through?” Tim asked, taking the offered clothes. He needed a bath more than he needed new clothes, but he didn't think the villagers would offer up any drinking or irrigation water for him to sponge off.

“Tonight, so hurry up and get packed. We want to be out of here by late evening.” Jason got up and stretched, there were dark circles under his eyes.

“Did you sleep at all?” Tim asked.

Jason glanced over at Tim. “I don't usually sleep. Not since I died.”

Tim’s throat clammed up. “Sorry,” he mumbled, not knowing what else to say.

Jason shrugged. “It’s just another thing on a long list that I’m going to ruin his life for.”

Tim looked up at him. “You really hate him, don't you?”

“I hate what he did,” Jason said, “Or what he didn't do.”

“Jason,” Tim said, “Bruce tried to save you. He really did. It—”

“That’s not what this is about!” Jason suddenly shouted, turning on Tim. “I don’t care about him letting me die! What pisses me off is that he didn’t end that clown freak!”

Tim jolted back at Jason’s outburst, putting one hand over Damian’s body to protect him if he had to. Jason started pacing around a little, getting more worked up as he went.

“All the people that sick bastard has hurt, the people he’s killed,” Jason snarled, a mad look in his eyes. “You would think after all that, after Barbara, after me, he’d do something about it. But no, the fucker still has a cozy little cell in Arkham.”

“You’re mad that Bruce didn’t kill the Joker?” Tim asked, keeping a wary eye on Jason as he paced frantically. “You know he doesn’t—”

“It would be justified!” Jason shouted, this time stalking up to Tim, looming over him. “Look me in
the goddamned eyes and tell me you don’t think the world would be better off if he was dead!”

Tim was about to try and reason with Jason when Damian suddenly sprang up and planted his feet into Jason’s gut. Jason grunted and tumbled backwards, winded. Damian let out a battle cry and leapt at Jason, murder in his eyes. Jason was quick to catch his breath though, and blocked Damian’s attack, rolling to his feet easily. Damian charged Jason and they went tumbling out of the hut, Tim scrambling after them.

Damian was fierce and had the element of surprise, but Jason was bigger and pissed off. Tim saw Jason reached for his knife and jumped in without thinking, trying to put himself between the two before any blood could be spilled. The knife slashed and caught Tim across the collarbone, the blade getting a little tangled in his shirt. Tim bit his lip against the pain and managed to jam his shoulder into Jason’s solar plexus, shoving him back a few paces.

“Both of you stop!” Tim commanded, “Stop fighting right now!”

“The little brat attacked me!” Jason snarled.

“He’s dangerous!” Damian shouted, “He should be put down like a rabid animal!”

Jason growled and took a few steps towards Damian, but Tim put himself in front of Damian. “Enough!” he shouted, “If you two want to fight, save it for Gotham! We don’t have time for petty disagreements!”

For a few tense moments, it looked like Jason and Damian would start fighting again, Tim blocking them or not. Then Jason’s eyes flicked to the bleeding cut on Tim’s collarbone; his hand clenched around his knife and he turned to stomp off. Tim breathed a sigh of relief and turned to Damian.

“Did he hurt you?” Tim asked, checking Damian for injuries. Luckily the fight hadn’t lasted very long.

“Brother, we cannot trust him,” Damian said, “We should dispose of him here and continue on our own.”

“We’re not killing anyone,” Tim said.

“Then we should just leave him here,” Damian said, “Brother, he is much too dangerous to continue our journey with him.”

“We can’t leave him,” Tim said, “He needs to get to Gotham as much as we do.”

“Tt, it hardly seems like he wants to go to Gotham. I say we leave him,” Damian sneered.

“It’s not about what he wants,” Tim said, pushing Damian into the hut so they could both change. “It’s about what he needs. And I think he needs Bruce.”

“Our father?” Damian asked, “Why?”

“It’s complicated,” Tim said, “We don’t have a lot of time. Get ready to head out soon.”

Damian huffed, but began to change out of his dirty clothes. Tim followed suit, quickly getting changed and searching through the last of their supplies. They wouldn’t need most of it if they were going to travel by train, but maybe they could trade it for some food or other things in the village before they left. Jason had already arrange to trade the camels so they could get on the train, so that was all squared away, but the villagers might be willing to give them money or supplies at least.
It wasn’t long after when a man and a woman came by the hut, speaking quickly in heavily dialectic Arabic. Damian answered them, though his speech seemed more polished and formal. Soon, they were brought two bowls of thin vegetable stew. Tim thanked them as best he could, but Damian wrinkled his nose.

“Is this all we are to have to eat?” Damian huffed.

“It’s probably all they have to offer. Be polite Damian,” Tim said, sipping the stew. It tasted like root vegetables and dirt, but Tim was grateful for it anyway.

Damian grumbled and gave it a sip. “It’s disgusting,” he scoffed, setting the bowl down a little roughly, sloshing a bit of the stew out onto the woven matt they’d been sleeping on.

“Damian!” Tim chastised, “These people have been kind to us. Don't insult them.”

“We never asked for their assistance,” Damian said, crossing his arms and turning up his nose.

“But they’ve been nice enough to give it to us anyway,” Tim countered, “Eat your stew.”

Damian only huffed and turned further away from his brother. Tim groaned and tried to remember that this was just reinforced behaviour from living with the League of Assassins and being treated like a prince. “Fine, go hungry then, but don't complain later when your stomach starts to growl,” Tim said. He finished his stew and got up to finish packing.

Damian scoffed and rolled his eyes, continuing to sit and pout. When it became clear that he wasn't going to get his way, he snatched up the bowl and downed it, wincing exaggeratedly when he finished. “There,” he said, as though he was proving a point to Tim somehow.

Tim pushed himself to smile. “Thank you Damian,” he said. Positive reinforcement would do better than punishment.

Damian huffed and continued to sit and pout while Tim packed their things. Tim made sure to pack Jason’s things as well, though he honestly wasn't sure if Jason was going to want to come with them anymore. Hopefully Tim wouldn't have to convince him. As much as he wanted to get Jason back to Bruce to get him help, he also didn't want to leave Jason to Talia and have him tell her where they were headed.

Tim finished with their things and managed to cajole Damian into translating for him with the man they’d met earlier to barter the supplies they no longer needed. Tim managed to get some more dried food and a small amount of money, but not much else. Hopefully the train they would be taking would get them to a city quickly.

They were just getting ready to get onto the camels and head out when Jason returned from wherever he’d gone. He was silent and moody, his expression dark as he wordlessly climbed onto his camel and waited for them. Tim let him be and signaled Damian to leave Jason alone. He didn't want to trigger another fight.

They rode for a few hours, one of the villagers riding ahead of them on a cart pulled by a little brown donkey. As they rode, an old CD player taped into the cart warbled out what sounded like Arabian pop music.
It wasn't long before Tim could hear the train in the distance, and as they came over a hill, he could see the little station. It seemed like there was a cluster of settlements in the area who all came to the station to get supplies. The train at the station was pointed to head north, and the train itself looked like it should have been retired twenty years ago, but there were several boxcars that looked fine for three stowaways.

The villager headed off the talk to one of the trainmen while Tim and Jason and Damian hung back. It was quite busy, and Tim thought that they might be able to sneak onto one of the cars without any negotiations.

“This is how we’re to travel?” Damian sniffed, “In the back like thieves or beggars?”

“Best way to travel,” Jason said, “You meet all kinds of interesting people.”

“And it’s a good way not to get noticed,” Tim said, “We don't want to leave an obvious trail.”

Damian huffed, but he didn’t complain any further. The villager they’d followed came back and spoke to them rapidly, gesturing for them to follow him. They were led to an open boxcar that already had seven other people in it, mostly men and one young couple, the woman looking to be around six months pregnant.

Tim thanked the villager as best as he was able and handed over the leads of the three camels. The villager shuffled off for a few minutes before returning with a large crate of extra supplies. Tim thanked him again, trying to get Damian to help translate.

The sun had nearly set by the time the train whistle blew. The three of them made sure they were huddled close together in one corner of the car. They waved goodbye to the villager as the train began to move, taking them further away from the compound they had escaped only a short time ago.

“We know where this train is headed?” Tim asked Jason. It didn't matter too much where they were going, so long as they were heading away from where they’d been.

“Border,” Jason said, “If we keep our heads down and don’t cause trouble, we should end up in Najaf in Iraq.” He leaned back and lit a cigarette, “At least that’s what he indicated on the map.”

“You have a map?” Tim hissed, “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Jason shrugged, but proceeded to pull out a folded map from his coat pocket. He tossed it at Tim and then settled down to get some sleep.

Tim grumbled and opened the map, trying to figure out where they were. Najaf was a secondary city in Iraq, which suited them just fine. It was better to keep out of larger cities where there was more wealth, and therefore more police.

Tim was trying to chart a quick course back to the states when he heard a scuffle from the other end of the car. One of the other men in the car was accosting the couple, arguing with the young man and gesturing to the pregnant woman. The young man spoke angrily, putting himself bodily between the woman and the other man. The older man shoved the young man roughly, sending him sprawling to the floor of the car. He then made a grab for the woman, who screamed. Tim was on his feet in an instant, but Jason had already moved.

Jason yanked the man away roughly, sending him to the floor. The man got up quickly, spitting curses and pulling out a short knife. The man lunged for Jason and the woman screamed again, but Jason didn't budge. In a flash of almost imperceptible movement, Jason caught the man’s wrist and...
twisted, causing the man to drop the knife, which Jason then caught and plunged into his gut. The man howled in pain and dropped to the floor, writhing as he bled profusely from his stomach. Jason grabbed the man by his ankles and started pulling him toward the open door of the car.

“Jason, don’t!” Tim cried, running to stop him.

Jason growled and glared at Tim. “You know what he was going to do to that woman. He’s a waste of oxygen.”

“We can’t just kill him,” Tim protested.

“Why not?” Damian asked. “He’s a bad person.” He knelt down to look at the knife handle sticking out of the man’s stomach. “Plus, he’s not going to make it very long anyway.”

“We don’t kill,” Tim said firmly.

“You don’t kill,” Jason snarled, “And look where it’s gotten you. Chasing the same damn nutbars again and again because you don’t want to get your hands dirty and get rid of them permanently.”

“It’s not our place,” Tim said, “You think it doesn’t piss me off every time I have to chase Scarecrow down again? Or every time Penguin bribes his way out of justice? But we can’t just make that decision. What gives us the right to decide?”

There was another howl of pain, startling all of them; while they’d been distracted, the young man had taken it upon himself to start kicking the fallen man, spitting vicious curses at him. The man tried to roll away, but the young man followed him. With a final strong kick, he shoved the man over the edge of the boxcar. Jason stopped Tim from taking a step forward as the man tumbled out of the car; there was a wet crunching sound, but the train kept running smoothly.

“There,” Jason said, “Problem solved.”

Tim gritted his teeth and shrugged Jason off, stomping back to the corner to continue pouring over the map. The sound of the man being sucked under the train rang in his ears, making it hard to concentrate. Damian came to sit next to Tim, watching his hands shake as he tried to trace where they were on the map.

“Are you alright brother?” Damian asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

Tim glanced back to Jason, who was speaking to the young couple. They seemed to be thanking him profusely, smiling at him and offering him some fruit. Jason smiled back at them and politely declined their offers.

“I’m fine Damian,” Tim said, voice tight as he tried to figure out their next step.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up going a bit longer than I thought it would, and it's a little slower here and there. I think it works as building up the dynamic between Jason, Tim, and Damian, which was this chapter’s main focus after showing their journey away from the compound.

One thing that I don't think I explained well was Jason's ability to communicate with the
people. I kind of imagine he has a limited vocabulary in Arabic, but enough to sort of communicate with the help of charades. Jason's pretty smart, and I imagine him as being able to pick up language pretty easily, as well shaving Talia around to suggest that he learn those languages. So he can kind of communicate with people, at least enough to get by.
Part IV Chapter ii: Conversation

Chapter Notes

I LIVE! I am so sorry this took so long guys. End of semester had me by the short and curlies and graduation is coming up fast. I really have been so busy and it's been so nice to write again. I want to say it's been really nice seeing people still commenting and reading this while I've been away though. You guys are the best readers I could ever ask for.

I didn't put a reference in this chapter, so the contest is actually what's not there. Tim mentions a famous rail line in this chapter, and at the end of the rail is a city. Tell me the name of that city and win a FREE 1k commission. Remember not to use google and refrain from playing if you've already won a contest before hand. Again, what is the city that the railway Tim mentions in this chapter ends at? Leave a comment with your answer!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The train carried them all the way to Najaf, stopping in a few other small stations along the way. Things remained relatively quiet after the first night, and the young couple saw fit to share some supplies with them, mostly food. Tim accepted politely, but he didn't eat much, still uncomfortable with the whole situation.

They arrived in Najaf after a day and a half train ride, stiff and wind chapped and dusty. Tim looked around the trainstation and tried to figure out what to do next.

“Maybe we can find another train?” he mused aloud, trying to see if there was any other trains around.

Jason nudged his shoulder. “Come on, I’ve got a friend in the city who owes me a favour,” he said, walking off in the direction of the city.

Tim grumbled. “You know, that kind of information would be really helpful beforehand. I’ve been trying to figure out our next move the whole train ride!”

Jason shrugged. “It’s not like you asked,” he said.

Tim growled and fell into step behind Jason, Damian at his side. He resisted the urge to grab Damian’s hand, knowing the boy wouldn't like it, but still wanting to keep him close in the unfamiliar city.

“Brother,” Damian said lowly, “I suggest we leave Todd to his own devices here and find our own way.”

“No Damian,” Tim said, “We need to get Jason to Bruce.”

Damian grumbled. “Why? Why are you so concerned about getting him to our father?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you later, okay?” Tim said, “When we have a private moment.”
Damian grumbled again, but let it slide and continued to walk at Tim’s side. Jason led them into and through the city, seeming to know exactly where he was going. As they got into the more populated areas, Tim was forced to stick close to Jason, nearly plastered against his back as they wound their way through the market.

“Nobody wander off,” Jason warned, “I’ve got a friend in the city, but a lot of people are still probably pissed off at me.”

“What exactly have you been doing since you got back?” Tim asked. He’d been burning with curiosity for a while now.

“Training mostly,” Jason answered, “Travelling a around a lot, helping people here and there.”

“Training,” Tim repeated, glancing at Damian. The League of Assassins kind of ‘training’ wasn’t exactly the kind he’d want anyone to go through, especially if they’d just gone through a trauma like Jason had. Talia was a master of manipulation, and she’d had free reign of both Jason and Damian for who knew how long.

They walked for nearly two hours through the city, winding through narrow streets. Tim was starting to suspect that Jason was leading them on a wild goose chase when he finally stopped at a huge wooden door set into a towering stone wall.

“Hope she’s in,” Jason said, banging the knocker. They waited for some time before a window in the door slid open and a pair of eyes peered out.

“What is you?” a female voice asked, heavily accented. She said something in rapid Arabic.

“We’re here to see Jida,” Jason said slowly. “Can we speak to Jida?”

The woman on the other side of the door said something in rapid Arabic again and closed the window. Jason stepped back from the door and they waited again.

“Did you catch what she said?” Tim asked Damian.

“A little,” Damian said, looking bored. “She said she’ll be back.”

They didn't have to wait for very long before the window opened again and a different voice called out. “Who is there? What you want?”

“Jidati! It’s me!” Jason called back. “It’s Jason!”

The window slammed shut. Tim was about to say something when he heard the locks on the other side of the door grind. The door swung open and an elderly woman in black garb stood on the other side, grinning ear to ear.

“Jason!” she greeted, stepping down from the entry way and wrapping Jason in a tight hug. “Oh my boy! So good it is to see you!”

“Hi Jidati,” Jason said, smiling brightly and letting the old woman squish his cheeks between her weathered hands. “How have you been?”

‘Jidati’ clicked her tongue and pulled Jason down to kiss his cheek. “Such a good boy what asks. I am old and sore, but happy.” She finally seemed to notice Tim and Damian and stopped. “What is this boys you bring?”
“This is Damian and Tim,” Jason said, “They’re—”

“We’re his brothers,” Tim said before Jason could finish his sentence.

Jidati let out a joyful cry and clapped her hands while Jason glared at Tim behind her view. “Brothers! Such little brothers!” she cried happily, coming over and wrapping Tim in a surprisingly strong hug before he could move away. Damian managed to evade her by hiding behind Tim. She pressed Tim’s cheeks between her hands. “Such eyes,” she said, “So beauty.”

“We need a place to stay for a day or two, Jidati,” Jason said, “Can you put us up?”

Jidati turned back to Jason. “Of course it is I can do this,” she said, like she was offended by the suggestion that she couldn’t. “Get you all inside, go go,” she urged, pushing Tim through the door.

Tim stepped through the door and into a courtyard, with a small fountain and some flower gardens around. A young woman swept the stone path, poorly disguising that she was watching them curiously. Another woman, younger than the first, sat on the steps of the building, watching after a group of five children. She looked up at them and suddenly seemed to get nervous, but when Jidati said something to her in Arabic, she relaxed again.

“What is this place?” Tim asked as they followed Jidati through the courtyard and into the large house. Everyone they came across was either a woman or a young child.

“Jidati Shamara runs a kind of sanctuary for runaway girls,” Jason explained. “Girls running away from abusive homes, forced marriages, girls who’ve been kicked out for being raped, that kind of thing.” Jason smiled and waved at a woman in her twenties who seemed to recognize him. “Jidati puts them up and helps them in any way she can. She’s even managed to get a few girls out of the country.”

“How do you know about this place?” Tim asked, glancing at a girl his age who was nearly full term pregnant read from what looked like an Arabic beginners book, the kind parents gave children to start teaching them how to read.

“I was passing through when I noticed some guys harassing a group of women and kids. Kicked their asses and then got invited home for a hot meal. Jidati told me they had a problem with some guys coming around harassing the girls, so I fixed the problem,” Jason said. He said it with a nonchalant shrug, but Tim didn’t want to think of what he meant by ‘fixing the problem’.

“Like I said,” Jason continued, “I’ve been helping people.”

Jidati led them to a small room near the back of the house. It had a single twin bed and a dilapidated dresser in it and nothing much else. A single window let in light from the outside, but the glass was so old and dusty that it was hard to see through it.

“Only this one bed is free. You boys will need to be sharing it,” Jidati said, “The shower room is down the hall. Seven minutes each!” she warned them. She smiled and gave Jason one last kiss on the cheek. “You settle. I will make sure it’s enough dinner downstairs for you.”

“Thank you Jidati,” Jason said, “We’ll come down and help out in a few minutes.”

Jidati said something in Arabic and then left them alone, shuffling off back into the house. Jason shoved Tim and Damian into the small room and closed the door.

“We’re not brothers,” he growled.
“We are,” Tim said, “Technically anyway.”

Jason growled again. “We’re not,” he said, looming over Tim again. Damian tensed and took a step forward, but Tim put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Does it really matter anyway?” Tim asked, noting backing down. He didn't want to fight about this in such close quarters. Jason was a lot bigger than him and could easily back him into a corner.

Jason glared for another minute before shaking his head and turning to leave the room. “I’m going to have a shower,” he said, “Do whatever.”

Tim let out a breath as he left the room, knowing that the situation could have devolved fast. Jason was extremely unpredictable, and Tim was still trying to figure out where he stood.

“We are not his brothers,” Damian said as Tim began to check their surroundings.

“He is, actually,” Tim said, crouching to look under the bed. Nothing, not even dust. “He was adopted by our dad years ago. We thought he was dead, but since he’s not, he’s still legally Bruce’s son, making him our brother.”

“Tt, how terrible,” Damian scoffed. He glanced at their surroundings. “Is this to be for all three of us?”

“There probably isn’t room for us to all have separate rooms,” Tim said, “Unless they have a separate place for the kids to sleep, if you want to bunk with them.”

“Certainly not,” Damian huffed, looking offended. He stalked over to the bed and put a hand on it, tutting at the way the springs creaked.

“It’ll only be for a night, just until we figure out what our plan is going to be,” Tim said, sitting down on the bed. Despite the shabbiness of the room, Tim was looking forward to sleeping in a bed.

“I still say we leave Todd behind,” Damian said, “He’s violent and unpredictable. We do not need his help.”

“He needs our help,” Tim said, “Jason… remember how I told you about Batman and Robin?”

“Yes?” Damian said, crossing his arms.

“Jason used to be Robin, before I was,” Tim said, “Before he… died.”

Damian raised an eyebrow. He came and sat next to Tim on the bed, clearly expecting a story. Tim explained quickly how Jason had come to be Robin and about his tragic death, as well as what Ra’s had told him about Jason’s resurrection.

“We need to get him to Bruce,” Tim said, “There’s something wrong with Jason, and we need to get him to Bruce so he can help.”

Damian seemed to contemplate that for a moment. “Todd does not seem to want to return to father. Why should we bring him?”

“It isn’t about wanting,” Tim said, “It’s about needing. Jason needs help, and he needs Bruce.”

Damian huffed and crossed his arms. Whatever he was about to say was stalled when there was a thump on the door.
“Hurry and wash brats, we have to help before dinner,” Jason called through the door. The floor creaked and groaned as he walked away.

“You go wash first,” Tim said, “I’m going to have another look at the map.”

Damian gave one last huff before he left the room to go have a shower. Tim opened up the map again and tried to plot their next move.

After a frankly heavenly shower, Tim wandered downstairs. He followed the sound of voices to the kitchen, where Jason was helping with dinner. He was laughing and smiling, joking as best he could across the language barrier. A few girls seemed completely relaxed around him, though a few others seemed more wary. Tim watched him for a moment, wondering just what Jason had been through since coming back from the dead.

The pregnant girl from earlier noticed him and gave him a shy smile. Tim smiled back and waved at her, suddenly reminded of Steph. He sucked in a deep breath as a wave of homesickness crashed over him. He wanted to go home, he wanted to see his friends, his girlfriend, his family. Tim wondered if they were looking for him right now, across the world, wondering where he was, what he was doing. Tim forced himself to take a deep breath so he wasn't overcome with emotion. There would be time for a breakdown later, when he was safe.

Jason noticed him finally. “Hey brat, help set the table,” he ordered.

Tim moved automatically, still working to push down his emotions. It was too dangerous to let himself get caught up in his situation right now, not with the League so hot on their tails. He accepted a stack of plates from a woman, her face heavily bandaged on one side. She said something softly in Arabic, but Tim could only give a slight smile in reply.

Damian came into the room and almost plastered himself to Tim’s side. “They’re following me,” he said, craning his neck to see into the hallway.

Tim followed his gaze and saw several children, all around Damian’s age, watching him whispering to each other. “Did you ask them what they wanted?” Tim asked.

“Why would I do that?” Damian asked, genuinely confused. Tim had the sudden thought that maybe Damian had never met anyone his own age before.

“They probably want to play with you,” Tim pointed out, “Go say hello.”

Damian looked up at Tim with complete betrayal on his face. “I am the grandson of Ra’s al Ghul. I do not play.”

“You’re eight, you should play,” Tim pointed out. He caught the eye of one of the children and waved them forward. They trotted over and Tim nudged Damian towards them. “Go on, say hi at least.”

Damian looked up at Tim and glared. Tim nudged him forward again and smiled encouragingly. With a sigh, Damian turned to the other children and began speaking to them in Arabic. A girl with a pink ribbon in her hair answered and tried to coax Damian to follow her. Damian glanced one last time back at Tim, this time seeming to try and beg him to intervene, but Tim only smiled and waved
him off. With a sigh, Damian followed the girl out of the dining room.

“You sure that’s safe?” Jason asked, startling Tim a little by suddenly appearing behind him.

“Damian can take care of himself,” Tim said.

“I meant for the other kids,” Jason said, “Does the little demon even know how to play?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Tim said, “I don’t think he’s even seen someone his age before.”

Jason hummed in contemplation and went back to the kitchen. Tim was soon co-opted into doing some cleaning before dinner with some of the girls his age. Not all of them spoke English, and the ones who did only spoke a few words, so it was sometimes a challenge to understand what they wanted him to do.

Eventually, dinner was served and they all sat down to a delicious looking homemade meal. Tim’s stomach growled just looking at the food, recalling that he didn’t think he’d eaten a real meal since the village. Damian protested being sat with the other children at the kids table, and was allowed to sit next to Tim with the other older teens and adults. Jidati (which Tim had actually learned just meant ‘grandmother’ in Arabic and wasn’t her name) sat at the head of the table, overseeing everything until everyone had a plate of food. A quick prayer went around the room, and then everyone tucked in.

“So Jason, tell us how it is you have your brothers here?” Jidati asked as they started to eat.

Jason glanced over at Tim. “Just travelling around,” he said.

Jidati raised an eyebrow at him. Tim gave her a smile to hopefully show they meant no harm. He didn’t really want to have to explain to Jidati what they were really doing, since it might put her in danger with the League. Jidati seemed to catch on, and let the subject drop to move on to what Jason had been doing since she’d seen him last.

Jason apparently had been around the world, not only training, but helping people. Tim listened intently as Jason explained how he’d broken up a child sex trafficking ring in Moldova eight months ago by poisoning the head ringers. Jidati smiled and praised him.

“It is so much better to know those men are gone,” she said, “Such half-men think they can get away with this, but it good boys like you learn them better.” Jidati looked over the table at the women. Tim counted nearly thirty women, ranging from around his age to into their mid thirties.

“Men like that, hmf, not even men,” Jidati spat, though her eyes were sad. “They think it is they can do whatever it is to girls because she cannot fight back. I would like so to show him what it is to be powerless. Make him think again how he treats his wife and daughters.”

Jason pressed his lips together and leaned over, patting Jidati’s hand. “You know you can get in touch with me whenever you need me. I’ll come help however I can.”

Jidati smiled at him. “Such it is a good boy you are. This is how a man should be,” she addressed the room at large. A few girls giggled and smiled at Jason, who blushed a little and ducked his head.

Tim watched Jason interact with the women around the table, smiling and laughing and teasing. He thought back to the ring of bruises Jason had left around his neck, the cold way he’d killed guards who got too close to Tim, the madness in his eyes whenever he talked about his plans to kill Bruce. Was this really the same person?
Dinner finished up and the children were released. Damian tried to follow Tim, but once more Tim ushered him off to spend more time with people his own age. Damian growled and grumbled, but he let himself be pulled around by the other children, sulking the whole time. Tim and Jason both helped clean up the remnants of dinner and stayed to talk for a while before they finally went back upstairs to talk about their plans. Damian managed to extract himself from the other children and gratefully followed Tim.

“They are stupid and uncouth,” Damian complained.

“They’re kids Damian, like you,” Tim said.

“I am nothing like them,” Damian huffed.

Tim suppressed a sad sigh. “Not everyone was raised like you Damian. These kids grew up normal.”

Damian blinked and seemed to think hard about that, like he’d never considered how other people grew up, that there could be anything different from how he’d been raised. Tim wanted to have a long talk about it with him one day, but it would have to wait until they were safe.

“Okay, so what do you want to do?” Jason asked once they were in their room.

Tim went to the dresser and laid out the map. “So we’ve got a few options,” Tim said, “But ultimately we have to keep moving by train or road until we get to an ocean port that will take us to the States.”

“No calling for help?” Jason asked.

“Too risky,” Tim said, “We don’t know how big the League of Assassins sphere of influence is, and we’re a lot closer to the stronghold than we are to Gotham.”

“That’s a fair assessment,” Damian said, “Mother and Grandfather are looking for us, and there are no lines they will not cross. If we are to avoid them, staying away from telephones and cameras is safest.”

Jason nodded, leaning over the map. “So where to from here? We catch a train or bus to the closest coast and book it?”

Tim squeezed in next to Jason to look over the map. “We could go directly west, straight to the coast and get a boat from there,” Tim said, “That’s the surefire quickest way home.”

“But?” Jason asked, raising an eyebrow, knowing something was coming.

“It’s a big risk,” Damian said, “These areas have Mother and Grandfather’s agents all over the place. They will be watching all the ports closely.”

“So probably not a good idea,” Jason said, “So north into Russia and then cutting across Europe?” he suggested.

“Better,” Tim said, “But once we get out of eastern Europe, travelling across borders undetected will be a lot harder. I don’t think we have the resources.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot easier to get across borders in more corrupt nations,” Jason said, “Not that western Europe isn’t, but you know, not as much.”

Tim rolled his eyes. Damian pushed his way through the two of them to get a better look at the map.
“So? What does that leave us?” he asked, “We need to get to either a port city or to an airport that accepts bribes. What should we do?”

Jason hummed. “We could keep heading north and see if we can’t sail out of St. Petersburg or some other smaller port,” he suggested.

“Sounds fine until you realize we’d have to go through Denmark ports, imbecile,” Damian huffed.

Jason growled. “Careful brat, I know a lot of places to hide a body in this city.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Damian snapped.

“Enough,” Tim said sharply, “You’re both missing a key issue here.”

“What’s that?” Jason asked, still glaring down at Damian.

“Talia and Ra’s both know exactly where we’re headed.” Tim said, “They know we’re going to try to get to Gotham. They’re going to be watching anyone coming in or out of the city.”

Jason looked over at Tim. “That’s a good point,” he said, “They’ll probably watch Bludhaven too, just to make sure.”

“Will we not be too close to Father by that time?” Damian asked, “Won’t it be easy to evade Mother and Grandfather?”

“Possibly,” Tim said, “But I don’t want to risk it. So,” he leaned over the map again, “—I think we should head east. Get up to Moscow and then take the Trans Siberian Railway all the way to the end of the line. From there we get a boat or a plane to San Francisco.”

“The hell’s in San Francisco?” Jason asked.

Tim grinned, “The Teen Titans base.”

Jason blinked. “That… is actually a really solid plan,” he said, “They’ll be expecting us to book it for Gotham, take the fastest route. They won’t suspect we might go the opposite direction.”

“Exactly,” Tim said, “And even if we don’t make it all the way to San Francisco, from that far away, it’ll be a lot safer to call someone. The Titans have a subsonic jet.”

“It will take longer though,” Damian pointed out, “It takes at least seven days to travel the entire length of the Trans Siberian Railway, and that is not even counting how we’re going to get to Moscow in the first place.”

“Easiest way, I think, is to keep heading north,” Jason said, “Cut through Turkey and then Georgia. That’s the least amount of border crossings.”

“So, are we agreed?” Tim asked, looking at the other two.

“It is the best plan we have so far,” Damian said, “Though I question the extended time we will have to take.”

Jason looked over Tim, as though appraising him, “I can see why you got my old job, Replacement.”

Tim suppressed a flutter of emotion. Something must have shown on his face though, or Jason realized what he’d said, because he closed off almost immediately. He turned away from Tim and Damian to look out the window.
“If it’s all settled, you should get some sleep,” Jason said, “It’s getting late and I want to start early.”

Damian turned to glare at the bed again. “I’d rather be back in the desert. At least I am aware of the dangers.” He turned back to Tim. “We have no idea what the history of this mattress is.”

“It’s fine Damian,” Tim said, “It’s just for one night.”

Damian inhaled, looking like he was about to start arguing, but Tim cut him off. “If you don’t want to sleep here, there’s blanket on the floor of the kids room,” he said, “Pick your poison and swallow it.”

Jason snorted and Damian went a particular shade of pink. With a few more huffs and puffs, Damian finally gave in, realizing that Tim wasn’t going to budge and he wasn’t going to get his way. They settled down for the night, Tim and Damian sharing the bed and Jason laying out on the floor.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” Tim asked, “I can take the floor.”

“One, I’m not sharing with the demon,” Jason said, ignoring the way Damian glared. “And two, it’s fine, I’m not going to sleep much anyway.”

“Right,” Tim said. He wondered how exactly Jason sustained himself if he didn’t sleep more than a few hours at a time. Tim could push himself, but that didn’t mean he didn’t need a good solid night’s rest every so often.

Putting it out of his mind, Tim laid down next to Damian on the bed and let his body relax. After four days travelling through the desert and another two on a train, he was ready to get some real rest.

Tim jolted awake some hours later, whatever nightmare that had woken him already fading from his mind. He took a few deeps breaths and tried to reorient himself and slow his thudding heart. Damian slept soundly next to him, his even breaths helping anchor Tim in the present.

“You called out for him in your sleep,” Jason said, making Tim’s heart skip several times.

“Christ, stop doing that,” Tim hissed quietly. He sat up in bed and looked over at Jason, who was sitting upon the blanket he’d laid out for himself.

Jason rolled his eyes. “How do you survive as Robin when your instincts are so poor?”

“I didn’t really get the job by having good instincts,” Tim said, “I’m more of a puzzles and detective work kind of Robin.”

“So like a mini-him, huh?” Jason said, curling his lip slightly. “Figures.” He looked over Tim again critically. “How did he even find you anyway? Thought you said he didn’t know about you being his kid.”

“Ah, well,” Tim said, “That’s kind of a weird story.”

Jason raised an eyebrow and Sat back against the wall, waiting for Tim to launch into the story. Tim took a deep breath and explained—quietly, so he didn’t disturb Damian—how he came to know Bruce and Dick, how he’d figured it out as a kid and then stalked Batman and Robin until Jason’s death, how he’d seen Bruce spiraling and confronted him, begging him to pick a Robin, and then
finally taking up the mantle when Bruce refused to cooperate.

“So what, you just parked your ass in front of him and told him to take a Robin or you’d do it? Tough shit if he didn’t like it?” Jason asked, incredulous.

Tim shrugged. “I mean, kinda? Not in those *exact* words, but basically,” he said, “Bruce was pretty reluctant to take me on. I basically had to face off against Two Face on my own before he’d even consider me.”

Jason snorted, keeping his giggles low so he didn’t wake Damian. “Damn kid, you’re something else. You really figured it out?”

Tim nodded. “When I was ten. I started following you and Bruce a few years later, taking pictures of all your adventures together.”

Jason hummed, then went quiet. Tim could see well enough in the low light coming from the window, the slight red-orange tinge suggesting a street lamp, to see Jason’s face take on a pensive look, like he was remembering all those adventures with Bruce. His hand clenched into a fist and Tim could tell he was getting himself upset.

“He really changed after you were gone,” Tim said suddenly. “After you… When I was a little kid, hanging out at the manor, I remember him differently. He was… softer, more open I guess. He wasn’t quite so harsh, or cold. Losing you… it really hurt him.”

Jason kept his eyes down on the floor, his gaze hard and unseeing. “Not enough to do the right thing and put that clown out of everyone’s misery.”

Tim bit his lip. “Not for lack of trying,” he said quietly, almost at a whisper.

Jason’s head jerked up as his gaze zeroed in on Tim. “What are you talking about?” he asked, voice just as quiet, but firm, demanding.

Tim drew his knees up to his chest like a shield, like maybe he could contain the terrible knowledge. “He never talks about it, and I think he’d deny it if you brought it up, but when you died… just after the funeral, he went after Joker. He was going to… I’m pretty sure he would have killed him.”

Jason said nothing for a long moment, staring at Tim in the darkness. Tim kept going. “Later, after I’d started training, Bruce, Dick, Alfred, everyone was so sure he was dead. That he’d died in that helicopter. Hell, when I looked at Joker’s file, it said ‘body unrecovered.’ They were completely certain he was dead. And then, when Joker showed up again, mad that someone was copycatting him, he was *scared*. Joker was terrified that Bruce would finish him off, for good.” Tim took a deep breath, remembering the events only two years ago in vivid detail. “When they finally caught Joker, Bruce shoved him in front of Commissioner Gordon and basically said, ‘here, shoot him if you want.’”

Tim looked over at Jason again. “I think, if I hadn’t become Robin, if he didn’t have anyone to balance him afterwards, he might have done it. He might have kept spiralling down and down until he hit that place, and he would have done it. And I… I don’t think it would have been good Jason. I don’t think he would have survived it.”

Jason stared back at Tim through the darkness. For several long minutes, there was no noise between them. The street lamp outside flickered once, making the world blink in and out for a second. Tim watched Jason, waiting to see what he would do.

Beside Tim, Damian groaned in his sleep and shifted, breaking the tension like a rock through a glass
window. Tim glanced down at him and tucked the blanket up around his shoulder, rubbing his back to try and get him back to sleep. Damian settled down and Tim breathed a long sigh, looking back to Jason.

“You can hate me if you want,” he said quietly, “If it wasn’t for me, Joker might be dead.”

Jason said nothing, and only stared at Tim, his eyes unreadable shards of blue-green glass in the dark. Finally, Jason moved, lying back down on his blanket and curling up, facing away from Tim. Tim sighed and laid back down on the bed next to Damian, berating himself for bringing it up.

Chapter End Notes

I want to point out that what Tim says is 98% canon (made up the bit out the file). If you go back and read A Death in the Family, after Joker kills Jason, it's pretty clear that Bruce intended to kill Joker. He never explicitly says it, but it's really damn close. He even says 'find the body' after leaving him to die in a helicopter crash (fun fact, he says that to Superman's face). Later, when Joker resurfaces, Joker is terrified that Batman will actually kill him, and when they catch Joker, Batman lets Commissioner Gordon decide what to do with him, knowing full well that Gordon might have shot him for crippling Barbara. The comics are "A Death in the Family" (Batman #426-#429), and the storyline where Joker returns is Batman #450-#451, both are available online.
I nearly had this done last night, but then I got drunk and couldn't write. Whoops. I had a lot of fun doing to research for this chapter, seeing the different ways you can cross that part of the world. I've fudged a few things here and there to make it a little easier on the story, but mostly I stuck to keeping it as realistic as possible.

Contest time! Find the reference and win a 1k fic from me! This chapter's reference is small, blink-and-you-miss-it small, so I'm going to make it easy on you; what and where is the reference to one of Toni Morrison's books? Read carefully and the first person to answer right wins!

They left early in the morning. They let Jidati know where they were headed and she sent them off with food, fresh clothing, and some supplies. When they were ready to go, Jidati handed Jason a small wad of bills as she kissed his cheek.

“Jidati, I can’t—” Jason started to protest.

“You take it,” Jidati ordered, “You are a good boy, this is thanks from the girls. They saved up for you to have this. You take it.”

Jason pressed his lips together. “You could use this money to fix the pipes,” he said.

Jidati waved him off. “The pipes will be fixed, we get by you know. You take it. Now go, before the train goes without you.”

Jason sighed and gave in, knowing he wouldn't be able to convince Jidati otherwise. “Thank you Jidati. If you ever need anything, you still have my email?”

“Yes, I have your silly code,” Jidati said, smiling. “Now go. It’s your brothers waiting now.”

Jason gave Jidati one last kiss before turning to walk with Tim and Damian, heading north through the city towards the bus station. Jidati had a bus driver friend who brought girls on the run to her when he encountered them, and he would be able to get them on a bus heading for north without much fuss. Have to sneak across the border, but Jason wasn't worried, he’d done it before.

The bus station wasn’t very busy when they arrived, and a man came up to them immediately.

“Yani?” Jason asked. The man nodded and motioned for them to follow. He led them to a rickety old bus and motioned them on. He said something quickly in Arabic and then scurried off.

“What did he say?” Tim asked Damian.

“He said this bus will take us as far as Zakho, and from there we’ll have to find our way over the border on our own,” Damian said.

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” Jason said, “Zakho is a border town, and people sneak across all the time.”
Tim unfolded the map and squinted at it for several minutes. “The whole trip should take about ten hours, I think, though we’ll probably stop a few times. Do we want to stop in Zakho or keep going?”

“I say we keep going,” Jason said, “We can sleep on the bus all day, and we don't know if anyone is tailing us. Better to keep moving.”

Tim nodded and made a few marks on the map in pencil. The bus driver barked a few things and people began to take their seats. The three of them crowded into the seat at the back, keeping their heads down so they didn't attract attention. Within a few minutes, they were driving off. Soon there was nothing for them to do but watch the Iraqi countryside roll by.

In comparison to the first leg of their journey, the bus drive was very relaxed. Jidati had given Tim an Arabic-to-English dictionary, so the kid was pouring over that most of the time. Damian had acquired a puzzle game from the other children and was working on it. Jason just sat back and watched the world go by out the window, lost in thought.

Tim’s words from the night before swirled around Jason’s head, chasing each other in circles. He wasn’t entirely sure he believed the kid, but he couldn’t say the kid was lying. Tim certainly thought he was telling the truth, but Jason didn't think it was right. Or maybe, he just didn't want to believe Tim was right? It was all such a confusing jumble.

Jason glanced down at Tim, who had since started napping, his book open and sliding off his lap. Jason caught the book before it fell and tucked it down between their thighs on the seat. He was only two years younger than Jason, but maybe half Jason’s size. When he’d spoken about coming to the manor as a kid, Jason had recalled the snippets of half-stories about the neighbor kid that used to visit. He must have passed the electric card on the mantelpiece a million times. It was so weird to think that this was the the same kid that Dick had spoken about so fondly was the same brat who’d replaced him. Jason had remembered wanting to meet the kid, wondering if they’d get along, and now here he was, having slotted into the hole Jason had left behind when he’d died.

A hole, according to Tim, that had effected Bruce so badly that he’d nearly done what Jason had been so upset at him for not doing. When Jason had seen that the Joker was still alive when he’d gotten his head back together, he’d flipped out. He’d tried to kill Bruce for not avenging him. Was he just misdirected? He hadn’t done much work in figuring out what actually happened after his death.

Then again, he’d really just taken Talia at her word, hadn’t he? She’d hand picked the information and then spoon fed it to him, and he’d trusted her. That was the same kind of stupidity that had gotten him killed in the first place, hadn’t it? Trusting a mother figure too much and getting bit for it. Jason glanced down at Damian, sitting on the other side of Tim and watching the world go by. He didn't really like the brat that much, but he felt a little bad for the kid. At least Jason had had Catherine for a while.

They arrived in Baghdad after around two hours and got out to stretch and use the bathroom, and Jason took a moment to look around. He didn’t think they were being followed, at least not closely, but it was hard to tell, especially with Talia. She’d found him wandering braindead through Gotham before even the so-called Greatest Detective in the World™ had found him, so he wouldn’t put it past her to at least have their trail.

“No-one wander off,” Jason ordered the other two. Damian gave him a look of derision, but Tim gave him a nod. They hadn’t said much to each other since last night, but Tim would look over at him every so often with those big sad blue eyes.

They didn't stay in Baghdad long, and were on their way again shortly. The whole journey was going to take the entire day, and it would be night before they came to their destination. Jason tried to
force himself to sleep, but it he hadn’t had much luck with that before. Ever since coming back from the dead and taking a dip in Ra’s Al Ghul’s magic bathtub, Jason hadn’t really done a lot of sleeping. He could doze for a while, and every once in a while he could actually lie down and sleep for a few hours, but his mind was continually plagued by nightmares. What worried him most however, was that despite how little sleep he got, he seemed to function fine. He could go days without so much as a nap and still be more or less clear headed. He got tired sure, but it was more of a physical thing, his body not responding to his commands as quickly, the ache in his muscles and bones. Jason had to be extremely careful to pay attention to his body, so he didn’t end up passing out or getting hurt.

They drove all day, stopping periodically to stretch. They didn't talk for the most part, and both Tim and Damian slept at various points. Jason kept an eye out for suspicious people and anyone who looked like they might be following them. The closest he got was a rough teenager trying to pickpocket him once at a gas station. The teen was skinny and desperate looking, so Jason only scared him a little, then sent him on his way with a bit of the food Jidati had given them.

“Was that necessary?” Damian asked, “He was nothing more than a common thief.”

“You’ve obviously never known what it’s like to go hungry,” Jason said. He’d recognized the look in the kid’s eyes, the gaunt angles of his face. Jason had been that desperate, hungry kid before.

Damian scoffed. “I have been trained to push my body to the extreme. ‘Hunger’ barely scratches the surface.”

Jason could have explained that it was more than just the hunger, that it was also the uncertainty. The constant anxiety of not knowing when the next morsel of food would be. Jason had lived with that anxiety for years, and it had never truly gone away, even after coming to live at the Manor.

Jason could have explained all that, but thinking about it, about the hunger and then the sharp turn his life had taken after coming to live with Bruce, made his head and chest hurt too much. So he said nothing and only climbed back onto the bus.

After many hours of driving, they finally arrived in Zakho, just as the sun was starting to go down. They climbed off the bus and gathered their things, heading into a shabby, 24 hour diner across the street from the terminal to talk about their next move.

“So, the border crossing is just a few miles away,” Tim said, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “How should we get over it into Turkey?”

“I suggest we use the cover of night to simply sneak across,” Damian suggested, “We all have stealth training, why not use it?”

“We should probably scout the area a little first,” Jason said, “There’s probably a weak point somewhere.”

“We might have some luck if we talked to the locals a little,” Tim suggested, “There’s probably a few people in town who know a way across the border undetected. There have to be at least one or two smugglers who could help us.”

“Where do we start though?” Jason asked, “We don't know anyone in town, and even then, how would we get them to help us? We don’t exactly have anything to give them.”
Tim hummed, sipping the coffee he’d ordered. “Why don’t we head to the border crossing and see how hard it’ll be to cross on our own, then make a decision from there?”

Damian huffed. “It should be quite simple for me. I’ve been trained in stealth since I was four.”

Tim made a particular pinched expression, but said nothing. They finished their coffees (tea in Damian’s case), and then headed out into the city. The border crossing was across the city from them, but it was nice to move around after being stuck in the bus the whole day.

It was completely dark by the time they reached the border crossing. The gate was still open, but there were few cars going through. A few guards wandered around listlessly, bored of the tedium of standing watch.

“Looks like it should be pretty simple to get across,” Tim whispered, “We just have to avoid being seen.”

“Easy as pie,” Jason said, grinning. The three of them skirted around the road crossing, staying low and out of sight. It was surprisingly easy to get across, Jason was almost disappointed.

“That was disappointing,” Damian said as they got back onto the road a few miles away from the crossing.

“That was the best case scenario,” Tim said, “Let’s keep walking for a while and see if we can’t reach the next town before morning.”

It took them three hours to walk to the next town, and by the time they reached it their feet were aching and the sky was beginning to lighten.

“We should keep going,” Tim said, rubbing his red rimmed eyes. “We should see if we can’t find another bus or something.”

“We don’t have enough money for tickets,” Jason said, “I think our best option is hitchhiking.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Tim asked.

Jason shrugged. “Any more so than what we’ve faced already?”

With some reluctance on Damian’s part, they sat on the side of the road and waited for someone to stop. Tim seemed grateful for the chance to rest his feet, sitting down next to a stone on the side of the road that had the word ‘Beloved’ carved into it; some kind of grave marker for an accident Jason guessed.

Jason kept his eyes on the road, watching for potential lifts. After only a few minutes, a truck rumbled to a stop near them. Jason dragged Damian over to translate for him, though the brat didn’t appreciate being dragged around by the scruff.

The driver said a few things in rapid Turkish, which Damian answered. They went back and forth for a moment before Damian turned to Jason. “He said he can take us as far as Batman.”

“As far as where now?” Jason asked, before remembering that ‘Batman, Turkey’ was a city. “Right, of course, let’s go.”

They climbed into the back of the truck, trying to get comfortable among the cages of chickens and a goat that were also in the back. Tim immediately curled into a ball in the corner and closed his eyes while Damian started making friend with the goat.
They spent the day that way, continually heading north in the backs of trucks and vans, and even in a bus full of nuns once. They were in the back of a pickup truck that was mostly rust at this point when the sun started to go down.

Damian sat next to Tim and leaned against him, obviously exhausted from the travel. “Brother, tell me about our father,” he demanded.

Tim sat up a little to accommodate Damian’s weight against him. “Sure, what kind of story do you want?”

Damian thought for a moment. “How about one about the crocodile man?”


As Tim was telling the story, it took Jason a few minutes to realize that it was his story, the story of his first night out as Robin. Jason listened for a few minutes, then he had to speak up.

“That’s not what happened,” he said, frowning at Tim.

Tim looked up at him. “That’s the way Dick tells it.”

“Well Dick’s a dirty liar,” Jason said, “This is what really happened.”

Jason launched into the story, the real story, of his first mission as Robin. He remembered the details like it was yesterday; the sensation of Gotham’s muggy air on his face, rushing across his cheeks and through his hair as he swung through the city. He remembered meeting Dick Grayson for the first time, following along beside him and watching him in action up close. He remembered the first time he saw Killer Croc, who was more ‘wannabe crime lord’ rather than ‘sewer cannibal’ at the time. More than that, Jason remembered how it felt. The feeling of excitement and danger as he fought alongside Dick and Bruce, the awe as he watched them work. He remembered feeling like he would burst as he saved the day and saved Alfred, who had been disguised as Two Face. Jason remembered putting on the Robin suit for the first time. Jason remembered feeling like magic.

By the time the story was done, both Damian and Tim looked like they were about to fall asleep. Damian seemed to sense the story was over and immediately curled up into Tim’s side and fell asleep. Tim gave Jason a tired smile through the darkness.

“You did that on purpose,” Jason grumbled, only just loud enough to be heard over the rushing wind and the rattle of the truck.

Tim quirked an eyebrow. “So? What of it?”

Jason narrowed his eyes. “I’m going to toss you out of this truck.”

Tim looked over Jason, his eyes tried and red rimmed, but nonetheless clear and penetrating. Jason felt strangely exposed under the blue gaze, and wondered if it was something the kid had picked up from Bruce through his training or if it was genetic somehow.

After a moment, Tim smiled again. “No you won’t,” he said, then he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Jason should have thrown the brat out just for that, but he didn’t move, only glared at the sleeping teen’s face. He hated the little brat for assuming he knew Jason well enough, but he hated him even more because he was right. Jason felt no real urge to get up and do any kind of harm to either of the
kids. In fact, he was marvelling a little at how at ease they seemed around him now, the two of them asleep while he was awake, as though they trusted him not to do them any harm, even though he could. Jason tried to chalk it up to the weariness in his own bones, that he was just too tired to do anything to the kids. He took a deep breath and turned over, closing his eyes and trying to get some sleep.

By the time it was morning the next day, they’d made it to Trabzon on the north coast of Turkey.

“Okay, so apparently a ferry that goes directly to Sochi from here,” Tim said, “It’ll be way quicker to take the ferry than go through Georgia.”

“We got a way on?” Jason asked, “Or are we just sneaking again?”

“Unless we have enough money to bribe our way on, I’d guess we’re sneaking,” Tim said, “Shouldn’t be too hard to get on, it’s not getting caught once we’re there.”

Damian groaned. “This constant movement is wearying. We should replenish our supplies when we reach Russia.”

Jason thought for a moment. “I’ve got a friend in Moscow that might help out with that,” he said, “Well, he’s more of an acquaintance who owes me a favour.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “We’ll deal with that when we get there,” he said, “For now, the ferry leaves in five hours, we should get going.”

As with crossing the border into Turkey, it was laughably easy to sneak onto the ferry for three highly trained individuals. They had to keep moving around to avoid being spotted by security, but the only time they came close to being caught was solved when they climbed onto the top of a tower of luggage and waited out the two guards who were making out in the storage room.

“Stop covering my ears. I know what reproduction is,” Damian hissed, trying to wiggle out of Tim’s grip. Jason stifled his giggles into his fist.

Finally, they arrived in Russia, having to sneak off the boat to get away, but making it all the same.

“Okay, I’m going to call my friend in Moscow and see if he can’t get us on a plane from here,” Jason said.

Jason’s ‘friend’ was actually a smuggler who traded mostly in illegal arms, but he owed Jason a favour. Jason wondered briefly why he was trading in such a potentially lucrative favour to help two people he didn’t even like—and might possibly kill at some point—but he was more focused on getting them to Moscow as soon as possible.

“Who is it?” snarled a heavily accented voice through the payphone, which made all the noise grainy.

“Vasily, it’s Jason,” he said.

“Ah, shit,” Vasily swore, “What do you want?”

“Shut up asshole, I’m calling in that favour you owe me,” Jason said, “I need a plane from Sochi to
Moscow.

Vasily said a few nasty things in Russia, which Jason ignored. “Why should I help you at all?”

“I just said I’m calling in that favour you owe me,” Jason growled, “We both know you're a man of your word, so pony up.”

After another moment of Russian curses over the phone, Vasily finally sighed. “Fine, get to airport in four hours and there will be plane waiting for you. Don't be late!” he shouted the last bit before hanging up.

Jason rolled his eyes before putting the payphone back on its hook. He walked back over to where Tim and Damian were waiting for him. “Alright brats, we’re heading to the airport.”

Vasily was only loosely affiliated with the League of Assassins, operating as an independent for the most part. He sold to anyone who would buy, neither asked nor answered many questions, and aligned himself with no one. He wouldn't ask them where they were going, or what they intended to do, so even if the League of Assassins came to him, there would be nothing he could tell them.

They got to the Sochi International airport with two hours to spare. “Alright, so now what?” Damian asked, “Did your ‘friend’ give us any other instructions aside from ‘be at the airport,’ or did you not think to ask?”

“Shut it,” Jason said, scanning the crowd, trying to pick out any familiar face or signal.

Jason was about to find another payphone and call Vasily back when someone grabbed his elbow. Jason tensed and nearly swung around at his attacker, but he saw it was only Alexie, one of Vasily’s men. He was a quiet man of few words, and only indicated that Jason should follow him before walking off into the crowd. Jason followed obediently, Tim and Damian just behind him. Alexie spared them a glance and raised an eyebrow at Jason.

“They’re with me,” Jason explained with a shrug.

Alexie furrowed his brows, but said nothing. He led them to a smaller runway where a small plane was being fueled for take off. Alexie went over to talk briefly with the pilot, then waved Jason and the others over. The pilot pulled down the steps for them and they climbed on; there were no real seats on the plane, or if there were they were blocked by the large crates that were inside, so they made themselves comfortable as best they could.

The pilot puttered around outside for a while longer before climbing into the cockpit and then preparing to take off. He said nothing to Jason or the others, and barely acknowledged their existence.

“So it should be two hours to Moscow,” Jason said, “Then we have a train to catch.”

Tim nodded and tried to settle down. Jason had noticed that the younger teen was curious, sometimes too much for his own good, and it wasn't long before he was poking around the crates, trying to see what was inside. He kind of reminded Jason of a kitten, poking around something just for the sake of knowing what the hell it was, with little regard for his own safety.

Eventually, Tim got into one of the crates, prying the lid off enough to see what was inside. With a squeak, he shut it so fast he nearly pinched his fingers. “Jason,” he hissed, “These are illegal weapons.”

“Yeah?” Jason raised an eyebrow. “What about it?”
Tim bristled. “We can’t just let these weapons go. Who knows where they’ll end up?”

“What do you want to do about it?” Jason snapped, “Call the police? Have fun with that. Even if you do, the pigs will only take the weapons for themselves.”

Tim glared at Jason, but he didn't say anything, and Jason knew he’d won. There was really nothing for Tim to do about the situation, and by the time he’d be in a position to do anything, he would be too far away to be effective.

They arrived in Moscow with little fanfare, and Jason knew better than to stick around and get his nose into places it didn’t belong. Tim seemed a little more reluctant to leave the smuggled weapons, but there was nothing for him to do. Eventually he followed Jason and Damian, sulking the whole way to the train station.

“So, we made it to the Trans Siberian Railway,” Jason said, “Now what?”

“I assume we sneak aboard and avoid getting caught until we reach Vladivostok,” Damian said.

“Alright, but how do we sneak aboard? This isn’t some backwater railway in the middle of the desert,” Jason said, “We need a plan.”

Tim looked around the station, taking note of buildings and fences and the trains. “I say we fall back on an old Robin favourite,” he said.

Jason raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? What would that be?”

Tim grinned, mischief in his eyes. “Train surfing.”

They found a good spot on an overpass on the outskirts of the trainyard where they could drop on top of a train without being detected. The trick was to get on while it was going slow enough not to buck you right off, but fast enough that you wouldn’t be noticed by anyone.

“Been a while since I did this,” Jason said, looking down from the overpass. It wouldn’t be long before a train would come by.

“I do this with Dick all the time,” Tim said, “It’s kind of our thing.”

“Must be nice,” Jason mumbled, too quiet for Tim to hear over the screeching of trains. He and Dick had taken a while to warm up to each other, and by the time they’d been on good terms, Jason had died. The irony stung a little.

“There’s a train coming,” Damian pointed out, “A passenger train, heading east.”

“Okay,” Tim said, leaning over the edge of the overpass. The train was very long, and it looked like it had several luggage cars that would be perfect to stow away in.

“Damian, stay close okay?” Tim asked as they prepared to jump.

Damian scoffed. “Worry about yourself brother. I will be fine.”

Jason rolled his eyes and prepared for the jump. The head of the train was under them now, starting
to pick up speed, but they had to wait until it was at least a few cars down so they were less likely to be noticed.

“Okay, on three,” Tim said, “One… two… three!”

The three of them jumped from the overpass, dropping carefully to the top of the train and flattening as they went under the overpass. Damian misjudged his landing and stumbled, arms windmilling a little as he tried to rebalance. Jason grabbed him just as he was about to fall off and yanked him back, pulling the smaller child under him as they went through the overpass. After a few seconds, the overpass ended and they sat up.

“Everyone good?” Tim asked, reaching for Damian, who wriggled out of Jason’s grip.

“I’m fine,” Damian huffed, trying to fend off Tim’s worrying.

“You’re welcome,” Jason said, rolling his eyes. He looked around as they left the train station. They’d chosen a station on the edge of the city, so after only a few buildings, the landscape opened up to green forests.

“Now we just train hop for the next seven days until we get to Vladivostok,” Tim said, settling down where he sat.

“Maybe we should find a place inside the train to sit?” Jason suggested.

“In a bit,” Tim said, “Once we’re further out.”

They sat on top of the train for an hour, feeling the wind rush through their hair and tug at their clothes. As the sun sank and the night started going cold, they found their way into a baggage car and found a secluded spot to spread out. They found their way to the kitchen car and managed to snag some food (they’d stopped to get supplies before leaving Moscow, but they didn’t want to have to rely on them too heavily, just in case). With a few last checks to make sure they were well hidden, they settled down for the night.

“Someone should keep watch,” Damian said as they prepared to get some sleep.

“You guys sleep, I’ll keep watch,” Jason said, situating himself where he could see the closest entrance to the car, but he couldn’t be seen by anyone from below.

“We can take turns,” Tim said, “Have a kind of rotation.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said, “I’ll be fine.”

Tim’s nose scrunched up a little. “We’re all in this together, you can trust us Jason.”

Jason glanced over at Tim, watching him for a moment. He seemed honest enough, and he hadn’t really given Jason any reason to distrust him at all. The kid hadn’t steered them wrong yet, and he was trained as Robin, as much as that pissed Jason off.

“You must be at least a little tired,” Tim said, “You can sleep. I’ll take the first shift.”

Now that Jason thought about it, he did feel tired, as much as he could feel tired anymore. His body ached and he noticed that he was having trouble focussing for more than a minute or two. His head felt foggy and his nerves felt like they were vibrating on a low setting. The days of travel they had endured had exhausted even Jason.
Jason sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, sure, why not?” he said, “You take the first watch and wake me in a few hours, okay?”

Tim smiled and nodded. “I will,” he said.

Jason gave a grumble of acknowledgement and switched places with Tim. Damian glared at him for a moment, making a show of turning so he could keep an eye on Jason before he settled down to try and sleep. Jason rolled his eyes and got as comfortable as he could. Within a few minutes, he was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up a little shorter than the others, but it's mostly filler. I wanted to show the particulars of their journey towards Moscow while also showing the slow build of their relationships to each other. There's going to more of it next chapter, but hopefully I move the plot forward a little more as well. Thanks for reading and I hope you liked it!
Part IV Chapter iv: Neurosis

Chapter Notes

Just getting this out before I head to bed for the night. We're in the home stretch my loves! The plot is going to pick up pretty quickly from here on out, so be prepared.

CONTEST TIME! Find the literary reference and win a 1k fic! Remember to give both the title AND the author, or your answer will not be counted. If you've won before, let someone else have a chance to win. It's pretty obvious where the reference is, so I won't give any hints. Happy guessing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The pain was unbearable. Jason couldn’t distinguish any other feeling as the crowbar rained down on him again and again. His bones cracked and his skin split under the blows, and even the concrete under him scraped at his skin. The piercing laughter around him stabbed his brain like knives, no matter how hard he tried to block the sound. Even when the blows stopped, the laughter echoed, rattling around in his skull like a ball of white hot lead. As the building collapsed on him and the woman who’d given birth to him, through the pain Jason had one thought.

Dad will come for me.

Jason held to this thought as the debris on top of him squeezed what little air remained in his perforated lungs. Dad will come for me, he thought as his vision began to go spotty and the pain began to fade into a strange hum in the back of his mind. Dad will come for me, he thought as he closed his eyes, consciousness slipping from his grasp as his body gave in to the beating and the explosion. Dad will come for me.

After what seemed like only a moment of blissful blackness, Jason awoke in agony, barely able to move for the cramped conditions he was in. The panic overid his brain and he struggled in a thick fog to figure his way out, his training kicking in as he quickly tore through his wooden prison, shredding his hands when his belt buckle broke.

Jason wasn’t sure how he managed to get out, how he managed to swim upwards through the cold mud and reach the air. The first breath of air was a relief and a curse all at once as his brain registered the pain once again. As Jason crawled through the grass, dragging his broken body, rain pelting him from seemingly every direction, Jason became aware of the sound in his ears. The laughter that still echoed, still haunted him as he tried to make sense of up or down.

The wet grass under Jason disappeared, replaced with hot, dusty concrete. The laughter became louder now and Jason curled in on himself as the crowbar descended once again, starting the whole hellish experience over again and again and again and again.

A hand on Jason’s shoulder made him bolt upright, his body reacting faster than his brain. He lunged for the throat of his attacker, getting both hands around their neck and snarling. He wasn’t going to go back. He wasn't going to let himself be hurt anymore.

Something small and heavy hit him in the side, knocking him over a ledge. Jason scrambled for a second, but he was too disoriented to get a proper hold and dropped. Jason hit the floor hard, landing
on his back. The air rushed from his lungs for a few seconds and Jason lay where he’d landed, gasping for breath.

By the time Jason got his lungs to work, the fog of panic was starting to lift from his brain. He scrambled to his feet, movements jerky and uncoordinated. Jason crashed into a shelf behind him as he tried to make sense of his surroundings. The fog rolled back further and Jason remembered where he was; a train car on the Trans Siberian Railway, heading for Vladivostok, with two little kids.

Jason blinked through the darkness, finding two sets of eyes staring back at him from the top of a pile of luggage. Tim and Damian were curled around each other protectively, Damian glaring fiercely and Tim watching Jason with fear and caution. Through the dim light, the red marks around Tim’s neck almost glowed.

Reality finally caught up with Jason and he realized what had happened. Guilt washed over him and made his stomach curl. The walls around him seemed to compress and Jason couldn’t breathe. He turned away from the other two boys and ran out of the car, into the chill of the rushing wind. Jason climbed onto the top of the car, trying to get his breathing under control. The sharp, cold air around him seemed to help, whipping away the demons in his head and shocking his body back into full reality.

Jason sat on the top of the train for a while, trying to banish the last images of his nightmare from his mind. That damnable laughter still plagued his mind, even over the roaring of the wind in his ears. Jason clenched his fists and tried not to think of Tim’s slender neck caught under them, fragile under the brute strength of Jason’s madness.

Jason didn’t like hurting people, at least not most of the time. Of course he got a little satisfaction of knowing he was taking scum off the streets like scraping old gum off of a sidewalk, but he didn't like suffering without just cause. A pedophile deserved to be tortured, and so Jason provided it, but the point wasn’t to hurt anyone, only to deliver justice. While he hated Tim deeply in his soul for replacing him, he didn’t really want to make the kid hurt unnecessarily. Choking him out after coming up from a nightmare wasn't really how Jason planned the kid’s demise.

A noise from behind him made Jason turn; Tim was carefully climbing onto the top of the car. Jason scowled and turned away, but he couldn't force himself to get up and walk away. Tim came to stand next to him and waited, keeping perfectly balanced on the moving train. After a minute or so he nudged Jason to get his attention. Jason glared up at him and Tim raised an eyebrow. He walked off to the front of the car and stopped, waiting for Jason.

Jason stayed where he was for a moment, stubborn. Finally he sighed and stood, following Tim. Almost immediately Tim took off, jumping and twisting and bouncing along the tops of the train cars in practised movements. Jason followed as closely behind as he could, but without as much twisting and bending. Flexibility had never been his strong suit, that was more Dick’s thing, but Jason made up for it in the power behind his motions. He could put twice as much force into a move as Dick could at the same age. Jason had never become the quick and sure-footed acrobat that Dick had been as Robin, but he’d made up for it by being tougher and rougher, taking hits better and throwing them back just as hard.

Tim was neither of them, not even a combination of the two. Jason could see some of Dick’s influence and some from Bruce, but the kid was not built for brute force or flexibility. He was quick and sure, that was true, but he moved like he was ten steps ahead of himself. Dick had always given the impression that he existed exclusively in the moment, moving on instinct and natural ability. Tim gave the impression of being aware of everything at once, compiling the information to his use as he went. Jason had the sudden thought that he moved very similar to Bruce, but without the heaviness
of Batman’s frame. He was small and light and he used that to his advantage in ways Bruce could never. With more training and practice, Jason could see the kid becoming a formidable opponent.

_Better to take him out now_, came a thought skittering over Jason’s mind, in a voice eerily similar to his own but just different enough that Jason could shake it away. Intrusive thoughts came and went in Jason’s mind, and he was only just starting to get better at distinguishing them from his own thoughts.

Sometimes, Jason didn’t trust his own head. He wasn’t sure how much of himself was _him_ anymore, even since the Lazarus Pit. Brain damage wasn’t like a wound; it didn’t heal the same way. It was more like losing a limb; the stump could heal, but the limb wouldn’t grow back. Jason couldn’t be sure if the parts of him that came back after the Lazarus Pit were even _him_, or if there was something else floating around in his head now. Or maybe even _someone_ else; after all, Ra’s had been in the pit when Talia had pushed him in. Maybe Jason wasn’t fully ‘Jason’ anymore.

These thoughts chased themselves around Jason’s head as he followed Tim along the train. They moved well together, Jason noted, and the more they moved, the calmer Jason’s mind became. He began to lose himself to the movement, the motions of running full tilt across the top of a train as it ran at full speed. By the time they reached the front of the train, Jason was out of breath, but it felt clean and fresh, like all the toxic gas that had been choking had been scrubbed from lungs.

“Feel better?” Tim asked. His voice was a little scratchy, and Jason’s eyes went to the ring of finger shaped bruises around his neck.

“Sorry,” Jason blurted out before he could stop it. He turned away. “I didn’t mean to…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tim said, “I’ve had worse. It kind of comes with being Robin.”

A spot under Jason’s armpit throbbed in a phantom pain, the first placed the crowbar had struck before all the blows blurred together. “Yeah, I know.”

They both went quiet for a while. They watched the sea of forest go by around them, black in the night. Suddenly the forest opened up on one side to show a huge lake. The water was perfectly still, and reflected the moon and stars back up to the sky. This far away from civilization, there was no light pollution to dilute the night sky, and it looked as though a chunk of the cosmos had dropped from the sky and settled into the earth. Jason felt the urge to swim out into the water, into the middle of the lake, and just float there for a while. Would he sink into the universe and disappear? Maybe if he did, things would make sense again.

“It’s not your fault,” Tim said, “I shouldn’t have tried to wake you like that.”

Jason glanced at Tim. His hair had grown long in the months he’d been captured, and it flowed like silk in the wind. “Why’d you do it anyway?” Jason asked.

“Wake you up?” Tim asked, turning to look at Jason. “You looked like you were having a nightmare. I wanted to help.”

“I’d have been fine. They usually wake me up on their own,” Jason said.

“What was it about?” Tim asked. He turned back and began to pick his way back along the length of the train, much more slowly this time.

The hollow echo of insane laughter made Jason shudder. “Just leftover memories,” he answered.

Tim was quiet a moment. “You ever get help afterwards?”
“For what?” Jason asked.

“Post traumatic stress disorder,” Tim said, “Did you ever try and talk to anyone about it?”

Jason remembered that first few weeks of coming back to his head, the swirling of emotion and memory coupled with learning that Bruce hadn’t avenged him. After his stilted attempt at blowing up Batman with a car bomb, he’d gone back to Talia, who had sent him around the world to learn how to be the most deadly person on the planet.

“What good would it do?” Jason asked, “There’s not a shrink in the world prepared to handle whatever I’ve got rattling around in my head.”

“If there is one, Bruce could probably find him. Or her,” Tim said.

Jason snarled, “I’m not going to crawl back to him. Not after everything he’s done.”

Tim frowned. “You mean not killing the Joker? I told you he—”

“It’s not just that,” Jason cut Tim off. “He replaced me. I died, and he just put someone else in my place. Like it didn’t even matter.”

Tim stumbled slightly and stopped. He gave Jason a look that he could only describe as withering.

“Are you serious right now?”

Jason stopped and turned back to Tim. “What?” he asked.

Tim glared at Jason. “Like it didn’t even matter? Bruce was devastated when you died. Not only did he nearly kill the Joker, but he went into a downward spiral that probably would have ended up with him either killing someone else or himself,” Tim said, waving his arms around as he spoke, “Not to mention how damn hard he hammered into my head how important it was to remember you.”

“Remember me?” Jason asked.

Tim made a high pitched frustrated noise. “You thought it was hard for you to live up to Dick? I had to live up to Dick and you! You call me a replacement, but I had to replace the Robin who died!” Tim shouted, “Everytime I walk past that monument in the Cave I’m reminded of exactly what I signed up for and why I signed up for it.”

“Monument?” Jason asked, a little startled by Tim’s outburst. The kid was normally so calm and level headed.

Tim took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “There’s a big glass case with your uniform in it. Your Robin uniform,” he said, sounding a little calmer now. “It got put up so we’d all remember why we do what we do.”

Jason stomach did something weird. “There’s a monument for me?”

Tim nodded. “Plus they kept your old room exactly as you left it. No one goes in but Alfred, but it’s there.”

Jason’s throat closed and he couldn't say anything. Tim started going along the tops of the train again and Jason followed, still silent, thinking hard. For a long time, he’d assumed Bruce had simply replaced him and moved on, like Jason had never been Robin. Like Jason had never mattered. He’d never really considered it as being anything else. What else was he wrong about?
They reached the car they’d stowed away in and got back inside. Damian was sitting on top of the pile of luggage they’d been sleeping on, looking like he was trying to meditate, but he jumped up so fast when they came back that Jason doubted he was doing it properly. Damian unsubtly curled around Tim and began checking him for injuries, glaring at Jason in intervals. Jason mustered the energy to roll his eyes.

“Come on, there’s a few hours until daylight,” Tim said, climbing back onto the luggage. “We should be able to get a few more hours of sleep.”

“I’ll keep watch,” Jason said, finally unsticking his throat.

Tim looked at him. “You sure?”

Jason looked back into those penetrating blue eyes. “I won’t sleep again tonight anyway.”

Understanding passed between them and Tim nodded. He settled down on the luggage to get some sleep. Damian very obviously put himself in between Tim and Jason, glaring hard at Jason. Jason huffed and did his best to ignore the pint sized demon.

An hour or so passed in silence. When Tim was completely asleep, Damian hissed, “If you attack my brother again, I will slaughter you.”

Jason glanced down at Damian. His eyes were like two chips of icy green fury in the dark. “You can try, brat,” Jason said, “I’ve seen you fight Tim. You wouldn’t last a minute against me.”

Damian growled. “I would eviscerate you,” he snarled.

Jason sighed, wondering if it was worth the effort to argue with an eight year old. Silence fell once more and Jason could feel his mind wandering. He tried to keep his thoughts away from Gotham, from Bruce, from home, but it was increasingly more difficult with every moment. He needed something to distract himself.

“So why exactly did Talia kidnap Tim anyway?” Jason asked suddenly, knowing Damian was still awake (he could still feel the kid’s eyes on him). “Like, I know she has this weird obsession with Bruce, but why exactly?”

Damian shifted a little. “I believe she intended for me to kill him in order to take his place as the rightful heir of our father.”

“Right,” Jason said, “Because that makes perfect sense.”

“The heir is the eldest son. Timothy is older than I, so to become the true heir, he would need to be eliminated,” Damian explained, his tone suggesting he believed Jason was an idiot for not understanding.

“Yeah I get that part, but why not just kill him herself?” Jason asked, “Why make it so difficult on herself?” Jason glanced down at Damian. He was only eight years old. “Why make it so difficult on you?”

Damian stared up at Jason, though the glare had softened now. “I… do not know for certain,” he said quietly, “Perhaps she intended for me to earn my right as heir.” Damian went quiet for some time, and his gaze traveled far away, his brow furrowing. “I have never failed her like this before.”

Jason watched Damian, looking over his tiny body. In the nondescript clothes he was wearing, curled up on top of a luggage pile, he suddenly looked every inch the child he was. Jason could see a
few scars across Damian’s knuckles, and he knew there were more all over his body. He thought about the training he’d received from the League of Assassins after his resurrection, and he couldn’t help but think of the kind of things that they must have put Damian through. There wasn’t a chance in hell that they’d gone easy on Damian for being Ra’s Al Ghul’s grandson; they’d probably gone harder on him because of it. It was probably a miracle Damian was still alive.

“Don’t worry so much about it kid,” Jason said, “I didn’t kill him either.”

Damian didn’t answer and silence fell around them. The train car leaned slightly as they went around a curve in the tracks. Jason sighed deeply again and rested his head back a little, letting the tension drain out of him slightly.

The sun began to rise and Jason was sure Damian had gone back to sleep. He almost startled a little when Damian spoke. “Do you think Mother will continue to force me to kill Timothy?” he asked in such a small voice that Jason nearly missed what he said.

Jason thought about it and shrugged. “She might, but I think she’s given up on that at this point,” he said, “Or else she wouldn’t have called me.”

Damian frowned, unhappy with that answer. Jason felt a little sorry for the kid. “Don’t stress about it,” Jason said, “The whole Cain and Abel thing is a tired cliché anyway.”

Damian snorted. “Each killed the other, hand against brother’s hand,” he quoted.

“That’s Polynices and Eteocles, moron,” Jason said.

“It fits,” Damian huffed, “It was still a brotherly rivalry. And it predates the myth of Cain and Abel.”

“One, that’s not the point, and two, Polynices and Eteocles kill each other. Talia just wants Tim dead, not both of you,” Jason said.

Damian rolled his eyes. “My apologies for offending your sensitivities to the art of metaphor.”

“That’s an allusion,” Jason said, “Shit, were you raised in a barn?”

“I was raised in a palace,” Damian huffed.

“Even worse,” Jason said, but he couldn’t help the slight grin on his face.

“What are you two arguing about?” Tim asked groggily, rubbing his eyes against the yellow morning light filtering through the window.

“Literature,” Jason said, ignoring Damian glaring up at him again. It was less harsh this time, more like a pout. Jason categorically refused to think it was cute. “So what’s on the agenda today?”

Tim hummed and sat up, stretching like a cat. Jason was sure he heard a few of the kid’s joints pop.

“First, we should probably find some food,” Tim said, “And second, we should probably hide as much as possible.”

Jason nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

They spent most of their days moving from place to place on the train, occasionally sneaking food from the kitchen or dining cars. Whenever they stopped at a station, they tried to switch trains as
often as they could to avoid getting caught. At night they found a secluded spot in the storage cars to sleep. When they weren’t sneaking food and avoiding security, they train surfed and talked.

“So he did try to forget me,” Jason growled when Tim told him about how Bruce had tried to shut away all of Jason’s photos in the aftermath of his death.

“Well, he was grieving,” Tim said, “And he only tried. Alfred wouldn't let him shut away everything.”

Jason snarled and tried to focus on where his feet were as they went around a sharp curve. It was a sunny summer day, and they were teaching Damian how to train surf. “That bastard.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Oh come off it. This is Bruce we’re talking about. He deals with the death of his parents by dressing up like a bat and punching people. You really expect him to deal with the death of his kid in a healthy, well-adjusted manner?”

Jason opened his mouth, but he didn't really have anything to say in response to that. Tim continued. “If you have a problem with him, talk to him. He’s not great at it, but it’s better than stewing in your anger by yourself until you explode,” he said.

“You talk a pretty big game for someone who didn’t even know he was your biological father until he was fifteen,” Jason grumbled.

“That’s not my fault!” Tim huffed, “My mom’s the one who never told anyone.”

“Sure, and the World’s Greatest Detective never figured it out either,” Jason said, “Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Tim groaned. “God, you are such an asshole.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Jason said.

For four days this was what they did. They circled around heavier topics, but then broke the tension with petty arguments and teasing. After a few days, Jason came to the realization that he actually kind of liked these two little brats. Of course he didn't really like them that much, but Tim was snarky and smartassed without being pretentious or an asshole, and Damian was sort of inadvertently hilarious, being so formal and trying to be threatening while simultaneously being eight years old (it was like being growled at by a rabid Chihuahua). Whatever Jason threw at them, verbally or physically, they threw right back at him, sometimes with more force. It was almost refreshing, to talk and tease and joke with someone closer to his age. For the first time in a long while, Jason sort of felt… normal.

On the fifth day, the train stopped at a small station to refuel, and there was no train leaving that they could switch to, so they were stuck for a few hours. There was a lake on the other side of the tracks; naturally, they decided to go swimming.

“Are we sure the water’s safe?” Tim asked, standing at the edge of the water, “It could be contaminated.”

Jason rolled his eyes and firmly kicked Tim in the backside, shoving him forward into the water a few paces. “Stop worrying so damn much. We all stink and I stole some soap, so get scrubbing,” he said, tossing the soap at Tim.

Tim bobbled the soap a little, but managed to catch it against his chest. He glared at Jason and stepped out of the water, stripping out of his filthy clothes.
“We should probably wash our clothes as well,” Tim said, giving his shirt a sniff and wrinkling his nose.

“Will they be dry in time for us to return to the train?” Damian asked, stripping from his clothes as well.

“We’ve got about five hours,” Jason said, “That should be enough time, it’s sunny out anyway.”

“We won’t miss our train Damian, don't worry,” Tim said, “We can still see the tracks from here.”

Damian grumbled something and finished stripping to his underwear. He seemed indecisive over what to do with his clothes before simply leaving them on the shore. Jason realized something.

“Neither of you have ever done your own laundry, have you?” Jason asked, already feeling annoyed.

Damian huffed and turned to swim out further into the lake. Tim at least had the good graces to look sheepish. “I’ve never had the chance,” he said.

Jason groaned and rolled his eyes. “Fuck, fine. Hand over your shit and the soap, I’ll do it. But don't get used to this.”

Tim smiled and gave Jason his clothes and the soap. “I promise I’ll learn,” he said.

“Whatever,” Jason said, “Go after the mini-demon before he swims too far out.”

Tim flashed Jason a smile before heading deeper into the water. Despite spending the better part of the last few months in a desert, Tim was as pale as ever, with only a few freckles to show for his time in the sun. Damian, on the other hand, was an even brown all over, whether it was by sun exposure or just natural pigmentation. Standing next to each other, they hardly looked like brothers at all.

They washed quickly and splashed around for a bit, at one point Tim and Damian ganged up on Jason and tried to wrestle him under. It almost worked, but Jason managed to toss Damian off his shoulders at the last minute.

Once their clothing was dry and they’d had their fun, the three of them trekked back to the train to sneak back on. As they crossed the tracks, Jason had the distinct feeling that someone was watching them. He turned to look back into the treeline, but couldn’t pick anything out. He was about to go back and investigate when Tim noticed him.

“Jason?” he called from a few paces away. “Is something wrong?”

Jason glanced back at Tim and Damian and realized how exposed they all were, especially spread out as they were. He jogged over to Tim and Damian and grabbed them both by the arm, frog marching them back to the train.

“Move fast and stay close,” Jason ordered.

“Did you see anything?” Tim asked, walking quickly to keep pace with Jason.

“No, but I’d rather not take the chance,” Jason said.

They snuck back onto the train and quickly found a secluded spot to hide. Jason cursed himself for listening to Tim and not bringing along a gun when they left the compound. The only weapon he still had was his knife, and if this guy had any kind of firing weapon, Jason was going to have a
challenge on his hands.

The train began to move and Jason almost thought that he was mistaken, and there was no one following them. He ventured a quick check out of their hiding spot, a small closet that was probably meant to store first aid or tools. No sooner did he stick his head slightly out did he see the glint of light off the barrel of a gun.

Jason pulled back into the closet so quickly that he squashed Tim and Damian behind him, causing Tim to squeak. The bullet slammed into the frame of the closet’s sliding door, shattering the plastic. Jason swore and pushed Tim and Damian further inside the closet.

“Stay here,” Jason ordered. He turned the knife to see if he could get a good reflection on it to see where the shooter was.

“The hell we will,” Tim hissed, “We’re not going to stay here while you get shot.”

“You’re a couple of snot nose brats,” Jason said, “Stay here and let me handle this.”

“We’re R-obins ,” Tim said, “We’re helping whether you like it or not.”

Jason growled, but he could see the conviction in Tim’s eyes, mirrored again in Damian’s as well. There was no way he was going to get them to stay still short of tying them up or knocking them unconscious.

“Fine, but you two stay together,” Jason said. He caught a look of the hallway finally and saw it was clear. Cautiously, he stepped out again, seeing no one around.

“You go that way and I’ll go this way,” Jason said, edging out and heading to where the shot had come from. Tim and Damian wiggled out from behind him and started carefully making their way in the other direction. Jason noticed that Tim had armed himself with a broom handle.

Jason slowly made his way through the car, finding no one. He hadn’t heard a door, but he hadn’t heard footsteps either. Whoever this was, they were good at stealth, which probably made up for his (or her) shitty aim. Finding nothing in his search, Jason made his way back to the others.

“Find anything?” Jason asked, keeping his voice low.

“Fire escape is open,” Tim said, “I think our guy went up to the roof.”

“Smart,” Jason said, cursing. He hated the smart ones, they were harder to take out. “Okay, we head to the roof, but we stay together and no one breaks off.”

Tim nodded and followed Jason, Damian close behind. They made their way to the roof of the train, careful to look for any movement that might be their shooter.

“Aren’t we way more exposed on the roof?” Tim asked as they climbed up.

“We cannot simply wait for our pursuer to come to us,” Damian said, “We must strike him down before he has the chance to strike again.”

“What the brat said,” Jason said, “We just have to be careful.”

Tim pulled a face, but he adjusted his grip on his broom handle and followed Jason and Damian onto the roof. So far as they could see, there was no one around, only the three of them. Jason scanned along the length of the train, trying to see anything out of the ordinary.
Jason saw the gun and the shooter a second before he fired. “Down!” Jason shouted, grabbing Damian and Tim and dragging them down, almost crushing them under him as he covered their bodies with his. When Jason lifted his head, he could see the shooter booking it across the train’s roof. Swearing colourfully, Jason took off after him.

“Jason! Wait!” Tim called, picking Damian up off the roof. They tried to follow, but Damian wasn’t so good at train surfing yet, and the wind was harder on his smaller body. Tim kept close to Damian, and they fell behind Jason and the shooter.

Jason ran full tilt after the shooter, a nondescript man with what looked like a specialized rifle. He noticed Jason coming after him and put on a burst of speed, but Jason was already hot on his heels. The shooter slung his rifle around and turned to take aim at Jason. Jason pulled to a stop, cursing as he realized that he had nowhere to go. He did however, notice the bend in the tracks that was coming up fast and prepared to anchor himself.

The shooter fired and Jason tucked into a roll, staying low as the train came around the bend. The shooter, having not seen the bend that was coming up behind him, stumbled and nearly fell off the train, gripping desperately at the roof to try and stay on. Jason was about to jump up and go after him when Tim appeared, swinging his broom handle expertly. The shooter had managed to climb back up onto the roof, but hadn’t fully regained his balance, and in a few fluid movements, Tim managed to disarm and pin him, broom handle pressing into his windpipe.

“Shit kid, you’re good with that thing,” Jason said, trotting over. He picked up the rifle and pointed it at the shooter. “Now, why don’t you be smart and tell us who you are and why you tried to shoot a couple of kids?”

The shooter growled, but with both Tim and Jason pointing weapons at him, there wasn’t really anywhere for him to go. “I’m here for the contract,” he said, his accent suggesting something East European.

“What contract?” Jason asked, though he had a pretty good idea.

“There’s an open contract out for three kids, and your photos match,” the shooter explained, “Kill the older two and bring the youngest back unharmed.”

“Mother is outsourcing?” Damian commented, “She must be desperate.”

“How much is the contract?” Jason asked.

“Is that really important?” Tim asked.

“One million euro,” the shooter said, “Every assassin in the world is looking for you.”

Jason grumbled. It was a smart move on Talia’s part, to put out an open contract. The League of Assassins was a huge network, but they couldn’t be everywhere at once. An open contract let any freelancer in on the trail, casting a larger net to ensnare them. Jason figured it was Talia, since he was certain Ra’s would never admit his League of pet killers was fallible (and he’d want Tim alive).

“So what do we do?” Tim asked, looking to Jason. “We can’t let him go.”

Jason glanced at Tim, and then passed his gaze onto Damian. The youngest of their group raised an eyebrow, but they managed to communicate. Damian grabbed Tim’s sleeve and tugged at it.

“We can find some rope and tie him up,” Damian said, “Come brother, we’ll find a place to put him.”
Tim stayed where he was and looked back to the shooter, still pinned by Jason. “Are you sure that will work?” he asked.

“It’s the best we got,” Jason said, “We’ll switch trains and lose him as soon as we can.”

Tim frowned, but Damian continued tugging at his wrist until he reluctantly left with him. They climbed down from the roof and disappeared into the car, leaving Jason alone with the shooter.

The shooter looked Jason over. “I’ve heard rumors about you,” he said, “They say you died and came back to life. Is that true?”

Jason looked down at him. He had hazel eyes and sandy blonde hair. “Yeah, it’s true,” he said.

The shooter raised an eyebrow. “Truly? What was that like?”

Jason pressed his lips together. “Why don’t you find out for yourself?” he said, then pulled the trigger on the rifle, shooting the man cleanly through the head.

Chapter End Notes

I realize that both the people Jason killed in the story have been killed on trains, but technically the other guy was killed by someone else, so it's okay. I had a lot of fun with this chapter actually. Writing these boys get to know each other is lots of fun.
Part IV Chapter v: Arrival

Chapter Notes

It's like 1am as I'm posting this, but I'm posting this because something has to go right this week. We're getting close you guys.

CONTEST TIME! Win a 1k fic if you can guess the right answer! Remember to give a full and complete answer to qualify. No cheating using Google and refrain from playing if you've already won a prize. This is another history one! There's a group of historical pilots referenced in the chapter somewhere; identify what it is AND tell me who they were and what they did. Remember, no Google or Wiki! I don't need names, but I have to know what they did at least. Good luck!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tim and Damian managed to find some extension cord that could be used to tie someone up and made their way back to where Jason was holding their would-be assassin. They were about to leave the car and climb up to the roof when Jason came striding through the door, the rifle slung over his shoulder.

“We found some extension cord,” Tim said, holding it up. He glanced behind Jason, as though expecting the assassin to follow. “Where is he?” he asked.

“I took care of it,” Jason said, walking past Tim. Tim noticed a splatter of blood on Jason’s sleeve.

“You killed him,” Tim said incredulously, “I can’t believe you! You killed him!”

Jason whirled around, anger on his face. “Yes, I fucking killed him. I did what I had to do.”

Tim bristled. “Damn it Jason!” he shouted, “We don’t kill!”

Suddenly, Jason slammed his fist into the shelf right next to Tim’s head, putting a sizable dent in the metal. “I did what I had to do!” Jason shouted, “Do you think I like killing? You think I’m like all those freaks that get their jollies ending a life? I kill because I have to!” he growled, leaning over Tim. “I do it because it’s what’s right.”

“It isn’t right,” Tim tried to argue, but his voice came out small with Jason looming above him so threateningly. Jason was only two years older, but he probably had a hundred pounds over Tim.

“Who’s the judge of that?” Jason snarled, “Soldiers kill, police kill, and no one bats an eye, even when they kill innocent people. Someone kills someone else in self-defense and we all move on with our lives. Some people just deserve to die and everyone knows it. I kill because I’m removing the scum from the world. I kill because I’m protecting people. I killed that man because I was protecting you!”

Tim looked up at Jason, seeing the anger and pain in his eyes. Silence hung around them for a moment, pierced only by the clatter of the train. Jason pulled away from Tim, shaking little from the anger still thrumming through his body. Blood dripped down his fingers from where’s he’d cut his hand punching the shelf. He turned from Tim and stalked out of the car, the rifle still slung over his
“Are you hurt, Timothy?” Damian asked, stepping close to Tim.

“I’m fine,” Tim said, though he felt a little shaky. “We should probably leave him be for a while.”

“That seems like a wise choice,” Damian said.

“I still can’t believe him,” Tim said, “After everything Bruce taught him.”

“He is not wrong though,” Damian said, “People destroy each other all the time. At least his reasons are just.”

Tim sighed. “That’s something I guess,” he said.

Damian pressed his lips together. “We should put away this,” he said, holding up the extension cord. “Since we won’t be needing it.”

“Yeah,” Tim said, starting to follow Damian. As they were walking back to the utility closet they’d found the cord in, Tim realized something. “You knew, didn’t you?”

Damian turned around. “Knew what brother?”

“You knew Jason was going to kill that man,” Tim accused, “That’s why you led me away.”

Damian shifted on his feet and looked away. “I knew you would not approve. You get upset when people die,” he said.

“Damian, I could have stopped him,” Tim said, trying not to be upset. Damian had been taught from infancy that killing was okay. It would take more than a few months to learn better.

Damian shook his head. “That man would have killed us if he got the chance. He was dangerous and Todd protected us.”

“That isn’t how it works Damian,” Tim said, wishing he could make Damian understand. “We don’t kill, no matter what. We bring people to justice, we don’t take vengeance.”

Damian crossed his arms. “You said our father protects people. Todd was protecting us. He had a just cause.”

“We don’t kill Damian,” Tim said sternly, but he softened and stepped towards Damians. “I know you don’t understand yet, but we can’t kill. It makes us just as bad as the people who want to hurt us.”

Damian growled and suddenly shoved Tim in the chest. “I am not a child! I do understand!” he cried, “That man would have killed us! He would not have stopped until he fulfilled his mission! Todd did right killing him! If he had not, I would have!”

“Damian,” Tim said softly, not knowing what to say.

Damian growled and threw down the extension cord. “I would kill, if it meant protecting you,” he said. He looked at Tim, sadness and confusion in his eyes. “Would you kill, if it meant protecting me?”

Tim was unable to speak, his voice stalled in his throat. A moment passed in silence before Damian turned away, leaving Tim alone in the car. Tim let out a long sigh and finished putting away the
The rest of the trip was relatively silent between the three of them. The tension between them was so tight Tim was sure something would snap. It seemed a few times like someone was on the verge of saying something, but the silence would settle again. Tim felt the anxiety curdle in his stomach, choking his words and making him nauseous. He tried to reach out to Damian the day after the incident, but Damian turned away from him. The three of the still stayed close to each other out of necessity and safety, but Tim had never felt farther from either of them.

Finally, after a week of stowing away on trains, they arrived in Vladivostok. They left the train yard and wandered towards the city.

“So, where to from here?” Jason asked, the first words he’d said in the three days they hadn’t been speaking to each other. He’d figured out how to disassemble the gunman’s rifle and stowed it in an empty case he’d found.

“Airport,” Tim said, “We sneak onto something heading for the US.”

“Are we certain to land in San Francisco?” Damian asked, skeptical.

“No, but we’ll land on the East Coast somewhere, so we can make our way from there,” Tim said.

Jason nodded. “Alright, let’s get this over with already,” he said, walking off.

Tim sighed, wishing once again he had the words to fix things. He was never too good with inspiring words, that was more Dick’s thing. Tim wasn’t as much of a natural leader as Dick, he just did what he needed to do because it needed doing.

As they made their way through the city, Tim kept an eye out. They were all tense from the fight, but they were also pretty wound up from trying to stay on alert for any more assassins. It was exhausting, but they couldn’t slip up for a moment. Tim had a harder time seeing through the crowds, but for a split second the street opened and Tim caught the profile of a familiar face.

“Shit,” Tim swore, grabbing Jason’s sleeve and Damian’s collar, dragging them into a narrow alley.

“What the fuck?” Jason growled, yanking his sleeve out of Tim’s grip.

“Lady Vic,” Tim explained, flattening himself against the wall and trying to peer around the corner to spot her again.

“Who?” Jason asked, also flattening himself to the wall, unsubtly trying to push Tim and Damian further into the alley.

“An assassin Dick’s tangled with before,” Tim explained, “She must be here for the contract.”

“Shit,” Jason cursed. He looked down the alley. “Okay, you two go that way and wait for me.”

“Not a chance,” Tim hissed, “You’re not killing her. We’re in too crowded a place.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “I’m going to lead her away, so you two can get to the airport, stupid,” he said.
“And then you’ll kill her?” Tim asked, trying not to grit his teeth.

“She started it,” Jason said, trying to peer around the mouth of the alley again. “Hey, what does she look like?”

“Blonde, about 5’6”, talks like Jane Seymour,” Tim said, “She’s actually an English noble, believe it or not.”

“Never cared for aristocrats. Buncha bourgeois parasites,” Jason said, “I don’t see her. You sure that’s who you saw?”

“I’m sure,” Tim said, creeping around to try and look again. Tim looked up and down the street and saw no sign of her. “She’s gone.”

“Oh little boy, you are quite mistaken,” a voice came from above them.

It was only their quick reflexes that saved them. Two throwing knives embedded themselves in the brick right where Jason and Tim’s heads had been as they all leapt out of the way. Lady Vic dropped from the fire escape above them, blocking the exit of the alleyway.

“You are quite clever, little boy,” Lady Vic said, “Spotting a trained killer takes some good instincts. Too bad for you, you will never be able to hone them.”

Jason shoved Tim and Damian behind him. “Run!” he shouted.

Tim grabbed hold of Jason’s sleeve and yanked him as he started the run. Jason cursed, but fell into step with Tim and Damian.

“What the hell? I wa gonna distract her. Now she’s chasing us!” Jason growled at Tim.

“We’re too close to the street, we’ll attract too much attention!” Tim said, “We have to get away!”

“She’s gaining!” Damian cried, glancing behind him. Lady Vic as agile and fast, and the end of the alley was coming up fast.

“Stay together!” Tim said. He spotted a fire escape over a dumpster and went for it, the others following close behind.

“We have to lose her,” Jason said, gripping the case tightly. “I need a minute to assemble this thing.”

They made it to the rooftops, but Lady Vic was still hot on their heels. They had a hell of a time trying to dodge her attacks, especially in an unfamiliar city, but after nearly fifteen minutes of trying to lose her, they found a tight alley and ducked behind a dumpster.

“This won’t hold forever, we need to come up with a plan,” Tim said.

“Hold on,” Jason said, opening his case and starting to reassemble the rifle.

“We’re not killing her!” Tim hissed.

“We can’t just keep running from her forever!” Jason growled back, “We need to do something before she kills us.”

“And that makes it okay to kill her?” Tim asked.

“If that’s what it takes to keep us from getting killed, then yes!” Jason said.
“I won’t kill her!” Tim said.

“You don’t have to!” Jason growled, “Just stop trying to force that on me!”

“Stop squabbling!” Damian snapped, “We need to do something before she finds us!”

“Too late little ones,” Lady Vic said, dropping in from above.

Jason ducked just in time to avoid her sword swing. Tim jumped into action, using her momentary distraction to strike her abdomen. While she was winded, he grabbed Damian and started running, Jason on close behind.

“We should stand and fight her brother!” Damian said, “We’re running away like cowards!”

“We’re running to save our skin!” Tim said, “Dick can barely go toe to toe with her, how the hell are we supposed to beat her?”

“Of for the love of—!” Jason whirled around and fired off a shot. Lady Vic yelped and backpedalled, but the bullet slammed into the hilt of her sword, knocking it from her hand.

“Jason!” Tim cried.

“Non-lethal hit,” Jason said, “Let me get a good position and I can shoot out her knee or some shit.”

Tim growled, but Lady Vic recovered before he could make any other comment. A knife whistled past his head, barely grazing his forehead. They had to get away from her, and they had to do it fast.

“Enough of this!” Damian snarled, skidding to a stop. He turned to face Lady Vic, dropping into a fighting stance.

“Damian!” Tim cried, nearly falling on his ass to change direction. He reached Damian just as Lady Vic was about to take a swipe at him. He used his momentum to kick Lady Vic backwards.

“Guess we’re doing this the hard way,” Jason said.

Under normal circumstances, Tim was pretty sure they’d all be dead within minutes, but with the three of them working together, they managed fairly well. It also helped that Lady Vic was trying to avoid hurting Damian, since the contract stated that he was to be brought back to Talia alive.

Just as Tim was starting to think that they might have been able to win this fight, Lady Vic growled and lashed out with a stiletto knife she must have hidden somewhere, going right for Damian. Jason reacted near instantaneously, blocking the attack, but taking the knife to the arm for his trouble. Jason grunted in pain, and was distracted enough for Lady Vic to put him on his ass in a few precise movements. After that, it didn't take her long to get Tim and Damian on the ropes. Finally, she caught Tim with a kind of rope device, tangling his legs together tightly while getting Damian in a chokehold.

“End of the line, little ones,” Lady Vic purred, pulling out another knife and taking aim at Tim.

Tim struggled to get loose, but the rope was reinforced and wrapped tight enough to cut his circulation. Lady Vic grinned maliciously as she threw the knife, almost lazily, the blade aimed precisely at Tim’s heart.

A shot rang out, and the knife flew sideways with a loud pinging noise. Lady Vic cursed and jumped back just as a shadow dropped into the alley. Tim could hardly see what was going on, but before he
knew it, Lady Vic was unconscious on the ground, while a familiar man with an eye-patch stood above her.

“Deathstroke,” Jason growled, starting to pick himself up off the ground. He reached for the rifle he’d dropped, but Slade caught his foot in the strap and dragged it towards himself.

“Heya kids,” Slade said, picking up the rifle. “You’re pretty far from home.”

“You’re here for the contract, aren’t you?” Tim asked, still trying to wiggle out of the ropes binding his legs together.

Slade’s eye zeroed in on Tim’s struggling. He drew a long, mean looking knife. “Yeah, heard about that contract. One million euro is pretty nice for killing a couple of kids. You really must have pissed someone off,” Slade said, taking a few purposeful strides towards Tim. “Lucky for you though,” he said as he sliced through the rope, “the big bad Bat is paying me double that to get you three back to Gotham, safe and sound.”

Tim rubbed the feeling back into his legs, trying to untense from the whiplash. “Batman hired you?” he asked.

Slade shrugged and helped Jason up from the ground. “Two million isn’t so bad for babysitting. Come on, she won’t stay down for long,” he said, gesturing to the still unconscious Lady Vic on the ground.

Tim glanced at Jason and then Damian; it was foolish as hell to trust Deathstroke, but they really didn’t have a lot of options. On a bad day Slade could go toe-to-toe with Batman, and on a good day he could tussle with the Justice League and still get away, there was no way they were going to be able to escape or fight him. They just had to put their trust in Slade’s word.

“Hurry up,” Slade growled, starting to lose his patience. “I’ve got a jet sitting in a private airport on the other side of the city.”

Jason growled something indistinct and shoved Damian at Tim, bullying them so they were on his other side, putting his own body in between them and Deathstroke. Slade rolled his one eye and started quick walking towards the street. Jason eyed the rifle Slade was still carrying, but he didn't attempt to take it just yet.

They got to the open street and Slade led them to a nondescript off-white van that had seen better days. He opened up the side and gestured them to get inside.

“I feel like I’m about to be murdered or sold into the sex trade,” Jason grumbled, finding a spot to sit inside the van. It was mostly empty aside from a few bags of weapons and miscellaneous toiletries. “This looks like every classic pedophile van ever.”

“Keep your head down or you might be murdered,” Slade said, climbing into the driver's seat. “And don’t touch anything. I’m supposed to get you home unharmed. You shoot off a toe and I get shit for it.”

Jason rolled his eyes, but Tim leaned towards the front. “Batman hired you for all three of us?” Tim asked.

“That’s right,” Slade said, “He didn’t seem all that surprised by the number of heads on the contract, so I’m guessing he figured it out.” Slade glanced into the rearview mirror and caught Jason’s gaze. “Heard something about you being the second little Bat-brat that he had tagging along after him. That true?”
Jason huffed. “What about it?”

Slade raised a white eyebrow. “Thought you died, kid.”

Jason shrugged. “It didn’t stick.”

Slade watched Jason for another second before scoffing out a laugh and turning back to the road. Jason rolled his eyes and tried to get comfortable.

They drove for fifteen minutes through the late morning Vladivostok traffic, Slade obeying all the traffic laws. They finally stopped at a private airfield just outside the city; there was no one else around, and aside from a few derelict planes that looked like they’d been flown by the Night Witches, there was only the high tech jet resting on the slightly cracked runway.

“Let’s hurry,” Slade said. He glanced around the airfield and narrowed his eye. “Wait a moment.”

“Those two things are mutually exclusive,” Damian huffed. “Make up you mind.”

“Shush brat,” Slade growled. He swiveled his head around a little more, as though trying to hear something. “Shit. Everyone down!”

Tim yelped as a throwing star embedded itself into the metal of the van next to his head. Jason swore and went for one of the guns Slade had in the van while Slade slung the rifle he’d taken from Jason around. Tim dragged Damian back into the van as Slade and Jason opened fire into the treeline.

“Ninjas,” Slade snarled, watching a black clad figure fall out of a tree.

“Wait, actual ninjas?” Tim asked.

“Well, we are just a boat ride away from Japan,” Jason said.

“These men work for Mother,” Damian growled, “I know those moves.”

“Talia al Ghul is your mother?” Slade asked, “Tough break kid.”

“Like you’re a stand-up father,” Tim said, “We need to get to the jet and get out of here.”

“Right,” Jason said, firing at the roof of the large hangar near the trees. A ninja cried out and tumbled to the ground. “We’ll lay down some cover fire while you two make a break for it.”

“I’ll lay down cover fire, you three get to the jet,” Slade said, “Contracts only good if it’s all three of you.”

“You think you can distract all of them?” Tim asked.

Slade grinned at him and reached past him into the van. He dug around in a duffel bag and pulled out a chain of grenades. “Kid, I can be plenty distracting. Now get ready.”

Jason quickly grabbed an ammo pack for the gun he’d taken and pulled Tim and Damian close, once again acting as a kind of human shield. Damian growled something about fighting, but Tim kept a tight grip on his wrist so he wouldn’t run off.

Slade pulled the pin on a grenade. “On my signal,” he said. He tossed the grenade shouted, “Now!”

Tim and Jason took off, Damian practically getting dragged along. Jason fired a few shots, but they were mostly to keep anyone from getting too close: he didn’t hit anything. They reached the jet and
quickly got inside, Damian nearly taking a throwing knife to the head as they reached it.

“Morons,” Damian snarled, “Mother only wants you two dead, not me.”

“Well they missed anyway,” Jason said, immediately heading for the pilot’s seat and starting up the jet.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Deathstroke?” Tim asked.

“I trust that asshole as far as I can throw him,” Jason said, “You really want to be stuck with him for ten hours over open ocean?”

“Do you even know how to fly this thing?” Tim asked.

Jason shrugged. “How hard could it be?” he said. He started the jet and began to lift them from the ground.

“That truly inspires us with confidence Todd,” Damian said sourly, looking out the window as another explosion went off. “We could have stayed and fought.”

“Probably, but this is the better option by far,” Tim said.

Damian scoffed. “We’re running away like cowards,” he growled.

“We’re living to fight another day,” Jason pointed out. The jet wobbled slightly. “Maybe.”

Tim pulled Damian from the window to get strapped into a passenger seat. “Retreat isn’t cowardly Damian, it’s smart, especially if you’re in over your head.”

Damian huffed and adjusted his straps. “It’s not how things are done in the League.”

“Well, we’re not with the League anymore, so we’re taking some creative liberties,” Tim said, strapping himself into the seat next to Damian. “How long until we get to San Francisco?”

“Depends,” Jason said, finally getting them stable and heading in the right direction. “One; on how fast this thing flies, and two; how well I’m able to not kill us in a wreck.”

“Please don’t kill us in a wreck,” Tim groaned, “We’re so close to getting home. I don’t want to be dead before we get there.”

“Eh, the being dead part is easy,” Jason said with a shrug. “It’s the dying part that sucks.”

“Comforting,” Tim said, “Let’s just go home.”

After nearly a half an hour into the flight, just as they were approaching their optimal altitude, the radio crackled to life. “Bring me back my jet you little shits,” Slade’s voice hissed through the receiver.

Jason picked up transmitter. “We just got to forty four thousand feet, not a chance. Also, where are the cupholders on this thing?”

Slade swore a blue streak through the radio. Jason whistled. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?” he asked.

“I’m going to kill all three of you,” Slade snarled.
“Do that and you won’t get your two million,” Jason pointed out, “Don’t worry your pretty little head, we’ll make sure to tell the boss to pay you. It is your jet after all.”

“You fucking better, or I’ll take it out of your hides,” Slade growled.

“What’s that? You- -aking u-, I can’t- you!” Jason said, cutting his words off to sound like the line was going dead. He punctuated this by yanking the transmitter out of the dash.

“You know we could have used that to radio Bruce in Gotham, right?” Tim said, “he could have met us in San Francisco.”

“Yeah well,” Jason said, pausing for a moment. “Fuck Gotham.”

Tim rolled his eyes and sighed. He worked his jaw as his ears popped and settled back into his seat. It was going to be a long flight across the Pacific and they’d just been nearly killed five times in as many hours. Tim was going to try and sleep.

The flight was as long and agonizing as Tim anticipated. There was something different about traveling by air; maybe it was the pressure, the way the air tugged and prodded at you from such a height. It could have been the sound, the whistle of the frigid air over the windows, catching in the tiny cracks and crevices of the jet, streamlined as it was. It could have been knowledge, the undeniable fact that they were 45,000 feet in the air and nothing substantial was holding them up from crashing down into the deep blue ocean. Tim always got a little buggy on planes, despite knowing they were completely safe in the right hands (in this case, he wouldn’t exactly call Jason’s hands ‘safe’, but he seemed to know what he was doing in general). Maybe it was some sort of leftover trauma from his parent’s plane going missing, his mother dying at the hands of the Obeah Man, all after their plane was hijacked.

As they approached the US coast, Tim started thinking about his father, about Jack. Slade had said Bruce had hired him, for two million, to bring them all home safely. So Bruce was certainly looking for them, and had discovered somehow that Jason and Damian were with him, which meant he’d been looking, really looking for him. He was probably worried, at least a little. Was Jack worried? Had Bruce even told Jack that Tim was missing? Tim’s eyebrow throbbed ever so slightly, a phantom pain from the last time he’d ever seen the man who’d raised him. It had been months, but it seemed all at once like a lifetime ago and just last week. Bruce had said he was going to work to get Tim removed from Jack’s custody while Jack was unsuitable to be a guardian. Was that still happening? Had Bruce already won the case and Tim was never going to see Jack again?

And what to do about Bruce? Bruce was his biological father, and Tim just couldn't ignore that; Bruce certainly wouldn’t. Tim had been so focused on staying alive these past months, surviving the compound, Damian, Ra’s, Talia, Jason, escaping and trying to keep Damian and Jason in line, he’d never really taken the time to think about what would happen when he got home. What was the rest of his life going to be like?

“We’re about twenty minutes from San Francisco,” Jason announced, “We’re starting our descent soon.”

“Finally,” Damian groaned, stretching in his seat. “Deathstroke could have at least sprung for a jet with cots.”
Tim unbuckled his seat belt and went to the front to lean over Jason’s chair. “Have you seen the layout of the new Titans Tower?” he asked.

“Helipad on the roof, right?” Jason asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t think it’ll fit this thing. There’s a second pad on the island,” Tim said.

Jason nodded. “Alright. Too bad this thing doesn’t have auto park.”

“It probably does,” Tim said, “But I don’t want to risk pushing buttons we don’t know are what for when we’re so close to being safe.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “I really like this jet though. I think we’re arriving an hour earlier than we left. Think we can convince Bruce to buy it off Slade?”

Tim glanced at Jason from the corner of his eye. “You’ll have to ask Bruce that,” he said, “Honestly, I think Bruce will be so happy to have you back he’ll build you your own jet if you asked.”

Jason smiled for a fraction of a moment, but then seemed to realize the implications of his words. Tim could almost see his brain shutting down, blocking out any feel-good emotions regarding Bruce. Tim forced down a sigh and turned to go back to his seat.

“You really think he would?” Jason asked, so softly Tim almost didn’t hear it.

Tim turned back to Jason, watching the pale light through the windshield glint off of the white streak in Jason’s hair. Tim’s lips curled up in a slight smile. “If you ask nicely, eat all your vegetables and do your homework, he’d probably make you a boat if you wanted.”

Jason snorted, and like that, the mask fell away again and Jason relaxed. “What the fuck would I even do with a boat?”

“You’d think of something, I’m sure,” Tim said. He smiled to himself and strapped himself back into his seat.

As they dropped from the sky, the Titans Tower came into view and Tim nearly cried in relief. Almost literal tears, his breath catching in his chest. Somehow his brain hadn’t really caught up to the fact that they’d made it. They escaped the League of Assassins and they’d made it home. Tim was going to see Gotham again, he was going to see Conner, Cassie, Bart, Ives, Cass, Steph, Alfred, Bruce, everyone. It was all so close, Tim could actually see it.

“Brother, are you alright?” Damian asked, watching Tim’s face as it did some complicated emotional acrobatics.

“Fine,” Tim said, voice coming up a little clipped. He scrubbed at his face. “Just happy to be home is all.”

It seemed like there was no one at the Tower at the moment, which was typical for a Tuesday summer afternoon. Most of the Titans were at their regular homes, and those who lived at the Tower usually went out to the city for a while to enjoy the sunshine. Jason, Tim, and Damian picked their way across the island, avoiding Kori’s weird alien garden, and came to the front entrance.

Tim punched in his passcode and the doors swished open with a metallic slide. Inside was dark, so Tim figured he was right about it being deserted for the moment.

“We should head straight for the communication room and contact the Cave,” Tim said. He started
leading them through the halls. He barely had time to react when a massive green lion jumped from the shadows.

“Interlopers!” the lion roared, sailing over a decorative plant and landing on top of Tim.

“Gar! It’s me!” Tim managed to say as his heart as it tried to expel itself from his chest.

The massive green lion sniffed, and it’s snarl melted away. “Robin? Holy shit!” Gar melted into human form and started helping Tim off the floor. “Dude, you’ve been missing for months. Everyone has been going crazy trying to find you. Where the hell have you been?”

“It’s a long story,” Tim said, trying to get his heart to calm down. He knew and trusted Beast Boy with his life, but there was something visceral about being pounced on by pissed off lion.

Gar wrapped his arms around Tim tightly the moment he was up off the floor, the embrace surprisingly strong for someone Gar’s size. “Geeze kid, we thought we’d lost another Robin for a bit there.”

“Well fuck you too then,” Jason snapped. He stowed the gun he’d drawn when gar had burst from the shadows.

Gar finally looked up at Jason and Damian, and Tim could feel his muscles coil under his green skin. Tim pulled back from the embrace and patted Gar’s arm. “Gar, this is Damian and… and Jason.”

“Damian and Jason,” Gar repeated, taking a deep breath, smelling the two out. Scent was more closely linked to memory than any other sense, and Gar had an excellent memory for scents. He admitted once that he often remembered people by their smell more than their faces. The moment Jason’s smell hit his nose, he stiffened; he took another sniff and looked over Jason again.

“Robin?” Gar asked, trying to make heads or tails of the situation. He looked to Tim, confusion etched into every line of his face.

Tim let out a long sigh and felt the weariness in his body, felt the dirt caked into his skin, the burns of the sun and the hunger in his stomach. “Like I said, it’s a long story.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like at this point Slade is kind of weird uncle to the BatFam. It kind of seems like that sometimes in the comics. Also, there’s a few things in this chapter that are going to be explained next chapter, namely about how Bruce knows about Jason and Damian and how he hired Deathstroke. I just know I’m going to get a million comments asking about how Bruce knows, but I am telling y’all to be patient yo. I know what I’m doing; all will be revealed in due time.

I was actually really excited to write Beast Boy. I've loved him since the original Teen Titans cartoon, and I think he'll always have a special place in my heart. I've actually come to love how he is in the comics as well, a little more self-assured and mature, but still a lovable goofball who just wants to make people smile.
Part IV Chapter vi: Homestead

Chapter Notes

This one went by so fast! I think it helped that I already had part of it written a while ago, so I just had to keep on going from there. This still ended up SO LONG though. 17 pages total! I thought about cutting it into two, but I didn't want to chop up the flow. I want to put in a warning for extreme emotional distress, but y'all already know what I'm about.

No contest this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After finding out where Tim had been heading and who took him, the next step was to find the League of Assassins stronghold in the desert. Ra’s had them everywhere, and it was hard to determine which one was the one he was residing in currently. However, with the help of a satellite and a few friends, Bruce was able to find the right place.

Bruce arrived in the late evening, but even in the dim light he could see that many of the buildings of the compound were rather singed looking. There were plenty of servants running around, attempting to fix the broken buildings and clean the charred detritus from what appeared to be a series of explosions, but there were few assassins and guards, which was strange. Ra’s usually had two warriors for every one servant, and to see the ratio tipped like this made him suspicious. Were the assassins on a mission somewhere? Batman decided to be extra careful just in case.

Batman stole his way through the compound, getting as close as he dared with the Batwing and then travelling on foot. He leapt across rooftops and used the shadows of alleys to hide. The main building had a sizable chunk blown out of it, but Bruce knew Ra’s would still be residing there. He’d never lower himself to stay in a residence that wasn’t his own.

Ra’s was in a kind of sitting room, two glasses of wine and a chess board set up. Bruce dropped in silently through the window and walked up behind the centuries old man.

“Where is he?” Batman demanded, his voice a growl of barely restrained fury.

“Gone,” Ra’s said, taking a sip of wine. “He escaped this place several days ago. He’s probably halfway back to Gotham by now.”

“Why should I believe you?” Batman growled.

Ra’s waved a hand vaguely. “Search for yourself if you wish,” he said, “Waste your time. My daughter is tracking the boy as we speak.”

Batman paused a half second. “So it was Talia who kidnapped Tim,” he said, “Why?”

“I imagine because she believed him to be a threat to her son, Damian,” Ra’s said, taking another sip of wine. “Though not in the way he turned out to be.”

Batman slowly stalked around the room. “I wasn’t aware Talia had a son,” he said carefully. Why would Tim be a threat to Talia’s child?
“She’s kept his existence a secret, specifically from you,” Ra’s said, not watching Bruce pace around the room, but probably constantly aware of his position.

“Why?” Bruce asked, tense all over.

Ra’s finally looked up at him, raising one sharp eyebrow. “Because the child is your son as well,” he said, “Created, I believe, from a night of passion you shared with my daughter around eight years ago.”

Bruce remembered that night, or pieces of it at least. He remembered the feel of Talia’s skin in his hands, the firmness of her body against his, the scrape of her teeth across his neck, her lips brushing against his ear. He remembered realizing he was drugged, but not having the wherewithal to stop and think. Was it possible that Talia had a child from that?

“If you do not believe me, here,” Ra’s said, pulling out a file folder and holding it out for Bruce to take. “There should be a sample of hair in there to test if you so wish. I’ve even included a photograph.”

Batman took the folder and opened it, giving it a quick look. The boy in the photograph was maybe seven or eight, unsmiling at the camera. The piercing green eyes were definitely Talia’s, but the boy did bear more than a passing resemblance to Bruce at the same age. A sealed plastic bag of some hair cuttings was neatly tucked into the folder, fine and as black as Bruce’s own. There were several other papers in the folder, mostly detailing physical growth from infancy to the age of eight, as well as progression of skills and learning. Bruce shut the folder, holding it tightly in his hand.

“Where is he now?” Batman demanded. Was it true? Did he really have a second son he’d never known about?

Ra’s put down his glass of wine. “It seems he’s been spirited away by young Timothy,” he said, “Talia feared the boy would displace Damian as your true heir and had him abducted. A mistake apparently, as Timothy won his brother over and convinced him to escape with him.”

“When did they escape?” Batman demanded. They might still be close enough for him to track with the Batwing.

“Three days ago,” Ra’s said, “They’ll be halfway to Gotham by the time you find their trail. Even my daughter is having trouble tracking them. The escape itself was quite incredible. You would have been proud.”

Ra’s seemed pleased by what he was saying. There was something else going on here. “Why are you telling me all of this?” Batman asked.

Something in Ra’s eyes changed. It wasn't a softening, but perhaps a kind of wistfulness. Bruce didn't know what to categorize it as, he’d never thought the Demon’s Head could be wistful. “That child of yours, Timothy,” Ra’s rolled the name over his tongue like a rare delicacy. Bruce was instantly put on guard.

“He’s different,” Ra’s continued, “I have never encountered anyone such as him in my long years. I should like to see him live, to see what he will become. My daughter plans to eliminate him, you do not, and so therefore,” Ra’s gestured to the file, “I am helping you.”

“Stay away from Tim,” Bruce growled, “Or I’ll make sure you’ll regret it.”

“I have no plans to abduct the boy, rest assured,” Ra’s said, picking up his wine again. “Though, should he be seduced to my side of his own volition, I would not object.”
Bruce’s spine stiffened and it took an impressive amount of control not to instantly attack Ra’s al Ghul in his own home. “That will never happen,” Batman snarled. He’d sooner die than let Ra’s anywhere near Tim again.

Ra’s smirked annoyingly and relaxed into his chair. “Time shall tell,” he said, “If you wish to stop my daughter from eliminating your first born and isolating your second born, I suggest you go quickly. My daughter is tenacious in her fury.”

Bruce couldn’t be entirely sure Ra’s was telling the whole truth, but it was obvious that Tim had escaped. The remains of the explosions outside were evidence of some kind of escape plan, and Ra’s admiration of Tim couldn’t be masked. If Tim were still here, Ra’s would be trying much harder to convince Batman of it. Tim had escaped, and apparently recruited Damian, his second son, to go with him.

Batman turned to leave the way he came. Ra’s didn’t seem upset by his presence at all, but there was no telling what the assassins and guards had been ordered to do if they saw him. He was nearly to the window when Ra’s called to him again.

“There’s one other thing, Detective,” Ra’s said, standing up. He pulled out another file folder and held it out. “Something else my daughter has been keeping from you. Her plans are many and multifaceted, so I do not know what she intended to do with him. I would warn you though, this rabid dog is not the puppy you once knew.”

Batman narrowed his eyes and took the folder, tucking it under his arm with the other. Without a word, he called the Batwing to him and stepped to the window. The plane swung by and hovered at a distance for him. There were shouts from below, but Batman paid them no mind as he grappled up to the plane and got inside.

There’d be no point in trying to scour the desert for Tim now, not three days into it. Hopefully Tim had planned far enough ahead where he knew what he was doing in the desert, which direction he needed to go. Bruce flew over the compound one more time just in case, then turned and headed back to Gotham. He might be able to intercept Tim’s return to the city.

When the Batwing was flying over the open ocean, Bruce set it on autopilot and pulled out the two folders. He opened Damian’s again, going over the information. It was certainly likely that he was Bruce’s son, what with the night he and Talia shared, and Talia’s obsession with him. This did seem like something she might do, though it was certainly extreme. Bruce flipped through the papers until he came to the information on Damian’s infancy. Damian had been 54 centimeters and 4 kilograms at birth, slightly above average size for a newborn. Bruce delicately traced the the ink impression of a baby foot, shorter than the length of his thumb. There was one photograph of Damian as an infant, held stretched out so he could be measured, umbilical cord still attached and his chubby face twisted in anger and indignation. Bruce wondered what the boy was like now.

Putting such thoughts out of his mind for now, Bruce pulled up the second folder and pulled out the contents. His heart stuttered to a halt and ice froze in his veins when he saw the photograph of Jason Todd on the top of the stack of papers.

Except that it couldn’t be Jason. The young man in the photograph was much too old to be Jason. He was maybe seventeen or eighteen, almost fully grown. The features of his face were unmistakable, but sharper, with less childhood fat to soften them. A white streak against the black of his hair stood out like a beacon, drawing the eye. Jason’s (not-Jason’s?) eyes were the same colour Bruce remembered, a washed out blue with hints of green, but they were hard, haunted. Bruce couldn’t help a shiver run through him when he looked into them.
Bruce hurriedly flipped through the rest of the papers. A police report of an unnamed boy being found wandering the roads in Gotham six months after Jason’s death, dressed in a funeral tuxedo and covered in mud, badly injured, like he’d been beaten severely with a blunt instrument. Hospital records of the injuries, including a significant brain bleed that resulted in a six month coma. From there there were no more records, only what someone had pieced together. Partial CCTV shots of a young man on the streets of Gotham, the right height and build for the Jason lookalike. A few reports of a teenage shoplifter matching Jason’s description. Then another photograph, this time slightly younger than the one on the top of the pile, the eyes dead and vacant. Bruce pulled out an MRI image of a brain, which showed significant damage consistent with the brain bleed described in the hospital records.

After that, the only records where League of Assassin reports, messy doctors notes relaying the state of Jason’s body and mind, Talia’s tight scrawl appearing periodically to make observations and suggestions. It went on until a year ago, when the reports simply stopped without explanation. Bruce flipped through the papers, trying to figure out what was going on. A plastic bag of hair clippings, white and black, was clipped to a sheaf of photographs. Each one was a partial or distance shot of someone who looked so much like Jason but couldn’t be because Jason was dead. In one picture, Talia stood next to the young man, her hand on his shoulder in a familiar, almost intimate way. Jason was taller than she was by a good inch or so, and they both seemed to be talking to someone out of frame.

Bruce quickly shuffled the papers back into the folder, unable to look at them for any longer. His hands shook as he did and he nearly spilled them everywhere. He put both folders down and gripped the steering wheel with enough force to make his knuckles go white and numb. Bruce took several deep breaths and tried to focus his vision and slow his heart rate. The trembling in his hands spread to his entire body as his brain replayed for him every detail of the face in the photograph, the haunted look in the young man’s eyes staring almost accusingly up at him from the paper.

Bruce sucked in a sharp breath like a sob and flicked the controls off of autopilot. The Batwing dipped slightly as Bruce got himself under control, but is gave Bruce something to do, something to concentrate on other than the existential terror of seeing his long dead son staring at him from a recent picture. Bruce fiddled with a few buttons and put on a burst of speed; he needed to get back to Gotham as soon as possible. He needed to get to the bottom of this.

“Did you find him?” Dick asked almost the moment the Batwing touched down. The moment he’d heard from Barbara that Bruce was close to finding Tim, he’d rushed over from Bludhaven to help out.

“No,” Bruce said, voice tight. “He escaped before I got there.”


“Three days ago,” Bruce said, trying to keep his grip on the two files. His hands had pins and needles in them from gripping the steering wheel so tightly on the way home.

“Three days? Tim could be anywhere in the world by now,” Dick said, clearly distressed, “We have to find him.”

“We will,” Bruce growled, brushing past Dick to get to his lab. He needed to test the hairs; it had to
be some kind of trick, something to throw him off.

“Bruce?” Dick questioned, following along behind him. “Is something wrong? What aren’t you telling me?”

Bruce paused at the workbench he was going to use. The files burned in his hands and he could barely hold onto them. “Don’t worry about it for now,” Bruce forced out. “I need to do some work in the lab. You should get ready for patrol.”

Dick inhaled sharply, like he was about to protest Bruce dismissing him. Instead, he made frustrated noise and walked off, leaving Bruce to his work. Bruce set the files down and started to get to work.

Bruce started with the file on Damian, since it would require the least amount of work. The only thing Bruce could do was read through it carefully and test the hair against his own. For the other file… there was a lot more Bruce would have to do.

For the most part, the file was a sterile piece of literature. It mostly consisted of medical checks and some observations. There were a few notes from Talia scattered throughout, dealing with the mental state of her son. What he was learning, what he showed interest in, and how his skills were improving. Bruce read them over and over, but whether by his own impressions of Talia clouding his mind or having too much emotional stake in the situation, Bruce couldn’t determine any affection in the words. All he could read from Talia’s writing was neutral, albeit active investment in the life of the little boy that was her son.

The paternity test went by quickly, and came back positive. Damian al Ghul, or whoever the hair belonged to, was indeed his son. For good measure, Bruce tested the hair against Tim’s DNA just in case Ra’s was trying to fool him. It came back negative for a complete match, but there was some relation between the two of them, enough to be considered either cousins or half brothers.

Bruce took a few deep breaths and looked down at the photo in the file. Talia’s piercing green looked at the camera with an almost haughty attitude, as though he fully believed he was better than whoever was behind the camera. Talia’s influence could be clearly seen even through the photo, but Bruce could see something else, or he hoped he could see something else. A vulnerable and incredibly young child in need of something kind.

Bruce set aside the file, but plucked the photograph out and set it aside, propped up so Bruce could see the childish face in his periphery at all times. He ran his hand over the second file; glancing up, Bruce could see the case where Jason’s monument stood, the red and green uniform bright in the dimness of the Cave. Bruce took a moment to steady himself before opening the file again.

The older Jason’s photo stared up at him, and Bruce had to take a second to catch his breath. Forcing down his emotions, Batman got to work.

While the DNA test was working, Bruce tried to sort through the rest of the information in the file. It all seemed legitimate, but Talia was crafty and had a lot of resources at her disposal. Still, it would have taken her or Ra’s a lot of time to construct something like this. Bruce would have to sift through everything with the utmost care for detail.

There was a beep as the DNA test finished. Bruce took a deep breath and pulled up the results on the computer. His brain took a moment to process the information.

Match.

Glass shattering behind him, making Bruce jump. He turned and saw Alfred standing a few feet
away, a tray of tea at his feet, the delicate china shattered to pieces as Alfred stared in a shock and horror at the screen.

“What is the meaning of this?” Alfred asked, voice clipped and tight with emotion.

Bruce glanced up at the screen again, trying to force his heart to calm down. “When I found the compound in the desert, Ra’s said that Tim had already escaped with the help of accomplices,” Batman explained slowly, “He gave me two files, one of them… claimed that Jason is alive.”

Alfred sucked in a deep breath. “And? What do you think?” he asked, bending to start gathering the broken glass.

Bruce looked back up at the screen. The computer had helpfully put up an image of Jason, from when he was fifteen, a big, bright smile on his face. Bruce thought back to the haunted eyes in the other photo. “If it’s a fabrication, it’s an elaborate one, but I’m not ready to believe… it’s possible that this is just to distract me from looking for Tim.”

“Yes,” Alfred said, putting the last of the largest shards onto the tray and picking it up. “What will you do sir?”

Bruce gripped the armrest of his chair harder enough for it to creak. He had to find Tim, but he couldn’t just ignore this. If this really was an elaborate hoax to throw him off of the search for Tim, it was an effective one. Bruce would need time to work through all of the information presented, time he didn't have because he needed to look for Tim.

“I… I’m not sure,” Bruce said. He hated having to admit it, but he didn't know what to do. “I can’t leave this, but I have to find Tim before Talia does.”

Alfred hummed contemplatively. “I would suggest sir, that perhaps instead of attempting to should all of this yourself as you usually do, to instead include Master Richard and the others in your investigations? If not this…” Alfred paused, looking up at the screen again. “Then at least in the search for Master Timothy.”

Bruce pressed his lips together; he didn't want to involve Dick or Barbara, not in this. They’d known Jason, had been just as devastated when he’d died as he had been. Bruce knew Dick, knew how he’d react to even the slightest glimmer that Jason might be alive; he’d get his hopes up, even though he try not to, and when it came crashing down he’d rip open the old scars of Jason’s loss. It would hurt Dick too much to know about this, to have that hope turn out to be false. It would be tricky to keep this from Dick, and even more so from Barbara, but he couldn’t allow them to get involved, not until Bruce was sure. He’d have to distract them from it with the search for Tim; that was something they could handle, something they could focus on.

“Alright,” Bruce said in an exhale. “I need… I have to look into this, but Nightwing and Oracle can handle the search for Robin. Until I know more about this,” he turned to look at Alfred, “Not a word to either of them. They can’t know about this.”

Alfred nodded, though he didn’t mask his disapproval very well. “As you wish, Master Bruce,” he said, “And Miss Brown and Miss Cassandra?”

“This stays between us for now Alfred,” Bruce said, “Please.”

Alfred looked at Bruce, eyes deeply sad. “Yes Master Bruce,” he said quietly. He turned to take the broken china back up the stairs, pausing momentarily as his eyes caught the case where Jason’s monument stood. He squared his shoulders and walked past it up the stairs and out of the Cave.
Handing over most of the work on finding Tim to Barbara and Dick made them both extraordinary suspicious, but Bruce deflected their questions as best he could. It helped that trying to find Tim kept them busy. Cass and Steph took care of most of the patrolling, both eager to help out in any way they could. Bruce had to admit that Stephanie was actually quite the formidable vigilante; with some guidance, she had the potential to become something truly spectacular.

But Bruce couldn't focus on that now, he had bigger problems. The more he dug into the situation, the more things pointed to Jason inexplicably being alive. Bruce searched through the records, and it quickly became a game of finding the things that weren't there. The doctors files at the hospital, the police report and investigation, chunks of CCTV footage, all missing from the records, both private and public. Bruce was the one with the missing pieces, and the harder he looked, the more he found the spots where they should be, like some kind of reverse jigsaw puzzle.

Anything after Talia had supposedly picked Jason up was much harder to verify. The League of Assassins had networks, but they changed all the time and were impossible to hack into. However, Bruce did manage to uncover something: a short video of some illegal weapons demonstrations on the dark web. In it, a young man expertly handled an assault rifle, shooting out several moving targets with deadly precision. His face was obscured by a bandana, but when he turned to the camera for a moment, his eyes were a washed out blue with hints of green in them, haunted and hard.

Bruce watched the footage again, watching the practised movements of the young man. He was built large and stocky, well muscled and clearly used to physical work, but there was an agility that was familiar to Bruce, something he couldn't place but he knew instinctively. It couldn't be anyone else, but it couldn't be Jason because Jason was dead and buried.

A cold sensation spread through Bruce’s stomach; he’d been avoiding thinking about it in the two days he’d been searching, but he couldn’t put it off any longer. There was something he had to check.

Bruce waited until the others were busy with patrol; there was hard evidence that Riddler was up to something, but he left it to the four of them, letting them be distracted and begging off with the excuse that something important had come up with Tim’s search and he was looking into it personally. Only Alfred knew the truth.

It seemed disrespectful to use a backhoe to uncover the Jason’s grave, but he had to work quickly. Bruce dug through about five feet of earth that way, careful not to damage the coffin. Once he’d dug up as much as he dared with the unwieldy machine, Bruce set to work with a shovel.

The night was warm and slightly damp, typical for summer in Gotham. The wind tore through the trees, promising a heavy storm to come, but the sound was strangely muted, as though even Mother Nature didn’t want to agitate the situation. Or perhaps Bruce couldn’t hear anything over the sound of his own heart pounding.

Without warning, Bruce’s foot fell through the dirt he was standing on. Jagged edges of wood gouged his flesh, making Bruce hiss in pain. Carefully, he pulled his foot out and inspected the hole.

Bruce’s throat closed as he realised what the hole he’d fallen through was. Forcing himself to take a
few deep breaths, Bruce uncovered more of the coffin and hooked it up to the tethers so he could
 crane it out. The hole in the top of the coffin taunted him, drawing his eye like a black hole.

Bruce quickly got the coffin back to the Cave, not wanting to have it out in the open for very long.
 After quickly refilling the hole, Bruce drove the coffin, covered with a tarp in the back of a pickup,
 back to the Cave.

Alfred was waiting for him when he arrived. Carefully, they unloaded the coffin and settled it on a
 sturdy examination table. Bruce peeled back the tarp, ignoring Alfred’s sharp intake of breath when
 he saw the hole in the top. Bruce ran his hand along the dirty mahogany, the lustre of the finish still
 shiny through the caked on earth.

Carefully, not uttering a word, Bruce pried the top off of the coffin off of the casket, his hands
 shaking so hard he nearly dropped the crowbar (he tried not to think of the weapon used to beat
 Jason close to death). Heart in his throat, Bruce lifted the lid and peered inside.

Empty.

The air left Bruce’s lungs in a rush. Where Jason’s remains should lay, peaceful and at rest, there
 was only dirt, spilled in from the hole in the top of the coffin. Bruce took a few deep breaths and
 tried to stave off the impending panic. Something shiny in the dirt caught his eye, and he carefully
 pulled it out. A belt buckle, with a small strip of leather still attached. Bruce inspected the hole
 from the inside of the lid; the soft blue satin was torn apart, and the gouges on the wood were
 consistent with the warped state of the buckle. Something caught in the splinters of wood caught
 Bruce’s eye and he leaned closer to try and see what it was.

A fingernail .

Bruce’s ears were ringing and he couldn’t breathe. Shoving himself backwards, Bruce tried to keep
 the images from his brain. Bruce couldn’t help but imagine the panic, the blind fear, of waking in a
 cramped space, confused, injured, in unimaginable pain. Bruce tried not to think of Jason screaming
 as he scrambled to find a way out, using his Robin training even in his chaotic state. He tried not to
 think of Jason shredding his hands as he broke through the wood, the pressure on his lungs as he dug
 his way through six feet of mud. Bruce choked down a noise in his throat as Jason’s screaming filled
 his head. Had he called for him? Called for Batman? For Bruce? For his father to come and rescue
 him from the nightmare?

Bruce whirled and slammed his fist into the nearest display case. The glass shattered into a million
 pieces, slicing into Bruce’s hand. The pain snapped Bruce back into his own head, though the sight
 of the blood on his hands made him think of all the blood that had been on them as he pulled his son
 from the wreckage of the warehouse. Bruce looked down at the item that he’d unceremoniously
 dislodged from its case.

A ceramic Joker’s mask grinned up at him, some leftover from a plot Bruce couldn't remember at the
 moment. Hollow, maddened laughter taunted Bruce, echoing through his brain and burning like
 white hot nails. Bruce put his heel on the mask and ground his foot down, cracking the mask to
 pieces.

“What the fuck is this?”

Bruce turned to see Nightwing, Batgirl, and Spoiler some distance away. The girls were huddled
 together, confused and somewhat concerned, but Dick was a ball of barely contained fury, glaring at
 Bruce and shaking so hard he looked unsteady on his feet.
“Dick,” Bruce said, barely above a whisper.

Dick looked to the coffin and then back at Bruce. “Tell me what the fuck is going on Bruce, I swear to God,” he demanded.

There was no point in lying, Bruce realized. Dick wasn’t as much of a detective as he was, or Tim was, but he wasn’t stupid. Wordlessly, Bruce crossed to a different table and pulled out Jason’s file from a passcode locked drawer. He handed it to Dick, who snatched it from his hands and started leafing through it. Steph was whispering something to Cass, who was squeezing her hand tightly. Alfred carefully guided the two girls away, leaving Dick and Bruce alone together.

Dick paced around as he read, boundless energy and the need to move, while Bruce stood still. Bruce gently picked shards of glass out of his hand, focusing on the physical pain, trying to keep himself in check.

Dick finally threw down the file on a worktable, leaning over it and hanging his head. “Why didn't you tell me?” he asked.

“I didn't want… I wanted to make sure,” Bruce said, “I wanted to make sure it was true, before anyone else knew. I didn't want to… I didn't want to give anyone false hope.”

“I could have helped. I should have helped,” Dick said, “You cut me out.”

“I was trying to protect you,” Bruce said.

Dick slammed his fist on the table. “I don't need your protection!” he shouted, “What I need is for you to trust me!”

“It doesn’t matter what you need!” Bruce shouted back, “I protect you because it’s my job to protect you! I protect you because I am your father! I protect you because you are my son!”

They were both breathing hard, the tension cracking like static around them. Bruce cut Dick off before he could retort. “I trust you with my life Dick,” he said, “I trust you with the lives of everyone in Gotham. I trust you when you say you can handle things. I trust you to do the best you possibly can and better. This—” he gestured to the empty coffin, “is not about trust. This is about me protecting you from false hope. This is about me protecting you from the emotional scars of having to investigate whether or not Ra’s al Ghul was trying to distract us from finding Tim. This is about me protecting you from having to dig up Jason’s grave. I did this on my own to protect you from all of this.”

Silence swirled around them for several moments. “What about you though?” Dick asked, “I could have helped.”

“That’s not your job,” Bruce said, running his uninjured hand through his hair. “I made a promise when I took you in to keep you safe. That’s my job. I can’t ask you to shoulder my burdens.”

Dick glanced at the coffin on the table. “He was my brother,” he said, the anger simmering in his voice. “I loved him just as much as you did. I was just as devastated as you when he died. I deserved to know about this.”

“I was going to tell you,” Bruce said, collapsing onto the workbench. “After I’d found out one way or the other. To spare you having to torture yourself with unanswered questions.”

Dick crossed the Cave and sat down next to Bruce on the bench. “But that’s what you’ve been doing,” he said, “You’ve been trying to do everything alone, not letting anyone help you, just like
you always do.”

“It isn’t your job to take care of me,” Bruce said.

“I’m not a kid anymore Bruce,” Dick said, “You have to stop doing this to yourself.”

Bruce let out a long sigh. He felt drained, exhausted, defeated. Dick leaned into his side, and Bruce could feel him trembling; he wrapped an arm around Dick’s shoulder and pulled him close. On the other side of the cave, Jason’s monument stood tall and silent, like an accusation.

“Jason’s alive,” Bruce said, his voice just on the other side of shaking. “He’s alive and he’s with Tim.”

Dick took an unsteady breath. “Guess we better find them.”

After the revelation that Jason was alive (and that Bruce had a second biological son, Damian), Dick and the others threw themselves into the investigation wholeheartedly. Barbara was livid that Bruce had kept the information from her, but after enacting her revenge (hacking into Cave’s main server and changing all his passwords, as well as changing all his desktops and screensavers to garish pink and sparkly monstrosities that played peppy Korean pop music), she did her best to help. Steph and Cass were a little annoyed at being left out, but neither said anything, sending that it was a family matter. Cass gave Bruce a few long, forlorn looks, but said nothing.

Crime however, did not take breaks for family emergencies; the thing with Riddler spiralled out of control and demanded everyone’s immediate attention. As much as Dick wanted to focus on Tim and Jason and Damian, he knew he couldn’t abandon Gotham—as it was, he’d probably been away from Blüdhaven for way too long.

Thankfully, despite the urgency of the situation, things were resolved fairly quickly. There were a few straggling thugs that needed taking care of, but the main threat was over with. They weren’t particularly dangerous, but there were quite a few of them. The four of them—Nightwing, Batman, Spoiler, and Batgirl—had to split up to track them all down.

Nightwing grumbled a little as he chased down a particularly stubborn thug. Dick could understand why; between everyone being a little tense and wanting to look for Tim, it was not a nice night to be a criminal, but Dick was eager to get back to looking for his brothers.

“Listen man, I’m kind of in a rush here,” Nightwing quipped as he darted after the thug. “Can we please wrap this up so we can all go home? I promise I won’t even punch you if you turn yourself in!”

The thug wasn’t swayed by Nightwing’s offer in the slightest and put on a burst of speed. He dashed around a corner into a dark alley, vaulting over a trash can to do so. Suddenly there was a hell of surprise and pain from the shadows, and when Dick turned the corner, a large shadow was standing over the thug, who lay prone on the ground.

“Hey kid, long time no see,” a familiar voice drawled.

Dick was instantly on guard. “Deathstroke,” he growled, “To what do I owe the pleasure?”
Deathstroke rolled his eye under his mask. “Put down your dukes, brat wonder, I come bearing a gift.”

Dick narrowed his eyes, not lowering his guard. “What kind of ‘gift?’” he asked.

Slowly, Slade pulled a small tablet device from his pocket and tapped the touchscreen a few times. He handed it over to Dick, making sure the younger man could see his hands at all times.

“This was sent out to every contract killer with an email last night,” Slade explained, “I thought you might like to know.”

It was an open contract, Dick realized; a million euro for the deaths of two and the return of one. Dick tried not to panic when he saw the photographs attached.

“Thought that one was one of yours,” Slade said, “The little middle one. Wasn’t he in the news just a while ago? Something about being Bruce Wayne’s bastard?”

“When did you get this?” Dick asked.

“Last night. Recognized the brat and figured I should double check,” Slade said.

Dick looked through the contract again. There was a description of each kid, instructions on how to contact the contractor, and even a last known sighting (in a little desert village just north of where the compound was, only a few days ago).

The quiet flap of a cape was all the warning Dick got before Batma melted from the shadows. He glared hard at Deathstroke, every muscle coiled and ready for a fight.

“What’s going on here?” Batman demanded, voice little more than a menacing growl.

Dick handed over the tablet, keeping his eyes trained on Deathstroke while Batman read the contract. Slade almost seemed bored by the whole exchange.

“You said this was sent of every assassin you know?” Dick asked.

“Every assassin with an email that the League could access, which is probably all of them,” Slade said, “They probably got to the ones who don’t have email either. They’re resourceful like that.”

Dick grumbled. “Great, so every assassin and bounty hunter in the world is looking for them.”

“Eh, I’d say about two thirds of all the assassins,” Slade said, “Most assassin's have a code, some kind of rule that helps them sleep at night. Not killing kids is a common one. I know a guy who rehomes the pets of all his targets.”

Dick raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? What’s your rule?” he asked.

Slade huffed and crossed his arms. “I’m here aren’t I?”

Dick blinked in surprise. “So, you’re not going to take the contract?”

“I didn’t say that,” Slade drawled, “A million euro is nothing to brush off, especially from the League of Assassins. It never hurts to get on Talia’s good side.”

Dick growled, but before he could say anything, Batman finally spoke. “I’ll double it.”

Deathstroke and Nightwing turned back to look at Batman, who was glaring straight at Deathstroke.
“Bring them back to Gotham safely, and I’ll double the pay.”

Slade grinned under his mask. “See, this is why I like you guys,” he said, “You got yourself a deal.”

Slade held his hand out for Batman to shake. Bruce reached over and squeezed Deathstroke’s hand hard enough to make his glove squeak.

“I want them back unharmed,” Batman growled, “Not a hair on their heads hurt.”

Slade whistled. “You got it Bat-dad. I’ll have them home in time for dinner and bedtime,” he said. He took back his tablet and tucked it into his pocket, sauntering away into the shadows. “See ya’ round.”

“Can we trust him?” Dick asked, watching the murderer-for-hire disappear into the Gotham streets.

“We don’t have a choice,” Batman said, “We’re running out of options and he’s got resources we don’t. Most of the assassins on the planet are looking for Tim. At the very least, we have the best on our side.”

Dick sighed and went to the thug that was still laying on the ground, unconscious. He started to tie him up. “Let’s just hope it works,” he said.

It was days later when the call came to the Cave. Bruce’s heart leapt into his throat as he recognised the calling number. He picked up before the second ring was over. “Did you find them?”

“Yeah,” Slade growled, “They stole my fucking jet.”

Bruce let out a sigh of relief. “Where are they now?”

“Somewhere over the Pacific I’m guessing,” Slade said, “I caught up to them in Vladivostok, but we got ambushed by some of Talia’s men. They booked it and left me to deal with a dozen and a half ninjas on my own. I’ve been getting chased through the city for five hours!”

“Vladivostok?” Bruce questioned. Why would they head for Vladivostok? That was taking the long way around.

“Yeah. Admittedly, I actually nearly lost them when they hit Moscow,” Slade said, “But then an old friend of mine turned up dead. Called himself ‘The Hunter’, used a specialized rifle. He showed up along a rail line with one of his own bullets right between his eyes. I got the idea that maybe the brats were heading east, using the railway. Jetted to the end of the line and voila, three brats in perfect health.”

Bruce was almost dizzy with relief. “But you got separated.”

“Because they stole my fucking jet,” Slade snarled, “If they wreck my jet, I’m billing you for it.”

“I’ll make sure to write you a receipt,” Bruce said, already pulling up satellite images of the Pacific. Slade jet would have some kind of cloaking, so it was probably useless to try and find it through satellite, but he’d give it a shot.

“I better still get paid for this,” Slade said, “Those brats would have been skewered without my...
“When they arrive in Gotham safely, I’ll wire you the money,” Bruce said. “Is that all?”

“I should have charged a hazard fee,” Slade grumbled, “There was one last thing. The oldest one, the one that I’m pretty sure came back to life.”

Bruce tensed slightly. “Yes? Is he hurt?”

“He’s fine physically,” Slade said, “But he was the one carrying the special rifle that shot The Hunter. He didn’t seem to have any reservations about killing either.”

Bruce thought back to the file, how long Jason was in the hands of the League of Assassins. There was no telling what sort of things Talia had manipulated Jason into doing. “I’ll keep that in mind,” Bruce said, “I’ll notify you when I’ve found them.”

“Just pay me,” Slade said, then hung up.

Bruce turned his attention back to the satellites. By the time he actually found what he was looking for, Tim and the other two would nearly be home. He had to find something that was quicker. Bruce pulled up the communication application on the computer and selected a name.

“Superman here,” Clark said over his comm.

“I need a favour,” Bruce said.

“Batman, what can I do?” Clark asked. The faint sound of wind could be heard through the comm, so Bruce guessed he was flying.

“There’s a jet flying over the Pacific as we speak,” Bruce said, “Tim is in it.”

“You found him?” Clark asked, sounding relieved. “That’s great! How did you find him?”

“That isn’t important,” Bruce dodged, “The jet is cloaked and I’m not a hundred percent sure where it is. Do you think you’d be able to find it?”

“I- probably?” Clark said, “But, er- I’m a little busy at the moment. There’s been a cave-in in a mine in Arizona, and it’s taking a while to make sure everyone gets out safely. The whole structure is unstable and we have to be careful about getting people out.”

“This is urgent Clark,” Bruce said, but he knew there was no use.

“I know it is Bruce, believe me,” Clark said, “If it were anything else, I’d absolutely drop everything to help you find Tim. But I can’t leave until everyone is out safe.”

Bruce let out a sigh. “I know. Thank you anyway Clark.”

“I’ll try to get this wrapped up as soon as I can,” Clark promised, “I promise.”

“Thank you,” Bruce said, then signed off. He tried a few other people, but anyone he could trust with this was either busy or didn’t pick up. Bruce growled and went back to sifting through the satellite images, hoping to catch something.

“Bruce? What are you doing?” Dick called from behind him. Bruce turned to see Dick, Steph, and Cass coming down to the Cave for a sparring session.
“Deathstroke caught up to Tim in Vladivostok. He’s apparently flying over the Pacific as we speak,” Bruce explained.

“What!” Dick cried, vaulting over a workbench to land right at Bruce’s side, nearly tumbling over his chair. “When was this?”

“Deathstroke called about two hours ago,” Bruce said, “He got separated from them.”

“You found Tim?” Steph asked, coming upon Bruce’s other side, hope in her eyes.

“Not yet,” Bruce said, “I know where he is, but I haven’t found the jet.”

“Did you ask Superman?” Dick asked.

“He’s busy,” Bruce said, “And so is everyone else.”

“Did you ask Superboy?” Steph suggested.

Bruce and Dick both turned to her. “He’s got all the same powers as Superman, right? I don’t think he’d be busy right now,” Steph said, “And even if he was, he’s Tim’s best friend. He’d probably be totally willing to drop everything to find him.”

Dick and Bruce glanced at each other. “It’s worth a shot,” Dick said.

“Make the call,” Bruce said. He glanced at Steph. “Good work Spoiler.”

Steph flushed a little with pride. Bruce didn’t mean to be so hard on her, but he worried about her, if not her conviction than her short sightedness. Steph had a tendency to leap before she even thought to look, which was incredibly dangerous. Hopefully, with a little guidance, she could temper herself and actualize her potential.

Dick was just about to hit the ‘call’ button when the screen lit up with an incoming call from the Titans Tower. Dick groaned and hit ‘accept’. “Gar, I can’t talk right now, I’m in the middle of something.”

“Dick?”

“Tim!” Dick cried, “Oh my God!”

The relief Bruce felt was so strong that, for a moment, Bruce forgot how to speak. On the other end of the line, Tim laughed. The sound made Bruce want to sob.

“Hey!” Tim said, “God it’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Tim?” Steph said, almost a whine. Bruce could see her eyes were shining with tears.

“Steph? Is that you? What are you doing in the Cave?” Tim asked, “Hang on, I’ll switch on the video feed.”

“Why is it turned off in the first place?” Dick asked, and he was rubbing at his eyes and smiling like he was trying to break his face.

“You have to turn off the video feed if you want to call a landline,” a new voice said, “Otherwise it won’t go through.”

“Gar?” Dick asked, then he groaned. “Stop using the computer to order pizza.”
“Don’t tell me how to live my life,” Gar said.

The video feed clicked on, showing Tim at the computer fiddling with the controls while Gar leaned his hip against the panel. Tim looked up into the computer and smiled.

“Hey guys!” he said, “You won’t believe what I’ve been up to.”

“Tim,” Bruce finally found his voice. “You’re at Titans Tower.”

“Oh!” Dick snapped his fingers. “That’s why you headed east! You weren’t aiming for Gotham, you were going to San Francisco!”

“Yeah, we figured it would be too obvious and Talia would catch us for sure,” Tim said, “So we trainsurfed to Vladivostok. Did you really hire Deathstroke?”

“We did, we thought he might be able to track you better than we could,” Dick said.

“Are you all safe?” Bruce asked, the worry and paranoia creeping in the back of his mind like stubborn spiderwebs.

“We’re safe,” Tim said, then paused. “All three of us.”

There was a sniffle from Bruce’s right. Steph had buried her face in her arms, tears streaming down her face.

“Steph? Hey no, don’t cry,” Tim tried to soothe her. “I’m okay, really. Little banged up, but we can hammer the dents out together.”

Steph laughed even as more tears spilled. “You dork,” she said. Cass came up to her side and wrapped her arm around Steph’s shoulder.

“Stay where you are, we’re coming to get you,” Bruce said, standing up.

“We weren’t planning on going anywhere,” Tim said, “Oh, before you go, did you want to…” Tim looked off to the side and waved at someone to come over. A tiny figure came onto the screen, green eyes peering out from under a shock of black hair.

“Damian,” Bruce said, greeting his son for the first time.

“Father,” Damian greeted. He looked over the others and straightened his posture. “I look forward to meeting you face to face.”

“I look forward to meeting you as well,” Bruce said. The photograph didn’t really do justice to how much Damian looked like Bruce, aside from the eyes and the nose.

“Jason…” Tim started, “He’s… he went to have a shower. But he’s with us.”

Bruce nodded. “I’m coming to get you now. Don’t leave the Tower for any reason.”

Tim nodded. “We’ll wait right here.”

“I expect you to be prompt, Father,” Damian said.

Dick gave a small huff of laughter. “I’ll do my best Damian,” Bruce said. His hand hovered over the ‘end call’ button. He didn’t want to stop looking at Tim, he didn’t want to lose the absolute confirmation that Tim was alive and well.
“Please come get us soon,” Tim asked, “I really want to come home.”

Bruce let out a breath. “I’ll be there as fast as I can,” he promised.

Tim smiled gratefully. “Can you leave the call on? I’d like to talk to Steph for a bit.”

“Alright,” Bruce said. He turned and started to walk to the Batwing to get it prepped and ready for takeoff. Tim’s voice echoed through the Cave as he spoke to Steph and Cass and Alfred, Damian’s voice chipping in now and then. Bruce let it comfort him as he prepared to leave.

The trip from Gotham to San Francisco was short in the Batwing, and Bruce wasted no time. Dick was strapped in next to him in the copilot seat, practically vibrating out of it. Bruce could sympathize. Cass and Steph had insisted they come along and were in the back seats, chatting excitedly. Everyone was in uniform, mostly for secret identity purposes.

“I can’t believe he’s in San Francisco,” Steph said, “He’s almost home. I’m so excited I think I might throw up.”

“There’s a barf bag in the seat compartment at your left,” Dick said, then smiled. “But I know what you mean. I’m ready for him to come home too.”

“Missed him,” Cass said.

“We all have,” Bruce said. He was focusing on flying the Batwing, which helped calm his nerves, but he didn’t think he’d be completely fine until he got Tim back to Gotham.

He also had no idea what he was going to say to Jason.

As if sensing his unease, Dick reached out and gripped his arm once in reassurance. Bruce took a deep breath and started dropping altitude for their landing.

There was a beep through the radio. Bruce raised an eyebrow and flicked the transmitter. “Batman,” he answered.

“It’s Oracle,” Barbara said, and she sounded a little frazzled. “You’re on your way to the Tower?”

“We’re nearly there,” Bruce said. They’d informed Barbara about what had happened before they left. Bruce was certain she’d cried.

“I was just talking to Tim. I think something’s happened,” Barbara said.

“Something?” Bruce asked, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

“The call suddenly cut off and I can’t reach him anymore. I think something’s wrong,” Barbara said, her voice rising in pitch.

“Look,” Cass said, pointing through the windshield.

Below them, the Titans Tower reached up, several fires belching out black smoke into the sky. Several window were cracked or shattered, as though some explosion had gone off.
“What the hell?” Steph said, leaning almost out of her seat.

Bruce clenched his teeth. “Someone knew where they were,” he said, “Someone beat us here.”

Chapter End Notes

Did you really think it would be that easy? Did you? Did you think it would be that simple? Huh? Bitch you're in my sandbox and I say when we're done playing.
Part V Chapter i: Entangled

Chapter Notes

This wasn't originally going to be the start of a new part, but Part IV was getting so long and we have a few chapters to go, so I've cut it up. This last part will be much shorter though, so don't worry about this carrying on for another six chapters. This chapter is slightly shorter than usual, but since the last chapter was so long, I think I can get away with it.

No contest this chapter, I was too distracted to think of one. Instead, whoever can guess what my favourite berry is gets a 1k fic. Hint; if you've read my other fics, you can probably guess it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Batman set the Batwing down a short distance away from the Tower on the front walkway (which he wasn’t supposed to do but he didn’t care right now). The four of them rushed out of the plane, Batman leading the charge, his heart pounding in his chest.

As they reached the front entrance, the doors opened and two figures came out, one supporting the other. Gar had his arm over the shoulder of a young man, his other hand pressed to a cut on his forehead that was bleeding sluggishly, the red against his green skin looking inappropriately Christmas coloured. The other young man was larger than Gar by several inches and had black hair with a shock of white in it. He gently helped Gar sit on a stone bench and straightened up again.

Jason Todd caught Bruce’s eye and stilled.

For ten seconds, no one so much as dared to breathe. They stared at each other, almost afraid to move. Jason looked like he was caught between wanting to run and wanting to throw a punch. Bruce could hardly believe his eyes. He’d known that Jason was alive, he’d seen videos, but this was something entirely different. The photographs and videos didn't do justice to how real, how alive Jason was, how he’d grown and changed but still remained the same somehow.

Bruce took a step forward, mind a blank. As he did, another explosion shook the Tower. Jason swore and turned, looking for the culprit. He’d been away from the others when Talia’s men had attacked, and when he’d heard the commotion he;d managed to separate a few men from the rest of the pack, and he was completely sure than at least one was still in the Tower, trying to destroy as much as he could. Jason spotted something dashing from the side door and across the grounds. He swore and pulled the gun he still had from the scuffle with Slade and took aim. The shot was somewhat deafening, but Jason heard the yelp of a direct hit.

“Gotcha you bastard,” Jason growled and took off running after the figure. He vaulted over some decorative stones into some kind of alien garden to find one of Talia’s men trying to crawl away, a gunshot wound on his leg bleeding heavily.

“Hey there friend, get left behind?” Jason snarled, grabbing the man and hauling him up. He dragged the mad by the ankles out of the garden just as Nightwing and Batman came to the edge.

“You shot him,” Nightwing said, the first thing he’d said since he’d seen Jason.
Jason rolled his eyes. “I clipped him. He was getting away and your stupid batarangs wouldn’t do shit at that distance,” he explained. He turned back to the man. “Now, why don’t you tell us where Tim and Damian are.”

The man said nothing, but before Jason could threaten him with more violence, Batman was looming over him. He grabbed the assassin by his shirt front and slammed him back against the decorative rock hard enough to snap his head back a little. Batman leaned down, getting well into his personal space.

“Tell me where my kids are or regret it for the rest of your life,” Bruce snarled so viciously that even Jason felt like taking a step back.

The assassin remained mute. Losing his patience, Batman reached down with one hand to the bullet wound on his leg and shoved his thumb into the exit wound, twisting it. The assassin howled in pain and tried to thrash away, but Batman held him down firmly. After a few seconds, Batman removed his thumb.

“Where are they?” he growled.

The assassin caught his breath. “She is taking them into the city,” he panted, “She will find a proper place and be rid of the false heir.”

“False heir?” Nightwing asked.

“Talia wants to kill Tim so Damian will be the oldest blood child,” Jason explained, “She originally tried to have Damian do it himself, but that backfired.”

“Where is she taking them?” Batman repeated to the assassin.

The assassin stayed mute until Batman reached for his thigh again. “I don’t know!” he cried, “We arrived only shortly after the children! Our plan was malleable.”

“So they could be anywhere in the city,” Jason said, looking out over the bay into the sprawling concrete jungle. “Fantastic.”

Batman stood and looked out over the bay. “We’ll split up to search,” he said, “Cover more area.”

“I can call the Teen Titans,” Gar said, having come up the path to where everyone else was. “We can cover more ground that way.”

“Thanks Gar,” Nightwing said before Batman could turn the offer down. “We really appreciate it. Will you be okay?”

“I’m fine. This is already healing,” Gar said, gesturing to his head. The bleeding had stopped and the gash had mostly closed. “I’ll need to go back inside and alert everyone.”

Nightwing glanced at Jason. “I’ll go with you,” he said, “I have to take the assassin to the holding cell anyway. Batgirl, Spoiler, come on.”

“Why us?” Spoiler asked, even as Batgirl tugged her along, leaving Jason and Bruce alone.

They stood in awkward silence for a moment, Bruce just staring at Jason. After a minute or so had passed, Bruce seemed to snap back into reality and moved to take off his cowl. Jason couldn’t decide if he wanted to run or stand his ground. All of his plans to get revenge on Bruce got tangled together into a jumbled mess that he couldn’t make sense of. Jason planned to slip away after using the
Tower’s amenities to avoid this confrontation, but then everything had gone sideways. Jason took a deep breath and clenched his fists, his whole body tensing, but before he could do or say anything, the air was squeezed from his lungs.

Bruce practically crushed Jason into his arms, swearing to himself he’d never let go. He could feel himself shaking and he was aware that someone could see them, but he didn't care; his son was back from the dead and it was some kind of miracle and Bruce just wanted to hold him close.

Jason was pressed so hard against Bruce that all he could smell was kevlar and expensive soap. Suddenly Jason was twelve years old, clinging to Bruce after a bad night on patrol, his father holding him close to comfort him. He remember jumping onto Bruce’s back after a good night, laughing joyously as Bruce piggybacked him up the stairs. The feeling of nostalgia hit Jason like a freight train, and he put his hand on Bruce’s ribs before he realized what he was doing, like he was about to hug back.

Bruce’s hand tangled into the hair at the back of his head, and Jason could feel him shaking. A small noise like a sob escaped Bruce and Jason hated that he could feel his own eyes stinging. His heart pounded in his chest and his legs felt weak. He wanted to run away and never deal with these emotions again. He wanted to sink into his father’s arms and stay there forever.

Bruce squeezed Jason tighter, and Jason’s lungs began to protest. He slid the hand on Bruce’s ribs around and pushed a little, trying to make Bruce take a hint. When that didn't work, he found his voice again.

“You’re crushing me,” Jason managed to get out. He wasn’t sure if his voice was tight due to lack of air or some other reason.

Bruce finally relented, but he didn't let Jason go far. He cradled Jason’s head in his hands, thumbs tracing along his cheekbones. Jason could see how wet and red Bruce’s eyes were. Tears spilled and Bruce shut his eyes tightly, pressing his forehead against Jason’s.

“Christ, Jason ,” Bruce swore, breathing hard, still shaking. “Fuck, Christ.”

Jason could count the number of times Bruce had said ‘fuck’ on one hand. He brought his hands up to grip at Bruce’s forearms, avoiding the sharp protrusions on his gauntlets. His stomach tied itself in knots as he tried to process what was going on. Jason remembered all the times Tim insisted how devastated Bruce had been after his death, despite what Talia had told him, and his brain wasn’t coming up with any good explanations for this.

Bruce’s throat worked for a moment, like he was trying speak without knowing what he wanted to say. “I’m sorry,” he said finally, “I’m so sorry Jason.”

Jason couldn’t get his voice to work. He wanted to shout at Bruce, demand why he’d never killed the Joker ( Not for lack of trying, Tim had said), why he’d replaced him ( Bruce was pretty reluctant to take me on, Tim had said), why he’d moved on like Jason had never mattered ( Bruce was devastated when you died , Tim had said), why he’d forgotten Jason had ever been a part of his life ( There’s a big glass case with your uniform in it , Tim had said), but it all stuck in his throat. He felt like he was about to burst; he wanted to scream, he wanted to cry, he didn’t know what he wanted.

Finally, Bruce stepped back a little. Jason was suddenly startled by the fact that they were nearly eye to eye, he didn't have to look up at Bruce anymore. Bruce looked Jason up and down.

“You’ve grown so much,” Bruce said quietly, almost but not quite sad. “I never… I never thought I’d get to see you like this.”
Jason shifted on his feet, not knowing what to do. He’d had so many ideas of what he’d say to Bruce when the ‘big reveal’ finally happened, but now his mind was a blank.

“Jason,” Bruce said, his face pinching. “I’m… I’m sorry for not… for letting you…”

Jason inhaled sharply. “We should come up with a plan to find the other two,” he said quickly. This was too much for him right now.

“Right,” Bruce said, and he seemed to relax a little, probably also relieved that they were avoiding emotions right now. “We should find your brothers first.”

Jason looked up at Bruce, but he was already putting his cowl back on. He wanted to say something about Tim and Damian not being his brothers, but he was a little stunned that Bruce had implied that he was still his son.

Batman finished adjusting his cowl and started walking to the Tower, where Nightwing and the others were coming out of the building.

“Looks like it’s mostly superficial damage,” Nightwing said, “Nothing structural.”

“Yeah, they were trying to get us disoriented more than anything,” Jason said, “They got us all turned around and nabbed the brats.”

Nightwing nodded. “Talia used the same tactic to grab Tim in the first place,” he said.

“Are the Teen Titans on their way?” Batman asked.

Gar glanced up at the sky. “They should be getting here—” the ground shook as something heavy landed at a considerable speed, “—soon.”

“Beast Boy!” Superboy exclaimed, popping up from the crater he’d just made. “Tim was here?”

“He got taken,” Beast Boy explained.

“Tim got taken again?” Impulse asked, arriving with a gust of wind. “Who the heck keeps taking him?”

“Talia al Ghul,” Nightwing said, “It’s a long story.”

“So tell us on the way,” Wonder Girl said, alighting next to Beast Boy. “What’s the plan?”

They split up into pairs to cover as much ground as possible. To Bruce’s relief, the Titans listened to him without complaint, taking his direction without any squabbling over who was the boss of who. Bart, Conner, and Cassie all seemed especially eager to find Tim, and Bruce was honestly grateful his son had such dedicated friends. Superboy and Impulse formed one team, Beast Boy and Wonder Girl another, Spoiler and Batgirl a third, and Nightwing and Batman in the Batwing.

“Everyone knows what area they’re covering?” Batman asked. When he received positives from everyone, he sent them on their way.

“So what the hell am I supposed to do?” Jason asked as the others left.
“You’re coming with us,” Batman said, walking back to the Batwing, not checking to see if they were following.

“God, I forgot how much it bugged me when he does that,” Jason growled to himself, following despite his annoyance. Against all odds, he wanted to make sure the brats made it home okay.

Dick hung back with Jason, practically vibrating with the need to say something. Jason tried to wait him out, but it was bugging him too much. They made it onto the Batwing before Jason finally couldn’t take it anymore and turned to face Dick.

“Whatever you have to say, say it before you make me regret this,” Jason snapped.

Dick drew a sharp breath and stared at Jason liked he still couldn’t believe he was real. “I’m just… I’m really happy to see you Little Wing,” he said softly.

Jason felt annoyance crawl over his skin like goosebumps. “Don’t call me that,” he growled.

“Jason,” Dick said, “I just wanted to say—”

“Don’t,” Jason said, “Whatever you're going to say, just fucking don’t. I can’t handle it right now.”

Dick made a face that was a cross between confused and hurt. “You just told me to say it?”

“I changed my mind, that’s allowed,” Jason said, “Just, whatever dumb thing you’re going to say, save it until after we find the replacement and the demon.”

“Replacement?” Dick questioned, “You mean Tim?”

“He replaced me as Robin, didn't he?” Jason asked, heading for a seat to strap himself into.

“Jason,” Dick said softly, and Jason absolutely hated his tone. “No one could ever have replaced you. Don’t think that for a second.”

“Oh fuck off,” Jason growled, “Spare me your pity and do something useful for a change.”

Dick looked taken aback at Jason’s harsh words, but Jason didn’t care right now. He didn’t want to care. He wanted to be far away from here. He should have slipped away when he had the chance.

“Both of you get strapped in, we’re taking off,” Batman said from the pilot’s seat. Dick gave Jason one last hurt look before joining Batman at the front, settling into the copilot’s seat.

“So what are we looking for?” Nightwing asked as he buckled himself down, glancing over his shoulder at Jason from time to time.

“Anything that might be a likely hiding spot for Talia,” Bruce said, “They can’t have gone very far, they probably haven’t had time to cover their trail. If we see something likely, we’ll contact the others to investigate.”

“The League owns a few places on the Bay,” Jason said, “I’m not sure where they are, but I know they’re there.”

Batman nodded. “We’ll start there,” he said. He flicked a switch and suddenly the Batwing transitioned into stealth mode, completely cloaked.

“I could have taken Slade’s jet,” Jason pointed out, “I got pretty good at flying it.”
No, we stay together,” Batman said firmly.

Jason rolled his eyes and concentrated on looking out the windows. “Two planes in the skies would be better than just one, you know.”

“I know,” Batman said, “But I want you here.”

Jason gritted his teeth. “What, don’t trust me after last time?”

The plane jerked a little, throwing them against their straps. “That’s not—!” Bruce started to shout, but he stopped and got the Batwing steady. He took a few deep breaths and continued more calmly. “I just… I just got you back Jason. I don’t want to lose sight of you.”

Silence simmered around them anxiously. Jason glared a little at the back of Bruce’s head, but he couldn’t pick any words to say. He wanted to be angry, to shout at him and make him see how wronged Jason was, but Tim’s voice stayed at the back of his mind, telling him about how Bruce had been affected by his death.

“Is there really a monument to me in the Cave?” Jason found himself asking. That seemed like a safe enough thing to say.

The tension seemed to bleed away slightly, though not completely. “Yes,” Bruce answered, “We should concentrate on the mission.”

Just like that, silence fell like a heavy weight over the three of them. Jason wanted to swear and curse the dismissal, but the knowledge that Tim and Damian could be in danger held his tongue. He had time, he reminded himself, afterwards he’d have time to yell and scream and hurt Bruce as much as he wanted. Right now he had to make sure the kids were safe.

“So what’s the plan?” Damian asked.

Tim kept trying to wriggle one of his hands free from the ropes he’d been tied in. Gone were the smooth, silky ropes he’d been tied with last time Talia had caught him; the ropes that were tying him down to the chair now couldn’t have been rougher if they were made of sandpaper.

“Bruce and the others know we were going to meet them, and I’m pretty sure Jason got away,” Tim said, “So they’ll be looking for us shortly.”

“So we wait?” Damian asked. The ropes binding him looked much smoother.

“So we don’t panic,” Tim said, “We’re still going to try and get out of here before Talia can do anything to us.”

Damian shifted on the chair he was tied to, looking slightly nervous. “Perhaps if we simply go along with Mother, she will be lenient with us,” he suggested quietly.

Tim looked up at Damian and felt his stomach curl. He wished he could say something, anything, that would lift the veil for Damian and let him see his mother for what she truly was, but it seemed like such a cruel thing. Besides, Tim’s own mother hadn’t exactly been the nurturing type either, so he could empathize with Damian’s dilemma.
“Damian,” Tim said carefully, “She might go easy on you, but… I don’t think she’ll go easy on me.”

Damian nodded. “I know, you’re right,” he said, “We should escape before they come back.”

Tim nodded and went back to trying to wiggle the ropes off. All he seemed to be doing was rubbing his wrists raw. “I’m sure after we get in touch with Bruce, we can talk to your mom. He’s always had a knack for working things out with her,” Tim said.

“Really?” Damian asked, and it didn’t sound hopeful, but it was a near thing.

“Sure,” Tim said, “He’s always had a soft spot for Talia. That’s probably part of the reason you exist.”

Damian was quiet a moment. “Do you think they ever loved each other?” he asked.

Tim looked up. Damian wasn’t looking at Tim, but down at the floor instead, shoulders hunched. Tim pressed his lips together, wishing he could help.

“I don’t know kiddo, maybe,” Tim said, “That’s something you’ll have to ask our dad.”

Damian said nothing and started wiggling in his ropes. They sat in silence for a few more minutes, trying to get the ropes off.

Tim groaned. “It’s no use, these are too tight,” he said. He was pretty sure he’d rubbed a good amount of skin off of his wrists and was starting to ooze blood.

“Perhaps there’s something in here that can help us?” Damian suggested.

Tim looked around the room they were in. When they’d been grabbed, they’d been blindfolded and drugged. The drugs had worn off quickly, and they’d still been in transit when they’d come to. It wasn’t until they’d been brought here that they’d had the blindfolds taken away. Tim had no idea where they were, but he didn’t think they’d left the city. They were in some kind of storeroom; shelves of dusty cleaning supplies and boxes of lightbulbs and toilet paper surrounded them, illuminated by the light coming in from a single dusty window above them. If one listened carefully, there was the distant sound of water and waves, which meant they were probably close to the Bay. Tim suspected they were in some kind of warehouse or factory, which was just typical. Hopefully Bruce and the others would find them soon.

“I don’t think I see anything that we could use,” Tim said, “What about you?”

“I think I see some screws under that shelf,” Damian said, twisting his neck so he could peer behind Tim, “If you tip yourself over, you might be able to reach them.”

Tim tried craning his neck to see where Damian was indicating, but he couldn’t get a good look. “You’re sure it’s screws?” he asked.

“Or nails,” Daman said, “Might be broken glass. Either way, it’s something sharp.”

Tim sighed and prepared himself to fall over. He wanted to do this without smacking his head while also not straining his neck. Carefully, Tim rocked his chair side to side; taking a deep breath, he finally tipped himself over, grunting as his shoulder absorbed the impact.

“Ouch,” Tim groaned. He tried to reach his fingers back to where Damian had indicated, and after a few minutes of searching, his fingertips closed around a bent screw. “Got it!”
“Finally,” Damian huffed.

Tim rolled his eyes and got to work trying to saw through the ropes with the busted screw. It would take a while, but hopefully he could get it done before anyone came to get them. Tim suspected they didn't have much of a plan aside from capturing them at this point. They seemed a little unorganized, if their current surroundings were anything to go by.

Tim sawed at the ropes until his fingers started going numb, but he didn't stop. It wasn't only him he had to get out of this situation; Damian was counting on him. While Tim was almost certain Talia wouldn't kill Damian, whatever she had in store for him might be worse.

After nearly an hour, when Tim was about a quarter of the way through the rope, the door of the room opened and two guards came in. Tim recognized them as the twins in black that had watched him while he was at the compound. One of them reached down and picked Tim up off the ground, setting him right side up. He grabbed Tim's hands, wrenching the screw out of his fingers none-too-gently, twisting his finger almost hard enough to break it. They grabbed Tim and Damian, hoisting them up by their respective chairs, and carried them out of the room.

"Unhand us!" Damian demanded, struggling against his bonds. "You shall pay for this insolence with blood!"

The men paid no attention to Damian, as though they had not heard him at all. Damian continued to spit curses at them while Tim tried to get a better look around. He was now fairly certain they were in an abandoned factory of some kind, as he could see offices as well as break rooms throughout the building. They were maneuvered down some stairs and taken out to a large concrete room with plenty of machinery around. Some of the machinery had been removed, creating a large empty space that could comfortably fit fifty or so people.

Thirty or so guards were already waiting for them, their hands poised over their weapons. Tim tensed and readied himself, but there was really nothing he could do. There was no way he was going to get out of the ropes in time to defend himself against an attack. All he could do was hope that someone came for them quickly.

The twins set them down in the centre of the space, and they were surrounded on all sides by guards. Tim tried to keep an eye on all of them, but it was impossible. He tried to stay calm and hoped that rescue was imminent. At his side, Damian still cursed and swore, demanding they be released periodically.

"That’s enough Damian," Talia’s voice said, carrying through the room. In front of them, the guards parted and let her through. She looked as imposing as ever, her hair flowing around her shoulders and her expression neutral.

"Mother," Damian greeted, and Tim was certain he heard a note of apprehension in his voice.

"My son," Talia said, "You’ve been giving me quite the run around. I’d be impressed, if it weren’t for the company you’ve been keeping."

Damian coloured a little in his cheeks, dropping his head a little. Talia stepped towards Damian and gently pulled his chin up with her fingers. Damian looked up at her, eye wide and trusting. Like lightning, Talia struck Damian across the face, the slap ringing through the entire factory floor. Tim winced, almost feeling the sharp sting himself. The red mark on Damian’s cheek almost glowed in the low light.

"I don't enjoy that Damian, but you must understand," Talia said, "I am your Mother, and it falls to
me to make sure you are brought up properly for someone of your station. You are the heir to a great empire, and you cannot waste your time with dalliances like this.”

“Yes Mother,” Damian answered, sitting up straight. Tim wished he could reach over and take his hand.

“What you’ve done is the epitome of stupidity,” Talia said, starting to circle around Damian. “You might have compromised your entire future with this little stunt of yours.” She came to stand behind Damian and placed her hands on his shoulders. “So tell me,” she dug her nails into Damian’s shoulders, her grip like iron. “What convinced you to run away from your dear Mother?”

Damian didn’t so much as flinch at Talia’s sharp nails in his flesh. He swallowed. “I… I wanted to meet my Father,” he said quietly.

Talia’s nails remained in Damian’s shoulders for a second, then she let go. “I understand my son,” she said, bringing one hand up to stroke through Damian’s hair. “I’ve kept you from him for you own good, but anyone would be curious. I should have done better to soothe your desires before such a display of rebelliousness. I take my portion of the blame for this.”

Damian relaxed slightly, leaning into his mother’s gentle touch. Talia dropped her hand and came back around to face Damian. “However, an explanation is not an excuse, and you must be punished accordingly for your actions.”

Tim tensed. “It was all my idea,” Tim blurted out. “If you're going to do anything, do it to me. Leave him alone.”

Talia glanced at Tim out of the corner of her eye, her glare disdainful. Otherwise, she didn't react to Tim’s outburst. “Damian, are you prepared to accept your punishment?” she asked.

Damian nodded stiffly, his back ramrod straight. Talia stepped towards him and pulled out a knife. Tim yelped as she slashed at Damian, only realizing that she was cutting the ropes after one heart stopping second. The ropes quickly fell away and Damian got out of his chair, standing in front of his mother.

“Damian al Ghul, as punishment for your disobedience, you will be sent to a remote asylum in the Karakoram. You will remain there until you are of age. Your training will be brutal and unforgiving.” Talia narrowed her eyes. “It may even kill you.”

Damian nodded. “I accept my punishment Mother,” he said.

“Damian, don’t,” Tim begged, struggling in his chair. “Just run Damian, please.”

Talia’s smile was like that of a snake, cold and satisfied. “You are the most wonderful child a mother could want, my son,” she said, gently caressing Damian’s cheek. “I will waive your punishment, if you so wish, if you do for me a simple task.”

Damian looked up. “What do you wish of me, Mother?” he asked.

Talia pulled out a knife; it was Damian’s dagger, the one with the pearl inlaid handle, the one he buried with his little cat friend. Talia held the knife by the blade and held it out for Damian to take.

“Take your dagger and plunge it into your brother’s heart, and you will be absolved of your crimes.”
Chapter End Notes

Oh goodness.
Part V Chapter ii: Incendiary

Chapter Notes

Wow so this one came pretty quickly. I was expecting to have to extend it a little, but I managed to get it up to an acceptable length. Today really is a great day for me.

CONTEST TIME! Win a 1k fic from me by guessing the right reference! Find the Elizabeth Barrett Browning quote I worked into the story and win! It's pretty small this time, so be on the lookout. Remember to refrain from playing if you've already won a prize before.

They got lucky, and the search didn't take very long. Jason recognized an old abandoned factory tucked away in an older part of the Bay, surrounded by condemned buildings. A quick scan of the building confirmed several heat signatures inside, many more than normal that would usually squat in the building. Superboy further confirmed that it was the League inside with his X-Ray vision.

Batman set the Batwing down on the dilapidated roof of a building a few blocks away, far enough to not be noticeable, but close enough that they would be able to get back to it quickly. Jason checked his gun before they set out.

"Are you bringing that thing?" Nightwing asked.

Jason glared. "Well I need to bring something and I don't have any of your dumb sticks," he snapped.

Dick huffed. "We don't use guns," he said, "And I think there are extra escrima here somewhere."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Not the point moron. I use guns, so deal with it," he growled.

Dick looked like he was going to say something else, but Bruce stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "No lethal force," he said, "That's all we ask."

Jason gritted his teeth. "Fine," he huffed, "But the assholes who grabbed those brats are getting their metatarsals blown to shit."

"I can live with that," Bruce said. He pulled a utility belt and a domino mask from a compartment and held them out for Jason to take.

Jason stared down at the mask. A part of him, tucked away in the back of his mind, wanted to weep tears of joy at being offered a place back in fold so easily. Another part of him wanted to recoil, wanted to run in the other direction and throw the mask back in Bruce’s self-righteous face. Jason did a mental shake to clear his head and took the mask, fitting it over his eyes.

"These feel way different than the last time I wore them," Jason commented, taking his time to make sure the mask was on properly. He did not want this thing messing with his sight.

"We changed the material. It’s stronger and lighter, but a little less flexible," Dick said.
“There’s some extra body armor as well,” Bruce said.

“Pass,” Jason said, taking the utility belt and snapping it around his waist. “I’m already wearing something weird on my face, I don’t need something else distracting me.”

“Are you sure? It’s going to be dangerous,” Bruce said.

Jason rolled his eyes, but Bruce was already digging through a cabinet. He pulled out a black chest plate and stepped towards Jason with it.

“You’re not going to let me out of this plane without that, aren’t you?” Jason asked. At Bruce’s pinched expression, Jason sighed. “Fine, whatever.”

Bruce helped Jason into the armor. It was a spare and didn’t have any symbol on the front, but that suited Jason just fine. The mask was already almost too much for him.

“It doesn’t fit right,” Jason complained as he fixed the last strap. He pulled his jacket over top the armor—actually, it wasn’t a bad look.

“Sorry if it’s big,” Dick said, “It’s one of mine.”

“It’s tight actually,” Jason said.

Dick paused. “Oh,” he said.

“I can get you one of mine, if you think it would fit better,” Bruce offered, already stepping back to the cabinet.

“It’s fine, it’s only a little tight,” Jason said, “We need to get moving.”

Batman nodded and the three of them finally left the plane. They stealthily made their way to the factory, taking out a few guards as they found a secluded spot. The Teen Titans found them quickly.

“We went around the building, there are lots of ways in, but they’re all guarded,” Wonder Girl said, “We should be able to get through, but not in one big group.”

“So we split into groups again and sneak inside,” Nightwing said, “We find Tim and Damian and get out fast. We do not want to mess with the League for longer than we have to.”

“Everyone split into groups again, find an entrance, and quietly get inside,” Batman said, glaring at Superboy and Impulse. “Find both of them and get them out. Only fight if you have to.”

Everyone nodded in the affirmative and split off again. Jason was tempted to go and find his own place to sneak in, but the way Batman stuck so close to him made that impossible. Nightwing also stuck close, making Jason feel almost as if they were flanking him. He did his best to ignore them, trying instead to focus on finding a way inside.

As per Batman’s usual modus operandi, they found a high window to sneak through, though thankfully he resisted the urge to shatter it like a dramatic moron. They took out the guards in complete silence and stole their way inside. The factory was ancient, rusted metal everywhere, but the three of them were quiet as mice, weaving their way through the winding maze of staircases and catwalks.

“This place is huge, how will we find them?” Nightwing whispered.

“We could cause a distraction and lure the guards to us,” Jason suggested.
“No,” Batman said, “We have no idea what they would do to Tim and Damian if we let them know we’re here.”

“So we just have to comb the entire factory,” Jason said, “Right, easy peasy.”

“You could have stayed on the plane,” Nightwing said. It was the first time he’d been sarcastic to Jason since seeing him, and even he seemed surprised by his own words.

Jason suddenly felt like he was thirteen again, on patrol with Nightwing and Batman, snarking with Dick in a half playful, half aggressive manner. The feeling was so sharp and painful that he couldn’t even think of a good comeback to Dick’s comment.

They wound deeper and deeper into the factory, taking out any guards they came across. Jason noticed with more than a shred of annoyance that Batman and Nightwing seemed to be trying to keep Jason away from the action. When they came across two more guards, Jason wasted no time leaping over Batman and slamming his heavy boots into one guard’s face and catching the other in a headlock. After a brief tussle, Jason knocked the guard out with a well placed knee to the face and dropped him.

Batman rushed over. “Are you alright?” he asked.

Jason rolled his eyes under the mask. “I’m fine. I know how to take out an assassin without getting killed, thank you,” he snapped.

Batman flinched, but said nothing else. They tied the guards and kept heading deeper and deeper into maze of metal around them.

“I think I hear something,” Nightwing said, quick-walking over a catwalk toward the sound of voices. As they got closer, Batman recognized a female voice.

“It’s Talia,” he said, gritting his teeth slightly. He’d always carried an amount of affection for Talia, an appreciation of her beauty and deadliness, the way one might admire a venomous snake, but having learned that she’d been keeping not only Damian from him, but Jason as well, along with kidnapping Tim, any lingering warm feelings for her had evaporated.

They found their way to a catwalk above a cleared area in the factory where about thirty guards stood in a ring around three figures. Talia stood tall and imposing in front of Damian and Tim, the latter of whom was tied down to a chair. A second chair stood empty, and it was clear that Damian had been only recently liberated from it.

“Too many to take out with just the three of us,” Nightwing said, “I’ll call the Titans.”

As Nightwing relayed their position to the others over their comms, Jason leaned over and inspected the terrain.

“I have a clear shot of Talia from here,” Jason said, “I can nail her right in the shoulder.”

“Wait a moment,” Batman said, trying to hear more clearly what was being said. Below them, Talia pulled out a dagger and handed it to Damian.
“Take your dagger and plunge it into your brother’s heart, and you will be absolved of your crimes.”

Damian looked up at his mother, almost not comprehending what she was saying. She pushed the dagger at him and he took it on autopilot. Her gaze bore down on him like a heavy weight, crushing him until he could barely breathe.

“Damian,” Tim called through the fog in Damian’s mind. “You don’t have to do this. Just run. Get out of here.”

Talia’s eyes narrowed, but stayed on Damian. “Do not listen to him my son,” she said, “He has already poisoned your mind enough with his manipulations. Rid yourself of him once and for all, and take your rightful place as heir.”

“You’re messed up in the head lady,” Tim growled, struggling in his chair again.

“Do not speak to her that way,” Damian snapped, finally turning to look at Tim. He turned the knife in his hand so it was facing outward. The weight of it was familiar in his hand, almost comforting. Damian had missed that feeling.

Tim was staring up at Damian from where he was tied, his eyes wide. Damian could see a plethora of emotion swirling inside them; compassion, shock, pity, and even fear. If he saw such emotion from anyone else, Damian might have laughed in their faces. Now, he wanted to ask his brother what was causing his fear and try to extinguish it.

It took Damian a moment to realize that Tim was afraid of him, of what he might do.

Tim seemed to gather himself. “Damian, you don’t have to do this. You don’t have to choose this,” he said, “You can be better. I know you can be better. All you have to do is run.”

But what about you? The question almost made it all the way out of Damian’s mouth, but Damian stopped it just behind his teeth. Mother would have him beaten for such sentimental concerns.

Regardless, Tim seemed to understand the question and smiled softly at Damian. “I’ll be fine kiddo, don’t worry about me,” he said, even though the fear was still swirling in his eyes. “You just get out of here and find Jason, okay?”

“I am growing impatient, Damian,” Talia’s sharp voice cut through the air like a blade. “End him and be done with it.”

Damian’s hand gripped the knife tightly. The familiar grip of the handle pushed into his palm, and Damian could recall how it felt in his hand when it was slick with blood. The phantom sting of cat’s claws against the back of his hand made Damian stall, and suddenly the knife felt like a ball of lead. The grip cut into his flesh as painfully as if he were holding the blade, and the memory of the hot blood on his hands burned like lava.

Damian stared into Tim’s eyes, felt his mother’s gaze on the back of his neck, and let the knife fall from his hands and clatter to the cement floor.

Talia sighed deeply. “Oh my son, you’ve fallen so far,” she said. She strode around Damian and picked up the dagger at his feet. She placed it back in his hands and curled her own around it. “Together then, shall we?”

Talia moved them forward, blade aimed right at Tim’s heart. Damian made a noise, but the deafening echo of a gunshot covered the sound. The blade shattered into a million pieces in their joined hands and Talia jerked back, swearing and cursing.
“We’ve been found! Kill them!” Talia ordered her men, pointing to where the shot had come from. Immediately the assassins around them leapt into action.

Damian looked up to where the shot had come from. Now that he was looking, he could see two masked figures fighting off the assassins that had already reached them. One he recognised as Jason, the other was dressed completely in black aside from a splash of blue across his chest. Nightwing, if Damian remembered Tim’s description.

Remembering his brother, Damian used the chaos to dart around behind Tim and start yanking at the ropes. If he could untie Tim, he could run and Damian wouldn’t have to kill him. Mother would be furious, but his brother would be alive.

As Damian tried to undo the knots, Talia took out her own dagger and approached Tim. “This is the end of the line for you, bastard,” she snarled, raising the dagger. Before she could strike, a massive black figure dropped down behind her.

Batman caught her wrist with one hand, the other arm curling around her neck in a headlock. He twisted her wrist until she hissed in pain and dropped the dagger. Damian had heard stories, had imagined what meeting him would be like, had even seen his face from the other side of a computer screen, but it was something else to see the Batman in person, in action.

He seemed so much bigger in real life.

“Beloved,” Talia greeted, not struggling in Batman’s grip, but tense and coiled to strike at any moment. “How lovely to see you again.”

“Talia,” Batman growled, “I wish I could say the same.”

With a feral grin, Talia jerked her arm around and managed to slam her elbow into Batman’s cheek. With a grunt, Batman dropped her wrist, leaving her the opportunity to twist in his grip and attack.

Damian watched the two of them fight with the awe of one watching titans collide. After a moment, he shook himself back to reality and finished freeing Tim. Before Damian could tell Tim to run, the older boy grabbed Damian’s wrist and pulled him quickly to a secluded spot away from the fighting.

“Brother, unhand me,” Damian complained, trying to wiggle out of Tim’s grip.

Tim pulled Damian into a little alcove between the machinery and faced him. “Damian, you need to run,” he said, “Get as far away as you can. I’ll come find you later.”

Damian finally pulled his wrist from Tim’s grip. “No, it is you who needs to run. Mother will punish me, but I will survive. You will not survive her wrath.”

“Damian,” Tim said quietly, “You can’t go back with her,” he said, “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but she’s bad for you.”

Damian growled and pushed at Tim’s chest slightly, enough to knock him back. “What would you know about it?”

Tim caught Damian’s wrists with his hands, not gripping, but gentle. “Trust me Damian, I know what it’s like to have a mother like her. I know you want to please her, but it’s never going to work. Nothing will ever be enough for her. You’re only going to get hurt.”

Damian looked up into Tim’s eyes, and he could see the truth there, the pain and empathy. Damian glanced back to where his mother was fighting his father, doing her best to strike him down with
every movement. His father, he could tell, was doing his best to subdue her, but without hurting her in any way.

“I…” Damian couldn't decide what he wanted. Mother would surely be furious if he left her now, but she was already furious, and he wanted his brother to live.

He wanted, Damian realized, to stay with his brother. He’d lived his life as a prince, with best of everything at his fingertips his entire life, but living with Tim for only a short while had cracked his worldview open. From his narrow path had opened up thousands of new possibilities, and they would all but close if he returned to his mother and grandfather.

Before Damian could say anything, a hulking figure in black and red dropped into their space. Damian tried to strike out at it, but his hand connected with something akin to a steel wall.

“Tim!” the figure exclaimed, wrapping its arms around Tim in a tight hug. “Holy shit you’re okay.”

“Superboy,” Tim huffed, the air rushing from his lungs as he was squeezed. “It’s nice to see you too buddy.”

Superboy stepped back, grinning ear to ear like he’d won the lottery on Christmas. He spied Damian from the corner of his eye and turned his smile on him. “Hey there, you must be Damian,” he said, reaching out to ruffle Damian’s hair.

Damian growled and swatted him away. “Do not touch me, alien,” he snarled. To his annoyance, Superboy only laughed at him.

“Superboy, I’d really love to catch up, but we’re in the middle of a firefight right now,” Tim said, “Do you think you can get me and Damian to safety?”

“Sure thing,” Superboy said, wrapping an arm around Tim’s waist and reaching for Damian. Damian tried to dart away, but for something his size, Superboy moved fast and caught him around the midsection.

“Ready?” Superboy asked, all the warning he gave before they were airborne.

It was quite jarring to be firmly on the ground one moment and then several feet in the air the next. Damian wriggled a little, but Superboy’s arm around him was like a band of iron. Superboy turned to head for a window, but a flaming arrow whizzed passed his head and knocked him off course. With a curse, Superboy crashed into a high catwalk, turning his body just enough so neither Tim or Damian were crushed under him.

“Shit,” Superboy cursed, “Hold on, I’ll get you out of here.”

“No, the others need you,” Tim said, “We can make our way from here.”

Superboy looked concerned. “Are you sure?” he asked.

Tim smiled at his friend and squeezed his arm. “We’ll be fine, don't worry,” he said.

Superboy didn't look happy, but the cries from below where the fight was intensifying pulled his attention. “Okay,” he said. He reached into his pocket and held something out for Tim. “Grabbed this for you from the Tower.”

Tim took the little rod and pressed a switch on the side, immediately extending the staff to it’s full length. He smiled gratefully at Superboy. “Thanks. Now get down there and kick some ass.”
Superboy grinned. "You got it boss man," he said. With that, he leapt from the catwalk and dropped back down into the fray.

"Come on," Tim said, grabbing Damian’s hand and tugging him away from the fighting. Damian dug his heels in, stopping them from going far.

"We cannot run," Damian said stubbornly.

"We’re not running, we’re escaping," Tim said, pulling harder on Damian’s arm. When the smaller boy refused to budge, he sighed. "Damian, this isn’t the time to get all weird about running. We’re way too exposed without any protection."

"I’ll protect you," Damian said firmly.

Tim groaned. "I really appreciate that Damian, but we need to go," he said.

Suddenly, three assassins swung onto the catwalk, one behind Damian and the other two behind Tim. Tim whirled and got his staff up just in time to block a swing from the assassin’s sword. The assassin closest to Damian made a grab for him, but a solid body slammed into their side before the could get a hold.

"Hey brats," Jason greeted, "You really fucked up."

"Fuck off Jason," Tim growled, taking a jab at an assassin and catching them in the rib.

"I’m just saying," Jason said, throwing the assassin over the railing of the catwalk. "I didn't get nabbed."

"Suck a dick," Tim hissed. The second assassin swiped at Tim with his knife close enough to slice through a few fibers on his shirt. Before he could strike again, Nightwing dropped from nowhere to distract him.

"Speak the devil’s name and he shall appear," Jason said.

"Tim!" Nightwing exclaimed, punching the assassin he was fighting in the mouth. "I’m so glad you're okay."

"Yes, all things relative," Tim said, finally managing to knock out the first assassin. "This is Damian by the way."

"Hi Damian," Nightwing said with a cheery smile while sleeper holding the assassin until he passed out.

Damian huffed, annoyed that he hadn’t gotten to beat anyone up. "We should get back down there and fight," he said, leaning over the railing.

"How about we don't do that," Tim suggested.

"Yeah, you two are the ones she’s after, you should get clear of the building," Nightwing said.

"Retreat is for cowards," Damian growled, gripping the railing like he was about to leap over it.

Five assassins landed on the catwalk, weapons drawn. Damian snarled and took a step, but Jason caught him by the collar and yanked him backwards away from the assassins. The four brothers sprinted across the catwalk, trying to dodge flaming arrows and throwing knives that were being hurled at them. They nearly all bowled each other over when three more assassins appeared in front
of them. The five behind them came up quickly, and they became squeezed on both sides.

“Well shit,” Jason growled as he began to fire at their attackers.

The four of them were drawn into a fight with the seven assassins surrounding them, which was a little tricky on the narrow catwalk that rattled unsteadily over the machinery below them. Damian struck when he could, but he was pretty squashed between the others, much to his dismay. He busied himself with catching thrown knives and aiming for people’s legs.

Finally, Damian managed to get around Tim and Nightwing and started attacking one of the remaining assassins. The assassin drew a long, mean looking blade and lunged for Damian. Before he could make contact, something insanely fast dropped the assassin in a second and tossed away the knife.

“Batgirl,” Tim greeted, “Nice to see you.”

“Fight first, reunion after,” Batgirl said, vaulting over Damian to land a kick at a newcomer assassin with deadly precision.

“If there is an after,” Jason growled, grappling with an assassin with a mean looking spear.

“Why don’t we be optimistic?” Nightwing said, flipping out of the way of another flaming arrow.

“Watch it!” Jason growled, swatting the arrow away as it nearly connected. The arrow glanced off Jason’s arm as he smacked it and went tumbling over the rail. It fell down into the machinery, pinging off the rim of some kind of tanker before falling in. There was the faint sound of a splash, then a loud ‘whumf’ as the oil inside the tanker caught fire.

“Opps,” Jason said.

“Fire in the hole!” Nightwing shouted.

The assassins scattered, leaving the five Bats to scramble across the catwalk towards safety. They tanker bulged for a moment before it burst with a belch of fire. Oil spilled out over the floor and began to spread the flames to the rest of the factory. Metal shrieked like the wails of the damned as air rushed through pipes and fire ravaged whatever it could reach.

The catwalk gave a shuddering jerk and Damian caught his foot in a broken grate, tripping ungracefully over his feet to fall onto the catwalk. Jason swore and back tracked, hauling Damian up by the back of his shirt.

“Get your shit together,” Jason shouted over the roaring of the fire. They started after the rest, but there was already a sizable gap between them.

“Damian!” came a female voice from behind them. Damian pulled up short, Jason just a step ahead of him.

Talia was on the catwalk, looking quite worse for wear and holding a gun in one hand. She was advancing quickly, all rage and fury, and Damian shrank back a little.

“Jason! Damian!” Batman suddenly appeared on the other side of the catwalk, the other three safely behind him. He was bleeding heavily from a cut on his cheek and there was a sizable chunk missing from his cape. Clearly his little wrestling match with Talia had been rough on both of them.

Talia stopped where she was. “This is your last chance Damian,” she said over the howling flames.
“You must choose your fate.”

Damian bit his lip and looked at Batman. Behind him, Tim watched from the relative safety of a larger, more stable catwalk. Damian looked back to his mother, the flames seeming to frame her without singeing her somehow, giving her the appearance of an angel from the depths of Hell.

“I… can’t we just go together?” Damian asked, watching the flames lick at his mother nervously.

Talia sighed. “Oh my son,” she said softly, lovingly. “You are such a disappointment.” She lifted the gun and took aim at Damian.

As Talia fired, the catwalk pitched to one side, an entire section coming free behind Jason and Damian, falling into the abyss of fire below. Talia’s bullet went wide as she was thrown into the railing. Snarling, she tried to aim again, but Jason was faster.

“Boss! Catch!” Jason shouted, grabbing Damian around the middle and tossing him over the gap.

Damian sucked in a breath as he went careening over the sea of fire. Bruce reached for him and plucked him from the air, holding him tight for a moment before setting him down behind him, next to Tim, who wrapped his arms around Damian tightly.

“Jason!” Bruce called, trying to think of a way to get to his second. He might be able to jump the distance, but he wasn’t sure the catwalk could take the impact of his landing.

Jason turned his back on Bruce for a minute, coming face to face with Talia as she rushed him. He managed to disarm the hand with the knife and catch the one with the gun, deflecting it. The gun fired, but Jason managed to get throw them into the railings, making Talia lose her grip on the weapon. It skittered on the metal grating of the catwalk for a half a foot before tumbling over the side. Jason got a boot into Talia’s stomach and finally threw her off.

Talia hit the catwalk and swore. The entire building gave a bone shaking shudder as another explosion went off. Glaring fiercely, Talia stood and took off down the other end of the catwalk, back the way they came.

“Mother!” Damian cried, taking a step forward, but Tim held him back. There was one last flash of Talia’s auburn hair, and then suddenly, as rare things will, it vanished into the fire.

Jason picked himself up off the catwalk with a grunt. The structure gave another shudder and Jason decided that it was time to go. The catwalk trembled again and another chunk fell away, widening the gap even further.

“Jason!” Bruce called again, starting to go a little hoarse. The smoke was curling around them meanly, digging its fingers into eyes and mouths and nostrils.

Jason swore and took a few steps back from the gap. He took a running start and leapt, trying not to think of the flames of hell reaching up to drag him down. Bruce leaned out as far he was able, one arm extended to try and catch Jason. Jason flung his arm out and closed his hand around Bruce’s wrist, slicing a finger on the razor sharp protrusions on his gauntlet.

Bruce grunted as his shoulder was jerked hard; Jason was much heavier than he remembered. He gripped Jason’s wrist as hard as he could and tried to pull him up onto the catwalk. Dick appeared on his other side and reached for Jason’s other hand. Working together, they pulled Jason upwards and away from the flames tickling his bootheels, onto the relative safety of the last jutting part of the catwalk.
Jason grunted as he was pulled into Bruce’s arms, squeezed tightly for just a moment. The catwalk gave a warning shriek and the three of them quickly scrambled off. From there it was a complex system of jumps and turns before they were finally out of the burning building.

“Is everyone out okay?” Bruce asked, quickly doing a headcount.

“We’re fine.” Tim said, panting and gasping.

“Where are the others?” Dick asked, straightening and looking back at the burning factory.

There was a pause as they all looked back at the building, but any anxiety was broken when an eggplant coloured blur crashed into Tim, knocking them both over.

“Tim! You’re okay!” Steph cried, wrapping her arms around Tim’s neck and squeezing hard.

“Steph,” Tim greeted, wrapping his arms around her ribs as she laugh-sobbed into his neck. She leaned back and peeled her mask up, swiping at her teary eyes and leaning down to kiss him on the mouth.

“PDA brats,” Jason said, nudging Tim’s side with his boot. “Child pornography is illegal.”

“Screw you Jason,” Tim huffed, picking himself and Steph off the ground. He barely got his balance back before he was swept up from behind.

“Tim! I’m so glad you’re back!” Bart shouted, lifting Tim into his arms and twirling him around. A second later it was a full group hug as Cassie and Conner joined them. Tim laughed and let himself sink into his friends arms.

Damian watched slightly enviously as his brother reunited with his friends. A hand landed on his shoulder and he looked back and up into the face of Batman, standing high above him. Slowly, like he was trying not to startle a skittish animal, Batman knelt down to Damian’s level. Even kneeling, he was still taller than Damian by a fair bit. He carefully removed his cowl, looking down into Damian’s eyes directly.

“Hello Father,” Damian said, unsure of what to do.

The corner of Bruce’s mouth twitched. “Hello Damian,” he said. He reached his hand out again and gently laid it on Damian’s slim shoulder.

Another explosion sent a wave of heat washing over them. They all looked back at the burning factory, black smoke twisting upwards like an angry scar across the blue sky. Metal groaned and a corner of the building collapsed in on itself.

“Do you think Mother got out okay?” Damian asked no one in particular. Bruce squeezed his shoulder tightly.

“I think she got out,” Gar said, “She seems like the type that doesn’t go down that easy.”

“She’ll be fine,” Bruce assured Damian. He was certain he hadn’t seen the last of Talia al Ghul.

Tim watched the flames consume the last of the factory. Cassie, Bart, and Conner formed a protective shell around him, and Steph held tightly to his hand. Tim’s whole body ached and every time he moved he could feel the grit embedded in his skin grind roughly against itself. He hadn’t slept properly in weeks and all he wanted was a hot meal, a bath, and his bed.
“Let’s go home,” Tim said, closing his eyes against the tears stinging them. “Please, let’s just go home.”

Chapter End Notes

And there it is! The Fam is back together again and all is well! Well... maybe. We're not done yet~
Part V Chapter iii: Exsanguinate

Chapter Notes

Damn I managed to get this out pretty quick. We’re getting close to the end guys! I think just two or three more chapters, depending on what I can get through. There probably won’t be much action from here on out, mostly feelings stuff, but we covered our action in the last few chapters.

Contest Time! You guys know the drill by now; whoever finds the reference gets a 1k fic from me. The reference is pretty obvious if you know it, so I won’t give any hints. Remember to give the NAME and TITLE of the reference, otherwise I won’t count your answer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After many reassurances to the Teen Titans that Tim would get in touch with them as soon as possible—after some much needed rest and recuperation—the Bat clan climbed into the plane and set off for Gotham. They were barely in the air before Tim conked out, slumped over in his seat and starting to drool a little.

Damian dithered for a moment on whether or not to sit close to his father or stick close to Tim. His choice was made for him when the girl in the eggplant coloured uniform took the only seat next to Tim, curling up close and letting him rest his head on her shoulder. Damian took the seat directly behind the pilots seat. He tried to think of something to say, but his voice seemed trapped somewhere between his stomach and his throat.

Jason strapped himself into a seat even as he berated himself for not booking it the first chance he got. Somehow it didn’t occur to him until they were in the air that he could have taken Slade’s jet and taken off somewhere. Yet for some reason he was sitting in the Batwing with the people he swore he was going to kill at some point.

Jason gently peeled the mask from his face and turned it over in his hands. Bruce had simply handed it to him as though it had been another patrol, like Jason hadn’t gone anywhere. Like he was still a part of the family.

Talia had told him so many things, how Bruce had simply left him behind, forgotten him and gotten a new Robin, like Jason had never been a part of his life. Tim had told him otherwise, but Jason hadn’t really believed him until he’d seen it with his own two eyes. He’d never seen Bruce so torn up as those few minutes they’d had alone together. Had Jason really been so blind? So fooled by Talia’s manipulations that he’d been prepared to kill the people he’d once loved?

Jason chased his thoughts around in circles as they flew back to Gotham. Jason had been in and out of Gotham in the couple of years he’d been back to life, checking in on Batman and Robin, taking out some criminals here and there, cutting into the Black Mask Gang’s business when he could, but he’d never gone home. He’d never even gone near the Manor, telling himself that he didn’t want to get caught, didn’t want to tip anyone off that he was alive and planning revenge. As they flew back to the Cave, Jason wondered if he hadn’t gone near the Manor because he knew unconsciously that he’d be too tempted to go home, if only to see. If maybe just the sight of the first real home he’d had in his life would just be too painful for him to see.
The arrived in Gotham faster than Jason expected—Bruce must have really updated since Jason was running at his heels. Tim snorted awake as they landed and rubbed his eyes, groaning as he stretched like a cat. Damian remained quiet, awkwardly standing to the side as the others moved around.

“Jason?” Dick asked softly, appearing in front of Jason. “You okay?”

Jason’s head snapped up a little. He hadn’t noticed Dick until he’d been almost right in front of him. He must have been tired from all the excitement. “Fine,” he said, unbuckling his seat belts. His fingers slid on the shiny metal for a moment, his hands shaking. Jason noticed finally that he felt unusually cold.

“You sure?” Dick asked, “You look really pale.”

“Just tired,” Jason said, finally getting the straps undone. He slung them off and stood.

A wave of dizziness washed over Jason and the next thing that was clear to him was the sensation of being held up by Dick. The rest of the others had all stopped to stare at Jason, their faces ranging from curiosity to concern.

“Jason?” Bruce asked, taking a step forward.

Jason pushed himself up out of Dick’s grip. “I’m fine, I was just sitting for too long,” he said, even as he felt himself swaying on his feet.

“Todd,” Damian said, pointing to the seat Jason had just stood up from.

Jason looked down at it. In the dips and seams of the comfortable black imitation leather seats was a pool of blood, seeping into the stitches and soaking the cushion underneath. The whole of Jason’s backside was stained red as well.

“Oh, well that’s no good,” Jason said.

“Alfred!”

The elderly butler had been waiting in the Cave for everyone to return, and when he saw Jason (alive and older than he remembered and alive) being practically carried out of the plane, he sprung into action.

“What happened?” he asked as he reached them, walking along Bruce’s side as he and Dick carted Jason towards the medbay.

“He’s lost a lot of blood,” Bruce said tensely, his jaw clenched tightly.

Jason lifted his head and grinned. “Hey Alfie, long time no see.”

Alfred swallowed down a wave of emotions. “It certainly has been a while, hasn’t it?” he answered, voice tight.

Jason smiled a little, even though he looked like he was about to pass out. They got him to the medical bay and laid him down on a table. At first it wasn’t clear where the injury was, but when they got the body armour off of Jason, they found a small bullet wound in his side.
“Oh shit,” Jason said, craning his neck to look at the wound. “Must have been Talia.”

“How did you not feel yourself get shot?” Dick asked, nervously hovering somewhere behind Alfred.

Jason shrugged. “Pain works differently for me now. Not sure if it was the pit or dirt nap, but I don’t feel pain the same way.”

“Is it possibly nerve damage?” Alfred asked, inspecting the bullet wound. The body armour had compressed it enough that it hadn’t bled out as much as it could have, but it must have nicked something internal to have bled this much for this long.

“Don’t think so,” Jason said, laying his head back. “It’s just pain that’s weird for me, nothing else.”

Alfred hummed and went for the pain killers. Numbed to pain or not, the bullet was still inside and he’d have to go digging for it, which was going to hurt quite a bit.

“Hey, just lidocaine,” Jason said, picking his head up off the table. “No morphine or any shit like that.”

“Stubborn,” Alfred admonished, but he did as Jason asked. On Jason’s other side, Bruce finally got Jason hooked up to a transfusion bag. They couldn't be sure how much he’d lost, but he’d need to replace it quickly.

Dick paced around anxiously. “God, I should have been paying more attention. We just got you back Jay, we can’t lose you again. We should have checked everyone for injuries.”

Jason grumbled. “What the fuck are you freaking out for asshole? You’re not the one laid out on the slab like a stuck pig.”

“Language Jason,” Alfred said, injecting the area with the lidocaine and finally getting to work.

The bullet was lodged next to a vein and was partially blocking it, which was probably part of the reason why Jason hadn’t bled out very quickly. Alfred clamped the vein and removed the bullet quickly, stitching the vein shut, then suturing the wound closed.

“You’ve given us a scare, but you’ll make a full recovery, Master Jason,” Alfred said, “In the meantime, you’ll need plenty of bedrest.”

“Joy,” Jason grumbled.

Alfred smiled and laid a gentle hand on Jason’s shoulder. “Welcome home, Master Jason,” he said softly.

Jason looked up at Alfred, something small and vulnerable in his eyes. He quickly looked away. “Thanks Alfred,” he said quietly.

Alfred squeezed his shoulder. There was a short debate on whether or not to move Jason upstairs to a more comfortable room, but Jason declined, preferring to stay in the medical bay for the time being. He also declined to have anyone stay with him until he fell asleep.

“There’s a whole host of awkward in the room. If anyone sits with me, I’m not going to get any rest,” Jason pointed out, “I’ll be fine.”

Even with Jason’s reassurances, Bruce still fussed over him for a few minutes, making sure he had a
cozy blanket, a firm pillow (Jason preferred firm pillows), a glass of water, and a way to call anyone downstairs.

“Would you fucking stop?” Jason finally snapped, “I’m fine. Don’t you have the other brats to deal with anyway?”

“Yes,” Bruce said, glancing to the entrance of the med bay. He pressed his mouth to a thin line; he did have to go check on the others, but he was reluctant to leave Jason.

“Just go,” Jason said, waving him off and settling into his cot. “I’m not going anywhere just yet.”

Bruce nodded, shifting awkwardly. “I’ll come down to check on you later,” he promised.

Jason rolled his eyes and turned away from Bruce, clearly done with the conversation. He was tired and he wanted to sleep. Bruce hesitated a moment longer, not wanting to just leave. Carefully, he brushed his hand through Jason’s hair, just a light touch, almost to reassure himself that it wasn’t all a dream, that Jason was a blood and bone reality, not a fabrication of his desperate mind.

With one last check to make sure all the machines were hooked up and working properly, Bruce finally left the medbay. The others were all still in the Cave, sitting around looking worn and tired. Tim was laying down on a workbench, his head pillowed on Steph’s thigh while she absently petted his hair. Cass was on Steph’s other side, leaning into her shoulder. Dick was sitting on one of the worktables, lazily swinging his foot back and forth. Damian had occupied the chair at the computer, looking comically small even as he tried to look imposing.

Bruce went to the cluster of sleepy teens. Tim stirred as he approached, blinking his eyes open blearily.

“Jason okay?” he asked, lifting his head slightly. He looked like he was fighting a losing battle to stay awake.

“He’ll be fine,” Bruce said softly.

Tim hummed. “Good,” he said, then promptly passed out cold. Steph huffed and poked him in the cheek, but he didn’t even twitch.

Bruce gave a faint smile. “I think that’s everyone’s cue to head to bed,” he said. Gently, so he didn’t rouse Tim from his sleep, he lifted Tim into his arms, cradling him like a small child. Tim just flopped in his arms limply, completely dead to the world.

As they all began to make motions to go upstairs and go to bed, Bruce noticed Damian still sitting at the computer, watching them like he was trying to decide what to do.

Bruce shifted Tim in his arms so he was more over his shoulder and Bruce could get a hand free. “Damian?” he called, “Why don’t you come upstairs and we can find you a room for tonight?”

Damian hopped out of the chair and walked to Bruce’s side. He frowned at Tim for a moment, but then looked up at Bruce, as though waiting for an instruction. Bruce simply held out his hand for Damian to take. The boy wrinkled his nose at the hand, but took it anyway; his hand was astoundingly small in Bruce’s grip.

Bruce lead them upstairs and through the Manor’s winding hallways to where the bedrooms were. Dick was shuffling into his, looking slightly damp, presumably from a shower. Cass didn’t have an official room in the Manor, but she’s all but claimed the bedroom on the far side of Bruce’s; a shock of blonde hair glimpsed through a crack in the doorway told him that Steph was sharing with her for
Bruce paused for the briefest moment outside of Jason’s door. He hardly went inside, it hadn’t been changed since before Jason had… but now it would need updating. The bed and the desk would be too small and the decor was a little too childish for the near-adult recuperating in the Cave. Bruce decided that it would ultimately be up to Jason on what to do with the room when he was feeling better.

Bruce stopped in front of Tim’s door and gently extracted his hand from Damian’s. “I’m just going to put Tim to bed and then we’ll find you a room, okay?” he said quietly.

Tim’s room had been left mostly as it was since he’d left so many months ago for Blüdhaven, aside from being cleaned by Alfred. Bruce pulled the covers back on Tim’s bed and gently settled him onto the mattress. He was busying himself with removing Tim’s shoes when he noticed Damian crawl up onto the bed next to Tim.

“I’ll sleep here for tonight,” Damian announced, his tone suggesting a decree rather than a request.

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “There are plenty of bedrooms,” he said.

Damian scoffed and settled down next to Tim, curling close. Tim sighed in his sleep and turned towards Damian slightly. Bruce was too tired to try to argue with Damian and decided to leave it for now. They’d find Damian his own room at some point in the future.

“Sleep well,” Bruce said as he prepared to leave. He stood at the bedside for a moment, watching Tim sleep peacefully with Damian protectively curled around him. Bruce brushed a stray lock of hair from tim’s forehead and then gently laid his hand on Damian’s head. Damian stared up at Bruce curiously, but said nothing. Bruce made sure to tuck them in, then left the room.

With a deep sigh, Bruce finally left the room, closing the door softly. The house creaked and groaned around him, settling for the night. The entire house seemed to breath deeply, like a sigh of relief, relaxed and peaceful, complete. Bruce retired to his room and fell into one of the most restful sleeps he’d had in a while.

Waking up in the medbay of the Cave couldn’t have been more surreal to Jason if he’d woken up as a giant bug. Like Gregor Samsa, Jason stayed prone on the bed for a long while, contemplating his situation. Being back in the Manor wasn’t something he’d ever thought he’d do again, unless it was to burn the place to the ground. He’d harboured all kind of wild fantasies about what he’d do to the place once he finally put his plans for revenge in place, but none of them had involved recuperating in the medbay as Bruce and the others slept peacefully above him.

Jason suddenly felt as though his skin was crawling. Forcing himself to keep his breathing steady, Jason carefully removed the machines from his person and got out of the bed. The glass of water on the nightstand that Bruce had placed there the night before taunted him; he was thirsty as hell, but the memory of Bruce fussing over him, like he was fifteen and had hurt himself on patrol, chased itself across his mind. Instead of taking for the water that was within arm’s reach, Jason stood and went to the sink, filling a glass and gulping it down.

Once Jason’s skin stopped feeling like it was trying to peel itself off, he left the medbay, wandering around the Cave. Some things were familiar; the giant penny and the robot dinosaur greeted him with
somber nostalgia, but there were many new additions to the trophy room that Jason didn't recognise, watching him from their glass cases like accusations for the time he'd been away. Jason traced his hand across the wooden stand of a strange looking device that was painted green with black question marks all over it, wondering what weird scheme Eddie had tried with this particular gadget.

Jason wandered through the trophies for a minute, before he finally found it, the thing Tim had told him about. He wasn't sure how he’d missed it really; it was the most obvious thing in the room, standing prominently and backlit just a few feet from the Batcomputer. Jason’s uniform stood proudly, tattered and nearly shredded to places, in a solid glass case, the sliced up mask staring at Jason like an old friend he’d forgotten. On the solid wooden bas, the epitaph read *A Good Soldier*.

Jason stared down at the epitaph for a second, burning the words into his brain. A good soldier? Was that how Bruce remembered him? Loyal and obedient until he wasn’t? Jason could feel his skin start to crawl again as he started getting angry.

“Jason?” came Bruce’s voice from behind him.

Jason whirled around to see Bruce coming down the stairs into the Cave. When he saw what Jason was standing in front of, he frowned. “I was coming down to check on you,” he said, “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“I don’t sleep much anymore,” Jason answered, turning back to the monument.

Bruce came up to Jason’s side, and they stood together for a moment, looking at the glass case. Neither said anything for a long while, Jason unsure of what say first. The Robin mask’s hollow eyes felt judgemental, and Jason could almost hear his fifteen year old voice, yelling at him to just *say* something.

“Why?” Jason blurted out, the word bubbling up almost without his permission.

Bruce took a deep breath. “I needed to see it,” he said, “I needed to be reminded, everyday, for the rest of my life, what the consequences were if I faltered for even a moment.”

Jason looked over at Bruce, studying his face. Bruce was not an expressive person, but Jason had lived with him for three years, and he’d gotten pretty good at reading him. Even now, to his surprise, Jason could read Bruce pretty well, and he could see that Bruce was in pain. Jason couldn’t be sure if it was the conversation or just looking at the case, but Bruce was hurt, deeply hurt, and Jason was part of the cause.

*Good*, Jason thought viciously. He wanted Bruce to hurt, Jason wanted him to feel it deep in his bones, the pain of what he’d done to him. Jason had made so many plans to make Bruce pay for what he’d done, to destroy everything that he’d built, then finally destroy Bruce himself.

But as Jason watched Bruce, he could see that Bruce was hurt, the anguish easily discernible in his eyes as he looked down at Jason’s memorial. He reached out and laid a hand on the cool glass.

Bruce took a shuddering breath. “I’m so sorry Jason,” he said, voice tight. “I failed you, and I understand if you could never forgive me for letting you…” He swallowed, unable to finish his sentence.

Jason pressed his lips together. “I’m not mad at you for not saving me,” he said.

Bruce looked up in surprise. “You’re not?” he asked, shocked.

Jason turned his eyes away from Bruce’s face, unable to stand his direct gaze. “I was never mad
about that,” he said, “I got my own dumbass killed, trusting the wrong people.” Jason remembered watching Sheila out of the corner of his eye as she smoked a cigarette while he was beaten to death. “There was nothing you could have done about it.”

Bruce looked at Jason in complete shock. “Jason…” he said, seemingly at a loss for words.

Jason felt Bruce’s gaze on him and gritted his teeth. “I don’t care about you not saving me,” he said, “But why the hell on God’s green earth is the Joker still alive?”

The silence slithered around them like a living thing, a predator waiting for its moment to make the killing strike. Jason finally looked up at Bruce, meeting his gaze. There was some sort of kerfuffle amongst the bats above them, sending a wave of chitters echoing through the Cave.

Bruce set his mouth in a hard line. “Jason… The Joker is…” he looked away and brought a hand up to rub at his mouth, fumbling around for the right words. Jason could be patient when he needed to be, and waited for whatever excuse Bruce would come up with to justify letting a madman live.

Bruce turned back to the monument and scowled darkly, lost in thought for a moment. “I’m responsible for a lot of things Jason,” he said finally, slowly and carefully pronouncing each word, like he wasn’t sure how each would land. “Dick, Tim, Cassandra, Barbara, every single person in Gotham, I’m responsible for every one of them. I can’t let personal vengeance make a mess of that. If I… if Batman killed, for his own gain or otherwise, what’s to stop me from leading Nightwing and Robin down the same road? I can’t do that to them.” He frowned deeply. “No matter what’s been taken from me.”

Jason gritted his teeth together slightly. That… he supposed he could kind of understand that. Even by the time Jason was just starting out as Robin, Batman had become a symbol to Gotham, and as much as it rankled Jason, as much as he didn’t agree with Bruce’s methods, he could see the logic Bruce presented.

Not for lack of trying. Tim’s words floated across his brain again. According to him, Bruce had tried to kill the Joker, blinded by grief and the need to take justice for what the man had done. Bruce had never followed through however, and the Joker was still out there, killing indiscriminately and making life hell for so many people.

Jason licked his lips. “If you didn’t have to be responsible?” he asked, “Would you do it then? If it was just you, not Batman, would you kill him?”

Bruce was quiet for a while, contemplative. “No,” he finally said.

A spike of rage impaled Jason’s stomach. He gritted his teeth and prepared to lash out, but Bruce began talking again.

“I’d break him,” Bruce said, staring into the eyes of the mask. “I’d shatter every bone in his body, but I wouldn’t kill him. I’d leave him alive, in agony. And when he healed, I’d do it again. And again, and again, for the rest of his life. I’d make him suffer, until he knew the kind of pain I go through every damned day.” Bruce’s fists clenched tightly. “Death would be a mercy I’d make him beg for.”

It was Jason’s turn to be shocked. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t that. The anger in Bruce’s voice rang true, and Jason could almost see it in the glint of his eye, the kind of person Bruce would become if he let himself go, if he flung himself off of the edge and took life and death into his own hands. Jason wasn’t sure if he was afraid or comforted by that knowledge.
After a long pause, Jason had to break the tense silence. “That’s pretty fucking dark, Boss.”

Bruce didn’t relax. “The deepest pits of hell would be too good for him,” he growled.

Jason let out a long breath, something in him soothed. There was at least a part of Bruce that wanted the Joker dead. It didn’t make everything okay, it didn’t fix everything, but at least Jason now knew the extent to which Bruce might go, if he were pushed far enough. For now, that could be enough.

Tim woke up sometime in the late afternoon, his exhaustion having caught up to him now that he was safe. Damian was in his room, casually rifling through his things and making a mess. Tim groaned and sat up, feeling groggy despite the long hours he must have slept.

“What time ‘sit?” Tim slurred, rubbing his face to try and wake himself up.

“Two forty seven in the afternoon,” Damian answered, unperturbed by being caught red handed invading Tim’s privacy. He tossed a shirt of Tim’s into a growing pile on the floor and turned to face him. “You’ve been asleep for nearly fifteen hours.”

“Crap,” Tim groaned pulling himself out of bed. He felt gritty and he knew if he smelled himself he’d pass out again. “I’m going to shower,” he said, “Did you already wash?”

“I made use of your facilities,” Damian said, reaching into Tim’s drawer again and pulling out an old button up Tim had forgotten he’d left at the Manor. “They’re not what I expected from someone of Father’s means.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “You’ll get used to it,” he said, crossing the room to go to his bathroom. Almost all of the larger bedrooms had their own ensuites, so there was seldom any fighting for the first shower in the morning.

Tim took his time in the shower, scrubbing off as much of the caked on dirt that he’d carried with him all the way from the desert, trying to get into as many nooks and crannies as he could reach. When he finished, he was tempted to just stand under the shower spray for a while, but his stomach growling at him told him that wasn’t going to fly. Tim got out and wrapped himself in the fluffiest towel he could find before dressing in the pyjamas he’d taken into the bathroom with himself.

Damian was still going through Tim’s drawers when Tim came out of the bathroom. Tim noticed that Damian had dressed in some of Tim’s old clothes that he’d likely found at the back of Tim’s closet or dresser. They were only slightly big on him, but they still made him look so young.

“Come on,” Tim said, heading for the door. “Let’s head down to the kitchen and see if we can’t find something to eat.”

Damian hopped up from the pile of clothing he’d made and came to Tim’s side, following him through the house. He looked around curiously as they walked through the halls, occasionally stopping to look at a painting or decoration.

“So this is our ancestral home?” Damian asked, looking up at a painting of some distant relative of the Wayne family, preserved in an ostentatiously garish frame.

“Yeah, the Waynes have lived on this land since they arrived in the New World, though I think this
house was built some time in the mid eighteen hundreds,” Tim said, trying to remember the exact year. “Bruce would know more about it if you want to learn about your family history.”

Damian raised an eyebrow at Tim. “Our family history,” he corrected.

Tim’s steps faltered, and the world seemed to shift around him. The house that he’d once felt like a guest in—and even now it was hard for him to feel completely comfortable—suddenly recontextualized itself. Tim was no longer in the house of his mentor, but the house of his father, his grandfather, and all the Waynes who came before. Tim was a part of the Wayne legacy, if only in blood. This was the house that belonged to Tim’s family.

“Right,” Tim said quietly, unsure of what to say. He felt as though his world had tilted or shifted slightly to the left. All the things he’d pushed away during his time being kidnapped and on the run were starting to creep up on him, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to deal with them.

Bruce was Tim’s biological father, and Tim couldn’t ignore that anymore, not in this house. The very same house that Jack Drake had threatened Bruce with a gun in, and then stormed out after rejecting Tim. The memory of that horrible two days came back with enough force to almost knock Tim off his feet. Tim was going to have to deal with Jack, with Bruce, with being a Wayne, and everything that came with that.

They reached the kitchen finally. Bruce, Dick, and Alfred were talking quietly amongst themselves when Tim and Damian walked in. Dick immediately brightened when he saw Tim and vaulted over the kitchen island, landing in front of Tim with complete grace.

“Tim!” he greeted cheerfully, sweeping Tim into a tight hug. “You’re finally up!”

Tim smiled as the air was squeezed from his lungs. “I’m up,” he said, “I’m surprised you didn’t come wake me up.”

“I was going to, but Alfred said not to bug you,” Dick said, setting Tim back on his feet, but not pulling away from the hug just yet.

“Master Tim has had what I can only imagine was a very trying journey. He deserved his rest,” Alfred said, putting two plates heaped with lunch down on the kitchen island. “I’m sure you boys are hungry.”

Tim’s stomach took the opportunity to growl loudly. Tim flushed a little, but Alfred only smiled and set out two glasses of juice. “Master Damian, I wasn’t sure what you’d prefer to eat, so if this is not to your liking, I’m sure we can find something else.”

Damian hopped up onto the kitchen stool and inspected the food. Tim gave him a raised eyebrow, hoping he communicated that Damian should at least try to be polite. Damian scoffed, but began eating anyway.

“This is satisfactory for now,” Damian said primly, eating in small, proper bites.

Alfred let out an amused hum. “How very kind of you to say, young Master,” he said. Oh, Alfred was going to have fun sassing this little brat.

Tim struggled not to just wolf down his food, knowing he’d only give himself a stomach ache. As he ate, he tried to ignore Bruce’s gaze on him, instead trying to chat with Dick as best he could. When he finished, he finally looked up at Bruce, who was trying to act casual, leaning against the counter as he sipped his coffee.
“Hey Dick?” Tim asked, “Why don’t you take Damian for a tour of the Manor?”

Dick glanced from Bruce to Tim, knowing exactly what was going on. “Sure, I’d love to,” he said, hopping up from where he was sitting. “Come on kid, I’ll show you the place.”

“I am not a child,” Damian scoffed. He looked up at Tim, half accusatory and half confused.

Tim patted his shoulder. “You’ll be fine, Dick is nice,” he reassured Damian. “You should get to know your oldest brother.”

“Tt,” Damian huffed, but he followed Dick anyway, soundly rejecting his suggestion that they hold hands so Damian wouldn’t get lost.

Alfred busied himself with the dishes, leaving Tim and Bruce to converse. As Tim tried to think of where to start, Bruce downed the last of his coffee and stood from leaning on the counter.

“Why don’t we go to the study?” Bruce suggested. Tim nodded and got up to follow Bruce through the halls of the Manor, the grand old house watching them quietly as they worked their way through it’s mazes.

Tim remembered being six years old and walking through these halls. He remembered feeling as though he wasn’t alone, even when no one was with him. Far from being creeped out, it was a comfort to feel as though he was being watched, like someone was looking after him at all times. His home, with its own empty halls and catalogue-perfect furniture, had always felt so empty and cold, even when Tim’s parents were home. There had been something so comforting about being in Wayne Manor that Tim hadn’t understood at the time, and wasn’t even sure he understood completely now.

They reached the study, the study, the one where Tim had first met Bruce, where Bruce had given him the news that had shattered his world and started this whole mess. Tim wasn’t sure if this particular room comforted him or made him more anxious.

Bruce closed the door behind them and they stared at each other, awkward silence chewing on the air between them. Tim decided it was probably best to bite the bullet and just dive right in. Bruce seemed to have the same idea.

“So we should—”

“I suppose you’re wondering—”

They both stopped, looking at one another in mild surprise. Bruce smiled slightly and went to the couch to sit down. He patted the cushion beside him and waited for Tim to take a seat.

“We should probably talk,” Tim said as he sat next to Bruce. He could already feel the awkwardness starting to fill the room.

“We probably should,” Bruce said.

They sat in silence for a while. After a few tense minutes, Bruce finally spoke.

“I’ve been keeping on top of the media. People wondered where you went to,” Bruce said, “I gave a statement saying that you’d decided to spend some time abroad, to figure things out.”

“Did that work?” Tim asked.
“Mostly, though there are a few fringes out there who believe I murdered you and tried to cover it up to protect the Wayne family legacy,” Bruce said, mouth quirking just slightly.

Tim snorted. “Of course,” he said, “What did you tell my d—what did you tell Jack?”

Bruce’s smile faded and he furrowed his brows. “Tim… we haven’t heard from Jack,” he said slowly.

“Since I left?” Tim asked.

“Since the night he was here,” Bruce explained, “He left Gotham and cut all ties. I tried to keep tabs on him, but I was more preoccupied with finding you.”

Tim felt his stomach sink. “So he just left?” he asked, hating how small his voice sounded.

Bruce nodded. “I’m sorry Tim,” he said, making an aborted movement with his arm, like he was going to put it around Tim’s shoulders. “I can look for him if you want.”

Tim curled his arms around his midsection, like he was trying to hold himself together. “No, that’s okay,” he said, “He’s probably just gone on a dig or something, or travelling, to get his head on straight. He does that sometimes when he needs a break from stuff. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.”

“Tim…” Bruce said, frowning deeply. He let out a long sigh, eyes going sad. “I’m sure you’re right Tim,” he said, “He’ll probably call soon and we can work out some kind of joint custody system.”

Tim smiled, relieved that Bruce was playing along. He couldn't face the alternative. Not yet. “Yeah like, weekends and holidays or something. Every other month,” he said.

Bruce nodded, but said nothing. Slowly, so Tim could pull away if he wanted to, Bruce gently placed his arms around Tim’s shoulders, pulling him into his side. Tim simply let himself be pulled at first, but then he leaned into Bruce’s side, resting his head on his shoulder. As tears began to drip down Tim’s face and sobs escaped his throat, Bruce continued to maintain the silence, a steady presence for Tim to break apart on.

Chapter End Notes

Damn, that's a lot of feels. There's still a lot of things left to deal with, so everyone just hang on for a bit alright?

Also, one thing I want to mention; in this AU, Bruce's attitude towards Jason's return is slightly different, and there’s a reason for that. To Bruce, Jason never tried to kill him. He doesn't know about the car bomb (yet) and Jason never lashed out at him, so he doesn’t have the same kind of response to Jason. He hasn't had the chance to be hurt by Jason the same way, so Bruce is a little more open with him. He considers the situation more as just having his son back, rather than having his son back to haunt him. There's a lot more nuance to it, but that's the main point I wanted to make.
Part V Chapter iv: Settlement

Chapter Notes

This took so much longer than I thought it would. I've been hitting wall after wall of unproductivity and writers block. I finally got this to an acceptable length, but it still ended up short and I forgot to put in a contest. These last chapters are mostly going to be just a lot of shorter scenes tying everything together. We're nearly to the end you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After another thorough examination by Alfred, Jason was cleared to leave the medbay and wander around the house to his liking, so long as he promised not to overstrain himself and get plenty of rest.

“We can put you in your old room,” Bruce suggested, “But it might be a little outdated.”

Jason thought about his old room, the way Tim had described it to him. They kept your old room exactly as you left it, he’d said.

“I’ll stay in a guest room for now,” Jason said, “Until we figure out what to do with it.”

“Are you sure?” Bruce asked. He seemed worried for some reason. Jason nodded, not wanting to think too hard about it. “Alright,” Bruce said, “We’ll get a room set up for you.”

Jason decided to wander around the house after that, re-familiarizing himself with the Manor. If being in the Cave had been weird, this approached Uncanny Valley territory. It had changed over the course of the few years he was gone, but there was so much that was the same that it left Jason feeling out of place. It was like walking through a room where all the furniture had been changed. It was still the same space, and everything was in the right place, but the couch wasn't the same colour, the coffee table wasn’t the right shape. Jason passed a photograph of Dick in police dress blues in one of the hallways. Things had changed and Jason hadn’t been around. The Manor had moved on without him.

Jason passed through the hallways, feeling like a ghost, like he was stuck in time. As he wandered, he realized he’d come down the hallway where all the family bedrooms were. Bruce, Dick, now Tim and Cassandra, probably Damian soon. The door to Jason’s old room stood like a sentinel, silent and imposing, guarding the gate to Jason’s past. Jason stood in front of it for a moment, frozen on the spot, unable to move forwards or backwards.

“Jason?”

Jason jumped, startled. Dick watched Jason curiously, cautiously, like he was worried that Jason might do something. Dick had changed since Jason had seen him last; he seemed more sure of himself, wiser and more mature. Jason wondered what he must look like to Dick.

“You’re blocking the hallway,” Damian huffed, popping his head out from behind Dick and scowling up at Jason.

Jason huffed. “Who the hell are you to boss me around in my own home?” he growled.

“This is my home,” Damian scoffed, “It belongs to my family.”
“It’s all our home,” Dick said, trying to mediate the situation. Jason noticed he looked a little frazzled and gave an amused smile to himself. Anyone would be a little frazzled dealing with Damian for more than a few minutes.

“I lived here longer than you’ve been in out of diapers, brat,” Jason goaded, glad to be getting some of his aggression out. Damian was conveniently reactive.

Damian snarled, puffing up with all the ferociousness of a kitten. “You are an urchin Father took pity on and dragged in from the street! I am his blood son! This home is my birthright!” he shouted, “You will show me respect!”

“I respect a well done piece of toast more than I respect you,” Jason said, unimpressed.

Damian hissed, then grinned viciously, “I would tell you that I would make your death slow and painful, but that would just be repeating history, wouldn’t it?”

Jason worked his jaw; now that was hitting below the belt. “To be honest, death would be preferable over having to listen to you for more than five minutes.”

“Okay, okay, why don’t we calm down?” Dick suggested, reaching for Damian like one might reach for a potentially rabid animal. “Why don’t we go down to the kitchen and have some tea or something? Doesn’t that sound nice?”

Damian paid no attention to Dick, still snarling up at Jason. “When you least expect it, I will slit your throat,” he hissed.

“You can’t even reach my throat,” Jason said.

Damian growled and looked like he was about to lunge, but he stalled, his eye catching something behind Jason.

“Damian?” Tim called, “What are you doing?” he asked. He looked tired and his eyes were red; had he been crying?

Damian went back to glaring at Jason. “He insulted me and disrespected our home,” he growled.

Tim sighed. “I’m sure he didn’t mean it Damian,” he said.

Damian bristled and looked like he was about to attack again, but Tim saw it coming. “Hey Damian, want to go explore the Cave for a bit?” he said before Damian could attack Jason.

Damian stopped, suddenly torn between ripping into Jason and exploring more of the Manor. Tim waited patiently for Damian to take the bait, and was rewarded when Damian darted past Jason, giving him an impressive glare as he passed, and came to Tim’s side.

“Let’s go,” Damian said, starting to follow Tim. He stopped to turn back to Jason. “This is far from over,” he growled.

“Have fun,” Jason cooed, waving at Damian.

Damian made a sour face, but turned and hurried after Tim. Dick walked up to Jason’s side, letting out a long sigh.

“He seems like a nice kid,” Dick said, “Once you get to know him.”
“I know him, and trust me, he’s a little shit,” he said. He glanced at Dick out of the corner of his eye. “Surprised you didn’t strangle the brat.”

“I like kids,” Dick said, sounding mildly offended.

Jason raised an eyebrow. “You never liked me,” he said.

Dick looked over at Jason, something incredibly sad in his eyes. “I liked you,” he said quietly. “I still like you. You’re my brother, I love you.”

“Oh spare me the mush,” Jason said, rolling his eyes. “It took you a year to say one nice thing about me to my face.”

Dick’s cheeks coloured. “I… I admit I wasn’t the best older brother to you,” he admitted quietly, but then he looked up, eyes earnest and shiny with emotion. “But I… we’ve got a second chance now. We can start over, get it right this time.”

Jason stared into Dick’s eyes, reading the emotion there. Dick gave him a watery smile, but it faded quickly. “Jason, I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I should have—” he choked on his words, “I should have been there.”

It took Jason a moment to figure out what Dick was talking about. “Fucking hell, this whole house is filled with guilt complexes,” he groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Dick, I don't care about that. You weren’t even on the fucking planet when I bit the dust.”

Dick looked a little shocked. “Jason, I—”

“No, shut up,” Jason said, “Quit making it about you. Not everything revolves around your fat head.”

Dick blinked, then huffed out a small laugh, scrubbing at his eyes. “Who are you calling a fat head? You’re the one who grew like ten sizes.”

Jason couldn’t help but grin; this felt much more natural. “Whatever, I’m bigger than you now and that’s what matters.”

“You’re not bigger than me,” Dick said incredulously.

Jason scoffed. “I am so bigger than you. That body armour was so tight on me it compressed a gunshot wound. I’m bigger than you.”

“Being fatter than me doesn’t make you bigger,” Dick said, rolling his eyes. “There is no way you’re bigger than me.”

“Oh, is that how this is gonna go?” Jason said, “You wanna bet I’m not bigger than you?”

Dick was smiling brightly by now. He strode forward and put his arm around Jason’s shoulders. “Come on, let’s go have Alfred take our measurements,” he said, “And prove once and for all that I’m still bigger than you are.”

“Asshole,” Jason said, walking alongside Dick. “The only thing bigger about you is your ridiculous ass.”

The two of them laughed and snarked each other all the way to where Alfred was folding linen in the laundry room. It didn’t take much for them to convince him to get his measuring tape and take their
measurements. After thoroughly proving that Jason was indeed bigger than Dick now, they went to the kitchen to find some snacks.

“The best part is that I’m not even finished growing yet,” Jason crowed, still grinning. “I’m going to get even bigger than this.”

“Whatever,” Dick huffed, swatting at Jason gently. It felt easy and natural, just the same as when they used to bicker at each other when they were young. Jason felt a weight sliding from his shoulders as Dick finally grabbed a dish towel and started whipping Jason with it.

Damian followed along at Tim’s side as he gave a tour of the Cave, pointing out different artifacts and explaining the story behind them. Damian listened intently, trying to visualize the capers that Tim was describing. The sound of their talking echoed strangely through the Cave, and Damian could hear the chitters of the bats above them. Tim looked tired and pale, but Damian didn’t know how to ask him to stop, to tell him he shouldn’t be upset because they were home with their father now and things would be okay. Damian didn’t know what to do.

Tim wandered them past another display, explaining the complicated plot someone called The Penguin had used to try and take over the city. He rubbed his eyes for the fifth time in as many minutes, but Damian couldn’t stop just listening to him talk. Somehow, Tim seemed to need to keep talking.

A noise behind them had Damian turning. Bruce was coming down the stairs into the Cave. He spotted them and raised an eyebrow, frowning slightly. He made his way over, and Tim didn’t notice him until he was practically right next to them.

“I thought you were going to go lie down for a while?” Bruce asked Tim, laying a hand on his arm, like Tim was about to fall over.

Tim managed a tired smile up at Bruce. “I’m fine,” he said, “It can wait a bit. Damian wanted to see the Cave.”

Damian frowned; Tim had offered to show him the Cave, why was he lying? Bruce frowned as well, his gaze falling on Damian for a moment before they went back to Tim. “Why don’t I show him the Cave?” he said, “You go upstairs and lie down for a while, okay?”

“It’s fine Bruce,” Tim tried to protest, “I can do it.”

Bruce looked down at Damian again, and this time something in his eyes softened. “Go upstairs Tim. Have a nap. You’ve earned the right to be lazy,” he said.

Tim looked like he was about to protest again, but Damian shoved him from behind. “Sleep, imbecile,” he ordered, “You look as though you’re going to pass out.”

Tim looked down at Damian and then back at Bruce. He took a breath, gearing himself up for more arguments, but then deflated. “Okay,” he said, rubbing his eyes yet again. “I’ll see you at dinner,” he said, shuffling towards the stairs.

“Get some rest,” Bruce called, “I’ll come up and see you in a while.”
Tim gave a half-wave and disappeared up the stairs, leaving Damian and Bruce alone in the Cave together. Damian looked up and Bruce, and Bruce likewise stared down at him. The awkward silence was almost thick enough to cut.

“Did you sleep well?” Bruce asked.

“I slept adequately,” Damian answered. He shifted from foot to foot, unsure of what to do.

Bruce let the silence circle for a moment. “Was there anything in particular you wanted to know about?” he asked, gesturing to the many displays and artifacts through the Cave.

Damian looked around, trying to think of something Tim hadn’t told him about. “What’s that one?” he asked, pointing to the large mechanical T-Rex in the corner.

Bruce smiled slightly. “That? I got that way back when Dick was Robin,” he said, beginning to explain the story behind the animatronic monster.

They spent over an hour going through the many trophies, Bruce explaining what each of them was in much more detail than Tim had. His story telling wasn’t as good as Tim’s, but Damian didn’t mind, he almost preferred his father’s more stark retellings.

They made their way through the Cave for a while until they reached the training matts, set into a lower part of the Cave. Damian looked through the railings on the side and down into the area.

“I have not trained since I left Grandfather’s compound,” Damian said, counting the weapons on the rack next to the mats. “Mother would not be pleased with me.”

Bruce stood next to him, not saying anything for a moment. Then he laid a hand on Damian’s small shoulder. “Why don’t we go a fews rounds? I’d like to see what you can do,” he said.

Damian looked up at Bruce and nodded. Truth be told, Damian was nervous to spar against his father. Mother had told him over and over what a great fighter his father was, how he always won and never held back. They made their way down to the training area and onto the mats.

“Let’s just stick with hand to hand for now,” Bruce suggested, “I just want to see where you’re at with your skills.”

Damian nodded and dropped into a fighting stance. Bruce dropped into one as well and Damian wasted no time, launching into his attack.

Bruce didn’t seem to have expected Damian to come at him so hard, but he quickly compensated and matched Damian’s ferocity. He met Damian blow-for-blow, but he never exceeded Damian’s force, keeping level with Damian at all times. Damian had trained with masters of the deadly arts, and he could tell Bruce was highly skilled. Damian gave it his all, but he could hardly land a hit on Bruce. If fighting Tim had been difficult, sparring with Batman was downright impossible.

After nearly forty-five minutes of constant movement, Damian was breathing hard and starting to slow. Bruce got a crease in his brow, but he didn't stop. The fight continued until Damian was near to collapsing. Bruce finally caught Damian’s little fist in his hand and held, effectively stopping the match.

“Alright, that’s enough,” he said, “Let’s take a break.”

Damian was gasping, trying to keep his feet steady. He was out of practice and he’d overexerted himself trying to impress his father; Mother would be so disappointed with him.
Bruce laid a hand on Damian’s shoulder. “You did good,” he said, “A little too hard out of the gate, but you’ve got talent.” Bruce smiled slightly, just an uptick at the corner of his mouth. “I’m impressed.”

Something cold and hot rushed through Damian’s chest at the words. He ducked his head, unable to keep looking his father in the face. Bruce gave his shoulder a squeeze before taking his hand away.

“Come on, why don’t we head upstairs and see if we can’t pick a room for you?” Bruce suggested. He held out his hand again, the way he had the night before, when he’d effortlessly carried Tim in his other arm. “I’m sure we can find you something that you’ll like.”

Damian looked at the hand. He’d never really held hands with anyone. When he needed to follow his mother, he’d grip her skirt, careful not to pull too hard. She’d never really offered her hand unless it was a special occasion. Carefully, he placed his hand in Bruce’s much larger one. It was warm and calloused, and Damian could probably spend hours picking out the individual scars. Damian couldn’t really hold onto Bruce’s hand the same way and mostly just wrapped his hand around two of Bruce’s fingers.

Bruce squeezed his hand slightly, staring down at Damian contemplatively. He slowly began leading him away from the mats towards the stairs. None of this was anything Damian was used to, but he supposed he could learn.

Jason sat at the kitchen island, late in the night, eating a snack Alfred had made for him while the elderly butler washed the dishes. Jason had offered to do them, but Alfred had steadfastly refused, threatening to banish him out of the kitchen if he kept pushing. So Jason had parked himself at the island, eating peach crumble topped with homemade whipped cream.

“Mm,” Jason hummed around a mouthful of sweet dessert. “This is what I missed the most.”

“The peach crumble?” Alfred asked, grinning slightly as he dried a dish and set it on the drying rack. Alfred had broken out the good china for dinner, the kind that absolutely under no circumstances went into the dishwasher. Not that the dishwasher got used often anyway.

“The food,” Jason said, “Even when I was at my batshit craziest, I could never think anything bad about the food.”

Alfred smiled. “I’m flattered,” he said, turning back to the sink, his back to Jason.

For most of Jason’s life, food had been a primary concern of his. When was he going to eat again? How much was he going to get? Would there only be enough for him or could he share with Mom too? On the streets it had been even worse, and there were quite a few times that Jason remembered being so hungry he wasn’t sure he’d wake up if he went to sleep. Jason had tried his best to steal or buy fresh stuff, but there were times when he barely had the energy to rifle through trash bins.

The Manor had been the first place Jason had never had to worry about food. It had taken him ages to get used to it, to having food just around whenever he wanted it, but Bruce had done his best to accommodate Jason’s many and varied neuroses. Alfred had been great at always reassuring Jason that there would always be plenty of food whenever Jason got hungry, that he didn’t have to hoard food in his room or make emergency stashes all over the Manor. One way he’d helped Jason was introducing him to the joys of cooking, giving Jason a sense of control over his own food.
Even on his darkest days, Jason could never bring himself to condemn Alfred or the Manor for that. Not only for the delicious food, but for the security and sense of control over his own hunger. In his imaginings for revenge, he always left Alfred out, or sent him away somehow.

Jason contemplated trying to explain this to Alfred, to let him know how much it had meant to him, when he noticed something strange. Alfred’s shoulders were shaking and he was leaning against the counter. Jason could see him gripping the edge of the sink, knuckles white with pressure.

“Alfie?” Jason called, “You good?”

Alfred sucked in a sharp breath. “Sorry,” he said, voice cracking, “I’m just… I’m so happy to have you home.”

He was crying, Jason realized. Alfred was crying.

Alfred took a sharp breath and straightened, squaring his shoulders. He briefly scrubbed at his eyes before clearing his throat. “If you’re done with your dish, I’ll wash it for you,” he said, forcing his breathing to even out.

In the years Jason had known him, he’d always seen Alfred as a rock, not just for him, but for the whole family. Unshakeable, dependable, stiff-upper-lip Alfred, always there with the first aid kit and a witty remark. Seeing him near to breaking like this made the peach crumble and whipped cream curdle in his stomach, like the universe was out of whack. Maybe that was unfair to Alfred, but Jason had never seen him like this, he had never thought to expect it.

Slowly, Jason got out of his chair and took his dish to the sink. He stood behind Alfred and laid the dish on the counter at his elbow, making no move to reach out to touch him. Alfred took the dish and plunged it into the warm soapy water and began to scrub it with a little too much vigour. Jason didn’t know if he should flee, leave Alfred to his emotions, or try and help in some way.

Hesitating nearly the entire way, Jason reached out a hand and brushed his fingers against Alfred’s back. Alfred didn’t tense or jolt, but he did pause for a moment in his scrubbing.

“I’m happy to be back,” Jason said, and it wasn’t a lie. Waking up in his own coffin and having to claw his way out had been a special kind of hell, and everything after that hadn’t been a walk in the park, but Jason was glad to be alive. He wasn’t sure what he of all people had done to deserve a second chance, but he’d be a fool if he wasn’t grateful to whatever Powers That Be that had seen fit to give it to him. He wanted to make the most out of what he’d been given; at one point that had meant brutal revenge, and though now he wasn’t so sure, he still counted his lucky stars to be alive.

Alfred took a long, deep breath, leaning back just a fraction of an inch, pressing back into Jason’s fingers. They stayed there for a while, the moment stretching into a bubble of infinity. Then Alfred cleared his throat again. “I’ll have to check your stitches again before you go to bed tonight,” he said, “Does it hurt at all?”

Jason’s side twinged slightly. “Not really,” Jason said, “I told you I don’t really feel pain the same way anymore.”

Alfred dried his hands and dug a handkerchief out of his pocket. He quickly dried his eyes and turned to face Jason. Anyone else might be fooled, but Jason could see just a bit of redness around Alfred’s eyes, so small he might have missed it if he hadn’t known. “We’ll have to run some tests,” he said, “Have you had any test done already?”

“Talia ran some tests,” Jason said, frowning. “I never saw the results.”
Alfred quirked a brow. “Well, I suppose that is to be expected of her,” he said disdainfully, “Given her penchant for keeping secrets.”

Jason thought of the little eight year old that had taken up residence in the Manor. “Yeah,” he said. How had he ever been fooled by Talia’s tricks?

Alfred looked into his eyes, and something passed between them. Jason couldn’t help it any more; he leaned forward, Alfred’s arms coming up to catch him. They stood together in the kitchen, their space, where Alfred had first taught him that he had the power to control his own life, holding each other for a very long time.

Tim woke up late in the night to a silent house. A quick glance at the clock told him that Bruce and the others were probably already on patrol. A few pangs of regret filtered through his chest, knowing that he should be out there with them, but they faded quickly. Tim was much too out of practice to be any use to Batman.

Slowly getting up and stretching, Tim decided that he could at least wander down into the Cave for a bit and see if Oracle needed backup in her hacking or anything. Maybe he’d even get a few rounds of training in as well. After brushing his teeth and changing into some clean clothes, Tim headed down.

The Cave was quiet when he arrived, not even Alfred puttering around, so Tim guessed it was a quiet night so far. He wandered over to the computer to check on everyone, but no one seemed to be in any distress. Tim turned and headed for the training mats, mentally going through his workout.

Tim stopped when he noticed a figure near the mats. Jason was casually running his hands over the racks of weapons, gaze far away, like he was adrift in old memories. He hadn’t noticed Tim yet, too focused on what he was doing. Tim watched him for a few minutes, wondering what was going through his head.

Jason’s hand stilled over a box of hand wrap tape on a shelf, fingers twitching minutely. Tim remembered following Jason and Bruce years ago, watching Batman and Robin work. Jason had always preferred his own fists to any sort of weapon, had always been a brawler as compared to Batman’s more polished fighting. Tim had been entranced by the way Robin had moved; it was different than the way Batman or Nightwing moved, like the world couldn’t touch them. Robin had moved like he knew the world could knock him down, but he’d just come back up swinging. Tim had always envied that about Jason.

*I get you out of here, and you give up Robin, for good.*

Tim bit his lip and quietly stepped back from the mats, his stomach clenching. Jason had kept his promise and gotten them safely (more or less) to Gotham. Tim was a man of his word, and he’d made a promise to Jason. He turned and went to his locker to find his uniform.

Alfred had cleaned and pressed the red, green, and yellow uniform, and must have gone in to shake any dust off over the months Tim wasn’t there. The domino mask rested on top of the folded pile, staring up at Tim. Tim picked up the mask and ran his fingers over the molded polymer (lightweight and flexible, but strong enough to offer moderate protection), his stomach still coiling. He didn’t want to give it up, but he’d promised Jason.
Jason was coming up the stairs when Tim found him again. “Hey,” Jason greeted, looking a little surprised to see him. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t you?” Tim countered, trying to smile through his nerves.

Jason shrugged. “I don't sleep much anymore,” he said, “You know that.”

“Right, yeah,” Tim said, fiddling with the mask in his hands. He took a deep breath and held it out for Jason to take.

“What’s this?” Jason asked, trying to see what was in Tim’s hand.

“Robin,” Tim answered, “Well, it’s just the mask, the rest of the uniform is still in my locker. I don’t think it would fit you. Actually, I don't think the mask will fit you either. Sorry, I wasn't thinking about that. I guess it’s more of a symbolic gesture,” he rambled. He stepped forward and shoved the mask into Jason’s hands.

“You kept your end of the deal,” Tim said, straightening his spine. “So I’m keeping mine.”

Jason turned the mask over in his hands. It felt odd in his hands, unfamiliar. His own mask had never felt strange, it had always felt like a part of him, and extension of his being, even when he first put it on. Being Robin had been the best thing that had ever happened to him, like his whole life had been building to that one moment. Jason remembered the exhilaration of soaring through the air next to Batman, catching his grin from the corner of his eye. He remembered feeling like he finally belonged somewhere. Jason closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

He opened his eyes and looked up at Tim, thinking about their grand adventure across the world. Tim had been different than him in every way. He was smart, calculating, and a brilliant strategist. He’d pulled the wool over Ra’s al Ghul’s eyes and gotten away with it. He was young and naive and he still believed in the big grand moral message of Batman, but he had a good heart and did his best to help people. In the short time Jason had known him, Tim had proven himself to be a capable fighter and a master planner.

Jason let out a long sigh and tossed the mask back at Tim. “Keep it,” he said.

Tim bobbled the mask in his hands for a second. He looked up at Jason in confusion. “Really?” he asked.

Jason shrugged. “It wouldn't fit me,” he said. As much as he thought of how great it would be to go back, there was no going back. Jason couldn’t return to the person he used to be; too much had happened to him to just forget it all.

Robin had been the highlight of his short life, but it was time to move on.

Tim turned the mask over in his hands. “So, I can keep it?” he asked, almost shyly. “You don't want to… shelve it or something?”

Jason waved a hand. “Nah, keep it,” he said, “You… you do good work.”

Tim flushed, feeling all sorts of fluttery for having Jason, the Robin he’d followed so closely, praise him. “Thanks,” he said softly.

The Cave was quiet for a moment. Jason looked out over the area; it had changed since he’d been gone as well. Jason had never felt so out of place since he’d come back from the dead. There were so many things that needed to be talked about, and so few words to describe them.
“So,” Tim said after a long pause. “What are you going to do now?” he asked.

Jason looked down at Tim. “I don’t know,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

So the last section jumps around in POV between Tim and Jason, but it should be pretty easy to follow. I wanted to show both of their thoughts, but I didn't want to break the flow of the writing.
Part V Chapter v: Liminal

Chapter Notes

So I finally have the time to write while I'm on vacation in British Columbia, so I might have this whole fic finished by the end of July. I've got a few more plot things to finish up, and then a postlude and an epilogue.

Contest time! Win a free fic from me! Find the literary reference and win a free fic from me. This one is super obvious, so I won't give you any hints. Remember to give both the author's name and the title of the reference, otherwise your guess won't be counted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim had been gone from Gotham for many months, long enough for school to have ended without him. The media frenzy surrounding the reveal of his parentage and his subsequent disappearance had calmed slightly, but Tim knew the moment he returned to the public eye things were going to go crazy again. Bruce was trying to mitigate things with WE’s PR team, but Tim knew he was going to be hounded for a long time before he had any peace again.

Knowing it was inevitable, Tim decided to start out small. He stared down at his new phone and the numbers he’d dialed into it, finger hovering over the ‘call’ button. Sucking in a deep breath, Tim hit the button and pressed the phone to his ear, listening to the rings until the line clicked on.

“Hello?” came the voice on the other end.

“Hey Ives,” Tim said, “It’s me.”

“Tim!” Ives exclaimed, “Holy shit man! It's been months! Where have you been?”

Tim sighed, relieved to hear his friend’s voice again. “I’ve been away,” he said, flopping back down on his bed and closing his eyes.

“Yeah no shit you’ve been away,” Ives said, sounding annoyed. “What the hell man, why didn’t you call?”

“I was in a deadzone,” Tim said, and it technically wasn't a lie. “No internet or phone service.”

“Geeze man, I was really worried,” Ives said, “You just disappeared. I thought something happened to you.”

“Sorry,” Tim said with a wince. “A lot of stuff happened all at once and I needed to get away from everything.”

“Yeah I get that,” Ives said, seeming to calm down now. Ives’s temper always burned itself out quickly. “But next time call or email and let me know you haven’t been kidnapped or something.”

Tim barely hid a noise. “Yeah, I'll do that,” he said.

Ives sighed. “So? How are you?”
“Tired,” Tim groaned, “I wasn’t supposed to be gone so long, but things kind of went sideways and I got stuck where I was.”

“Geeze, that sounds rough,” Ives said, “But you’re back now? You’re okay?”

Tim closed his eyes and thought about everything that had happened and everything that he still needed to deal with. “Yeah, I’m back,” he said, “Kind of looking forward to returning to as much normal as I can.”

If Ives sensed anything in Tim’s voice, he kept it to himself. “Yeah man, things were super weird without you. Everyone thought you died or something.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Tim said, grinning a little.

“Har har asshole, I was worried,” Ives said, though Tim could hear the smile in his voice. “So? You figure it out? All the weirdness with your dad?”

Tim’s gut clenched a little, thinking about how Jack hadn’t tried to contact Bruce once the entire time Tim had been missing. “I guess,” he said, “It’s just… it’s such a shit show.”

Ives made a noise of agreement, letting Tim take the wheel of the conversation. “I mean in the entire time I was gone, he never once tried to get in contact with Bruce,” Tim said, “He just… he just abandoned me.” Tim hated that his voice was starting to crack.

“I’m sorry Tim,” Ives said softly, “I don’t even know what that must be like.”

“It sucks is what it’s like,” Tim sniffed, rubbing the wetness from his eyes. “He completely cut ties with Gotham. He even sold the townhouse.”

“Wow,” Ives said, “So you’re living with Mr. Wayne now I guess?”

“Yeah,” Tim said, “He’s putting me up for now.”

“Just for now?” Ives sounded confused. “Isn’t he your actual dad?”

Tim bit his lip. “Yeah, right,” he said, “Sorry, this is all just so crazy. I mean, Bruce Wayne is my biological dad. What the fuck, right?”

“Yeah, must be really tough to find out your real dad is like, the richest person ever,” Ives said sarcastically.

Tim rolled his eyes. “It is so not that simple,” he said.

“I know,” Ives said, “But seriously, is Mr. Wayne treating you okay?”

Tim looked around his room. It was the same room that Bruce had given him years ago, after his mother died and Jack had been in a coma. At the time Tim had assumed it had been a regular guest room, but later he’d learned that all the guest bedrooms were in another wing, and this wing was exclusively for family bedrooms. Bruce had done his best since Tim had arrived to make him feel welcome and relaxed in the house. Even when he was a child, climbing over the fence to play with Dick, Bruce had always been kind and welcoming. Once out of curiosity, Tim had gone to the back wall where he used to climb over and found the little rope ladder was still there, perfectly maintained, just in case he’d ever wanted to come over again.

“Bruce has been really good,” Tim said, “He’s very nice and he wants to take care of me. It’s all
kind of weird, but he’s trying.”

“That’s good,” Ives said, “If he wasn’t I’d have to come and beat him up.”

Tim laughed, mentally picturing scrawny Ives trying to square off against The Batman. “Thanks man, that’s really nice of you.”

“No problem man, what are best friends for?” Ives said, “But seriously, if you ever need a place to stay, my folks have a guest bedroom. It’s filled with Christmas junk, but I can clear it out for you. Just say the word.”

Tim smiled. “Thanks Ives,” he said, “That really does mean a lot to me.”

“What are best friends for?” Ives said.

They talked for a while longer, promising to meet and catch up at some point in the future. As they talked and joked with one another, Tim could feel the exhaustion creeping out of his joints, the feeling of normalcy slowly beginning to return. As crazy as the last few months had been, he was back now and he could begin the long process of coming to terms with everything.

Eventually Ives said goodbye and they hung up. Tim laid on his bed for a while wondering if he could get away with taking a nap. A knock on his door made him sit up. “Come in,” he called.

The door opened and blonde head poked through. Steph smiled at Tim and trotted into his room, jumping onto his bed to curl up next to him. “Hey there,” she said.

Tim smiled and turned onto his side, wrapping an arm around her. “Hey,” he said.

The two of them spent the next several minutes cuddling and occasionally sharing kisses, just quietly enjoying each other’s company. Tim knew that they should talk, but right now he just wanted to enjoy the feeling of being close to the one he cared about. Everything was crazy, but just existing next to Steph seemed to make the world simple again.

Eventually Tim and Steph simply fell asleep next to each other, sharing the warmth of their bodies and taking comfort in each other’s breathing, the sheer fact of the other’s existence being close to theirs lulling them to slumber. There were many things that would need to be dealt with, but for now Tim could just be for a while.

Damian was quickly making himself into a complete nuisance.

Everyone—with the exception of Jason—had tried to be accommodating to Damian’s moods and general bad attitude, knowing the kind of environment that the boy came from, but he was certainly testing everyone’s limits. Damian was rude, entitled, and seemed to lack basic empathy. Tim could curb the worst of it, but Bruce knew it was entirely unfair to expect Tim to deal with Damian all the time. Tim was Damian’s brother, but Bruce was their father, and he had a responsibility to try his best with Damian.

Even when the little brat seemed to be trying to single handedly drive him out of his mind.

“Why should I have to help set the table?” Damian huffed, “That’s what servants are for.”
Bruce fought hard not to groan and mentally apologized to Alfred for the third time that day. “Damian, everyone helps out around the house, even me. That’s how things work here.”

Damian scoffed. “Such things are beneath me,” he said, “I am the heir to the house of al Ghul. I will not lower myself to such a vitiation of my stature.”

Bruce took a deep breath. “Damian, please just set the table like I asked you too. You would have been finished by now if you hadn’t decided to argue,” he said.

“Setting the table is **his** job,” Damian said, gesturing to Alfred, “Why should I have to do it for him?”

*Now* Bruce was starting to lose his patience. “For the last time Damian, Alfred is more than just a servant. He’s part of the family, and you will treat him as such.”

Damian crossed his arms, obviously ready to out-stubborn Bruce with all the tenacity of a self-righteous eight year old. They stared each other down for a while, then eventually resumed the argument, nearly coming to a shouting match before Alfred intervened and pointed out that Damian was leaving Tim to set the table all on his own. Guilted into action, Damian begrudgingly set out the silverware and the glasses, huffing and complaining the entire time. He also managed to insult the food no less than seven times over the duration of dinner. By the end of the night, Bruce had the beginnings of a massive headache forming.

A few hours before patrol was to begin, Bruce went down into the Cave to check on a few things. Tim was still in the process of getting back to physical fitness, so it would be another two weeks before he joined him on patrol. Bruce didn’t mind, he’d rather Tim take his time to recover rather than try to go out when he didn’t feel like he was at a hundred percent. Aside from that, Batgirl and Spoiler had taken to tailing along with him on patrol for at least part of the night. They made a startlingly good team, Bruce had to admit. He was considering making them train together a little more so they could hone their teamwork skills. Of course, a part of him still didn’t want to encourage Stephanie; she was reckless and bullheaded and often charged in before she thought things through. It was sure to get her hurt at some point, but she was just too damn stubborn to give up, not after all this time. If Bruce hadn’t managed to convince her by now, he didn't think he’d ever get through to her.

Of course, there was the creeping realization that she reminded him of Jason. She was impulsive and reckless in many of the same ways Jason had been, and Bruce was coming to admit that he’d been scared to get close to her out of fear of what might happen to her. Luckily, she seemed to be doing well with both Tim and Cass to help push her in the right direction.

Bruce sat down at the computer and started to sort through some cases, letting the silence of the Cave soothe his aching head. He worked for maybe an hour and a half when an alert came through the computer. Someone was trying to call him using an encrypted number, but Bruce was certain he recognised it. Frowning, Bruce accepted the call and sat back to talk to one of the few people who could access the computer’s communication functions.

“Hello Beloved,” Talia said, “I wasn’t sure you’d pick up.”

“Talia,” Bruce greeted, “I see you made it out of the warehouse unscathed.”

“No thanks to you,” Talia said, but it was playful, like she was flirting with him.

At one point, Bruce might have been more willing to indulge her, flirt back a little, play with fire, but now all he could feel towards Talia was anger. “What do you want?” he asked.
“I just wanted to check in on our son,” Talia said, “I am his mother after all, I should now how he’s doing.”

“He’s fine,” Bruce replied curtly, “After you tried to shoot him and set him on fire.”

“The fire was Jason’s doing, not mine,” Talia said, “And I wasn’t shooting to kill. I would never harm our child in such a way.”

Bruce clenched his fists. “Why Talia?” he asked, “Why keep them from me?”

Talia was quiet for a moment, obviously trying to find the right words, the best ones to manipulate him with. Bruce looked into her green eyes, the same green eyes that Damian had inherited from her. Bruce could see the similarities between them, the shape of their noses, the luminous quality of their dark complections, and even the arched curve of their eyebrows; as much as Damian looked like Bruce, he had plenty of his mother in him as well.

“Damian is the heir not only to your legacy, but also my fathers,” Talia said, “He needed a strong foundation to be able to survive, and I knew I would be able to provide that. You are many things, but you are weak to children, you coddle them too much. If I left him with you, he would never survive my father.”

“He’s a child,” Bruce said, “And you’ve trained him to be a killer.”

“I’ve given him the tools he needs to survive his family, both of them,” Talia said. There was a note in her voice, a particular cadence, that told Bruce that she truly believed what she was saying. For all her faults, she did seem to love Damian and want the best for him. “I have no doubt you’ll bring him into your crusade as you have the bastard,” she continued.

Bruce ignored the jab at Tim. “You kept him from me Talia,” he said, “He’s my son, I should have been involved in his life.”

“I did what I had to do,” Talia said, remorseless.

“And Jason?” Bruce asked, unable to keep the growl out of his voice. “Was it necessary to keep him from me?”

Talia went quiet again. “He was not the same boy you knew. His mind was gone, destroyed by a massive brain bleed. I… I wanted to fix him, before bringing him back to you.”

“That shouldn’t have been your decision,” Bruce said, “He should have been with his family.”

Talia raised an eyebrow. “I was the only one with the tools to heal him fully. No surgeon or doctor in the world would have brought him back to you the way the Lazarus pit has.”

“That may be,” Bruce said, “But that should have been something we decided on, not you. He should have been with us.”

Talia glared at him through the computer. “I did my best with him, I gave him what he needed.”

“You manipulated him,” Bruce said, “You told him I replaced him. You warped his mind against me and his family.” Bruce glared at her. “You taught him to be a killer.”

“I only gave him what he asked for,” Talia said, “Has he told you yet? About all the people he’s rescued by ridding the world of terrorists? Human traffickers? Abusers?” She grinned slightly, “Has he told you about the car bomb?”
Bruce was starting to lose his patience. “He’s home now Talia, where he should have been all along. You have no more claim to him.”

“We’ll see,” Talia said, “I’ll call again soon. According to you I may have no claim to Jason, but Damian is my son as much as yours. He’s my blood, and I will be keeping an eye on him.”

Bruce wanted to tell her off again, but he couldn’t because she was right. He couldn’t keep Damian from her, at least not completely. At the very least Damian would want to contact her as well. Bruce stayed silent rather than try to argue.

“Goodbye Beloved,” Talia cooed, then the line cut off.

Bruce sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He had always liked Talia in certain ways; she’d grown up with Ra’s al Ghul for a father, but there were still pieces of her that could be sweet and kind. He’d been fascinated by those pieces, and there was always a part of him that wanted to try and pull her out of Ra’s influence, bring her over to his side. However, those kind pieces of her were never enough to offset the nastier parts of her, and she let opportunity after opportunity to get out of the life she lived slip past her fingers. Bruce was nothing if not tenacious, he would always try to get through to her, no matter what, but having discovered that she’d stolen years from not one, but two of his sons, he was rather irate with her at the moment. Perhaps it would fade with time, or perhaps it would only fester and grow deeper.

One thing he was grateful for was that he’d gotten to Damian when he was fairly young. There was time to correct the bad, to teach him to be better. As much as he was giving Bruce headaches lately, he was so glad to have him in his life. He wanted to have his sons close to him, he wanted to have a relationship with them. He wanted to love them and teach them, watch them grow into the upstanding men he knew they could be. Everytime Bruce looked at them, his chest hurt with how much he was proud of them and loved them.

Bruce was just about to start going back to his cases when he heard a noise behind him. He turned and saw Damian near the stairs to go down to the sparring area.

“Father, come spar with me,” Damian demanded, then turned to go down to the mats.

Bruce sighed, but he got up and followed Damian down to the mats. It might take a long time, and there would be many many headaches, but Bruce couldn't help but look forward to it.
struggled to breathe, to keep his head above the churning blood. Everything hurt and he couldn't catch his breath. He felt like he was being dragged down. Jason tried to scream, but found that when he opened his mouth, more blood poured out.

Joker laughed harder. “Little Jason fell dooooowwwwn the hole, bumped his head, bruised his soul,” he crooned through his laughter.

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Jason cried, blood still spraying from his lips.

“Oh you can’t help that,” said Joker. He still floated on top of the blood. “We’re all mad here. You’re mad. I’m mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” Jason asked, trying to kick his feet to stay above the blood. Pieces of Sharon’s body floated past, exploded apart. She must have been too close to the bomb.

Joker suddenly leaned down, putting his face right next to Jason’s. He smiled widely, too wide, the skin stretching and cracking, ripping apart and showing off rows and rows of teeth. Despite the blood drenching them both, those teeth remained white and clean. Thick black mud bubbled up through them, dribbling down Joker’s front and splashing onto Jason’s face.

“You must be,” Joker gurgled, “—or you wouldn’t have come here.”

Joker raised the crowbar again and brought it down. Jason ducked his head under the blood to avoid the blow. As soon as the blood was over his head, he began to sink. Jason kicked and fought madly, trying to swim to the surface again. His lungs burned and everything was so hot around him. The current swirled around him, dragging him further down; Jason could see through the murk that he was being dragged towards his coffin. The blood was draining into it through the hole he’d punched in the top. Jason swam madly, trying not to get sucked down into it. He didn’t want to go back into his coffin, he wanted to be alive. He wanted to be alive!

Jason woke with a shout, jerking up and scrambling out of bed, like he was still trying to swim upwards. Jason slammed his toe into the bedside table and yelped, crumpling to the ground. He swore and grabbed his foot, breathing harshly. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the pain, tried to focus on how much it hurt. If it hurt, he was alive. If he focused on the pain, he could forget the image of the Joker’s split face above him.

There was a knock on the door. “Jason? Master Jason are you okay? I heard screaming,” came Alfred’s voice.

Jason tried to listen to it, tried to react to it, but his body wouldn’t move. It was like he was existing outside of his body, unable to pull the strings to make himself move. Jason could feel his lungs seize, hardening into stone as they filled with blood and mud. He wanted to be alive!

The door opened and Tim and Alfred came in, Damian hovering in the doorway. Alfred made to move towards Jason, but Tim grabbed his arm and pulled him back. Jason could see the shadows of the bruises he’d left on Tim’s neck the last time. Tim came around Jason to crouch directly in front of him, far enough away that he could get back in time if Jason lunged.

“Jason?” Tim called calmly, “Jason can you hear me?”

Jason tried to nod, to let Tim know what was happening, but he was still stuck outside his body. His toe throbbed, the pain so bad it travelled up his leg, pulsing with heat. Jason felt like he was turning to stone.

“Jason,” Tim called again, “You need to breathe. You’re going to pass out if you don’t breathe.” Tim
leaned forward, concern on his face. “I need you to try and whistle.”

Jason managed to glare at Tim. “Just trust me,” Tim said, “Try and whistle for me,” he said, then whistled, as though to demonstrate.

Jason took a few moments, but finally he managed to purse his lips and blow. There was no sound, but Jason kept trying. The air drained out of his lungs, and then automatically filled as his chest forcibly expanded. Jason tried to whistle again, and as he did, stopping and starting as he ran out of air, he realized he could breathe again.

Tim smiled at him. “Told you,” he said, “Just breathe for a few minutes.”

Jason nodded and tried to regulate his breathing. Slowly, Jason managed to crawl back into his skin. The pain in his toe receded and Jason relaxed, slumping over and resting his head on the side of the bed.

“M’alright,” he mumbled, exhausted. “Just a nightmare.”

Alfred finally came forward, crouching next to Jason at the same distance Tim was. “Are you alright Master Jason?” he asked.

Jason nodded and sat up. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he said. “I’ll be alright.”

“Would you like some water? Warm milk?” Alfred asked, hand twitching like he wanted to reach out to Jason, but he wasn't sure it would be appreciated.

Jason closed his eyes for a second. His throat was raw; he must have been screaming in his sleep. “Yeah, okay,” he said.

Cautiously, Alfred reached for Jason, laying his hand on his shoulder. The touch made Jason jolt a little, but after reassuring Alfred, he let him help him stand up. Tim stepped in to help, and together they got Jason to the kitchen.

“You ripped your stitches,” Tim remarked, noticing the red starting to soak through the bandages.

“I didn't even feel it,” Jason said, slumping onto a chair.

Alfred bent to have a look. “I’ll get the medical kit,” he said, walking around the counter to get the medical kit that they kept in the kitchen. There were similar kits all over the Manor.

Jason grumbled and started to unwind the bandages from around his torso. Tim handed him a glass of water, which he gulped down quickly. They got the bandages unwrapped and Alfred leaned down to inspect the wound just as Bruce and Dick walked in, still in uniform.

“What happened?” Bruce asked, crossing the room in a few long strides to stand next to Alfred. He was still in full gear, but his cowl was down.

“We heard screaming,” Dick said, looking rather nervous. He also had his mask off.

“Todd had a nightmare,” Damian said, “And a panic attack.”

Jason mimed strangling motions at Damian, who only scoffed. Bruce scowled, his version of looking stricken. “Are you alright?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Jason insisted.
“You thrashed hard enough to rip your stitches,” Tim pointed out, “You have really bad nightmares.”

“Mind your own damned business, replacement,” Jason hissed.

Tim rolled his eyes. “Fine, be like that,” he said, but he took Jason’s glass and refilled it from the tap, handing it back to Jason.

Jason took it and sipped it, leaning back as Alfred began to work on his seeping wound. It had held mostly, but a few stitches had ripped through the skin. Bruce frowned and rested his hand gently on Jason’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his soft tone belying his serious expression. “Do you… do you need to talk?”

Jason looked up at Bruce. “No, I’m fine,” he said curtly. Talking wasn’t going to do anything.

Alfred and Bruce shared a quick look, but they said nothing. Tim yawned and walked with Damian out of the kitchen. Dick continued hovering nervously at the edges, almost chewing through his lip. Bruce stood like a dark, brooding shadow at Jason’s side.

Jason finally sighed. “Don’t you guys have to go back out?” he asked.

“Not until I’m sure you’re alright,” Bruce answered. It was so automatic that Jason was too startled to have a response.

Alfred finished redressing the wound. “The skin tore, not the stitches,” he said, “You need to be more careful Master Jason.”

Jason grumbled. “Not much I can do about that. I can’t control how much I thrash in my sleep.”

“Maybe I can sleep in the same bed as you, wake you up before it gets bad?” Dick suggested.

Jason remembered the feeling of squeezing Tim’s neck in his hands, hard enough to nearly crush it. “No,” he said, “I’ll be fine, I’ll sleep on the couch or something if I get tired enough.”

“You need to sleep, Master Jason, it’s important for you to heal,” Alfred said.

“Isn’t there a recliner in your old room?” Dick asked, “You could sleep in that.”

Jason hadn’t stepped foot in his old room yet, and he’d avoided going near it. He didn’t know if he wanted to see it. ‘I’ll sleep in the TV room or something,” he said.

Bruce squeezed his shoulder. “Alright,” he said, “Let us know if we can do anything.”

Jason suddenly felt too large in his own skin. He gulped down the last of his water and stood. “I’m fine,” he said again, “I’m going to the library. You can head back out.”

“Are you sure?” Dick asked, “We can stay if you need us.”

Jason swiped a dishrag from the counter and threw it at Dick. “I don't need a babysitter. Go do what you do,” he said.

Dick threw the dishrag back at Jason with a huff, but he seemed more relaxed. He and Bruce hesitated for a moment, but Jason left them in the kitchen, heading down the hallway to the library.
Or rather, Jason meant to go to the library, but he found himself wandering aimlessly through the house. He wasn’t sure how long he spent walking around like a forgotten ghost in the halls of the ancient manor he once called home, but when he was done he was back at his room. His old bedroom, the one he hadn’t dared to go near.

The sky was starting to lighten with the promise of sunrise, so Jason had lost track of time. This wasn’t uncommon for him after a nightmare. One time he’d woken from a nightmare in Warsaw, Poland, gone for a walk, and when he became aware of himself again, he was in Łodź. That had been in the early days, when he was still so raw at the edges. He’d barely slept at all in those days. He’s just chased himself around in circles in between moments of lucidity. The only thing on his mind in those days had been revenge.

Jason wasn’t sure what was on his mind now. Flashes of ideas for revenge crossed his mind all the time, potential plans forming and reforming, but Jason felt no urge to act on them. It was as though something inside of him had been cut off those desires. He was still angry, so angry at Bruce sometimes, and he wanted to shout and throw punches, but that was an anger that was familiar, old and trustworthy inside of him. He’d grown up fighting that way, even since he was big enough to fight back against Willis’s rages. But revenge on the whole of Gotham, the desire to destroy everything Bruce held dear and kill him, felt like it was locked inside a little box. It was still there, and Jason could see it clearly, but it couldn’t get out and he couldn't get in. He didn't even want to get back in. The thought of trying to take his revenge only tired him now.

The old door loomed above Jason, taunting him. On the other side was Jason’s old life. All he had to do was open the door and walk through it. Everything was exactly the same on the other side, according to Tim. His books, his clothes, his worldly possessions, everything just the same as he left it. All Jason had to do was open the door and go through it. The doorknob was polished and dust free; Alfred would never tolerate anything else. It taunted him.

Jason reached for it, his fingers brushing the cold brass. How many times had he just grabbed it without thinking, flung the door open and then slammed it close. How many times had he just walked right into his room, with no thought about how it was his, his own space. The first space he’d ever had that was his alone, secure and comfortable. Even Bruce wasn’t allowed to enter without Jason’s permission. What a novel concept for a kid who grew up squatting in one bedroom apartments with his drug addict mother in one of the most crime ridden parts of the city; to have a space that was completely his own.

Jason wrapped his hand around the doorknob, willing himself to turn it, to rip the bandaid off and get it over with. His arm tensed as it prepared to twist it and push forward. It would take just a minimal amount of effort.

Suddenly, Jason dropped his hand from the polished brass knob. His heart thudded in his chest. Jason stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked away. He went to the library and found a comfortable chair in the corner, in one of his favourite spots. He let out a long breath and tried to banish the thoughts chasing him in circles inside his own head.

Chapter End Notes
We're getting really close to the end you guys. This is so exciting!

Also, Happy Birthday Tim Drake!
Part V Chapter vi: Restoration

Chapter Notes

I'm 2 hours late for Jason's birthday, I'm super tired because I've been working a lot, this is completely unedited, but GOSH DARNIT I'm going to post this thing! I have no idea why this took so effing long to finish, it should have been an easy chapter, but I kept hitting mental blocks. I guess I've been tired from working so much extra. Anyway, here we go, this is it. It's not the last chapter, but we probably have one more to go, two at most, then the epilogue. Wow you guys, this is really almost done!

Note that this chapter doesn't have any breaks, but it does jump from POV to POV a few times as needed. Usually I'd separate them, but I didn't want to muck the flow up.

No contest this chapter, too much stuff going on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure you’re alright to go out?” Bruce asked, fixing his gauntlet to his wrist. “It’s alright if you want to wait longer.”

Tim stuck the mask over his eyes. “If I wait any longer, I’m going to go out of my mind,” he said, “I need to get back out there.”

Bruce nodded. “Of course, I understand,” he said, “But don’t feel like you have to rush yourself. It’s fine if you need more time.”

Tim gave a long, dramatic, teenager sigh. “Bruce. I’m fine to go out, really,” he said, “Trust me, I’m fine.”

“I trust you,” Bruce said, trying to stomp down on his worry. He had the feeling tonight he would be finding an excuse to turn in early.

“Good,” Tim said, fixing his cape. “Besides, I have to get back into the swing of things sooner or later. I’m sure Bludhaven will need Nightwing back and Batgirl and Spoiler have their own stuff to do.”

“I don’t mind staying longer,” Dick said, strapping his escrima sticks down securely. “But, you’re right, I should be getting back soon.”

Bruce grunted in acknowledgement. He wasn’t lying when he said he trusted Tim; the boy was completely capable of taking care of himself, and Bruce could see that he was back to his normal self for the most part. Yet there was a still a part of Bruce that resisted, a little piece that made him want to shut Tim inside, away from anything that could hurt him. A newfound sense of fatherliness? He’d reacted similarly after Dick or Jason had been hurt on patrol years prior, so it wasn’t so out of the ordinary. Bruce bit down a sigh and pulled his cowl up.

“We leave in a few minutes, but first I have to brief you,” Batman said, “There are a lot of things you missed while you were away.”

Robin nodded and followed Batman to the computer. Batgirl and Spoiler were standing next to it,
Damian in the computer chair and Jason leaning against the railing, trying to look as disinterested as possible.

Batman and Damian stared each other down for a moment before Damian gave a dramatic huff and vacated the chair. Batman sat down at it and began to pull up the case files that would be relevant for them tonight. The swish of the elevators made everyone look up. Tim smiled as a familiar redhead wheeled into the Cave.

“Oracle,” Batman greeted, “Why are you here?”

“Hello to you too,” Barbara said, raising an eyebrow. “I thought I’d come to the Cave tonight instead of staying at the Clocktower and say hi.” Her eyes landed on Tim and she smiled. “Welcome back kiddo.”

Tim smiled and trotted over to her, bending slightly so he could hug her. “Hi Barbara. I missed you,” he said.

“Missed you too Tim,” Barbara said, squeezing Tim tightly. Eventually she let go, reaching one hand to pat Tim’s cheek. “Nice to have you back,” she said.

“Great to be back,” Tim said, smiling brightly.

Barbara smiled and took back her hand. She glanced around Tim to spy Jason, still leaning against the railing. Tim noticed her looked and helpfully stepped aside so she could wheel herself over to him. Barbara had known that Jason was back, she’d yelled herself hoarse at Bruce for keeping the information from her, she’d even seen the footage and the photographs, but this was the first time she’d seen Jason face to face. Everyone else in the Cave politely gave them some space.

Jason looked down at Barbara, eyes narrowing at her chair. He’d known about what Joker did to her, and honestly, thinking about it, she got off worse than he did. He was back and in perfect physical health, and she was stuck in a chair forever. It didn’t really seem fair.

“Been a long time, red,” Jason said, unable to stand the awkward silence any longer.

Barbara looked up at him and reached her hand out. “Come here so I can hug you, asshole,” she said, her voice cracking imperceptibly.

Jason obediently bent so she could wrap her arms around his neck. After a moment, he put an arm around her and squeezed; he’d missed her as much as he had the others, if he allowed himself to admit that he missed anyone. She was the big sister he’d never had, always there for him whether he liked it or not.

“I’m glad you’re home,” Barbara said softly into his ear, squeezing him as tight as he could as he was awkwardly bent in half.

“Thanks,” Jason said, unable to think of anything else. He was happy that people were happy he was back, but he wasn’t sure he was happy to be back.

Barbara finally let him go, quickly wiping her eyes of wetness. “So, want to help me with my stuff tonight? Or are you heading out with the others?” she asked.

Jason shrugged; he’d let Tim keep Robin, but he’d never really planned to be Robin again. He felt adrift, out of place, like he’d outgrown something but he wasn’t sure what it was. Nothing felt right to him anymore.
Barbara raised one eyebrow at him and let him stay quiet, not pushing for an answer. She wheeled back to the computer, booting Bruce from the main console to start tapping away at the keyboard.

“I want to go out with you,” Damian suddenly piped up. “I want to fight as well.”

“You don’t have a uniform,” Tim pointed out, “And you’re way too young.”

Damian huffed. “I do not need a uniform. I can fight,” he said.

“You’re still too young,” Bruce said, “We’ll see in a few years.”

“I am perfectly capable of fighting now,” Damian insisted. Jason half expected him to cross his arms and stomp his feet. “I should be included.”

Bruce let out a long sigh, looking ready to start bashing his head against the dash of the computer. Tim put his hand on Damian’s shoulder. “Hey, tell you what,” he said, “In a few years, you can have Robin after me.”

Damian looked up at Tim. “After you?” he asked.

“Yeah, I won’t be Robin forever,” Tim said, “I’ll have to give it up sometime. Once I’m done, you can be Robin.”

Damian stopped to contemplate this for a moment. “How long with that be?” he asked.

Tim shrugged. “I few years probably. When you’re twelve at least.”

Damian gave a disgusted snort. “That’s ages away,” he complained, “What am I to do until then?”

Tim thought for a second. “I’ll teach you,” he said.

“Teach me?” Damian asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, to be Robin,” Tim said, smiling now. “So when the time comes for you to be Robin, you’ll be ready.”

“That’s a great idea Tim,” Dick said, appearing on Damian’s other side. “I can help out and when it’s Damian’s turn, he’ll be more prepared than any of us were.”

Damian considered this for a long moment, then nodded. “This is acceptable,” he said, “But I want to be Robin sooner than twelve.”

“We’ll see,” Bruce said, hoping to put a stop to the discussion for the time being. “Robin, we have work to do.”

Tim gave Damian’s shoulder another squeeze before returning to Batman’s side to continue going over cases. Dick smiled down at Damian and ruffled his hair, laughing as Damian swatted him away with an indignant squawk.

Eventually Batman and Robin left the Cave, Nightwing, Spoiler, and Batgirl hot on their heels, leaving Jason, Damian, and Barbara in the Cave together. Barbara worked tirelessly as Oracle while Jason and Damian amused themselves by sparring and chasing each other across the trophies.

“You know you two don’t have to stay down here,” Barbara said, “You can head upstairs and go to sleep.”
“I don’t sleep,” Jason answered, contemplating the giant Joker card. He could probably surf down the T-Rex’s back on it if he tried.

“I will sleep when Brother and Father do. I must begin acclimatizing my body to function best at these times,” Damian said, jutting his chin up like the haughty little prince he’d been raised to believe himself to be.

“You’ll stunt your growth,” Barbara said, “End up being the shortest Robin ever.”

Damian growled as Jason cackled; he stopped abruptly when Damian threw a billy club from the weapon rack at his head. Jason swore a blue streak and ran after Damian, who was small and agile and had a head start. Barbara sighed and turned back to her console, ignoring the two boys trying to kill each other behind her.

“If you two don’t settle down, I shall send you both to your rooms,” Alfred said, watching them chase each other for a few minutes.

“He started it!” Jason said, “He threw a stick at my head!”

“He had it coming,” Damian growled.

Alfred only raised a grey eyebrow at the two of them. Jason grumbled several epithets while side-eyeing Damian, but Damian remained where he was on top of a display case, arms crossed in defiance.

“Young man,” Alfred said, “Come down from there, or there will be no raspberry scones left for you.”

Damian stayed where he was, pouting. Jason, appropriately chastised, stuffed a scone in his mouth and started filling his pockets with more. Barbara dunked hers in her coffee and took small bites. Eventually, Damian stole his way down from the top of the display case and snuck across the Cave to stealthily sneak a few scones.

“Looks like a slow night,” Barbara said, leaning back in her chair. “They might be in early.”

“I expect Master Bruce and Master Timothy will retire early,” Alfred said, “Though I couldn’t tell you if the others will follow.”

“Why just them?” Jason asked around a mouthful of pastry.

Alfred quirked a brow. “Master Bruce has always, without fail, been extra cautious on the first night a Robin returned to active duty. I expect them to return in no more than an hour,” he said.

Almost forty minutes later, there was a rumble that reverberated throughout the Cave as the Batmobile rolled inside. The summer humidity had broken slightly that night, rain coming down in slightly more than a drizzle, making the sleek car shiny with the water. Batman and Robin hopped out, looking no worse for wear than when they’d left earlier.

“Slow night, sirs?” Alfred asked, making Jason snort a little.

“Yeah, we didn't see too much,” Tim said, peeling his mask off. “Stopped a few muggers and some carjackers, but that’s about it.”

“Sounds like a nice night,” Barbara said, “I’m not really tracking anything on any communications lines. Probably safe to turn in if you want.”
Tim yawned. “Honestly I think I might. I’m more out of practice than I thought I was.”

“Really? It’s barely past midnight,” Jason said, “I can’t believe you’re what replaced me.”

Tim scoffed. “Yeah well, I’ve lasted longer than you did, so bite me,” he said.

“Tim,” Bruce warned, but Jason was laughing. Bruce didn’t think he’d ever get used to Jason being so casual about his own death.

The calm was broken when the computer screen behind Barbara suddenly dissolved into static. Everyone turned to watch as screen after screen stuttered out and filled with static. The tension rose palpably in the room as everyone waited for whatever villain was trying to mess with them. When a grinning white face finally appeared onscreen with the accompanying manic laughter, the room suddenly felt like it was filled with ice water.

“Jason,” Tim said, watching him closely.

Jason had gone as still as a statue and as white as the stripe in his hair. He stared unblinking at the screen, watching Joker ramble about some plan or another, he couldn’t hear through the static in his ears. His world narrowed, and Joker was standing above him, bloodied crowbar in his hand. Jason’s chest hurt, his ribs were broken and his lungs were collapsing. There was someone calling his name, but all he could hear was white noise and that horrible laughter in his ears.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder and Jason reacted instantly, spinning and lashing out with force. It was sloppy, but his fist connected with something fleshy; Jason took another swing, but this time he was blocked. Instinct took over and Jason began fighting in earnest.

Jason wasn’t sure how long he fought, taking swings and kicks and blocking, putting his whole weight behind his attacks, trying to do the most amount of damage he could, but without a weapon, he wasn’t as deadly as he needed to be. His attackers kept coming, they wouldn’t go down, they wouldn’t leave him alone. In the distance someone was calling his name, but it was so far away. He had to keep fighting.

“Jason!” someone shouted in his ear, grabbing him from behind. They pinned his arms to his sides and gripped him tightly, effectively immobilizing him.

Jason thrashed and struggled, trying to break free, but to no avail. The voice in his ear was telling him to calm down, to breath deeply and come back to them. Them? Who was them? Jason didn’t want to listen, but he found himself responding anyway; something about the voice made him want to listen. Eventually Jason began to calm, his heart slowing down and awareness returning to his brain.

As Jason’s mind began to clear, he started to notice what was going on around him. Barbara’s chair had been tipped over and her coffee cup was shattered, dripping coffee across the console and onto the floor. Tim was leaning over her, trying to help her up even as he cradled one arm close to his body. Damian stood in front of them, putting his tiny body between Jason and the others. There was a sizable bruise forming on his left eyebrow, like he’d been clocked with an elbow or something. Alfred was cautiously approaching Barbara and Tim, keeping his eyes on Jason, his expression morphed into something like horror and astonishment. All of them were watching Jason like he was some kind of wild animal ready to strike at any moment. It took Jason a moment to realize that it was him who’d done this. He’d lost his mind and attacked without discretion. He’d done this.

“Jason?” the voice came again in his ear. It was Bruce who was holding him, arms as tight as steel shackles around his arms and chest, pinning him down. “Jason, are you alright?” he asked.
Jason didn’t answer, couldn’t find his voice. He wiggled a little to try and get away. Bruce tightened his arms momentarily, then let go, taking a few steps back. The entire room took a collective breath as they waited to see what Jason would do. Jason looked up at Bruce’s face; there was a steady ooze of blood from a cut on his lip and a sizable bruise forming across his cheek. Bruce’s eyes were filled with concern, the same kind that Jason half-remembered from nights he woke up from nightmares and Bruce came to comfort him.

“Jason?” Bruce called, taking a step towards Jason, his hand out like he was going to try and touch him, draw him forward into a hug and comfort him, the way he used to before Jason died, before he was all messed up.

Jason jolted back before Bruce could touch him, stumbling over his feet before he righted himself and made a dash for the stairs. Someone called his name as he ran, but he ignored them. He ran on instinct, darting through the halls and up stairs, letting his feet remember where to go. It wasn’t until his hand was on a doorknob that Jason realized where he was.

The door to Jason’s old room loomed above him, as solid and as imposing as ever. Jason’s hand was closed firmly around the polished brass knob, ready to turn it and open the door. He’d instinctively come here, some vestigial piece of the old Jason knowing he’d be safe here, that this was his space and he could hide here to calm down.

Open the door, Jason thought to himself. Just open the fucking door and get it over with. Coward!

With a snarl, Jason turned the handle—too hard and too vicious, the spring creaking at the rough treatment—and shoved his way inside.

Suddenly, Jason was fifteen.

Or it felt that way, like he had stepped backwards in time. Everything was exactly where he’d left it, just like Tim had told him it would be. The room was tidy and dust free, like it always had been every time Jason had come home from school and Alfred had been in to clean. His backpack was by the door, right where he’d always tossed it when he came in. His books were still on his shelves and his desk was still filled with old newspapers, some school project Jason couldn’t remember unfinished. The bedspread was exactly the same, but the sheets had been changed, kept fresh even after all this time. Like it was just waiting for him to come back.

Jason stepped into the room, inhaling the smell of old paper and the rose oil that Alfred used in the laundry. The curtains had recently been cleaned, and everything had been dusted. Jason went to his closet and opened it, finding all of his old clothes neatly arranged, not so much as he’d left them (he remembered always leaving his hoodies over the back of his chair, much to Alfred’s constant disapproval) but still dust free and smelling faintly of cedar to keep the moths at bay. Jason noticed something in the pocket of an old coat he used to wear every time it was cold out; he pulled it out to find it was a CD he’d forgotten completely about, stuffed into his pocket and still wrapped in protective plastic. Jason turned to spy his stereo on his desk, looking just as he’d left it.

Yanking the plastic cover off and popping open the case, Jason strode to his desk and put the CD into the stereo, switching it on. The several years out of date electronic clicked to life and began playing music as flawlessly as it always had. Jason took a few steps back and sat down on his bed, letting the music wash over him. He didn’t know if he felt like he was relaxing or not, but he wasn’t the same kind of on edge he’d been earlier.

Jason sighed and flopped backwards down onto the bed, staring up at his ceiling. His heel banged against something as he did, something he didn’t remember being there. Curious, Jason sat up and reached under the bed, pulling out a large water damaged cardboard box. With a start, Jason realized
that it was the box of personal effects Mrs. Walker had given him, with his original birth certificate inside, the thing that started the whole mess that landed him in his own personal satin-lined box.

Jason pulled the box up onto the bed and started sorting through the papers. Someone else had gone through it, organized it a little (Jason suspected Alfred again), but everything was still there, even the water damaged birth certificate. Jason stared at the little scrap of paper, irrefutable proof that Jason Peter Todd had existed, that he’d been born to Willis Todd and Sheila Haywood, that there had once been a little baby that someone had loved enough to bring into the world.

Setting aside the birth certificate, Jason went for the photographs. A good portion nearly disintegrate in his hands, the water damage and years spent in a cramped box not preserving them as they should have been. Jason wondered if anyone had thought about the photos, if Alfred had been in and considered taking the photos to be restored or framed, protected somehow, and then deciding against it. Not all of them were in dire straights however, and Jason smiled at a photo of Catherine, carrying a toddler Jason in a laundry basket that he’d been told used to be his crib until he outgrew it.

Jason looked up again at his room, taking in everything. The whole room was exactly how he’d left it all those years ago, hastily packing a bag and jetting off into the unknown to find his estranged birth mother. How stupid he’d been, running off to find some sense of family when he should have stayed where he was. What would have happened to him if he’d never gone to Ethiopia? If he’d forgotten the whole thing and continued as he was? He’d probably be in college by now, some fancy university because he’d always been smart enough and Bruce had the money to send him anywhere. Maybe he would have moved on from Robin, like Dick had, and become something else. So many possibilities flittered through Jason’s head, he could spend weeks considering them all.

A framed photograph on Jason’s bookshelf caught his eye. It was one of him and Bruce together, shortly after he’d come to live at the Manor and taken the mantle of Robin. He and Bruce were smiling, out at some property the Wayne family owned, surrounded by conifers and the sun shining down on them. Jason had really liked that photo, it had always looked to him like such a normal photo, just a father and son out on a camping trip together (in truth the trip had been some survival training for Robin).

Jason leaned over and picked up the photo, studying it. The boy in the photo stood tall and proud next to Bruce, grinning ear to ear, happy and carefree. How long ago had this been? Not so long ago really, a handful of years in the grand scheme of things, but Jason could scarcely remember the last time he’d been able to call himself ‘happy and carefree’. Jason looked over the photo again, noting how the Jason in the picture was so much shorter than Bruce. Jason now was nearly the same size as Bruce, he could look him right in the eye.

Jason looked up at the room again, and suddenly things seemed to shift around him. The dimensions seemed off, everything was distorted. It took Jason a second to realize that things actually were off, not because of the room, but because of him. He’d grown since he’d last been here, and things were suddenly out of proportion to him. Everything in the room no longer fit him. The desk, the clothing, the bed, nothing would fit him properly anymore, he’d changed too much. He didn't even like the kind of music his stereo was blasting now. Everything in this room was something that only belonged to the old Jason, the little kid who’d been so naive to think that a brightly coloured bird costume made him invincible.

Jason took a few deeps breaths, feeling out of place in his old life. What was probably meant to be a preservation of Jason’s life felt like a cage, a shrine for the person that Jason used to be. That boy was gone, he’d died years ago when Jason had put his trust in the wrong people. This room wasn't Jason’s anymore.
Feeling his frustration mount, Jason got off the bed and paced around for a moment. This was his room and it wasn’t, and he didn’t know how to feel about that. What could he do about it? There were plenty of other rooms Jason could move into, make his own, but this room would still be here, taunting Jason every time he walked passed it.

Jason stopped in the middle of the room. This was *his* room still, however mismatched it was to him now. He’d been given this space to do with as he pleased, to decorate and fill with whatever junk he wanted.

Filled with a surge of emotion, Jason stomped to his curtains. They were nice, heavy things, perfect for blocking out the early morning light, and a nice, rich green colour. They’d already been in the room when it had been given to him, all those years ago. Jason grabbed two fistfuls of the fabric and gave it a hard yank, intent on tearing them down.

Jason grunted as the curtains held and jerked his wrists awkwardly. They were bolted down solidly and weren’t about to go anywhere just by dramatic yanking. Flushing a little in embarrassment and glad no one saw that, Jason climbed onto his desk to start unhooking the curtains from the rod.

Jason pulled the curtains down and walked them to the door, tossing them out into the hallway to be dealt with later. Jason then stripped the bed and did the same with the bedspread and sheets.

Jason had been rearranging the room for nearly an hour when Dick poked his head into the doorway. He had a look on his face that told Jason he wanted to ‘talk’, but Jason busied himself with rifling through his drawers, trying to sort out what he wanted to toss and what he maybe wanted to keep.

“Heard about what happened,” Dick said, coming into the room. “It wasn't actually Joker. It was Tetch, trying to get under our skin while he hacked into our systems. Barbara managed to stop him in time,” Dick explained. “Tim’s wrist is sprained, but he should be fine.” He paused. “No one is mad at you Jason.”

“I don't care,” Jason scoffed, tossing an old walkman to the floor. The plastic cracked as it landed, sending splinters skittering over the carpet.

“Really Jason, we all understand,” Dick said, stepping further into the room. “Seeing that so unexpectedly, anyone would be shocked.”

Jason whirled around and threw a glass ornament at Dick’s head. Dick yelped and ducked before it could hit, the glass bauble shattering against the wall. “Would you shut up?” Jason snapped, “I don't want your pity.”

Dick frowned at him. “No one here pities you Jason,” he said, still a little ruffled at having something thrown at him. “We want to help you.”

“You can help by moving this thing out,” Jason said, kicking the now empty dresser. It was solid cherry wood and wouldn’t budge if only Jason went at it.

Dick’s frown deepened, but he did as Jason asked and grabbed the other end of it. Together they walked the larger dresser out into the hallway, setting it down outside next to the piles of other stuff.

“We can’t just leave it in the hallway,” Dick said, looking around at the piles of stuff. The old stereo laid on its side, one corner cracked where it had been tossed to the floor. Much of the stuff looked like it had been tossed around roughly.

“We’ll put it somewhere later,” Jason said, “I just want all this shit out of my room first.”
“You’re not getting rid of everything, are you?” Dick asked.

Jason snarled. “It’s my room and I’ll do whatever I want with it,” he snapped, storming back through the door. “You can stay and help if you want, but if you’re going to sit there and bitch about it, fuck off.”

Dick grumbled something, but followed Jason back inside and started pulling clothing out from the closet while Jason carefully retrieved his books from the shelf (he was definitely going to keep his books). Dick folded everything as he took it down from the hangers, stopping every so often to look over something with sad nostalgia in his eyes.

“Are you sure you don't want to keep any of this?” Dick asked, gesturing to the stacks of clothes.

“None of that will fit me anymore, dumbass,” Jason pointed out, “Toss it.”

“Not in the trash?” Dick said.

“Trash it, burn it, fuck, donate it to Goodwill. I really don't give a shit,” Jason said, carefully stacking his books. He’d need to find a way to organize them until he got a new place to put them.

Dick sighed and brought the clothes out of the room. It wasn't long before the others in the house became curious enough to start wandering in the direction of all the commotion.

“What are you doing?” Bruce asked, watching Jason try and keep his stacks of books alphabetized.

“Redecorating,” Jason answered. He picked up a stack of books and handed them to Bruce. “Find a temporary home for these. I want them back later.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow. The bruise on his face had purpled into a painful looking splotchy mess, but the cut on his lip had stopped oozing blood. He took the stack of books and walked off in the direction of the library.

“You don’t plan to destroy any of the furniture, Master Jason?” Alfred asked, running his hand along the desk they’d moved out into the hall. “Some of this has been in the Wayne family for decades.”

“So put it somewhere useful,” Jason said, “I don’t care where it goes, so long as it’s not here.”

Damian came up beside Alfred and inspected the desk. Even after so many years, it was still in prime condition. “I want to use this,” he announced, “I want to put this in my room.”

“Sure, but let’s get Jason’s stuff figured out first,” Tim said, starting to sort through the piles of junk, setting aside some more interesting CD’s.

Stephanie and Cass joined them after a while. “Hey, if you don't want these hoodies, can I have them?” Steph asked, pulling out a large black hoodie and holding it up, uncaring that she’d knocked over and entire stack of clothes to get it.

“Knock yourself out,” Jason said. He considered what to do with the mattress.

“We can probably just throw that away,” Bruce said, “Mattresses should be replaced every few years anyway.”

“Alright, help me get it down to the trash then,” Jason said, grabbing the mattress at one end. Bruce helped him with the other end and Dick came to help them balance it.

Barbara wheeled into the mostly empty room. “Are you going to change the colour palette?” she
“Probably,” Jason said, attacking a small cluster of cobwebs that had escaped Alfred’s notice by hiding behind the bookcase.

“Maybe you should change the wallpaper to go with it?” Barbara suggested, “If you’re changing the entire room, you might want to change the walls as well.”

Jason hummed. “Sure, yeah that’s a good idea,” he said, “Maybe I’ll rip the carpet up too, if Alfred’s not particularly attached.”

“Young sir, I do believe this carpet and wallpaper is nearly as old as I am. It would be a delight to update it,” Alfred said dryly.

Working well into the morning, they completely cleared Jason’s room, tearing down the wallpaper and ripping up the carpets, even pulling out the baseboard (though they kept the planks under Alfred’s insistence they they were still useable). The furniture that they’d moved out had been moved to either the attic or had found another place in the Manor. Everything else had either been gathered into the trash or found some other home. The only things Jason was keeping around were his books and the photographs.

The floor under the carpet was actually a nice looking dark wood. Once it was scrubbed clean, Jason decided that a simple coat of stain and varnish would do. As they waited for it dry, Jason took to scouring through the attic and unused rooms of the Manor, looking for furniture that didn’t make his skin crawl with unpleasant memories. Whenever he found something, it was pulled out of storage and scrubbed clean and given any repairs it might need. Whatever Jason couldn’t find readily available in the Manor was ordered and express shipped.

It took the entire day and night, but by the next morning, Jason’s old room had transformed from a macabre shrine to a boy that no longer existed into a functional space Jason actually felt like he could use without getting hives.

“Think that’s it,” Jason said, straightening a painting on the wall. He didn’t really care too much for it, but the wall was too bare without it something and the painting would do until Jason could find something he liked better.

“Looks like it,” Bruce said, testing the drawer on the desk again. They’d had to repair and oil the lock on it several times, but now it clicked open without so much as a squeak.

“Master Jason,” Alfred called, “Did you yank on the curtains by any chance? The screws holding in the rod look as though they’ve been pulled from the wall.”

“Uh, no,” Jason lied, glad he was facing away from Alfred. Judging from his sigh, Alfred hadn’t bought it.

“It looks nice Jason,” Bruce said. He’d skipped patrol that night in order to help Jason finish his room, letting the others go out without him. Jason appreciated the gesture, “Shame about all the stuff you’re just getting rid of.”

“It’s just stuff,” Jason said, “And it was my stuff anyway. I can toss it if I want,” he said, slightly defensive.

“Right,” Bruce said, gently running a hand over new wallpaper they’d put in. He walked over to the new bookcase, which was half filled with Jason’s books and partially filled with nick nacks and photographs. He picked up a photo of Catherine. “Do you want better frames for these?” he asked.
“If I take those out of the frames they’re in, they’ll fall apart,” Jason said.

“You could always used the duplicates,” Alfred suggested.

“Duplicates?” Jason asked.

Alfred climbed down from the ladder, finished putting in the deep red curtains Jason had picked out. “I had all of the photographs that were still intelligible copied and put away. I tried to have the originals restored, but I was told the restorative process would have undoubtedly ruined them completely and the better option would be to have copies made,” he explained.

“Oh,” Jason said, “Yeah, sure, I’ll take a look through them at least.”

“Very good lad,” Alfred said, dusting off his hands. “I’ll run and fetch them for you.”

Alfred left the room, leaving Bruce and Jason alone. Silence stretched like a lazy cat between them, unsaid things floating in the air. Jason sat down on his bed, unsure of what to say.

Bruce looked around the room. “This looks really nice Jason,” he said, “We’ll have to get you some new clothes soon. You’ve been wearing Dick’s old stuff, but I think you’ll feel better with something that actually fits you.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, not sure what else to say.

Bruce stood awkwardly for a minute, seeming like he was trying to figure out what to say. “I’ve come up with a few scenarios. For your return I mean.”

“My return?” Jason asked.

Bruce sat down on the bed next to Jason. “We have to tell the media something. Everyone knows that you died, so we’ll need a plausible explanation as to why you’re back,” he said, “Something that doesn’t lead back to Batman and the others.”

Jason hadn’t even thought of ‘returning’ from the dead as Jason Todd, adopted son of Bruce Wayne. He supposed he probably should have, but the blanket of anonymity that being ‘dead’ had served him well in the last few years. No one suspected who he was, even if they were familiar with Gotham. After all, there was no way some random kid who sure looked an awful lot like Jason Todd was actually Jason Todd, right?

“We could go over a few scenarios later, if you want,” Bruce continued, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Jason took a deep breath and let it out as a long sigh. “Bruce… I don’t think I can stay here.”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “If this is about what happened in the Cave—”

“It’s not just that,” Jason said, “It’s… there’s a lot of stuff in my head. I need… I have to figure some stuff out on my own.”

“You don’t have to leave for that.” Bruce lifted a hand, like he wanted to reach out to Jason, but he stopped short, letting it fall back on the bed. “You don’t have to leave,” he repeated, “You just got back.”

“I know,” Jason said, running a hand through his hair. “But… so much happened to me Bruce, and I don’t… I need to figure it out on my terms.”

Bruce looked pained, ready to keep arguing, but Jason cut him off. “I know you want me to be back,
God, sometimes I’d like to be back too,” he said, “But the kid who you knew, the person I was before… he’s gone Bruce. He’s not coming back.”

Bruce pressed his lips together and looked around the room that they’d spent the better part of nearly two days renovating. They’d torn out everything, scraped out the remnants of the boy Bruce had lost. But when he looked back at Jason, at the blood and bone reality of Jason, returned to him from beyond the grave, Bruce couldn't bring himself to be sad about it. What was a room full of stuff when his son was alive?

“You’re back,” Bruce said softly. He reached a hand out and threaded it through Jason’s hair. Jason tensed for a good second, but he let it happen. “It doesn’t matter that you’ve changed, because you are back. You’re alive and I—” his voice choked off with emotion. Bruce curled his arm around Jason’s shoulders and pulled him close, pressing his nose into Jason’s hair. He smelled different, used different shampoo, different soap, but there was enough of what Bruce remembered as Jason for Bruce to remember all the nights he’d come into this room to check on his son after a bad night, to hold him after a nightmare. There was no faking that; Jason was alive.

“If you need to go, for whatever reason, I’m not going to stop you,” Bruce said, “But I want you to know that this is your home. Don't think for a second you can’t come back. We’ll always be here for you Jason, no matter what.”

After a tense moment, Jason let himself relax into Bruce, turning his head and burying his face into his father’s shirt. For a second, Jason let himself be tired. He was exhausted by everything that had happened to him in the last few years. He hadn’t slept well since being dead, and he’d been pushing himself further and harder, deeper into his obsessions until he was consumed by them. Now, having let his desire for revenge and blood and death go, he was tired, the weight of everything crashing down onto him all at once.

But Jason still couldn’t sleep.

“I need to go,” Jason mumbled into Bruce’s shirt. “I can’t… there’s so much I need to figure out. I need to figure out who— what I am now. And I don't think I can do that here. There’s too much… history.”

Bruce squeezed Jason tighter. “I understand. I don’t like it, but I understand,” he said. Gently, he tucked his thumb under Jason’s chin and tilted his head up so he could look him in the eyes. “And I know exactly what you are. You are my son, and nothing will ever change that.”

Jason felt the steadily-becoming-too-familiar sensation of tears pricking his eyes. Bruce’s mouth turned up in a soft smile and he leaned over to press a kiss to Jason's forehead. Jason let out a sigh; the anger, the hatred, it was all still there, and probably would never go away, but for now, Jason could pretend. He was Jason Todd, adopted son a Bruce Wayne, and they were simply father and son, having a close moment in his bedroom.

The sky brightened outside, the coming of a new day, and Jason remembered that neither he nor Bruce had slept since two days ago. With a sigh, he pulled away from Bruce and stretched.

“Alright, I think that’s enough,” he said, “We both need to try and sleep.”

Bruce glanced out the window. “Right,” he said. Jason could see him stifle a yawn. “I should head down and check on the others.” He stood and started walking towards the door.

“Hey Bruce,” Jason called, causing Bruce to stop at the door and turn. “Get out of my room.”
Bruce blinked in surprise, then huffed out a laugh. “Goodnight Jay,” he said, then left the room, shutting the door softly behind him.

Jason let out a long sigh and fell back against his new bed. It was incredibly comfortable, fresh out of the packaging, express shipped all the way from some specialty place in Star City. His desk was old, something that had belonged to Thomas at one point, as was the shelf currently housing all of Jason’s books and photographs. They’d moved Jason’s favourite chair from the library into his room, an overstuffed, beaten all to hell thing that preceded even Alfred’s time at the Manor. His desk chair was new however, all sleek, creaky leather. The bedframe was old as well, a reinforced oak monster they’d dragged in from one of the other rooms in the Manor.

If Jason were any other person, he would sleep like a prince, surrounded by all the love and care of his family. Jason readied himself for bed and hoped the nightmares wouldn't be too vicious tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Like I said at the starting notes, this should be the second to last chapter if I go super long in the next one. Happy (belated) Birthday Jason Todd, and I'll see you guys next chapter!
Here we are! The last actual 'chapter' of this fic! There will be two more chapters of this, but those will be more epilogue kind of stuff. This has been super fun and I'm really excited to finish this and see what everyone thinks.

CONTEST TIME! I think this will probably be the last chapter that I do a contest, just because I want to focus on the writing for the next two parts. This is another video game reference, so go looking for that. It should be fairly obvious, so I won't give any hints.

“Are you sure you have everything?” Bruce asked, trying not to be too obvious about his hovering, but unable to just take a step back from this.

“I don’t really need much,” Jason said, “I want to travel light.”

Unsurprisingly, the news of Jason’s plans to leave had been met with mixed feelings. Dick in particular was torn between wanting his recently returned brother to stay home where he could watch out for him and wanting Jason to be happy. Alfred hadn’t said anything, but Jason could tell he was conflicted as well. Tim, having spent the last little while in close quarters with Jason, was a little more understanding of Jason’s desire to figure himself out. Damian didn’t seem to care either way.

Bruce had been completely supportive, but Jason could tell that he was apprehensive about letting Jason go out on his own. There was so much that could go wrong, but at the same time he didn’t want to cage Jason in.

In honesty, Jason himself was a little conflicted about leaving. He knew he couldn’t stay, but it was surprisingly hard to leave. After speaking with Bruce in his room, it had taken Jason nearly a week to get everything together, though it should have taken him a day at most. Jason was travelling light, only taking enough supplies that would fit on the back of a motorcycle (one he was borrowing from Bruce).

But Jason knew he needed to go, he had to, for his own sake. Maybe it was stupid and selfish, but he knew he couldn’t stay at the Manor, in Gotham, not yet anyway. He had some soul searching to do, and a lonesome road trip seemed like the perfect way to do that. At least it seemed that way to Jason, no matter what the others had said.

“Do you really need to go?” Dick had asked, full of brotherly concern. “I mean, are you sure?”

Jason sighed, starting to lose his patience with Dick (not that he had much patience for Dick in the first place). “Yes, I’m sure,” he said, “I need to get out of here, figure my shit out for a while.”

“You can do that here,” Dick said, “You don’t have to stay at the Manor if it’s too hard, but you don’t have to leave Gotham either. You could come out to Bludhaven if you wanted. I wouldn’t mind having you around.”

“ I’d mind,” Jason said, “Why are you acting all clingy anyway? I’ve been gone for years, what’s a
few months?"

“That’s just it,” Dick said, “You’ve been… gone for long and you just got back. I thought we could spend some more time together before you left.”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “Really? Since when have you ever wanted to spend time with me?”

Dick had the audacity to actually look hurt. “You’re my little brother, of course I want to spend time with you,” he said softly.

Jason felt a spike of anger course through him. “Don’t bullshit me, you never liked me back then. It took you ages to be in the same room with me without trying to glare a hole through my skull.”

Dick flushed, either in anger or embarrassment, but Jason forged on before he could defend himself. “You hated me for taking Robin and you took your anger at Bruce out on me for replacing you,” Jason said, “We were never brothers.”

For all of two seconds, Jason was sure Dick would take a swing at him, but he deflated with a sigh. “You’re right,” he mumbled softly.

“Come again?” Jason asked, not sure he’d heard correctly. Was Dick actually admitting that he’d been a dick?

“You’re right,” Dick said, louder this time. “I was a terrible older brother to you, especially in the beginning. I was just so… angry at Bruce all the time, and he’s so infuriatingly myopic about people, it was just… easier to be mad at you than it was to get in his face. I’m sorry Jason.”

Jason blinked, stunned. He’d never really expected Dick to ever own up to all the shitty things he did when Jason was Robin. Which really wasn’t much, but that was half the problem; he’d gone off to do his own thing and left Jason to deal with Bruce. It wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn’t stung so damn much, being ignored by the person he’d looked up to. Things had calmed down between them eventually, but Jason and Dick had never exactly been close, and Dick had never mentored Jason the way he seemed to with Tim.

“It’s… fine,” Jason said, unsure of what else to do. What else could he say?

Dick smiled. “It’s really not,” he said, “But I want to make it up to you, now that I’ve got a second chance. You can come to me if you ever need anything.”

Now Jason just rolled his eyes. “Sure, but I’m still not staying with you,” he said, “I’m heading out on my own and you’re not changing my mind.”

“Oh come on,” Dick whined, “Where the heck are you even going?”

Jason shrugged. “Don’t know yet. Just gonna drive around for a bit at first I guess. Help people along the way.”

Dick set his jaw. “Why don’t I come with you? It’s dangerous on your own.”

“No.” Jason huffed, “Look Dick, I appreciate the sentiment and all, but I’m not the same punk kid I used to be,” he said, “I can take care of myself.”

Dick looked like he wanted to argue more, but he was smart enough to know that it wasn’t getting him anywhere. “So that’s it then? You come home, from the dead, spend a few weeks lurking around the Manor, tear out your old room, and then just go? Leaving us to wonder when you’ll be
“When did you become such a mother hen, goldilocks?” Jason asked, “I’ll be fine. I know your phone number and I’ll even send postcards. I’m not dropping off the grid. Hell, even if I did, the world’s greatest detective lives in the basement. I’m sure you’ll track me down if I get into trouble.”

Dick sighed. “We don’t want to see you get into trouble is the thing,” he said, “But if you’re serious about this, you promise to call? Not just here, but Bludhaven to?”

Jason rolled his eyes and held up a three fingered salute. “I solemnly swear to call you at your shitty apartment in Bludhaven and bug you at four in the morning,” he said.

Dick chuckled. “You were never a boy scout,” he said.

“You want me to pinkie promise instead?” Jason asked, but he felt more relaxed as well. “I promise I’ll keep you in the loop, now stop being an asshole about this.”

“I’ll try,” Dick said, sighing again. “But… it just sucks to see you go. We just got you back. I feel like I’ve got a second chance to be your big brother, and now you’re just leaving again.”

“You can be a big brother by not worrying so damn much,” Jason said, “Trust me, I’ve been taking care of myself for a year now, I’ll be fine.”

Dick frowned slightly, probably not pleased to be reminded that Jason had been alive for years and none of them had ever known, but he kept that to himself. “If you need anything, call okay? You know we’d drop everything to come help you.”

“I know, it’s one of the most annoying things about you,” Jason said, tossing a couch pillow at Dick. “Now go away or watch TV, Dick.”

Dick huffed, catching the pillow out of the air and tossing it back at Jason, but he sat down on the couch next to Jason. He’d cornered Jason watching TV in the media room, taking a break from packing things up.

“What are you watching anyway?” Dick asked, spreading himself out as he got comfortable.

“Hell’s Kitchen” Jason said, shoving at Dick’s foot that was creeping its way across the couch. “I like watching Ramsey tear these idiots a new one.”

“You would,” Dick said, but he settled down to watch with Jason. It was nice actually, to just sit and be normal for a while. For a few hours, anyone looking in would just see two brothers hanging out, enjoying each other’s company.

Of course, Dick wasn't the only one with opinions about Jason leaving, though he was the most vocal about them. Or rather Dick was the most vocal about wanting Jason not to leave. Damian, on the other hand, had the opposite opinion.

“Have you not left yet?” Damian asked, sneering at Jason from the other corner of the training matt. “I should have thought Father would have kicked you out by now.”

“I’m leaving on my own terms, you little gremlin,” Jason growled, “Isn’t it past your bedtime anyway?”
“I am an al Ghul, I sleep when I see fit,” Damian said haughtily. Jason rolled his eyes and resumed his training, ignoring the eyes glaring holes into the back of his head.

Things were quiet aside from the whistling of air off Jason’s kicks and punches and the punchy breaths he makes as he moves. Then Damian spoke up. “You trained with Mother for some time,” he said, it wasn’t a question. “You’ve been trained to kill.”

Like I have, hovered in the air, unsaid but still sharp. Jason turned to look at Damian, trying to gauge him. The boy stood tall and proud, but Jason could see that it was an act, a posture meant to hide Damian’s true feelings. Jason could tell now, after having spent some time with the little brat, that he was insecure, that he was worried his background with the League of Assassins would paint him in a bad light with Bruce and the others.

“Yeah, I trained with her,” Jason said, “She’s a good warrior.”

Damian scoffed. “Of course she is, she is of the al Ghul lineage,” he said, “It would be remiss of her not to live up to her heritage.”

Jason didn't bother hiding his eye roll. “Right,” he said dryly, “Wouldn’t want to disappoint that lineage.”

Jason turned back to his training, intent on ignoring the brat some more. He sort of understood why Damian had come to him; he was the only one in the house who knew Talia aside from Bruce, and things between Bruce and Damian were still a little awkward right now. Jason could understand why Damian would come to him, but he desperately wished he hadn’t, if only for Damian’s own sake.

After a long moment, Damian cut through the silence. “Do you think Mother loves me?”

Jason faltered on a kick, the surprise halting his movement and making him over balance awkwardly. He grunted as he stumbled, managing to right himself at the last second. He looked at Damian, who seemed to have shrunk on himself a little, like a vulnerable child. Which he was, Jason reminded himself. Damian was eight, and had lived under the complete and total influence of Talia for his entire life. Sure the brat had a nasty attitude and a superiority complex, but honestly, with a Talia al Ghul for a mother, he was doing alright for himself.

Plus, it wasn’t as though Jason had a good track record with mothers himself. Sheila had sold him out almost the second she had the chance, stood by while the Joker had beat him to death with a crowbar, and only shown any remorse when the maniac had tied her to a post to blow her up too. Catherine, as much as Jason had loved her, as much as she had loved Jason, had been an addict and time and time again chose herself over Jason, and eventually it had killed her. Catherine had tried, but she’d always fallen short of making the right decision. The decision to leave Willis, the decision to get clean, the decision to try just a little harder, for herself and for Jason.

But Catherine had loved Jason, hadn’t she? For all her mistakes, Catherine had loved Jason with her whole being. He’d known that from the beginning, even when she drowned herself in her latest fix, forcing Jason to be the adult far before he was ready. Through all the mistakes, Catherine had loved Jason, and Jason had loved her for all her faults. Looking at Damian, thinking of Talia, Jason could guess what was going through his head.

“What sort of question is that?” Jason asked, “Of course she loves you.”

Damian looked up at Jason, something close to hope in his eyes. “You really think that?” he asked.

“Of course,” Jason said, “Would she have tried so hard if she didn’t?”
Damian stopped to think about that. Jason could see him relax a little, the tension bleed out of his shoulders. The answer and the question would grow more complex as time went on, Jason knew better than to think it wouldn’t, but for now, Damian could have the comfort of surety.

“Hey, come on,” Jason said, “I need a sparring partner and you need practice.”

Damian nodded and strode forward, his face molding back into the too-serious expression Jason knew shouldn’t be so common on a child’s face. Hopefully Bruce would figure it out sooner this time, learn from his mistakes with Dick and Jason, and give what Damian needed from him.

“You’re still not my brother,” Damian said at the end of their session. They were both sweaty and out of breath, and Jason was sure he’d have a few nasty bruises to poke at.

“That’s fine, you’re still a little shit,” Jason said, but he was grinning. Damian was small, but agile and fast, which made for a good workout. He didn’t pull his punches; Jason had to admit, he’d miss the little bugger while he was gone. Damian was a pain in the ass and he had to make that everyone else’s problem, but hey, Jason could relate.

Damian scowled at Jason, but he didn’t try and attack until Jason reached over and ruffled his hair, so Jason figured he could chalk it up as progress.

“Don’t get into too much trouble without me while I’m gone, alright?” Jason said after Damian had tired himself out chasing him through the Cave.

Damian tried to scoff, but it came out stunted as he tried to catch his breath. “I’ll get into as much trouble as I please,” he said.

Jason chuckled. “That’s the spirit kid. Give the old man a run for his money,” he said. He patted Damian on the head one last time before he went to shower.

Preparing to leave wasn’t as easy as Jason had thought it was going to be, not just from an emotional standpoint, but a logistical one as well. Jason was pretty sure he was headed somewhere, but he’d be damned if he knew where that somewhere was going to be. As romantic as wandering aimlessly through the backroads of the continental United States sounded, Jason had to have at least some structure to his plans, or who knew where he’d end up.

Right back where he started probably.

So Jason had to be a little more strategic than just ‘wandering’. This included having papers on him to prove that he was a real person with a license to drive and credit cards to buy things. These of course required identities, which, lucky for Jason, could be falsified with the right amount of smarts. Also lucky for Jason, there were a lot of smart people around to choose from.

“Have you decided on a false name?” Barbara asked, tapping away at her computer. She was putting the finishing touches on the false ID’s Jason would be using for his trip.

“Todd Jason Peters,” Jason said, leaning over her chair to watch her work.

Barbara looked up at him over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow. “Really?” she asked.

Jason shrugged. “It’ll work. I’ve used it as an alias before.”
Barbara rolled her eyes. “Whatever ‘Todd’, just don’t clip through the floor or get stuck in a T-pose,” she said, typing the name into place.

“That’s why I go by my much less goofy middle name,” Jason said, “See? I can be smart about these things too you know.”

“Right,” Barbara said, unimpressed but still smiling slightly. “That should do it,” she said, putting the last touches in place.

Jason looked over her work. “Can you make me 21 instead of 19?” he asked.

Barbara sighed and rolled her eyes. “No,” she said, “I don’t think giving you access to alcohol is going to help you get your head on straight. In fact I think alcohol does the opposite.”

“Party pooper,” Jason grumbled.

Barbara rolled her eyes again and started to print the cards. As she was fiddling with her machine, Jason noticed an open file on her desk. Curious, Jason picked it up and began flipping through it.

“Oh hey, I remember this,” Jason said, plucking a crime scene photo out of the file. “Ugh, this was so messy. I can’t believe I didn't notice how fucked up I was.”

“You were investigating Black Mask?” Barbara asked, looking over at what Jason was holding.

“Um, kinda,” Jason said awkwardly, not sure if he should say anything.

Tim and Damian knew that Jason was willing to kill, that he had killed, but he wasn't sure if the others knew. Of course they would find out eventually, they were detectives after all. Or maybe they already knew and no one wanted to say anything. With the way Barbara was looking at him, it seemed likely the she knew that it was him who killed the gangbangers in the crime photo.

Jason sighed and stuffed the photo back in the file, flipping it closed. “Look, I was in a weird fucking place when I did that. Besides, those guys were a bunch a of rapists and murderers. They had it coming,” he said, his voice turning into more of a growl as he spoke. Jason could feel the rage bubble under his skin, making his fingers itch for the trigger of a gun. He could clean the streets, rinse away the muck and grime with blood. They all deserved to die.

Barbara laid a gentle hand on Jason’s arm, the touch calming him down, making the rage fade from a bonfire back into a candle flame. Jason noticed that he’d been gripping the file so hard it was starting to crumple. He swore and tried to flatten it out again.

“Sorry,” he muttered, avoiding Barbara’s gaze. He tried to straighten the file out against the edge of the table, but he pressed too hard and the file ripped. “Shit,” Jason growled. His hands were shaking.

“Hey, hey,” Barbara said, grabbing Jason’s wrist. “Look at me. You’re okay,” she soothed, rubbing his arm. “It’s fine. I have the whole thing on the computer. It’s fine.”

Jason took a few deeps breaths. “Yeah, sorry,” he said. There was no reason to get worked up, but Jason was having a hard time calming down. Barbara gently tugged him to sit down on her couch, the printing of the cards abandoned for now.

“You know I killed those people,” Jason said, after his stomach had settled enough for him to speak. “Everyone knows I did, and they won’t say anything.”

“You weren’t in your right mind,” Barbara said, handing him a glass of water. “We understand.”
Jason huffed; it wasn’t quite a laugh and it wasn’t a sigh. “You really don’t understand,” he said, running his hands through his hair. “Yeah, the pit messes with your head, but it’s still you. Everything you do is still you. It’s not like…” Jason stopped, wondering if he should go further. 

Fuck it, he thought, he’d already come this far. “I still think those men deserved what they got, what I did to them. I don’t regret killing them, any of them. I think they should have been killed.”

Barbara looked at Jason with something strange in her eyes, like she was seeing him for the first time. Jason found his hackles rising, like a cornered animal. “Of all people, don’t you understand? After what that messed up freak did to us, don’t you want him dead?” he asked, reaching out and grabbing the armrest of her chair. “Don’t you think he deserves it?”

Barbara looked down at Jason’s hand on her chair, frowning deeply. She rested her hand over his, her other one gripping her armrest so tightly her knuckles went white. She closed her eyes and took a long, deep breath, gathering her thoughts. Barbara finally let out a long sigh and took off her glasses, resting them in her lap.

“I do want him dead,” she said softly, “But I don’t think I need to be responsible for it.”

Jason could tell that she wasn’t finished and waited for her to continue. Barbara put her glasses back on and looked up at Jason, meeting his gaze. “I wish he was dead. I wish he was out of everyone’s misery. Maybe even a part of me wants to do it myself.” Barbara paused, and Jason could feel the crackle in the air. She’d never admitted that out loud to anyone.

Barbara steeled herself again. “But I realize that it’s not the way things work. We don’t deal in death, and we can’t be executioners, even if we think it’s justified, even if the world would agree with us,” she said, “There’s just too much at stake.”

Jason thought about the talk he’d had with Bruce in front of the monument, about why he hadn’t killed the Joker. Bruce had said he wouldn’t kill the Joker because he couldn’t lead Dick and Tim down that path, that he had responsibilities to the city and the cause he’d committed himself too. Jason had understood that, though he didn’t necessarily agree. Bruce didn’t tolerate anyone who took life and death into their own hands, but so far he’d never mentioned Jason’s sordid deeds, even though he must have known. They couldn’t ignore it forever, it all had to come crashing down sometime.

And where would Jason be standing when it did?

Jason slowly removed his hand from Barbara’s chair, having to carefully extract his fingers, having gripped so hard there were imprints on his palm. He rubbed his hand to get the blood flowing again. “What do you think Bruce would think of me?” he asked, so soft he wasn’t sure he’d been heard. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be heard.

“Bruce loves you,” Barbara answered easily, “No matter what happens, that will never change.”

“Yeah sure,” Jason said, “But what happens when I cross a line? What happens when I don’t play by his rules?”

Barbara looked at Jason, considering, compiling her thoughts. If there was anyone Jason could trust to give him an honest answer that was as close to the objective truth as possible, it was Barbara. She’d always been the one person Jason could rely on when it came to the hard truths.

“I don’t really know what would happen,” Barbara said, “Bruce loves you, so much that it nearly broke him, but he’s rigid and uncompromising.” Her face softened slightly, though she didn’t smile. “I think it has to be up to you,” she said.
“Up to me?” Jason asked.

Barbara nodded. “You have to decide what’s more important to you, bringing down criminals by being a murderer, or being a part of a family who loves you.”

Jason scowled, something hardening in his stomach. “That sounds like an ultimatum,” he said.

“I guess it is a little bit.” Barbara said, smiling sadly. “But you know as well as I do how Bruce is. His way or the highway.”

Jason groaned. “What a pain in the ass.”

Barbara chuckled. “I know, but he really does have a point,” she said, “I don’t think he would have survived so long otherwise.”

Jason sighed and leaned back against the couch. He was quiet for a few moments before he spoke again. “I don’t… I don’t like killing “ he said, “I don’t enjoy it at all, even when I think someone deserves it. I like knowing that they’ll never hurt anyone again, but the actual act of killing them?” Jason shrugged, leaving it at that.

“But,” Jason continued after a pause. “If the Joker ever gets out, if I ever see him again,” Jason looked up at Barbara, looking her dead in the eyes, “I’ll kill him and it’ll put a damn smile on my face.”

Barbara met his gaze. “I don’t think anyone would begrudge you for that,” she said. She glances back at her machines, which had finished printing the cards and papers Jason would need. “As for what you do to anyone else, you’ll have plenty of time to think about it while you’re on the road.”

Jason nodded but didn’t say anything. He got up and followed Barbara to look over the ID’s and paperwork they’d made up for him. The fakes were good, probably good enough that Jason could vote with them if he wanted to. Trust this family to never cut corners when it came to the important things.

“I want to help people,” Jason said after a long silence. “I still want to help people, but I don’t know what that means for me anymore.”

Jason had helped people while he was travelling, little side tasks as he was planning his revenge, and most of the time that ended in the deaths of the guilty people. Sadistic murderers, drug lords, human traffickers, rapists, pedophiles, the worst human scum had all met their end at Jason’s hand. Hundreds if not thousands of people had been saved because Jason put poison in the food, squeezed the trigger, slit the throat. Killing had become a necessary evil to him, something that was done to achieve his goals.

At least, that was how Talia had encouraged him to view it.

Barbara hummed. “I suppose you’ll have to figure it out for yourself,” she said, “You’ll have to decide what you want your priorities to be.”

Jason looked up at Barbara, who was checking the cards for any imperfections. She grabbed a scanner of some kind and held it over the card until it beeped. Satisfied, she moved on to the next card. She was thorough and meticulous, just like she always had been, and Jason knew he could trust her work.

“I guess I will,” he said softly, even though he was fairly certain what he was going to decide in the end.
Barbara glanced up at him over the tops of her glasses and smiled. Her eyes shone softly in a way that Jason could tell that she had a pretty good idea what his decision would be as well.

Finally, after over a week of puttering around the Manor, slowly getting things ready, Jason was primed to leave. He stood across from Bruce, packing things into the motorcycle he was taking, wondering what to say. He was leaving in the early morning, not wanting to have a long tearful goodbye with everyone (aside from Alfred, who he’d already hugged and spoke with upstairs). Only Bruce was with him now, and Jason wasn’t sure if that was better.

“If you run into trouble, don’t hesitate to call,” Bruce said, hands shoved into his pockets so he wouldn’t fidget. “We’ll help you with whatever you need.”

“I know,” Jason said, “Thanks.”

“Did you get the box of food Alfred made for you?” Bruce asked, shifting his weight to either foot anxiously.

“Yes,” Jason said, starting to get a little annoyed, though he was unable to bring himself to be mad. “I checked everything twice Bruce, I’m good.”

“I’m just checking,” Bruce said, “I want to make sure you’re going to be okay.”

“I’ll be fine Bruce,” Jason said, “Quit worrying.”

Bruce gave a half-smile. “I’m your father Jay, I’ll always worry,” he said, “That’s just how that works.”

Jason didn’t flinch, but he fumbled putting the rolled up tent into the motorcycle trailer. He saved it from dropping to the ground and put it back in its place. It felt so strange to hear that after so long, after having spent so long vowing revenge on Bruce for replacing him. How quickly things could change.

If Bruce noticed Jason fumble, he didn’t comment. He waited patiently for Jason to finish packing before he took a step towards him, gently resting a hand on Jason’s shoulder. “I want you to remember to call,” he said, “Not just for emergencies, but just to check in, okay?”

“Trying to keep tabs on me?” Jason asked, only mostly teasing.

“I just want to make sure you’re okay,” Bruce said, “Just… let someone know where you are once in a while? It doesn’t have to be me, you can call Dick or Tim, or text them if you prefer that.”

Jason looked up at Bruce; he was really trying. “Alright,” Jason said, “I’ll send postcards or something.”

“Thank you,” Bruce said, seeming genuinely relieved. “Before I forget, I’ve got a few last things for you,” he said, walking to a nearby work table. “I had a few accounts set up for you under different identities, just in case,” he said, handing Jason a few bank cards. “There’s plenty of money on all of them, so you should be alright, but if you need more, just call and I can wire some to whichever account you prefer.”

“Thanks,” Jason said, taking the cards and putting them in his wallet. “Guess my college fund is going to be useful after all.”
“Your college fund hasn’t been touched,” Bruce said, “It’s staying right where it is until you decide on what school you want to go to.”

“Oh,” Jason said. He hadn’t really thought about school since coming back from the dead, unless it was to imagine what might have been if he hadn’t died. He supposed, with everything happening the way it was, college wasn’t as much of a pipe dream as he’d thought it was.

“One last thing,” Bruce said, picking up a small box from the work table. He slid the lid off of it to reveal a tiny device with a button on it.

“It’s a homing device. If you get into trouble, press the button three times in succession and it’ll send an SOS signal to the Cave,” Bruce explained, “It has a tracking signal in it, but this is only for emergencies, I won’t be looking for it unless it sends a signal.”

Jason took the device; it was small enough to be kept in his wallet, but there was a little loop on it that suggested it could be put on a necklace or onto a keychain. “Thanks,” Jason said, slipping it into his wallet for now. “If I get in over my head I’ll use it.”

“Be safe,” Bruce said, just short of begging.

“Two, three, four,” Jason said to himself, worrying that it might have been a bad idea to come to Bruce’s. He supposed, with everything happening the way it was, college wasn’t as much of a pipe dream as he’d thought it was.

Bruce reached out and gripped Jason’s shoulder. “If you feel like you’re in danger, no matter what it is, even if it’s just a feeling, I want you to use it,” he said, “I’d much rather drop everything to come see you for a misguided gut feeling than have you—” Bruce cut himself off with a frown, but Jason understood.

“I will,” Jason promised, “If I’m in danger of being offed again, I’ll call.”

There was a kind of awkward pause. “If that’s everything—?” Jason prompted. This was why he was leaving so early, to avoid these awkward goodbyes.

Bruce pressed his lips together, having a million things to say, but not knowing how to say them. Instead, he stepped forward and gently put his arms around Jason, hugging him tightly. “Be safe,” Bruce said, just short of begging.

Jason hesitated a moment before returning the hug. “I will,” he said, just short of a promise. There was still so much in his head that didn't make sense, so much that he had to dig through, clear out and examine, but for a second he could just hug his father and pretend that things were fine.

“Leaving without saying goodbye?” came a voice from the top of the stairs. Jason pulled back from Bruce to see Tim watching them.

“Without saying goodbye to you, brat,” Jason huffed, though there wasn’t any bite in the words.

“Drama queen,” he said, “Don’t get hurt okay? I didn't get you back here so you could run off and get hurt again.”

“You got me back here? I think someone is forgetting history,” Jason said.

Tim raised an eyebrow. “Please, you never would have come back if I hadn’t manipulated you into helping me,” he said.

“Manipula—?” Jason choked, “Okay, that’s it. Come here you little shit,” he said, moving towards Tim, intent on finally strangling the little brat.
“Boys, enough,” Bruce said, catching Jason’s arm and pulling him back. He looked up at Tim. “Shouldn’t you be in bed? It’s late.”

Tim shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep,” he said, the bags under his eyes prominent and bruise-like. He hadn’t been sleeping well in the last few days and Bruce was starting to worry. Tim looked at the packed motorcycle and then back at Jason. “You’re really just going without saying goodbye?” he asked.

Jason refused to acknowledge the curl of guilt in his stomach. “I hate mushy goodbyes,” he said. Tim hummed, not seeming too upset. Maybe he was too tired. “Dick is going to cry you know. He’s going to be incorrigible and cry to me. I’m not going to get anything done for a week.”

“Well, that sounds like it’s your problem,” Jason said, grinning. “I’ll call tomorrow or something.”

“Gee, how generous of you,” Tim said, rolling his eyes.

“I aim to please,” Jason said. He looked to Bruce one last time; it was now or never. Bruce patted his shoulder one last time before Jason hopped onto his bike, pulling the helmet on and strapping it down.

“I’ll see you guys, I guess,” Jason said, not sure what else to say.

Bruce gave him a tight smile, unhappy but trying not to show it. Tim gave a bored half wave. “Better go before you infect everyone with your zombie virus,” he teased.

Bruce turned to glare at Tim, but Jason laughed, the tension easing from his shoulders. “See if I bring you back a present now, brat,” he said. He flicked the helmet’s visor down and started the engine.

With one last wave to his father and his brother, Jason sped off, kicking up dust and leaving a scuff on the cement. The garage door opened and suddenly Jason was free, the cool morning air buffeting him as he sped towards Gotham. The light of dawn was just starting to peek over the horizon, casting the city in a faint glow that would brighten as the morning continued. The Manor loomed behind him, it’s shadow seeming to extend towards Jason like a protective blanket. As Jason got further away, the shadow receded, but remained where it was, ready to welcome him back at any time.

Ahead of him, the cosmos stretched out, the rare clear Gotham night ablaze with stars. Jason could go anywhere, as far afield as he desired, and return home whenever he felt like it. Looking up at the sky, picking out the constellations in the sky, Jason felt at peace for the first time in a long time.

Bruce stayed in the garage long after he lost sight of Jason tearing down the long drive, listening to the engine of the motorcycle get fainter and fainter. Part of him wanted to go after Jason, trail him, make sure he was alright, at least until he got out of the city, but he stayed where he was. He had to trust that Jason would return home when he was ready.

Behind him, Tim yawned. “You know, he took off the tires of the Batmobile before he left,” he said. Bruce turned and looked at Tim. The boy was starting to fall asleep against the railing of the staircase. Bruce smiled at his son and put an arm around his slim shoulders.

“Of course he did,” Bruce said, “Come on, let’s see if we can find the tires before anyone else wakes up.”

Tim hummed and leaned into Bruce, mostly asleep despite standing up. They found two tires before Damian woke up and declared he’d find the other two before they did. He managed to find one before Dick woke up from the commotion and tried to help them find the last tire, which they don’t
until Cass appeared with it in her arms. Once the tires were reattached, Bruce extended the entirety of his cooking talents into making grilled cheese for everyone while Dick lamented his lack of a proper goodbye from Jason. It was loud and chaotic and Alfred would scold them for the mess, but Bruce couldn't bring himself to feel anything but content.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, things are finally wrapping up. If there's something you think is missing, don't worry I've got plenty to explore in the next two chapters. Just hold onto your horses.
Wow this took no time at all. I had a blast writing this, and I'm so excited to be so close to finishing it. There's just one more chapter after this you guys!

Please note that there are meant to be non-linear; they don't occur in the order in which they appear. It doesn't matter too much what order they're actually in aside from one or two, these are meant to show the kinds of things that happen after the end of the last chapter. Most are just fun, but a few are canon scenes that would have been changed by the events in this fic. I obviously couldn't get to everything that happened after, but these should at least give you an idea of what might have happened.

The problem with being the richest man in Gotham was that everyone always wanted in on your business. From the moment that the media got wind that Tim Drake, illegitimate child of said richest man in Gotham and the subject of the biggest scandal of the year, had returned to Gotham after a long, suspicious absence, they began circling like hungry vultures. When they learned that Tim had not only returned, but brought with him a second illegitimate child of the richest man in Gotham, with no explanation as to where he'd come from or how he'd been found, the media went absolutely ape shit.

Knowing that there was nothing to be done about the public interest, Bruce tried to ignore the swarm of paparazzos wherever he went and the constant attention from reporters and journalists. All that could be done was to wait for the frenzy to die down. Until then, life had to go on.

One of the aspects of life for the richest people in Gotham however, tended to be semi-public galas and parties, some of which implied the attendance of not only the rich, but their families as well. In an effort not to seem like he was hiding the boys away, Bruce dragged his reluctant sons to a garden party that Bruce was about 56% sure was a way to drag him specifically out of hiding. Nevertheless, Bruce and his newfound illegitimate sons had to make at least a cursory appearance, or otherwise suffer the social stigma.

“Aren’t you just a sweetheart.” The woman’s voice rose to an alarming pitch as she bent in front of Tim. “You’re going to be a real heartbreaker when your older huh? Just like your daddy.”

“Thanks,” Tim said, wishing he could leave. Unlike Dick, who has always loved the spotlight, Tim didn’t care for the attention being a Wayne brought him. Especially when it came from socialites who were quite clearly trying to butter him up so they could get closer to Bruce.

“Say, where is your dad sweetheart?” the woman asked, straightening up and tossing her hair over her shoulder. “I want to tell him how wonderful he is looking after you all in his own.”

*I'm sure you do*, Tim thought. “I don’t know where he is, it’s a big crowd,” he said.

The woman giggled. “Aw that’s okay sweetie. Want me to help you find him?”

*I wasn’t the one looking for him?* Tim thought. “That’s alright, I’m sure he’s not very far.”
The woman seemed to sense that she wasn’t going to get anywhere with Tim and was starting to lose interest when her eyes lit up at something passed Tim’s shoulder. Tim turned to see Damian making his way towards him and cursed internally. Damian may have seemed like the easier target, being younger and less accustomed to life in Gotham, but they’d been learning the hard way that that wasn’t really the case. Damian had little patience for anyone he didn’t consider part of his inner circle, which only included his family at this point (though if they were honest, Damian didn’t have a lot of patience for them either), and he had a sharp tongue for insults. So far they’d managed to play off Damian’s worst insults as him being young and cranky at parties because he was bored. A few people had even assumed Damian had misspoken, taking one look at the brown of his skin and believing him to be unfamiliar with the intricacies of the English language; Tim and the others were much more quick to dispel that assumption.

Tim turned to Damian as he arrived at his side. “Hey kiddo, what are you up to?” Tim asked, playing the part of the endearing older brother.

Damian’s scowl had been permanently fixed to his face the whole evening. “I am bored Brother, can we leave yet?”

The woman swooped in before Tim had the chance to speak. “Aw, poor little thing. You must be tired,” she cooed.

Damian turned his scowl on her, but Tim finally managed to step in. “Why don’t we go find Bru—Dad, and see if we can’t leave early?” Tim suggested, grabbing Damian and pushing him gently through the crowd, away from the woman.

“Harlot,” Damian snarled as they left, hopefully too quiet for her to hear.

“Be nice,” Tim chided, though without much feeling to it. He searched through the crowd, hoping to spot a familiar face among them.

Finally Tim caught sight of Bruce, talking to a group of men and women Tim semi-recognized. He led Damian over and waited to be acknowledged, as was per custom for these sorts of events where children were seen and not heard.

Thankfully Bruce noticed them quickly. “Tim, Damian, there you are,” he said, gesturing them forward. “Ladies, gentlemen, I’m sure you’ve all heard about my sons by now,” he said, addressing the group he’d been talking to, who chuckled at his small joke.

Tim smiled politely at the group, years of being shown off at these parties having been ingrained in him by now. The Drakes had travelled most of the year, but there had been times when Tim had been stuffed into a little suit and expected to show off his good manners for a while before being carted off by the nanny. It was better now that he was older, but what made it tolerable was the way Bruce treated him. There was a bit of showing off—Bruce seemed to enjoy introducing them as his sons, but he also did his best to include the two of them in conversations, even when the other adults talked over their heads.

“Are you enjoying the party?” Bruce asked, turning back to the two of them.

“This party is boring and the people are dull, Father,” Damian said, “Can we leave?”

Bruce smiled indulgently as the others around them tittered again, amused by Damian’s bluntness. “Not yet,” Bruce said, stepping away from the crowd to speak to them a little more privately. “If you can hold out for another half an hour, there’s a gap in the wall you can sneak through. You can text Alfred to meet you on the other side.”
Tim smiled. “Thanks Bruce,” he said.

Bruce patted Tim’s shoulder and ruffled Damian’s hair before wandering back over to the men and women he’d been talking to. Bruce would probably have to stay at least another hour, but at least he wasn’t forcing them to stay.

Tim nudged Damian’s shoulder. “Come on, let’s go see how many hors d’oeuvres we can snag before we leave,” he said, grinning mischievously.

Damian scoffed and muttered something about being ‘uncouth’, but followed along behind his brother. Hopefully they could entertain each other until they were able to slip away.

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Damian was a pain in the ass.

It seemed like a mean thing to say about an eight year old, but there really was no other way to put it. Damian was an entitled, arrogant, spoiled little brat who still acted the part of the prince, making anything that happened someone else’s problem. Everyone was trying to be patient with him, but it was difficult when Damian seemed to be trying to make himself as annoying as possible.

The current battlefield in the ongoing war was breakfast. Damian had opinions about the food served at the Manor, much to Alfred’s moderate frustration, and disregarded the protestations of everyone else in his vicinity.

“Did you use all the milk?” Dick asked, pulling out the carton from the fridge. A quarter-glass sized portion swished around the bottom of the carton, not nearly enough for the rather large bowl of cereal in Dick’s other hand.

“No,” Damian said, picking at his breakfast with a look of mild disdain. “There’s some left.”

Dick scowled. “This is barely enough to have a glass of, let alone cereal,” he said. He glanced at Damian’s glass of milk, which had only been half filled. “Why didn’t you just take all of it instead of putting it back?”

Damian scoffed. “I didn’t want a full glass,” he said. Almost deliberately, Damian picked up his glass and took a delicate sip.

Dick tried his best not to get angry, to remind himself that Damian came from entirely different circumstances and that it would take some time before he adjusted. Dick tried to put himself in Damian’s shoes, tried to imagine how it must feel to be in a completely new environment with new rules and strange people. He could imagine that Damian was feeling scared and vulnerable, trying to assert some sort of control on his environment, lashing out like any child would. It didn’t make the little brat any less annoying, but it helped Dick soothe his temper.

Damian took another deliberate sip of his milk, but this time Tim reached over and tapped his elbow, sending the milk over Damian’s lip and cascading down his front. Damian choked and coughed, slamming the glass down and wiping furiously at his face.

“Brother! You will pay for this insolence!” Damian shouted, leaping from his chair and chasing after Tim, who was already making a run for it. Dick listened to them shout and crash through the Manor, resigning himself to eating his cereal dry.

Later, after things had calmed down, Dick asked Tim why he’d done it. “You can’t let him get away
with everything,” he said, “He’s got to learn some manners, and letting him push you around won’t help.”

“That seems a little mean,” Dick said, though it did make sense.

“Yeah well,” Tim shrugged, “He’s a little mean.”

Dick sighed. “Yeah, he is.”

Jason had been on the road for maybe a few months when he got the call. At first he resisted, but it quickly became clear that he was needed, badly. So Jason hastily packed his things onto his bike and sped across the countryside back to Gotham. The trip took him the better part of two days, and he only stopped for gas and food.

Bruce met Jason on the front step. He looked tired and drawn, almost sallow. “Thanks for coming Jay,” he said.

“It sounded urgent,” Jason said, not bothering to unpack his things just yet. “Where is he?”

“Upstairs,” Bruce said, rubbing his eyes. “In his room.”

Jason nodded and trotted up the stairs, stopping briefly to hug Bruce. Bruce hugged him tightly for a minute, then let him go.

The Manor was strangely silent as Jason walked through it, like it was in mourning. It might have been, for all Jason knew. He’d always imagined the old ghosts in the halls as being friendly. A few staircases and turns down hallways led him right to where he was needed.

Tim’s bedroom.

Jason knocked on the door, his stomach turning over anxiously. When he’d gotten the call, he’d resisted a little, not wanting to return to Gotham unless it was by his own decision, but after hearing how bad it was, he’d relented and agreed to come for at least a couple of days. He didn’t exactly know what he was going to see on the other side of the door, but he was sure it wasn’t going to be pretty.

Tim opened the door just as Jason was going to knock again. He was deathly pale and had dropped a ton of weight, and his eyes were rimmed red like he’d been crying for a long time. He looked up at Jason and the tiniest flicker of hope shone in them.

“You came,” he croaked, his voice destroyed by prolonged crying and probably dehydration.

“I came,” Jason said, “I heard about what happened. I heard about your friend.”

“Conner,” Tim said, the name sounding like a wound, bleeding and raw. “He—he died. Superboy Prime, from another universe—he killed him, and I—” Tim cut himself off, making a horrible choking noise that made Jason hurt to hear it.

“I’m really sorry kiddo,” Jason said, not sure what to do. Tim had asked him to come specifically, practically begged him to come back, just for a little while. He’d been keeping up with the news in Gotham, around the world, and he knew things had gotten bad. “I wish I could have helped.”

Tim took a deep breath and looked up at Jason, something twisted and desperate in his eyes. “You
can help,” he said, “You...you died, but you came back, you can help.”

Jason felt something ugly curl around his gut. “Aw geez kid, I wish I could—”

“You can! I know you can!” Tim said, stepping forward and clinging to Jason’s shirt. “There must be something you remember, something you can tell me.”

Jason grabbed Tim’s wrists, wondering if he should worry for his safety or Tim’s. “I don’t remember anything,” he said, “I’m sorry, I wish I could help, but I don’t—”

“No!” Tim shouted, trying and failing to pound on Jason’s chest. “There has to be something! People don’t just come back like that! You have to know something!”

Jason gripped Tim a little harder, trying to restrain him. “Tim, shit, calm down!” he said, “There’s nothing I can tell you. I’m sorry, but I don’t remember.”

“Nono!” Tim cried, trying to wrench himself out of Jason’s grip. “There has to be a way to bring him back. I can’t—” tears began to flow down Tim’s cheeks. “I don’t know what to do without him. He was my best friend. What am I going to do?”

Tim suddenly jerked up to look at Jason, looking shocked and confused, like he’d just had an upsetting revelation. Tears still flowed freely down his cheeks. “I think I loved him,” Tim said, almost so quiet it was a whisper.

No sooner than the words were out of his mouth, Tim’s face crumpled and all the fight seemed to drain out of him. He slumped against Jason’s chest and began sobbing uncontrollably, his shoulders shaking with the force of his hitched breaths. Jason winced at the sound, wishing for the first time he knew more about how he came back, about what had happened to him, if only for Tim’s sake.

When it looked like Tim was going to keep crying for a while, Jason carefully scooped him up and brought him into his room. Tim continued clinging to his shirt, whimpering and sobbing even as Jason sat them down on the bed. Jason wrapped his arms around Tim’s small body and rubbed his back, trying to get him to calm down.

After a few minutes, Tim seemed to be falling asleep, having cried himself into exhaustion. Jason gently laid him down on the bed, wondering if he should stay or leave. The door creaked open slightly and Jason looked up to see Damian in the doorway. He shuffled his feet for a few moments before finally getting up the courage to cross the room, hopping up onto the bed next to Jason and Tim. Jason pulled back a little, allowing Damian to curl up with Tim on the bed, letting his older brother cling to him like a lifeline, shaking even as he dropped off to sleep. Jason caught Damian’s eye, a look of understanding passing between them. Slowly, Jason got up and left the two of them, quietly shutting the door. As soon as he was clear, Jason sagged against the wall, sliding down in until he had his head between his knees.

Jason lost track of time for a while, but when he became aware again, there was a pair of feet in front of him. Jason looked up just as Dick sat next to him in the hallway.

“Hey,” Dick said, managing a smile. He looked just as tired and pale as Tim, with greasy unwashed hair and an unshaved face.

“Hey,” Jason said, “You look like shit,” he said before he could think better of it.

Dick laughed, but it sounded hollow. “I feel worse than I look,” he said, like it was supposed to be funny. Jason didn't so much as crack a smile. Dick sighed and dropped his head back against the wall. “How’s Tim?” he asked, real concern in his voice.
“Awful,” Jason said, “I heard something big went down. I guess the kid’s friend… didn’t make it?”

Dick let out a long breath, seeming to deflate. “Yeah,” he said, “It… things haven’t been good Jay. It’s really bad out there.”


Dick told him; everything. About Superboy, Impulse, Spoiler, even the events that unfolded in Bludhaven. Jason listened with rapt, horrified attention, his stomach turning at each new revelation.

“Geez,” Jason said, after Dick had told him about Stephanie’s—the little blonde who’d coveted his old hoodies—torture and ultimate demise.

“Yeah,” Dick said, “Tim… I think this thing with Superboy, his best friend, it’s just the thing that broke the camel’s back. After all the shit that happened with his dad, then Steph dying, it’s just been too much.”

*I think I loved him,* Tim had said, and the thought of the words made Jason’s mouth go sour. “Poor kid,” he said.

“Yeah, he’s had it really bad,” Dick said. He was starting to list to the side, like he was too tired to hold himself up.

“What about you?” Jason asked. Dick had given him a basic rundown of the events in Bludhaven, but there were large chunks of information missing, things Jason just knew were eating Dick alive.

“I’m fine,” Dick lied, trying to prop himself up straight again. “Really, I’ll be okay.”

“You don’t look okay,” Jason said. He reached out and laid a hand on Dick’s shoulder. “Please, you keep telling me you want to be brothers. Don’t cut me out.”

Dick looked at Jason, the bruise-like bags under his eyes making him look like he’d been fighting a losing battle. After a long, drawn out moment, Dick finally collapsed, leaning his head against Jason’s shoulder and breaking down. Breaking *all the way* down, telling Jason about Tarantula and Blockbuster, all the people Dick couldn’t save and the things that happened to him.

When Dick got to the things Tarantula, Catalina Flores, did to him in the aftermath of Blockbuster’s death, Jason went rigid with rage. “Where is she now?” he demanded, forcing his voice to remain steady.

“Dead,” Dick said, “Blew up with the rest of the ‘Haven.” Jason had heard about that, the bomb that leveled the entire city, killing millions of people. He’d worried of course, but received a text from Alfred that Dick was alive and well.

‘Well’ seemed to be overstating it a little.

Jason took a deep breath. “Good,” he said, “Saves me the trouble of hunting her down.”

“Jason,” Dick admonished, but there was no force in it.

Jason growled. “Mess with my family, you deal with *me*,” he said. He slung his arm around Dick’s shoulders. “You tell Bruce?”

Dick shook his head. “The only one who knows is you,” he said. He sounded so tired.

Jason nodded. “Okay,” he said. Dick would tell or not tell whoever he felt needed to know.
Hopefully Jason would be able to help him, but he wouldn't tell anyone else unless he thought it was necessary for Dick’s health; it wasn't his trauma to share.

Dick shifted after a few minutes of silence. “But how have you been?” he asked, plastering on a smile. “How has travelling been? Are you feeling any better?”

Jason could see the deflection, but he could see that Dick was desperate for something else to focus on, anything else besides his own misery. It was almost manic.

“I’ve been doing a lot better,” Jason said, “ Took out a ring of drug lords in Phoenix, and a couple of abusive pimps in Chicago.”

“Jason,” Dick said, the question on the tip of his tongue.

“Don’t worry,” Jason cut him off, “ They’re all alive. They’ll never win any beauty contests ever again, but they were pretty ugly to begin with.”

Dick actually managed a genuine chuckle. “ Good,” he said, leaning back against Jason’s shoulder. “ I’m glad you’re feeling better,” he said.

“Thanks,” Jason said, not knowing what else to do. What could he say or do to make anything better? There was so much going on, and Jason hadn’t been there to help.

He should have been there.

After a long time, so long that Jason was sure Dick had fallen asleep, Dick picked his head up. “Hey, so Bruce and I were talking,” he said, “About taking a little trip.”

“A trip?” Jason asked, “What kind? Like a vacation?”

“Not exactly,” Dick said, “Something more like a journey. A re-centering sort of thing, retracing Bruce’s old stomping grounds when he was training to become Batman.” Dick smiled at Jason. “Want to come along?”

“Won’t that take a long ass time?” Jason asked. Bruce had ‘trained’ to become Batman over the course of many many years, his journey extending across the globe. “What about Gotham?”

“Cass said she doesn’t want to go,” Dick said, “She’ll stay behind and look after things while we’re gone. And Barbara and her Birds of Prey will be here to help,” he said, “It’ll just be Bruce, Tim, Damian, and me.”

Jason was tempted, sorely tempted. He’d been thinking of making his trip international while he’d been on the road, but the furthest he’d gone was a few sojourns up to Canada and back, and only because Canada’s drinking age was 18 or 19, depending on the province. At the same time, he had the urge to keep an eye on Tim and Dick and even Bruce, as they all seemed to be in wretched states. But Jason also remembered Cassandra, and the idea of leaving her with all of Gotham to take care of didn’t settle well with him. Bruce’s heart was in the right place, probably, but Jason didn’t think it was right.

“No,” he said, “I’ll stay in Gotham. Help Batgirl out.” He smiled. “Maybe even finally figure out a new moniker for me. How does ‘Batboy’ sound?”

Dick wrinkled his nose. “Terrible,” he said, but he was smiling again, and there was a bit of light in his eyes. “If you're sure,” he said.
“I’m sure,” Jason said, “You guys seem like you need all the help you can get.”

Damian did not fully trust Batgirl.

The others seemed to, much to their folly, Damian thought. Of course, Cassandra seemed sweet and friendly, but in Damian’s experience, sweetness and friendliness belied the mostly deadly adversaries. And Cassandra Cain was most certainly deadly.

He could see it in her movements, the way she carried herself. When she trained in the Cave, her strikes were those of a trained killer, an instrument of death honed to perfection, but she always stopped just short of lethality. Still, she was unparalleled by the others, even Bruce didn’t usually defeat her, and when he did it was always by some fluke, or Cass letting him win.

Beyond that, Damian could see in her eyes that she knew, she what it was like to take a life, just like Damian did. He had recognized it instantly, having been around killers all his life. Cassandra Cain had taken a life, and was the deadliest person in the room at any given moment.

So, Damian did not trust her. Not in the slightest.

“Damian?” Dick called, poking his head into Damian’s room. “We’re heading out soon, you sure you don’t want to come?”

“I’m busy,” Damian scoffed, scratching another line into the page. He was trying to remember the landscape of the compound he’d left behind. Had the watchtower been next to the armory or the medical building?

“Alright,” Dick said, cheery despite there being no reason for it. Dick Grayson was almost always cheery, Damian was noticing. It was quite annoying. “Well, Cass is going to be downstairs if you need anything, okay? Bye!” And with that, Dick left.

Damian looked up from his work. All alone with Cassandra? This may be his chance to investigate the woman. If she was truly a foe, this would be his best chance at uncovering that.

Careful to move silently and quickly, Damian set his sketchbook aside and began to make his way downstairs. Bruce, Tim, and Dick were going out somewhere, something for a case that Damian had not been invited to know, and Alfred was on a grocery run and wouldn’t be back until later. Cass had been staying at the Manor more and more lately, spending time with Tim and sometimes Dick. Damian had kept his distance, and she hadn’t pushed him, only smiling at him kindly when their eyes met at the dinner table.

Damian found Cass easily, almost as if she wanted to be found. She was sitting on her own in front of the TV, flicking between the news and infomercials. Damian could see her try to mouth the words along with the anchors and announcers, trying to get the words right. The subtitles were on as well, so she could try to read them as they talked.

Damian carefully snuck up behind her, moving silently across the old floors. Cassandra made no indication that she’d noticed him, remaining completely relaxed. Damian put himself into the best position to pounce, his body coiled and ready. Cassandra remained unaware of him. Waiting until the TV was nearing it’s noisiest, Damian lunged.

Cass turned and caught him, almost plucking him out of the air. Plopping him down on the couch cushions, she leaned over him in the perfect position to land a killing strike, giggling in delight.
After a moment of shock, Damian scrambled to get away, not crying out because that would be cowardly. To his surprise, Cass let him up right away, jumping back as though Damian had struck her. He leapt over the arm of the couch, putting the furniture in between him and her. She looked as shocked as he felt, her eyes wide.

The shock melted into concern. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I thought… I thought it was playing.”

Damian remained tensed and at the ready, either to attack or defend himself (not to run away). Cass curled up into a ball on the couch, bringing her knees up to her chest, looking all sorts of contrite. Damian thought she might begin to cry.

“Sorry,” she said again, lowering her eyes. Her apology seemed genuine, and she did appear to be genuinely upset. Damian began to slowly relax, though he didn't drop his guard.

“I do not play,” Damian said, not knowing what else to do. He couldn't run away.

Cass looked back up at him, something sad and lonely in her eyes. “I know,” she said, “I used to not play games either.”

Damian knew only a little about her history, about David Cain and the things he did to her. To him, it sounded only like incredibly intense training, though Tim and the others had tried to explain it. ‘Abuse’ wasn’t a concept Damian was familiar with, but the word was getting used around him more and more the longer he stayed with his family.

Cass let herself go limp against the couch, resting her head on the back cushions. She looked Damian up and down and gave a sad smile. “We played similar games, didn’t we?” she asked.

Damian frowned. “I do not play,” he said again, starting to cautiously come around the side of the couch.

Cass looked down at Damian’s hands, her eyes landing on the white scars on his knuckles and fingers. She lifted her hands and traced the scars crisscrossing her own knuckles. “They weren’t fun games anyway,” she said.

Damian blinked, understanding starting to creep into the back of his mind, a shadow of a thought. Slowly, he came back around to the front of the couch, standing next to Cass, who remained limp, as unthreatening as possible.

Cass smiled again and lifted her head to look at him better. “What sort of games were yours?” she asked.

Damian frowned, but he climbed sideways onto the couch next to Cass, facing her, his own knees pulled up to his chest. “One time,” he started, “One time I was sent into the Canadian wilderness with minimal supplies. I was meant to survive for two weeks on my own,” he said. Why was he telling her this?

Cass nodded in understanding. She turned her shoulder towards him and showed him a long, jagged scar. “Hot knife torture,” she explained, a frown creasing her brow. “Two for flinching.”

Damian nodded and extended his arm, showing the darkened rings around his wrists. “I hung from a ceiling by ropes for three days.”

Moving slow and deliberately, Cass gently took Damian’s wrist in her hands, her deadly, scarred fingers tracing the darkened bands, fingertips running feather-light along his pulse point. She looked up at him and smiled sadly again, though this time she seemed less lonely.
“They weren’t fun games, were they?” she asked.

Damian looked down at Cass’s hands. They had killed, just like his had. “No, they weren’t fun at all,” he said softly.

“Sorry I’m late,” Selina said, bustling through the door. “Something unexpected came up.”

“Do not trouble, Miss Kyle,” Alfred said, taking her coat delicately and hanging it with care. “The schedule in this house tends to run late all the time. You are perfectly within a reasonable time frame.”

Selina smiled. “I sure hope you’re as reasonable when it comes to the reason why I’m late,” she said, shrugging the strap of the carrier higher onto her shoulder. “Claudius hasn’t been well these last few days and has been staying at the vet. They called me as I was coming over that he was cleared to go home and they needed me to pick him up right away because they needed the kennel space,” she explained, “Sorry, he’ll be fine if we put him in a room away from everyone.”

Alfred raised an eyebrow and bent to look into the carrier. Claudius hissed at the strange man. “I’m sure we can find a space for him,” Alfred said.

“Thank you,” Selina said, walking along beside Alfred. Bruce met them as they were coming to the bottom of the stairs. He smiled at Selina, and Selina appreciated the nice, tight sweater that accented his shoulders.

“Hello Selina,” Bruce said, “You look lovely.”

“Thank you,” Selina said, “I’ll be with you in a minute, I just need to get Claudius all squared away.”

Bruce then noticed the carrier. “Ah,” he said, looking amused. “Collecting strays again?”

“You’re one to talk,” Selina said, grinning. Bruce followed her and Alfred as they made their way to an unused part of the Manor, with many rooms that were empty. “Ever thought about getting a cat? They’re great for pest control.”

“I have too many pests already,” Bruce said. He glanced down the hallway, something catching his eye. “Speaking of, Damian, what are you doing?”

Selina followed Bruce’s gaze to spot a child coming out of one of the rooms. He was slightly dusty, like he’d been exploring the nooks and crannies of the old house. “Nothing,” Damian said. He looked up at Selina, his eyes narrowing.

“Damian,” Bruce said, stepping close to Selina and laying a hand on the small of her back. “This is Selina Kyle.”

Damian’s eyes only narrowed further, his nose curling like he’d smelled something awful. Selina put on a smile and extended her hand. “Nice to meet you Damian,” she said.

Damian glared at her hand, looking like he was about to say something nasty. Before he could open his mouth, Claudius let out a loud meow, unhappy to be confined for so long. The glare disappeared from Damian’s face, replaced instead by a look of interest.
“You have a cat,” Damian said, looking into the carrier at Selina’s hip. He was nearly eye to eye with it.

“Yes, his name is Claudius,” Selina said, “I wouldn't bug him, he’s not very friendly.”

“Claudius,” Damian repeated, apparently not hearing the rest of the sentence, because he lifted a finger and pressed it to a gap in the carrier. Remarkably, instead of immediately eating the probing finger, Claudius came forward to sniff at it, giving it a little lick with his pink tongue.

*Interesting*, Selina thought. “Would you like to help me get him settled?” she asked.

Damian looked up at her again, the glare coming back, but not as fierce as before. Silently, he followed them into an empty room, his attention mostly on the carrier. They came into the room and Selina began to unpack her things. A temporary litter box was set out, as well as a dish of water and food. Keeping an eye on Damian, Selina opened the carrier to let Claudius out.

Claudius was a street cat, and had been his whole life. He wasn't particularly beautiful, all scarred and scruffy, with a permanent grumpy look on his face, and a demeanor that could generously be described as ‘cantankerous’. The only person he had ever allowed close was Selina, and he distrusted most other humans. When Selina opened the carrier, Claudius immediately trotted out and went to investigate Damian.

“Strange,” Selina said, watching Claudius let himself be petted by Damian. “He’s usually not so friendly.”

“Seems friendly to me,” Bruce said, leaning over to get a better look at the cat. Claudius took one look at Bruce and hissed. “Or not,” Bruce said, stepping back.

“Father, you're frightening him,” Damian said, sitting cross legged on the floor and pulling Claudius onto his lap. Astonishingly, not only did Claudius allow this to happen, but he seemed to enjoy the attention. When Damian began to pet him, the grisled old alley cat melted, purring so hard he shook.

Selina couldn’t help but smile widely. “You’re very good with cats,” she remarked, “You mind keeping an eye on him for me?”

Damian looked up at Selina, this time with only the hint of a glare. “I suppose,” he said, as though he was being put upon to do so.

“Thank you Damian, that’s very helpful,” Selina said, standing up finally. “If you need anything, you can come and get me, alright?”

Damian nodded, the only acknowledgment that he even heard her. He seemed much more absorbed in the way Claudius was making biscuits in the air as Damian petted him. Selina smiled and stepped out of the room with Bruce.

“You should get a cat,” she said as they walked down to the dining room.

“I’ll think about it,” Bruce said.

“"You’re really leaving?"  

Tim looked over his shoulder to see Dick in the doorway, looking worried and anxious. If this were
any other time, were any normal situation, Tim might try to assuage Dick’s fears, stay and help him through the crisis.

This wasn’t any normal situation.

“I have to,” Tim said, turning back to packing his bag. He didn’t know how long he’d be gone, how long it would take for him to find what he needed.

“Tim,” Dick said softly, stepping into the room. “I know this has been hard on you, losing him after… everything else that happened, but he’s gone ;” he insisted, “He’s not coming back.”

Tim flipped the lid of his duffle bag down with more force than necessary. “He’s not gone,” he said through gritted teeth. “I know he’s not gone. I can feel it.”

“Tim, please,” Dick said, begging now. “You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to leave.”

Tim wished that were true. He wished he could stay in Gotham and help Dick on cases and keep Gotham safe, just like Bruce would have wanted. But he couldn’t, because Bruce was the one who needed him, Bruce was the one in danger.

His father was alive, Tim knew it.

“I have to do this Dick,” Tim said, picking up his duffle bag. “You can’t stop me.”

“Tim,” Dick said, his voice gentle. “We live in an insane world. You and I have both seen our fair share of it. I know you believe Bruce is alive… God knows I want it to be true,” he said, his face pinching in pain. “But this time… this time is different. You can feel it, I know you can. Everything we went through before the crisis… everything the Black Glove put us through, it’s like even Bruce knew it was coming.”

Dick stepped towards Tim, laying a hand on his shoulder. “We’re not like the others. We’re not Gods, or aliens, we don’t have special powers. Bruce was just a man , Tim. Superman brought Bruce’s body to us. We buried him. And now we have to let him go.”

Tim remained silent, looking down, away from Dick’s face. Dick squeezed his shoulder. “Tim… Tim will you just talk to me?” he asked, almost begging. “I want to help.”

Tim closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. “You think I don't know how it sounds?” he said finally, a hint of anger in his voice. Why couldn’t Dick just trust him? “After everything with Jack, being kidnapped, I lost my friends , and then I lost Bruce. I know how it sounds. I lost everything and then I snapped . I…” Tim swallowed around the painful lump in his throat. “I know how it sounds.”

He looked up into Dick’s eyes, anger and determination swimming in his gaze. “But I know I’m right Dick,” he said, “And I’m going to prove it.”

Dick frowned, the pain in his eyes growing deeper. “I know how you feel Tim…” he said, his voice soft and small. He tried to gather strength, be the older brother he had to be now. “There’s someone I want you to talk to, a therapist in Metropolis—”

“No,” Tim said, stepping back, away from Dick’s grip. “I’m leaving Dick, and I need you to let me go.”

Dick reached out again, to try and draw Tim back to him, but he let his hand clench around empty air. “Tim,” he said, “You’re not going to find anything. This will only make it hurt worse.”
“Dick, we’ve been brothers since I was six,” Tim said, recalling those long ago days when he would climb the wall to spend time with what would become his ‘real’ family. “Please, believe me. If I’m wrong, then I’m wrong and that’s that,” he said, “But if there’s even the slimmest chance that I’m right? I have to take it. I have to try.”

“Tim, I…” Dick paused, looking down at his younger brother, remembering the shy but bright eyed child who he’d played with over a decade ago. Had it really been so long? “I can’t believe you. I can’t afford to believe you.” It would hurt too much when it all went wrong. “But I know I can’t stop you either,” he said, breaking into a pained smile. “You’re too damn stubborn to let me stop you. You get that from your dad.”

Tim smiled back, equally as pained, before it faded into something serious again. “I’m going to find him Dick, I’m going to bring him home.”

Dick looked away, forcing himself not to say anything. “I still don’t like it,” he said.

Tim tried to smile again, stepping close and wrapping Dick in a hug. “I know,” he said, “But it’ll be okay. It’s not like I’m going to be alone.”

“You ready to go?” came a voice from the doorway. Jason waited patiently by the door, his helmet under his arm. “The bikes are ready to go when you are, kid.”

“I’m coming,” Tim said, pulling away from the embrace. Dick reluctantly let him go, his stomach still coiling with uncertainty.

The three of them made their way down to the Cave, the atmosphere around them grim and somber, but with an undercurrent of determination, mostly emanating from Tim. Dick felt all the things he wanted to say curl in his stomach, but they caught in his throat, choking him and muting his voice.

Damian was waiting for them in the Cave, standing next to the bikes Tim and Jason were set to ride out on. He looked up as they entered and immediately ran to Tim, throwing his arms around Tim’s middle.

“Take me along,” he said, “Take me with you. We can find Father together.”

“Oh Damian,” Tim said, wrapping his arms around his little brother. For the first time since he’d decided to leave, he felt conflicted. But he knew he couldn't bring Damian along. The journey was much too precarious for a ten year old, no matter how competent that ten year old was.

Aside from that, there was something Damian needed to do.

“Guys, can you give us a minute?” Tim asked Jason and Dick. Jason nodded and led Dick the rest of the way to the bikes, leaving Tim and Damian with a little bit of privacy.

“Do you really think Tim is right?” Dick asked Jason once they were out of earshot. “Do you think Bruce is really… do you think he’s out there.”

Jason remained quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “Don’t know,” he answered, “But if he is, if he’s still alive or lost or whatever, then there’s no one else I’d trust more than Tim to find him.”

Dick studied Jason for a second. In the years since his return, Jason had grown exponentially, getting even bigger than Bruce. He’d also come well into his own, becoming the feared vigilante Red Hood, the scourge of criminals everywhere. Red Hood was just as skilled as Batman, but more brutal, leaving those who crossed him bloodied, crippled, and even disfigured in some cases. He stopped just short of killing, but leaving many wishing they were dead.
“I hope you’re right,” Dick said, looking back to where Tim and Damian were talking. Tim ran his hands through Damian’s hair. “You know you can’t come Damian,” he said.

“I can,” Damian insisted, “I want to help.”

“And you will,” Tim said, kneeling in front of Damian to look up into his eyes. “Because there’s something I need you to do for me while I’m gone.”

Damian looked at Tim questioningly. Tim pulled a mask from his pocket, smaller than his own and with a sharper, more angular design. “Damian,” Tim said, “It’s your turn to be Robin.”

Damian’s eyes widened. “Brother… I—are you certain?” he asked, concern etching into his face.

Tim nodded. “Batman needs a Robin, no matter who that Batman is,” he said, glancing at Dick out of the corner of his eye. “And I can’t be around to help Dick if I’m looking for Bruce, so it has to be you now.” Tim smiled at Damian and put the mask into his hands. “I need you to help Dick take care of Gotham while I’m gone. Can you do that for me?”

Damian looked down at the mask in his hands, his thumbs tracing the lightweight material. The eyes stared up at him, waiting for him to make a decision. He closed his fingers around the mask. “I will,” he said, looking up at Tim. “I will make you proud Brother.”

Tim smiled and pulled Damian into a hug. “I know you will,” he said, “You’re going to be a great Robin.”

Damian hugged Tim back tightly, still reluctant to let him go. “But you have to promise to come back,” he said, “Even if you don’t find Father, you must come back.”

“I will,” Tim said, “And I’ll bring Dad back too. He’s going to be so proud of you.”

Damian squeezed Tim tighter. “And you must call as well,” he said, “If you do not, I will come and find you.”

Tim laughed. “I promise I’ll call,” he said.

“Once a week?” Damian asked.

“Every day if I can,” Tim said. He squeezed Damian for another minute before he stood. “Be careful, okay?” he said.

“I will,” Damian promised, walking along Tim’s side as he walked to the bikes.

“Don’t get into too much trouble,” Tim said, accepting a helmet from Jason. “And listen to Dick, okay?” He grinned a little as he strapped the helmet on. “But not too much.”

Jason sniggered while Dick groaned. “No, please just listen to me Damian,” Dick said.

Jason slapped Dick on the back. “Come on goldilocks, you know Robin never listens to Batman,” he said, crossing to his own bike.

Dick grumbled, but he couldn’t think of a good argument. Damian came to stand at his side, and the two of them watched as Tim and Jason climbed onto their bikes and started them up. The twin roars of the engines made the bats above them chatter and flit about, but they stayed where they were. Tim turned back to his brothers and gave them one last smile before turning to Jason. Jason gave him a nod and sped off, Tim quickly following, leaving Dick and Damian, the new Batman and Robin, to
defend Gotham until Tim and Jason returned, Bruce with them. It wasn't going to be easy, but Tim was determined; he was not going to lose another father, not this time.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the conversations in this chapter, particularly the last one between Dick and Tim, were lifted right out of canon. It was actually a lot of fun incorporating stuff like that into this chapter. If you know the comics, most of the canon should be pretty familiar. Also, I fully head canon that Selina participates in TNR (trap, nutter, release) programs for feral cats throughout Gotham.

Before anyone mentions or asks what the hell happened to Jack, remember that there is an epilogue coming. Be patient and all your questions will be answered.
Well, here it is, the last chapter. This was a lot of fun to write and I’m really glad with how this came out. Special thanks to Meara for helping me figure out a few things with this chapter, and thanks to all of you, dear readers, for making this super enjoyable to write. I know a lot of you are sad that this is ending, but I couldn’t be more pleased with how this turned out. All of you are wonderful and I hope you enjoy this last chapter as much as I have.

“Quit hogging the remote!” Jason growled, trying to snag the aforementioned object from Damian, who did his best to keep it away.

“Why do you even want it?” Damian hissed, shoving Jason in the sternum with his elbow. “We’re only going to use it for volume control anyway.”

“Because you always put it way too low,” Jason said, leaning over Damian to try and crush him under his weight.

Damian scoffed. “It’s not my fault you’ve destroyed your hearing setting off explosions,” he said, tucking the remote under him to keep it away from Jason’s hands.

“My hearing is fine, you’re just a freak,” Jason said, making one last attempt to get at the remote.

“Boys, enough,” Bruce said, restraining himself from sighing. He held out his hand to Damian and raised an eyebrow.

With a put upon sigh, Damian handed the remote over, taking the opportunity to shove Jason off of him. They scuffled for another minute before Bruce managed to stare them down.

“What movie are we watching this week?” Dick asked, coming into the TV room, a large bowl of popcorn in his arms.

“It’s Cass’s turn to pick, right?” Tim asked, laying out the soda on the coffee table.

“I believe it is,” Alfred said, laying a second bowl of popcorn out. He turned to where Cass was curled up on the edge of the couch. “Well my dear?”

Cass smiled and held out a DVD case for Alfred, having already picked her movie well ahead of time. Alfred took the DVD from her and inspected the title.

“Mamma Mia,” he read, “An excellent choice.”

Jason groaned. “Dammit, I’m going to have those damn songs stuck in my head for a week.”

“What’s wrong with ABBA?” Dick asked, flopping down on the couch next to Jason.

As Dick and Jason began to discuss the finer points of enjoying Swedish pop bands, Tim settled in
between Damian and Bruce on the couch. He looked around the room and felt a swelling sense of contentment. In the nearly five years since discovering that Bruce was his biological father, Tim had undergone many hardships, some of which were nearly debilitating, but he’d come out the other side with his family’s support. The last five years had been more filled with love and acceptance than the entirety of Tim’s life before; Bruce was an attentive and kind father, though he struggled to show his feeling at times. Dick had and always would be his big brother, whom Tim would always look up to (even when he was being a colossal idiot). Jason was always ready to poke fun at everyone, but he was also fiercely protective and would do anything to keep his family safe. Cassandra was his sister and his best friend, sometimes understanding him better than anyone else. Damian was a pain in the ass and he still, after five years, had an attitude problem, but he was devotedly loyal to his family. Tim couldn’t have asked for a better place to belong.

“Tim?” Bruce asked, bringing Tim out of his revery. “You’re quiet. Is everything okay?”

Tim smiled up at his father. “I’m fine,” he said, “Just thinking about how nice it is to spend time with my family.”

Bruce smiled and wrapped an arm around Tim’s shoulders, squeezing him tightly for a quick hug. He then turned his attention to Jason and Dick, whose ‘discussion’ was starting to escalate into pushing and shoving. Damian grumbled and crawled closer to Tim to try and escape their rowdy older brothers.

Once everything was finally laid out and everyone had settled down, Alfred put the DVD into the player. The title screen had barely popped up when the doorbell ringing made everyone look up.

“We expecting someone?” Jason asked. Movie night was a family affair, but Steph and Barbara had been known to join from time to time.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Bruce said, frowning.

Alfred stood from the loveseat. “I’ll answer it,” he said, “It’s probably nothing.”

“Want us to wait for you?” Dick asked, gesturing to the title screen still playing on the TV screen.

Alfred waved him off. “Don’t trouble yourself. I won’t be long,” he said, making his way through the house to the front door. He wondered who could be ringing the bell at this time of the evening. They didn’t get many unsolicited visitors this far out of the city, and those they did were usually lost.

Alfred was preparing directions back to town in his head when he opened the door. “Hello, how may I—ah,” he cut himself off when he saw who was on the other side of the door. “Mr Drake.”

Jack Drake had not aged well in the last five years. He had put on maybe thirty or so pounds, having been rather thick at the waist to begin with. His hairline was receding at a rapid pace, though not as fast as it was greying. Wrinkles and lines creased his face, making him seem even older than he was.

“Hey,” Jack greeted, giving an awkward smile. “It’s been a while.”

Jack Drake had not aged well in the last five years. He had put on maybe thirty or so pounds, having been rather thick at the waist to begin with. His hairline was receding at a rapid pace, though not as fast as it was greying. Wrinkles and lines creased his face, making him seem even older than he was.

“Hey,” Jack greeted, giving an awkward smile. “It’s been a while.”

Alfred straightened his spine, cautious and on guard; the last time any of them had seen or heard of Jack, the man had pointed a gun at Alfred’s chest. “What do you want?” he asked, keeping his voice neutral, though he was unable to keep out an undercurrent of iciness.

Jack seemed to pick up on the coldness, but he persisted anyway. “Is… is Tim here? Can I talk to him?”

In the five years since Jack had left Gotham, he’d never attempted to contact Tim, not even once, not
even when Tim had been ‘shot’ on live television and gravely injured. Tim had held out hope at first, confident that Jack would take a while to be angry, then calm down and return, ready to work with Bruce to still be in Tim’s life. However, as the months turned into years, Tim had stopped speaking of Jack’s return as inevitable, finally not speaking about him at all. The entire family knew it must have hurt him deeply, a wound that would always be painful, but they hadn’t pushed. Bruce had offered to find Jack once, but Tim had turned him down, still confident at that point that Jack was just days away from calling.

But Jack hadn’t called. He hadn’t written, or even sent any indication that he was still alive. Until this point, none of them had known what had become of Jack Drake. Now, Jack was standing on the front step, smiling uncomfortably and asking to see the child he’d abandoned for half a decade.

Personally, Alfred would have loved to tell Jack off and slam the door in his face. How dare he show up after all this time and demand to see Tim, who he’d attacked and rejected the last time he’d seen him? The nerve of this man.

However, as much as it would soothe Alfred’s soul to send Jack away, tail between his legs, never to return and make Tim hurt even more than he already had, it had to be Tim’s decision. Tim was the one who had to decide whether or not to accept Jack back into his life. As terrible as the man had been at it, he had raised Tim for fifteen years, and that wasn’t a bond that just went away, no matter how much time had passed.

“Wait here,” Alfred said, “And be aware that the security systems are fully functional, and will automatically activate if a weapon is produced.”

Jack shuffled his feet awkwardly. “Yeah sure,” he said, looking down in shame.

Alfred pinned Jack under his state for another minute before he firmly closed the door and went back to the TV room. The movie had not been started in his absence, and instead Alfred could hear everyone arguing about the merits of sweet popcorn versus salty. They hardly noticed when he finally returned.

“Oh hey,” Dick said, spotting Alfred after a moment. “Who was at the door? Vacuum salesman?”

“Master Tim,” Alfred said, trying to hide his discomfort and annoyance. “Mister Jack Drake is here to see you.”

The silence that fell on the room was deafening. Everyone froze in shock, slowly comprehending Alfred’s words. Tim in particular seemed to be a mix of shocked and astounded.

“Jack Drake?” Jason finally asked, “The guy who attacked Tim with a whiskey bottle and then ditched town?”

“The very same,” Alfred said. He looked to Tim. “Shall I send him away?”

“No,” Tim said, almost too quickly. “No I’ll go talk to him.”

“Are you sure?” Dick asked. He still remembered that night, so many years ago now, when Tim showed up at his Bludhaven apartment, shaken and soaked to the bone, the stitches in his head still red and fresh.

Tim nodded, starting to stand up. Bruce stood with him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Do you want us to come with you?” he asked. He didn’t really feel comfortable with the idea of leaving Tim alone with a man who had once pulled a gun on him.
Tim looked up at Bruce; they’d learned through looking through old photo albums that Tim actually took after Bruce’s mothers side of the family, his fine features showing up in a number of Kane relatives. Even Martha, at his age, somewhat resembled her grandson. Jason had teased him relentlessly about looking like a girl, but Tim had secretly been pleased to see pieces of himself in his family; it made him feel like he truly belonged here.

“I’ll be fine,” Tim said, putting on a smile even though he wasn’t sure what his emotions were doing. Judging from the deepening frown on Bruce’s face, he wasn’t very convincing. “Really, it’s alright. He just wants to talk, right?”

“Right,” Bruce said, still frowning. “We won’t be far if you need us,” he assured Tim.

Tim’s smile was a little more genuine this time. “Thanks Dad,” he said. He turned back to Alfred and followed him down the hall.

“We’re not seriously letting this happen, are we?” Dick asked, barely containing his anger. He was still pissed at Jack for what he’d done. He didn’t think he’d ever stop being furious, at Jack and at himself for not preventing it.

Damian hopped down from the couch and headed for the door, stealthily following behind Tim and Alfred. After a beat, the others did the same. Tim wanted them to keep their distance, but like hell they were going to leave him to handle this on his own.

Thoughts swirled in Tim’s head while emotions churned in his gut, making for a dizzying combination. Tim had trouble keeping himself focussed, and was completely unable to think of anything to say to Jack. What could he say, after all this time? Tim had always held out the hope that Jack would return one day, some small part of him still wanting the comfort of familiarity and the assurance that he had mattered to Jack, but now that he was back, Tim didn’t know what to feel. He’d been abandoned for five years, and in that time he’d lived with Bruce and the others. He’d unlearned dozens of toxic mentalities, and was in the process of still flushing even more out. As much as Tim had loved Jack, and still did to a degree, he could no longer cling to the fantasy that Jack had ever been good for him.

Tim followed along behind Alfred, dumbstruck and unable to gather his thoughts. It wasn’t until they came to the door even felt present in his own body again. When Alfred opened the door and Tim caught sight of Jack, aged poorly but still recognizable, his mind sharpened and laser-focused. Everything he wanted to say, to ask, to know, came rushing through his head. Where have you been? Why didn’t you call? Did you ever really love me?

Jack looked up at Tim and smiled. “Hey kiddo,” he said, relieved to see that Tim had actually come out to see him. “How have you been?”

Tim couldn’t answer; how had he been? How could he sum up the last five years into something comprehensible? The trials, the joy, the deaths and returns? Tim pinched his eyebrows together. “Fine,” he answered softly, unsure of what else there was to say.

Alfred glared at Jack one last time before turning to Tim, his eyes soft and caring. “Let us know if you need anything,” he said, squeezing Tim’s shoulder and then walking back into the house, leaving Jack and Tim alone together.

Awkward silence stretched between them, tight enough to snap at the slightest provocation. Tim looked down on Jack from the top of the steps, trying to decide what he wanted to ask first. Jack looked anywhere but at Tim and shuffled awkwardly where he stood.
“So,” Jack said, too loud and shattering the air. “You look good. You’ve grown up. I hardly recognized you,” he said with a grin.

That’s what happens you’re gone for five years, Tim resisted saying. “Thank you,” he said instead.

Emboldened, Jack continued. “Your hair’s gotten too long though. Time for a haircut soon?” he said jovially, trying to joke around like he used to.

Tim frowned. “I like my hair like this,” he said. A comment like that five years ago would have prompted Tim to call a hair salon to book an appointment almost immediately, but now all Tim could think about was the way it felt when Conner ran his fingers through his hair.

Jack’s smile faded. “Right,” he said, “That’s… that’s nice. For you.”

“It is,” Tim said, starting to get frustrated. Had Jack always been like this?

The silence floated back again, the awkwardness returning with a vengeance. Tim waited for Jack to say something else, but it almost seemed as though Jack was waiting for him, even though Jack was the one who needed to clear the air. Tim had waited patiently, for five years, and now he was the one who deserved an explanation.

Jack coughed finally. “Listen Tim, about what happened…” he started, looking pained. “I was really upset at the time. With everything that had happened around that time, what with losing the company, the house, your mother… finding out about you and Bruce, finding out I could never be a real dad, it just got to be too much,” he said, “I was distraught and I reacted badly.” He smiled up at Tim. “Think you can forgive me?”

Tim pressed his lips together, mulling over the words. He’d understood all of that before, at first rationalizing Jack’s actions, then reexamining them over the years. Tim had factored all of those things into the equation; there was nothing new there.

“What do you mean by a ‘real’ dad?” Tim asked, his brain sticking on that.

That clearly wasn’t the response Jack had been expecting. “What?” he asked, confused.

“You not being able to be a ‘real’ dad,” Tim repeated, “Did you think you suddenly weren’t my dad anymore?”


Tim frowned. “So what did you mean?” he asked, starting to feel himself get angry. All this time and this was what Jack had to say for himself?

“You know what I meant. I—” Jack cut himself off, clenching his fists and squeezing his eyes shut. He took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. “Look Tim, I know it’s been a long time, probably too long, but…” he looked up at Tim. “Can we talk? Just… catch up? I… I missed you.”

Tim felt his anger fizzle and melt away. Wasn’t this what he’d been waiting for? For Jack to come home and want to be in his life again? So what if it was awkward and unwieldy? That was just how Jack was, it wasn’t really his fault. Maybe Jack hadn’t been the best parent, but there has been more good than there had been bad, hadn’t there? Five years of absence didn’t just negate fifteen years of raising and loving Tim as his son. Tim should probably give him more benefit of the doubt.

As Tim was about to answer, Jack apparently decided he was taking too long, or that the atmosphere was too heavy, or maybe he just wanted to say something else to hear the sound of his own voice
more, Tim would never be sure. “Come on Tim,” Jack chuckled like he was joking. “I think you owe your old man a conversation at least, right?”

In a flash, Tim felt the anger return, a hot spike lancing up his spine. As quickly as it came, it vanished, leaving Tim with an overwhelming sense of calm. Tim looked down at the man he’d known as his father for the majority of his life, and he slowly began to realize that this was just how Jack was. Jack was a selfish, entitled, and slightly narcissistic man who didn't like not getting his own way and got angry when his flaws were pointed out. He was never going to change, and Tim had to stop trying to change him. Tim had outgrown Jack years ago, probably before this whole mess had even begun. Tim looked down at Jack, realizing all of this, and he felt relieved.

“I think we should talk,” Tim said finally, watching the hope alight in Jack’s eyes. “But—” he cut Jack off before he could interject, direct the conversation. “I’m kind of in the middle of something right now. It’s family movie night and we’ve already got everything set up. Maybe we can talk some other time?”

The disappointment on Jack was visible. “Oh, alright,” he said clearly not knowing what to make of this. “Rain check, sure.”

“Why don’t you give me your number and I’ll get back to you?” Tim suggested, “Sorry, you just kinda came at a really inconvenient time for me.”

“Of course,” Jack said, digging through his pockets for his phone. “Right, you’ve got… you’ve got your own stuff. Should have thought of that.”

Tim smiled and descended the stairs to meet Jack face to face. He tugged out his phone and they exchanged numbers. “I’ll see you around, okay?” Tim said, smiling at Jack.

“Yeah,” Jack said awkwardly. He reached out to Tim, like he wanted to hug him, but stopped, ending up patting his shoulder instead. “See you around.”

Tim smiled and waited until Jack went to his car, but didn't stay to watch him drive down the road. When he opened the door to go inside, he found Bruce and the others waiting for him. The wasted no time in pouncing on him.

“Are you okay? What did he want?” Dick asked, practically vibrating with concern. “What did he say? Did he do anything to you?”

“Want me to follow him for you” Jason offered, leaning against the wall, trying to look casual while swinging his switchblade around.

Tim smiled. “It’s fine you guys, nothing bad happened,” he said, “He just wanted to talk.”

His brothers were clearly unsatisfied with this answer, trying to pry more information out of him. Eventually Bruce managed to cut through them to lay a hand on Tim’s shoulder. He looked down at Tim with a concerned expression, not asking anything. Tim gave him a slightly rueful smile and stepped close, wrapping his arms around Bruce’s ribs and burying his face in his broad chest. Bruce returned the embrace, holding Tim tightly, like he was afraid to let go. A weight at Tim’s side told him that Damian had joined in on the hug, and it wasn’t long before Dick and the others joined in, surrounding Tim with their comforting presence.

“I’m fine, really,” Tim said, smiling through his tears.

Bruce squeezed Tim a little tighter. “I know Tim,” he said, “It’s alright. We’ve got you.”
Tim sniffled and laughed, the tears flowing even harder now. He clung to his father, his ‘real’ father—not because of blood, but because he knew Bruce tried, even when he failed—and let his family comfort him.

Chapter End Notes

So that's the end. There's probably much more that could be explored in this universe, but I think ending it here is the best way to preserve the story. I've mentioned to a few people that I might do a kind of ‘spin-off’ if I get enough people asking for it, but for this story I don't think I'll continue it much further beyond this.

This has been a great ride for me and that's all thanks to you. I hope you have a great time reading.

End Notes

Check out mishaberrywrites for more of my writing!

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