Call to Rememberance

by Raliena

Summary

Everything seems to be going right for the Bat Clan. Damian's settling down. Jason's slowly making his way back. Dick's comfortable back as Nightwing. Bruce is enjoying having his family around him again.

But they forgot one person. And now that forgetfulness is being thrown back in their faces... BIG time.

- Inspired by Fracture by wintersnight
“Officer Grayson,” Dick looked up from where he was tying his boots, “Could we have a word?”

Two detectives were standing in the doorway of the locker room. He easily identified them as Montoya and Allen.

“Of course,” Dick nodded, “How can I help?”

“In private.” The words were firm.

Dick noted the small undercurrent of tension. There was something going on. Something he didn’t know about. Something that was making the pair of detectives uncomfortable.

Outwardly Dick shrugged and pliantly followed them to an interrogation room.

“What is this about?” Dick asked, “Do I need my Union Rep?”

“No. We just want to ask you a few questions about your brother.”

“Jason or Damian?” Dick returned immediately.

“Timothy.”

“Timmy?” The name threw Dick for a moment, “No, Tim’s the good kid. He doesn’t get into trouble. There’s no reason for you to be looking at Tim. Whatever he’s been accused of… Whoever accused him… It’s not true. Timmy doesn’t cause trouble.”

“And the others do?”

“Pretty much.” Dick shrugged, “Jason has issues about his background. Feels people look down on him. Then there’s the whole PTSD thing which I will not go into. Damian… Looks down on people. Feels he is superior. That generally leads to trouble. Tim… Tim… Tim doesn’t cause problems. Sure, he doesn’t get on with the others brilliantly, but that’s not his fault. They start the fights. He just refuses to let them walk over him.”

“Do they fight a lot?”

“Not so much anymore.” Dick tried to remember the last fight and nothing was springing to mind, “I think they’re getting over it. Getting more tolerant of each other. Which is a good thing.”
“Getting over what?”

“Is this really relevant?” Dick turned the conversation back around, “What do you want to know about Tim?”

“When did you last have contact with him?”

“Texted him last week.”

“Why?”

“Virus on my computer. He’s good with them. He fixed it.”

“You’re dating Barbara Gordon, couldn’t she fix it for you?”

“Technically yes. But I’d made her angry, so she was the one who infected it. It would take a lot of grovelling to get it fixed quickly, given what I’d done to upset her. Tim’s quicker than making up to Babs. That takes a lot of chocolate and Rocky-Road ice cream for some reason. And sometimes it’s Mint Chocolate. And woe betide me if I get it wrong. And then there’s the multiple ‘just-because-I-love-you’ massages. Tim’s easier.”

“Are you sure it was a week ago?”

“Fairly sure. I can check if you’d like.”

“Please do.”

Curious Dick pulled out his phone and quickly accessed his texts. He knew there was nothing that could be incriminating in them. He wasn’t stupid. He’d been doing this long enough that he knew how to play the game.

But he was still confused. Why the interest in Tim? Why the questions? Things weren’t making sense.

“Wait,” He stared at his phone, “That can’t be right.”

“What is it?”

“It’s been two months. I wouldn’t leave it that long. Surely I invited him to movie night or something since then.”

He looked up at them, his eyes narrowing. He knew he was letting more than a few shades of Nightwing colour his expression; a few shades of Batman too. However, he didn’t care right then.

“I think I’ve been extremely patient so far. What is this about?”
“You’ve heard about the bodies in the warehouse district?”

“I’d ask which ones, but I think I know the ones you mean. The ones not yet linked to any particular gang in the old food warehouse. I heard rumours about a mass murder.”

“That’s the one.”

“What’s that got to do with Timmy?”

“There was some blood found at the scene. It wasn’t in CODIS, but there was a familial match. The blood was from a first degree male relative of Jack Drake.”

Dick felt the blood drain from his face. His words caught in his throat. He wanted to deny what he was hearing. But couldn’t find the breath to speak.

“As far as we can determine Jack Drake only had one brother, who died before Wayne adopted Tim Drake. His father died over twenty years ago. So that only leaves…”

“Timmy. How much blood? Where was it? You’re not talking about a body, so I presume he wasn’t amongst them.”

Dick’s brain was racing, making plans to find Tim and check that he was safe. Tim had to be okay. He just had to be.

“According to the forensic people his blood was older. By a few days. Also, the locations and the splatter indicate that he was being held prisoner and tortured.”

“No.” The word managed to come out of Dick’s throat, even while it felt like he was being strangled.

Chapter End Notes

Still in progress. Might be a fair wait for the next chapter, but I wanted to gift the first chapter for Christmas.
Merry Christmas everyone!
And Happy Holidays if Christmas isn't your thing.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Happy New Year to everyone!
I don't know when I'll next update this, my muse has gotten distracted. But I'll try to keep at this.

It had to be wrong. It just had to be. No one got the drop on Red Robin. It just didn’t happen… Besides Tim would have called for help. There would have been a comm message.

Maybe Jack had had an affair. Dick wouldn’t put it past the man. Maybe Tim had a half-brother running around somewhere.

All Dick had to do was find Tim and prove his theory.

Because it couldn’t be Tim. It just couldn’t! Dick would have known if Tim was in danger.

“Do you know anyone who would want to harm Timothy?”

“No. No one. Tim’s a good kid. He works hard. He isn’t dating anyone. He doesn’t make waves. Doesn’t cause problems. You’ve got to be wrong. Tim’s safe at home.”

“And where is home?”

Dick opened his mouth and then closed it again.

Where was home for Tim? He wasn’t at the Manor. Dick would know. He would have seen Tim at some point. He couldn’t actually remember the last time he saw Tim at the Manor. So Tim couldn’t be living there. Alfred, for one, wouldn’t allow Tim to hide away in the Manor and never be seen.

Dick’s next thought is for the old Brownstone, but he instantly dismissed that one. Tim had had one of his rare emotional reactions to the place and sold it as soon as he had disposed of the fake uncle. Tim wouldn’t be there; not only did he not own it anymore, but he couldn’t walk through the door.
The old Drake Manor was inhabited by a very nice young family, so Tim couldn’t be living there.

That only left one place left that Dick could think of.


“He’s not there.” Montoya leaned forward, “We checked. No one’s living there. You don’t even know where he lives? What kind of brother are you?”

Dick couldn’t answer that. He didn’t know what the answer was. Only he was sure it wasn’t positive. He was desperately casting his mind back, trying to remember the last time he saw Tim without a cowl or a domino on. And to his horror he couldn’t remember.

It couldn’t be after he had caught Tim falling from Ra’s kick. It just couldn’t!

“We’re going to interview the Manor’s inhabitants.” Montoya declared, “You are to stay here and not communicate with them until we give you leave. Do we need to confiscate your phone?”

“No.” Dick shook his head, “Just… Be gentle? I don’t know how Damian will react. He’s… He’s prone to extreme reactions. He doesn’t know what is an appropriate level of response to anything. And he tries to hide anything he deems as a weakness.”

“And Jason?” Allen asked.

“I doubt he’ll be there.” Dick shrugged, “But if he is… Don’t be surprised at the swearing. And he might not believe you. He doesn’t… He doesn’t trust cops.”

“Not even you?”

“He trusts me as Dick. Not as Officer Grayson. He’s seen far too many crimes get ignored to fully trust cops. Don’t take it personally.”

“Strange,” Montoya remarked, “You know all these details about them. But I doubt you know the first thing about Timothy Drake.”

“Photography is his passion,” Dick’s gaze narrowed slightly rising to his feet in anger, “Has been since he was a small child. He prefers to develop his photographs himself. Prefers film to digital for his art. He says it is purer. Brings him closer to his subject. His most prized possession is a photograph of him with my first family, taken the night they died. I hugged him and promised to put on a show just for him.”
“He’s smart. Smartest guy I’ve ever met. Miles ahead of even the best minds in science and industry. I’ve only ever played him in chess once. Once was enough; he wasn’t even paying attention and he massacred me. Loves engineering. Wants to know how things work. Anything. A car. A plane. A radio. A computer. A person. He likes to know what makes things tick.

“He has a habit of dating dangerous women. Every single one of his girlfriends has had danger in their shadows. Pretty certain he’s still a virgin. He respects women too much to love them and leave them. I think he’s searching for the right one. Complete opposite of me. I’ve had more hook-ups than some women have shoes.

“If you ask him he’ll tell you his favourite book is Red Rabbit by Tom Clancy. But really he alternates between Pratchett and Eddings. Depending upon how he is feeling. He occasionally strays into the Dirk Pitt series, but never for too long. Finds them a little farfetched in large doses.

“He’s a nerd. Loves Star Trek. But prefers Picard over Kirk. And while he enjoys the reboot, he’s still loyal to the original series and the Next Generation. He can’t stand the prequels of Star Wars. And quite honestly would rather burn “I, Robot” than watch it. Calls it an insult to Asimov.

“He’s a history buff. Both generally and of Gotham in particular. He wants to visit virtually every castle he passes in his travels. And he has the charm to usually get in, even if it’s not open to the Public.

“His father’s loss devastated him. His mother not so much. Not because he cared for her any less, but because at that time they were distant figures he didn’t know very well. He only really connected with his father after Jack lost most of his money. He once told Jack that he’d gotten injured trying out for Football, when he’d really got it playing with his friends. When Jack called him out on it, Tim said he hadn’t thought that Jack would check, because he never had before.

“I know lots about Tim.”

“When why didn’t you know he was missing?”

Dick sank back down into the chair.

He wanted to grab his phone again and start calling people. Call Bruce and find out what he knew. But he had no expectation of privacy. While he wasn’t being officially detained, he knew that he wouldn’t be allowed to leave the room, so anything he said or did would be monitored.
However, that didn’t mean he couldn’t make steps towards finding Tim. He started plotting his next few moves, anything to get ahead on the hunt.

Just on the off chance though…

“Hi, this is Tim Drake. I can’t come to the phone right now, but please leave your name and number after the beep and I will get back to you.”

“Tim… It’s Dick… I need you to call me. I need to know you’re alright. I need… I need you… God! I’ve been a lousy brother haven’t I? I don’t know where you are or what you’re doing. But you’re okay. You’re always okay…… You’ve got to be okay. I don’t know…. I don’t know what I’ll do if you aren’t okay……. Please… Please be okay. Just… Just hang on. Wherever you are… Hang on. I’ll find you. I swear it.”

Dick hung up the phone. It was bad enough that he wasn’t able to leave the interrogation room. He refused to let them see that he was begging his brother to be alive. To respond to his messages. He wasn’t going to let them see him cry. And he knew that was a possibility. He had cried after Jason’s death. He had cried after Bruce’s death. He had cried after Damian’s death. There was a very real chance that he was going to cry from this. He would not give the other officers the satisfaction. And he knew they were watching.

He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction, because he knew that the ones who would most likely be watching would be those who viewed him as a little stuck up prince, due to his family. He wouldn’t let them mock him further. Inwardly he hoped that they would at least give Tim’s case the attention it deserved.

Dick didn’t really care if the whole Batman secret came out, so long as Tim was alive. So if the police detectives managed to find Tim, he wouldn’t care one bit that it was them and not him.

That being said, he wasn’t going to hang around and wait for them to get started. He knew that the family wasn’t involved, so he could skip that step. And move straight to the important stuff.

Besides, he had only been told not to call the Manor; he pressed a speed dial on his phone.

It was answered quickly.
“Babs,” Dick breathed, “I need you to find Tim.”

“What do you mean?” Barbara frowned, “He’s at the Manor.”

“I can’t remember the last time I saw Tim at the Manor.” Dick replied, “I mean I honestly can’t remember. And now, I don’t know where he is.”

“Why don’t you just call him?”

“I have. I got his voicemail. And the police have his DNA on torture implements at a crime scene. The wrong end of torture implements.”

“Who? Who was hurting him?”

“We don’t know. I don’t know. And I don’t know how long they had him. I don’t know if they still have him. I don’t know where he is. Or how he is. And I need to know, Babs. I have to know.”

“Working on it. When did you last see him?”

“I can’t remember. Seriously, I can’t remember. Can you?”

“Well… No. I mean, I’ve seen him in passing. Not spoken to him.”

Dick translated that in his head; Babs had seen Tim as Red Robin on her cameras, but hadn’t established a comm link with him.

“When?” Dick pressed, “I thought I’d texted him last week and it turns out that it was two months ago.”

“I’m not sure.” Babs hedged, “A month maybe? I don’t know, Dick. He’s not been reaching out for a long time. I’ve not really spoken to him since he helped me fix up the Clock Tower after I returned to Gotham.”

“When did we let him drift so far away from us?”

“I… I don’t know. I didn’t even realize it was happening… Do you have any further details?”

“Nothing that the police don’t have. And I don’t think they gave me everything either.”

“You’re still in the station, aren’t you?”

“Yes. They’ve gone to the Manor to talk. Didn’t want me getting in the way.”

“They suspect it’s a family affair.”

“Yes.”

“Anything we need to worry about?”

“No. Babs, can you ask around?”
“Already doing so. But you might get more success if you ask yourself.”

“Planning on doing so, as soon as I can. What I want to know is how we didn’t notice. And I’m not liking the answers that I’m coming up with.”

“What are those answers?”

“I’ll tell you later.” Dick didn’t really want to discuss it, but he was starting to have suspicions.

The door opening caught his attentions and he quickly said goodbye as he saw his partner standing in the doorway.

“Up you get, Grayson.” His partner declared, “I’ve got orders to take you home.”

“Straight home, I presume, Quill.” Dick sighed, “No possible diversions?”

“The detectives don’t want you interfering with their interviews. Straight home Grayson. And you get to explain to me exactly how you managed to screw up this bad. God, you talk about your brothers as if they were everything you ever needed. And you manage to lose one? And you didn’t even notice?”

“I know. I screwed up. Just… Just things kept happening.” Dick ran a hand through his hair, “Can… I need to find Tim. I need to bring him home. I need to apologise to him.”

“You need to wait. The detectives are working on it. I’m taking you home.”

“Okay.” Dick sighed, “But I’m not going to stop until Tim comes home.”

They were silent until they got into the car.

“Talk, Grayson. How did you miss this?”

“Tim’s the good kid. He’s always been the good kid.” Dick sighed, “Never gets into trouble. Jay and Dami need help. They need a lot of help. I’ve been so focused on making sure that they’re confident of their place in the family… Tim just… Just slipped between the cracks. I didn’t worry about him, because I didn’t think I had to.”

“That’s a pretty poor excuse.”

“I know. But you don’t know Tim. He’s… I wanted him as my brother years before Bruce adopted him. Even before Bruce took me in. He was such a cute kid.”

“Hold on, you knew him before?”

“The last night at the Circus…” Dick tailed off, before restarting, “Before the show, we were glad handing. He asked for a photograph with us. Me especially. I promised him that I’d do the performance just for him. He was such a sweet kid. I asked my parents if we could keep him.
He even looked like he could have been my brother. I’d wanted a sibling for a long time. And there he was, the perfect little brother."

“And now you’ve lost him.”

“Like hell. I’m going to find him. He’s coming home. And then, I’m gonna fix this. I’m going to make sure that nothing like this ever happens again.”

“How? How do you lose a kid like that? The perfect kid?”

“Do you know Megan Elliott?” Dick seemed to be changing the topic.

“The cancer kid on fourth?” Quill frowned, “Yeah. I know her.”

“What’s her sibling called?”

“She’s got a sibling?”

“Yeah,” Dick nodded, “A good kid. Doesn’t cause any fuss. Doesn’t make waves. Helps out as much as they can. Can you tell me the name? Or even the gender?”

“No.”

“Exactly. When you’re focused on one thing, you can exclude everything else. It’s like the old video of the basketball players and the gorilla.”

“Oh, I get it.” Quill sighed, “What is the Elliott kid’s name anyway?”

“Tyler. He’s ultra-protective of her.”

“So that’s what it was. You all just focused on Damian and Jason?”

“Pretty much. And I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for that now. God, what have I put him through? What have I let him be put through?”

Dick had both hands fisted in his hair. His mind was conjuring up images upon images of what could have happened and what could be happening even then.

“Hey,” Quill tapped his shoulder, “Montoya and Allen are good at their jobs. They’ll find out what happened. The only way you could be more certain about that would be if you had the Batman on the case.”

Well, that situation was going to change; Nightwing was on the case. So was Oracle. And the rest of the Bats would be following shortly.

And like hell any of them were going to stop until Tim was safe and sound and back where he belonged!
“Detectives,” The butler greeted them as he opened the door, “How may we assist the GCPD today?”

“We need to talk to Mister Wayne and all the residents of the Manor. Including yourself. Immediately.”

“It involves serious business then, Detectives, I would presume. May I enquire as to the urgency and the duration of these discussions? Young Master Damian is currently at school. If the discussion is urgent then I can collect him. If the discussion is overly long I will be late in collecting him from school.”

“We have a police car collecting him as we speak. He should be arriving shortly.”

“Very good, Sir, Ma’am. I shall inform Master Bruce that you are present. If you would follow me, I shall bring Master Bruce to the Green Drawing Room.”

“Is Jason Todd currently in residence?” Montoya inquired.

“Yes, Detectives. I presume you wish for him to also be in attendance?”

“Absolutely. We said everyone and we meant it.”

“Then I shall insure that he is awake and presentable, Detectives.”

“We also need you to be there.”

“I presumed so by your insistence as to everyone, Detectives. If you would wait here. We shall join you shortly.”

The detectives looked around the room. It was clear to see why it was referred to as green, although the colour was broken up by pictures and a small bookcase.

“Quite a few books here. Wonder how often any of the spines get cracked?”

“Nice view as well,” Montoya motioned out the large windows, towards the elegantly manicured grounds.

“Todd still asleep? Wonder why? What kept him up all night?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Late night parties? Involving god only knows who and what. The Waynes generally manage to keep themselves out of the gossip rags; unless Wayne himself is out and about. But that doesn’t mean they don’t get up to things. All this money? You can’t tell me they’re completely on the straight and narrow.”
“Detectives,” A cherry voice greeted them from the doorway, “What brings you here today? Are you here selling tickets for the Benefits’ Gala? Because I thought that wasn’t for another six months.”

“Mister Wayne, have a seat.”

“Call me Brucie. All my friends do. Is Dickie alright? Has something happened to him?”

“Grayson is fine. Take a seat.” Montoya attempted to reassure.

She had spotted the real fear behind the jovial smile. Despite Bruce Wayne’s obvious lack of intelligence, he really did care for Grayson, that much was clear.

“Father, what is going on?” A young, but arrogant voice demanded from the doorway, “I was removed from school without prior warning. I am missing my art class.”

“Have a seat, brat.” The lower Gotham drawl was a jarring contrast to the lightly accented upper class tones of the previous speaker, “They ain’t gonna talk until we’re all seated. Might as well get this over with.”

“Indeed, Master Jason. May I suggest you take your own advice?” The butler had returned, “Master Damian, I am sure that the detectives would not have interrupted your education for anything less than a true situation.”

“If you would also be seated,” Montoya motioned, “We would prefer it.”

The butler seated himself quietly.

“This ‘bout Dickie-bird?” Jason pressed, “He okay?”

“Grayson cannot be harmed.” Damian’s voice was tight, clearly trying to hide fear.

“He is fine.” Montoya replied, “Officer Grayson is back at the precinct. We came to talk to you about Timothy Drake-Wayne.”

“Drake?” Damian frowned, “Why what has he done?”

“When was the last time any of you spoke to him?”

“I don’t remember.” Jason drawled, “Cut to the chase, detectives. What’s the matter? Why are ya asking about him?”

“There’s no easy way of saying this,” Allen took a deep breath, “We have evidence that indicates Mister Drake-Wayne has been kidnapped.”

“What?” Every single bit of tomfoolery was gone from Brucie’s voice and body language,
“Who? When? Where is he?”

“Currently we don’t know.” Montoya replied calmly, “We are still investigating.”

“Who has my son?” Brucie had completely changed.

Montoya and Allen both blinked at the change. The multi-millionaire was radiating danger and threat. For all his foppish ways, it seemed Bruce Wayne really cared about his boys.

“We don’t know.” Allen stated, “We’re working on it. At the moment we’re trying to establish a time-line. Find out when he was taken.”

“You don’t even know that?” Damian sounded outraged.

“Not yet.” Montoya shrugged, “Currently all we have is evidence of kidnapping.”

“No, ya don’t.” Jason frowned, “Because if that was all ya had, you would at least know when it happened. You have evidence of something else. Either his death, which I doubt, because ya would have led with that. Murder’s easier to explain than kidnapping… How much blood?”

“Are you sure you wish to discuss this with the youngster in the room?” Allen queried.

“I have encountered worse.” Damian rebutted, “I have seen death before. In several incarnations.”

“He can handle it.” Jason agreed.

“Detectives,” Bruce returned to the heart of the matter, “What has happened to my son?”

“Evidence indicates that he may have been tortured.” Allen confessed, “At present all we have is DNA evidence.”

“Blood.” Jason was blunt, “How much?”

“Enough that it is likely that Mister Drake-Wayne will be very weak at present. And in need of medical care in the near future.” Allen elaborated.

“And ya want to know if one of us did it.” Jason continued, “I mean, we’re pretty good suspects. I’m known for not liking him. Damian, pretty much the same. Bruce would never hurt Timmy. And Alfred… He’d protect this family with every last breath in his body. And that goes for Timmy too. Ya’re not just establishing the timeline. Ya’re investigating us to see if we could be behind it. Whether it was our hands or our money bankrolling it.”

“You believe we would consider that a possibility?” Montoya pressed.

“Absolutely.” Jason agreed, “I don’t trust cops. And I know that the first suspect in something like this is the family. Particularly when we didn’t report him missing. And I last heard from Timmy about a month and a half ago.”

“Who initiated contact?”

“I did. It’s always that way. I’m always the one that starts it. Even if I don’t realize that I
started it. If I’m in trouble. If I need help… He’ll come.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d rather not discuss it.” Jason countered.

“I’m afraid that is no longer an option.” Allen fired back.

“In which case, I’d rather talk in private.” Jason announced.

“That’s acceptable.” Montoya agreed, “We were intending on it any way. We’ll start with you. Then the butler, Brucie and finally Damian.”

“His name is Alfred.” Jason got to his feet, “Follow me. Alf, I’ll take ‘em to the library. Seems as good a place as any… Don’t reckon I’ll need it, but might be worth putting the lawyers on standby.”

“I understand that you and Mister Drake do not get along.” Allen opened the interrogation.

“So I’m a suspect.” Todd shrugged, “I get it. I do. But I wouldn’t do that to Tiny Tim.”

“Tiny Tim?”

“I’m trying not to physically attack him anymore. I did in the past. I’ll admit that. But I’m getting better. I got help. Timmy got me help. Help I was willing to take, ‘cause Timmy found the right way to help me. I owe him a lot.”

“We have heard rather different stories.”

“You would. We don’t publicize it. Timmy understands why I was so angry with him. It wasn’t really his fault. But I blamed him. It was easier to be angry at him than anyone else.”

“Why?”

“Long complicated story, and not important right now. What is important is that Timmy is missing. And ya don’t know where he is. And I don’t know where he is.”

“Do you know anyone who would want to hurt him?”

“No… Well, the brat might, but this isn’t his style. He wouldn’t torture Timmy and he wouldn’t delegate. There might be people in business who would have an issue with Timmy. He’s CEO of one of the biggest companies in the world. For some people that’s enough.”

“Why didn’t you notice he was missing?”

“I don’t interact with him on a regular basis. Sometimes I’ll go weeks ‘tween seeing him.”

“And the rest of them?”

“Part of me thinks that is my fault.”
“Why?”

“I didn’t like him. I made it very clear. But I was on the outs with all of the family. Everyone knew it. Bruce and Dick have worked so hard to bring me back into the fold. And I fought them most of the way…”

“Why?”

“Street kid. I fought them the first time too. Only now I’m older and wiser and more stubborn and more wary. Trust me, the things I saw while I was presumed dead… It makes Gotham look tame. Anyway, I was fighting them. And they were focused on me. And on Damian, ‘cause he hasn’t had the best upbringing.”

“Really?”

“Let’s just say his mother is a bitch. She always planned on him. Bruce’s willing participation was not something she would have deemed a necessary part of Damian’s conception.”

“You mean she…”

“No-one’s ever said. But I know the woman. She’s ruthless. She wanted Damian to be born. And she wanted him to be perfect. Therefore, he had to be Bruce’s. And she always gets what she wants.”

The two detectives exchanged a glance; this had been a more intriguing conversation than they had been expecting.

“Did you know that Drake was missing?”

“Personally, I haven’t interacted with him for nearly six months. I knew his friends didn’t know where he was. I knew they were looking for him. They got desperate enough that they phoned me. And trust me, that means they were pretty desperate. That was just over a week ago.”

“And what did you do?”

“Nothing. I didn’t think there was a problem. Not the first time he’s taken off on his own. I figured he’d turn up when he was ready. Besides I didn’t want ta tell Bruce and the others.”

“Why not?”

“Because that was right at the point I was starting to realize that they really did want me back. That they actually cared. That I hadn’t been replaced. And I knew that if they knew Timmy was missing… They’d focus more on him than on me… And I didn’t want to be second place ta Timmy again. So I kept my mouth shut……. And now I have ta live with that. If I had had the slightest, and I do mean the slightest, inkling that Timmy was actually in trouble… That he was being hurt… I would have said something. I would have done something. I would have gotten him outta there. No matter what the cost.”

“How long have you known?”

“Like I said, a week? Maybe two? Certainly no longer. Give me a moment, I’ll get you an
exact time frame.”

He started scrolling through his phone.

“Nine days.” Jason was firm, “They called me nine days ago. I didn’t think anything of it. They’ve never contacted me before, but as I said…”

“You didn’t consider it anything to worry about.”

“A young boy, alone in the world… And you didn’t consider it anything to worry about?”

“Timmy’s gone to Afghanistan on his own before. And Europe before he finished Freshman year. There’s no need to worry about it… At least there never has been before.”

“You weren’t worried, because nothing had ever happened before?”

“I wasn’t worried, because Tiny Tim’s been walking the streets of Gotham since he was a tot. I reckoned nowhere was more dangerous than he’d already been. I thought he could handle himself.”

“Is there anything else you think we should know?”

“Nothing I can think of. Or at least that I’d be willing to tell ya. I presume ya’ve checked his apartment.”

“You know where he lives?”

“Of course,” Jason shrugged, “Ya don’t?”

“So far we haven’t found any records for his accommodation.”

“Look, finish up with the others and I’ll take ya there.”

“You could just tell us the address.”

“He’s got a pretty tight security system on the place. I know my way through it, but I couldn’t explain it.”

“Why would you know how to get through his security? You said you weren’t close. And that you actively tried to keep away from him. And actively kept others from interacting with him.”

“No. Not actively. More passively. I just didn’t tell anyone about things I knew. And yeah, we’re not close. But right now, I wager I’m closer ta ‘im than Dick or Brucie. ‘Sides I like ta know where people are. I like ta know if there are places where I can crash if I need ta. Timmy would never deny me a place on his couch. Provided that I didn’t try ta kill ‘im. I’ll get ya in. But I won’t leave it open for the future. I won’t do that ta ‘im. I won’t make his safe space dangerous.”

Chapter End Notes
I'm trying to write Jason with a bit of an accent. Not sure how well I'm doing. Feedback would be helpful.
“How may I help you, detectives?”

“When did you last hear from Mister Drake-Wayne?”

“That would be approximately three months ago.” The butler replied, “I have reached out to him on numerous occasions since then, including four days ago. However, I have had no reply, detectives.”

“You didn’t press any further?”

“I have found that attempting to press Master Tim into something that he does not wish to do is generally a pointless activity. However, detectives, if I continue to make sure that he is aware that I am interested in establishing contact he will eventually cave. He is too kind-hearted to ignore me for long. I anticipated that he would contact me at the very latest next month, when my birthday occurred.”

“Do you know of any enemies?”

“While I know that his position as CEO lends itself to enemies, I cannot image Master Tim having any personal enemies, detectives. He has always come across to me as a soft-spoken young man, more prone to using words to get the result he desires than actions. He is a born diplomat and negotiator, capable of making everyone believing that they have gained the best outcome possible. Even as a young man he was capable of such feats, talking down bullies from their targets without seeming to be overly interested.”

“How did he do that?”

“He is capable of seeing multiple sides of a situation, detectives. He can also see potential outcomes of events and can phrase things so he can gain the optimal outcome, Sir.”

“He manipulates people?”

“That would be one way of phrasing it. However, I would remind you that everyone has free will and the option of choosing a different path to the path Master Tim desires, Ma’am. All he uses are words and he never lies in the words that he chooses. In fact, Master Tim rarely lies at all; at least to me.”

“Is that your opinion of him? That he is a manipulative young man?”

“I am appalled that you are interpreting my words that way, Ma’am. Master Tim is a compassionate young man, who cares more for others than he does for himself. A young man who would willingly sacrifice everything he is for the sake of another, even a stranger. An intelligent and bright young man, who is capable of so much good in this world. Yes, he is capable of deception, but he will only do it in the cause of protecting people. He forgives all too readily offences against himself, in my humble opinion. However, offences against those he cares for are not so easily forgiven. In addition, simply because he forgives, does not mean that he forgets. He does not trust easily a second time. I fear, I may have betrayed that trust, and I doubt I will be able to win it back so easily.”

“What do you think you did?”
“I do not know. However, I do know in retrospect that I have not given him the support he needed. I also have not commemorated his last birthday in the manner he would expect from me. I fear he may believe I have forgotten him, Sir.”

“Do you believe that anyone in this house could have harmed him?”

“While I acknowledge that they have had their differences in the past, Sir. I do not believe that any of them would cause such harm now.”

“I have noticed that you refer to each of the members of the Wayne family by their full first name, but Mister Drake-Wayne you use a nickname?”

“Master Tim finds his full first name something that displeases him. I have seen him flinch when I utilized it. I make a concerted effort not to use it, in order that he does not associate me with whatever bad memories his full first name evokes.”

“Do you know what caused that?”

“I am afraid that I am not able to illuminate you any further.”

Montoya and Allen exchanged glances; clearly Alfred was too loyal to the Waynes to give any further information. It was possible that he wasn’t even capable of believing they would harm each other.


123456789

“I don’t know where Timmy is.” Brucie declared, “And none of my boys would harm him. Have you talked to Lucius? He might know of a ransom demand or something.”

“Do you know of any enemies he might have?”

“No. Timmy’s a good kid. He doesn’t make enemies. He works hard. Harder than I ever did. Lucius loves him. He’s a brilliant CEO. The Board don’t have any issues with him.”

“Any ex-girlfriends?”

“Nobody who would do anything like this. I mean, Stephanie and he used to date, but they’re just friends now. There was Ariana, years ago; they broke up and stayed friends. Also Zoanne, they tutored each other for a while. But it never went very far. There was Darla, I think she was linked to the Mafia, but that was a long time ago; and I think she got shot by a stray bullet. There was Greta, many, many years ago; thought I think that was a one-sided crush on her part. He didn’t think of her that way.”

“That’s… Impressive.” Allen blinked, “I wouldn’t have expected you to remember anything quite so detailed.”

“Detective Allen,” Brucie turned a slight glare towards him, “I may be a lush and a fool in the eyes of the world. But I do care for my children. I know about their friends and particularly their romantic liaisons. I have to check, because they can be leverage points against us. I keep
records of the romantic liaisons I have. However, I am more personal when it comes to my children.”

“But you don’t know of any enemies?”

“No.”

“What about Tamara Fox? Weren’t they engaged at one point?”

“Not officially. That was an ill spoken remark by a harried young woman in front of a media representative. There was no official engagement. It was all a show.”

“And could Tamara Fox have reacted badly upon realizing that Mister Drake-Wayne had no intentions of going through with her statement?”

“No chance. She never saw Tim that way. Besides, she’d never hurt Tim. Tim doesn’t have enemies. He never did. He’s not that sort of person. Everyone likes Tim. He’s going to be a great man one day. Please… Find my son. Bring him home.”

“Do you know of anyone who would try to hurt Tim to get at you?”

“If they were going to, they would have sent me a message by now. I don’t know who could have Timmy. I don’t know why they would take him. But I want him home safe. Please… Please bring my boy home.”

The amount of desperation in Brucie’s voice wasn’t something that could be easily faked. Montoya doubted that Brucie had the ability to simulate the emotion needed.

123456789

“You believe I had something to do with Drake’s disappearance.” Damian stated rather than asked.

“It is well known that the two of you had issues with each other. It has been extensively reported.”

“In tabloids and news outlets barely worth the name.” Damian was dismissive, “I currently have no interest in the removal of Drake from this family.”

“Is that because you know he will never come back already?”

“Sir, I must protest!” The butler spoke up from his corner where he was observing, “Master Damian would not get involved in something like that.”

“If I desired Drake’s death I would make it as clean and as quick as possible.” Damian declared firmly, “However, I am not involved. I desire no harm to come to Drake. It is not in my best interest to harm him. While I have, in the past, desired his removal from the family, it is not my current desire. Indeed, I would prefer it if Drake would become a greater part of this family; however, I will not force him in that direction. Nor will I allow him to return while there is a chance that he might become discarded in the manner he has been already.”
"You deem him to have been discarded?"

"Correct. I believe he has been forgotten by most members of the family. While I originally did not object, by the time I realized the value Drake provides to the family it was too late. I could not bring him back by my own actions. He believes that I am happier the way things are and will not return at my request."

"What changed your mind?"

"I confronted him about his position as CEO approximately eight months ago." Damian started.

Then he paused, clearly trying to figure out what he wanted to say.

"Look!" Timothy snapped; some small part of Damian was pleased at having made the usually soft-spoken and even-tempered teenager lose his famous cool.

"I get it. I get it! I don’t have a place in the family. I know that. But someone has to be CEO. And the Board won’t throw me away just yet. Answer me this Damian, if I am not in charge, who will be?"

"I am the rightful heir."

"You are also just a kid. Maybe not in experience, because God knows you’ve seen things that most kids your age haven’t. And you’ve done things that they haven’t. But you’re still a kid. The Board looks at you and they see an arrogant, outspoken child! They won’t let you run the show at the moment. For all that you are the true heir."

"Tt. Then the Board should reappoint Father."

"The Board dismiss Bruce as a fop. A fool. An idiot. We know the truth, but the rest of the world, they only know Brucie. Who, quite honestly, is so overplayed by Bruce it’s a miracle they ever let him foster Dick, never mind the rest of us. As far as the Board is concerned Brucie had been a puppet dancing on his master’s strings as CEO. And the puppet-master was Lucius Fox. Now, he’s good at what he does. Runs the company like a dream, has a Midas touch; but there are many members of the Board who deem him an upstart. He’s not one of them. They were more than happy when he stepped down and made me CEO. Not because I am Bruce’s adoptive son. But because I’m not him. They deem me to be more controllable. Someone they can direct and shape. I cause fewer scandals than Brucie and am deemed to present a far better image in the Press.

"Don’t even try with Dick or Jason. Jason, they see as beneath them, because of his heritage and his manner of speaking. They don’t see how much he has achieved to overcome all the obstacles in his path. And Dick’s a common cop as far as they are concerned. If he as a detective,
then yes, they’d be more interested in him being in charge than me. More because of the fact that he is charming than anything else. I’m good at what I do, but it takes a lot more work for me to build the type of contacts that come easily to Dick. God, if he had any interest in running the business, he’d be putting other companies out of business all the time. He’d charm them so much that they’d lie down and let him walk all over them. He’d be worse than Luthor. Him and Lucius together? Dream. Team. Trust me on that.

“But the Board won’t fire me or let me stand down in favour of you, at this time. You’re too young. Too inexperienced. If I stand down, without a named replacement, they will replace me with one of them. And then you won’t get the CEO position until you’re at least forty. Trust me on that. At least while I stand as Regent for you, the position is waiting for you. I’m just the stand in. The Replacement. The Interrex. The position will wait for the Prince. Take your time over it. I’m not going to usurp you. There’s no point for me to do that. The Board will go your way in time.

“So grow up. Be a child! Learn. Grow. Study. Broaden your mind. Get a degree. At least a Bachelor’s. But you’re smart enough for a Master’s; be a shame to waste your mind. Particularly with your work ethic. Whatever you want you work at it, until you get it. You could study at any university and study any subject. The Board would give you the CEO position when you were finished. I mean literally. Your graduation day would be my last day as CEO. I’m serious on that. I don’t see this as a long term thing.”

“What is to stop you from destroying the company? You are certainly capable of it. You could destroy my legacy.”

“And why would I do that? I destroy it, and the Board will fire me. I destroy it and when I’m looking for my next job, I’ll be lucky if I get a job stacking shelves in a Mom and Pop store. I have to keep the company going. For my future. If I walk out of this job with the company thriving, I can pretty much walk into any job I want after that. I have to show I have the experience and ability to do what is necessary.

“That’s the logical reason why you should believe me when I tell you I’m not going to ruin the company. The illogical real reason why is simple. I may not be part of the family, but I still care for all of you. If the business is succeeding you have the funds for the best equipment… For the best protection. I am keeping you all safe, by helping the company to grow. And I still care. As stupid as it is. Even though I am not part of the family, I still care. And I don’t ever see myself as stopping caring. You need me, I’ll be there. No matter in what capacity you need me; I’ll come when you call. That is something you can take to the bank!”

“Why?”

“Because even if you don’t think of me like that, you’ll always be my brother to me. And I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

“What if someone else steps forward to take the job?”

“Bruce, I’ll step down. Dick, the same. Jason, I’d fight. He doesn’t really know how to lead
a group of people as a superior without sex or violence. Actually, I’d probably pay to see Jason up against the Board.”

“What is your plan?”

“Pardon?”

“Tt. You have a plan. You always have a plan. What is your plan?”

“I increase the profitability of the business. I can already see some new directions and improvements we can make in current projects. Maximise income, while minimizing expenditure, but not at the cost of the rank and file employees. You come into the business regularly. We get your face known. You don’t come in and work with the managers though. You’re the mail-boy, the tea-boy, the kitchen staff.”

“That is beneath…!” Damian started.

“It’s necessary!” Tim cut him off, “Currently you have a bad image amongst the employees. They see you as an entitled brat. A miniature Brucie, but without any of the positives. If you want the best out of the company, you need to be loved. They need to like you. So, we have to work on that. That means a lot of getting your face out there. A lot of Community Projects. Not just ones where you turn up to cut the ribbon or dig the first spade. Ones where you are there from start to finish. Where you put in the hard graft. I’m thinking Habitat for Humanity and ASPCA. We turn your image around. Make them love you.”

“Why? Tt. You don’t need love to rule. Grandfather does not need to be loved by his people.”

“No. He doesn’t. He rules by fear. I’ve seen it. He assigns ninja to ensure his investment in people. But he doesn’t watch the point of betrayal. He watches their wives. Their children. Fear is not a good way to rule. Particularly in a situation where you do not have the force to back up your threats. You have money and power, but there will always be someone stronger than you. Someone who will find a way to get around your protection. Who will counter your fear. Fear cuts deeper than swords, but it is not fatal. And people will rise against you. But if you are loved? They will follow you to the ends of the earth.”

“Tt. You are certain of this? It seems silly. Typical of your Western culture.”

“Your culture too. Consider this Damian, I will give you two names, and you will tell me who has had a greater impact upon the world and why.”

“Tt. Simple enough.”

“Saddam Hussein and Diana, Princess of Wales.”

“Saddam Hussein has inspired much violence and changed the political map of the Middle East. Princess Diana was never in a position to do such. Clearly Saddam Hussein is the victor in this contest.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Did you know that Princess Diana was a teacher before she was a Princess? She married into her position. And later, she and Prince Charles divorced. Upon the divorce, legally she was no longer a Princess. And yet, she is still called such, even to this day. Even though, legally the position is held by Prince Charles’ current wife; Camilla. It is so strongly associated with Diana, that Camilla instead uses the title Duchess of Cornwall. She was no longer residing at Buckingham Palace when she died, but she was so loved by the people that they left
over ten tonnes of bouquets there, over sixty million flowers in her memory. There is a charity in her name to continue her work. Even now her name is still spoken with love. Who mourned Saddam’s demise? Not very many. Those who go out and commit violence in his name? They do for their own sakes. For their own fame. It is more about them than him. But with Diana, it is all about her.”

“You want me to be Diana not Saddam?”

“Absolutely. People work better for a boss they like than for one they hate. If they hate you, they will be more likely to leave the company. We just need to change your image.”

“Change my image?” Damian growled; eyes narrowing in anger.

“Change your narrative.” Tim explained further, “Right now you’re an entitled kid who came from nowhere and is the owner’s son. We change your narrative. We keep as close to the truth as possible, but we change details.”

“Such as?” Damian challenged.

“You were born a Middle Eastern Prince. Your Grandfather is the head of the family and very traditional. His oldest legitimate child is your mother and he has no legitimate sons. Thus, making you his heir. Unfortunately, there was an attack on the family and your mother, fearing for your safety placed you in your father’s keeping. A father who was unaware of your existence until that moment.”

“Tt. So far I do not see anything that is changing my narrative.”

“Once the danger was past, your mother went to reclaim you, only to learn that you had embraced some of your father’s ideals.”

“Again no change.”

“This caused your mother to disown you. Disinherit you.”

“I fail to see what you are doing apart from airing my dirty laundry, as Grayson would say.”

“This has caused you to lash out at people. You are afraid of getting too close to people, because if your own mother could treat you like that, what would other people do? You’re not arrogant. You’re scared of getting hurt again. You’re not dismissive. You’re trying not to get close. You’re not entitled. You’re hurting. You’re scared and trying not to show it. Because you were taught to never show weakness. But if people want to see you… The real you, they just need to see how you treat animals. How you care for creatures that cannot hurt you and simply return your love. You’re rallying against the culture you were raised in and the one you find yourself in now. It is such a big change that you’re finding it hard to adjust and you’re trying not to let anyone see how out of your depth you are. You’re also struggling to find your place in a family where Bruce adopted children. He chose them; you aren’t certain that he would make the same choice with you. Which is why you lash out at me. We play the whole Big-Ego-Hidden-Depths trope to the max. It won’t take much acting from you. And it won’t take much from me either. You won’t even have to change how you act towards me. We’ll make me the focus of your anger.”

“You believe that will work? What will it require?”

“You volunteering on a semi-regular basis. You decide how much, when and what for. Though I would recommend the animals at first. Photos will get out. Trust me on that. All you have to do is be yourself around animals. I’d suggest kittens or puppies. That would really help sell
“Your image. But also horses would help.”

“Horses?”

“Royalty rides horses. Showing your competency in that area will help spread the story. I have a few twitter accounts under false names that will help put your image out. I make a few comments here and there about how frustrating it is that your mother completely sacrificed your personal life, and thus your development of social skills, in order for you to learn things far beyond your age. Which was all done in an attempt to impress her father. You spend time with Dick learning those skills that she neglected in her belief that you would never need them.”

“You believe rumours and pictures will make me more… More likeable?”

“Yes. A lie will run around the world, before the truth has got its boots on. Give it a while of doing things like that… Maybe a few candid shots of you volunteering at a children’s charity… People will start asking about the apparent change. They’ll start asking me.”

“Why you?”

“Because the Press knows that getting a straight answer out of Brucie is a waste of time. He’s not aware of what’s going on around him. He probably won’t have even noticed the change.”

“Father is far more aware than you are giving him credit for.”

“Bruce is. Brucie isn’t. It’s the difference in a mask. Batman isn’t the only mask he wears. Brucie is as much a mask as Batman. Only more people are fooled by it. The Press don’t trust Brucie. They know he’ll tell them anything they want, but they’re never sure it’s real. Because who would give a drunken fool valuable information? So they’ll ask me as the public face of the Wayne family.”

“What will you say?”

“Not a lot. I will let them infer a great many things. I will play up the angle of being your hated older adoptive brother. Long suffering and frustrated at your actions towards me. That’ll give a reason for why I’m not living at the Manor. I’ll stress that you adore Dick and find Jason tolerable.”

“Why not tell them the story you want them to tell?”

“Because if I do that, they won’t believe it. Give them too much, too easily, too soon they’ll think it’s a cover. Hiding some bigger secret. I’ll keep as much back as possible. They’ll fill in the blanks on their own. That way they’ll think they’re uncovering great secrets.”

“What if they want to know who my grandfather is?”

“There’s several thousand Middle Eastern Princes. They’ll never be able to narrow it down. And even if they try, I’ll just counter every suggestion. You may end up as a Prince of a Nomadic Desert Tribe. One completely off the records.”

“That would be acceptable. You will stand down when the time comes?”

“Absolutely. Hopefully by that time I will have expanded the company further and replaced the Board with people you can work with, rather than the power hungry vultures currently in position. I will do whatever I can to make your life easier in the future. You need me I’ll come. You call. I’ll come. Call on me as your Iolaus, as long as daylight lasts.”
“And you will help me slay the Hydra?”

“I will do whatever you require.”

“Then we have a deal.”

“We made a deal.” Damian finally found his words, “I would study to take over the position. He would act as my Regent until the time when I was ready. He swore that he would not make me a Prince in the Tower. I have no need to antagonise him.”

“You expect us to believe that?”

“It’s the truth. I have nothing to do with this. Anything that has happened to Drake is not in my best interest. So why would I wish him harm?”

“Do you know of any enemies he may have?”

“None that I am aware of. However, Drake does not keep me informed of such things. I would suggest talking to Fox. He would have a better idea of the enemies obtained through Wayne Enterprises.”

“Any personal enemies?”

“Again, none that I am aware of. However, Drake would not inform me of such things. I would recommend talking to his friends. I do not have the privilege of being classed as such.”

“You are coming across very differently to how we were expecting.”

“That is to be expected. What is reported in the media is often very different to reality, particularly when it comes to the personal lives of celebrities.”

“Even Grayson thought you still disliked Mister Drake-Wayne.”

“Grayson has been more focused on Todd to notice my current lack of antagonism towards Drake. This has been aided by Drake’s reduced exposure to the family. Grayson has not been able to observe my interactions with Drake; thus he is unaware of the situation change.”

“Do you know who his friends were?”

“I know their names. However, I will not give you their contact details. I will ensure that they are aware of your investigation and anyone who believes they have any pertinent information will contact you.”

It was clear that Damian wasn’t going to provide any more information; and they weren’t really in a position to force anything out of him.
Chapter 5

Jason shifted in his seat slightly as he directed the detectives to Tim’s place. He really wasn’t comfortable in the back of a police car. Unmarked though it was, it still brought back way too many memories for him.

“Where are we going?” Montoya asked.

“Nearly there.” Jason replied, “Take the next left.”

“This doesn’t seem to be the sort of place a rich kid should be.” Allen remarked.

“Funny,” Jason snorted, “Used ta be quite swanky round here. Before my time, of course. Turn right, then pull up at the end. Ya can park in the street. Should be alright. Your car’s not too flashy. And it’s better than it used ta be round here.”

“Really?” Montoya blinked, “I never worked this beat.”

“Yeah,” Jason nodded, “I used ta sleep in that side alley. Don’t look like there’s anyone sleeping there now.”

“You slept rough?” Allen almost turned to look at him, before remembering the road.

“Yeah,” Jason shrugged, “Wasn’t that in your files on me? I slept rough and then got put into a school for troubled kids. Turns out the headmaster was trying ta train criminals. Might as well have called him Fagin. When that got shut down, Bruce took me in.”

Allen pulled the car to a stop, directly outside a fairly large building. Certainly larger than anything else on the street.

“Crime Alley?” He remarked as he got out the car, “Seriously? He lives on Crime Alley?”

“It used ta have a different name.” Jason stretched as he got out the back seat, “Used ta be called Park Row.”

“But why here?” Montoya asked, “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense.” Jason replied, “If you know Timmy. Besides this place is important. At least ta us… Give me a moment, I just need ta open the door.”

He walked confidently towards the big building, before kneeling down to look at the lock.

“Do you have a key?” Montoya blinked, “Because you aren’t acting as if you do.”
“I have a key,” Jason replied, “Timmy’s security system on the other hand… Well, I prefer unlocking it from this height.”

“Why?”

“Because it means that if Timmy’s home, he can’t kick me in the groin again.”

“Again?” Allen coughed, “You mean he’s done it before?”

“Little lesson,” Jason snorted, “Timmy’s small. But that don’t mean he won’t fight. It also don’t mean that he won’t fight dirty! I swear he got taught fighting by a woman. Because he will do whatever it takes to win a fight… If he wants to win.”

“So whoever is holding him…?” Montoya tailed off.

“They don’t play fair.” Jason nodded, “And they ain’t amateurs. Amateurs would have underestimated Timmy. He’s just a business man after all.”

Jason pushed the door open, only rising to his feet once the door was open sufficiently to allow him entrance.


“No man is measured by the love he gives to others but by how much he is loved.” Jason spoke clearly and precisely, his accent disappearing for a moment.

“System deactivated.” The computer declared, “Welcome, Jason Todd.”

“Unusual pass phrase.” Allen remarked.

“From a book,” Jason shrugged, “One of the Brother Cadfael series. I think it was a dig at me at first. A quote from a series I don’t particularly like, nor consider good literature. In my opinion it is no better than most murder mystery series. However, Tiny Tim enjoys it. Anyway, welcome ta Casa del Timmy.”

The two detectives looked around. Jason watched them.

He watched as their eyes skipped over the hidden nooks and crannies of the place. The hidden catches and switches that led to a world the detectives had never seen before. That hid weapons and computers. That hid secrets that many people would die and kill to know.

He watched as they dismissed the decorative swords on the walls. The display of Legolas’ dual knives ignored as simply a homage to the film trilogy. Few would consider testing the keenness of the blades to discover that they were not only sharp, but potentially deadly. Perfectly balanced for fighting, and able to fit perfectly into Timmy’s grip.
Equally the replica of the sword from the Legend of Zelda had an edge, and the matching shield was designed to complement it. There were others hanging from the walls in strategic locations. Including a Klingon Batleth, something that Jason was still trying to figure out how to permanently borrow. He didn’t recognise where some of the weapons came from, but knew they were all things that firmly established Timmy’s geek credentials.

They didn’t overpower the décor, but certainly they were a visible presence in the space.

Turning, he smiled as he noticed a new addition to the collection. Gandalf’s staff stood in the shadow of the door.

Jason had no doubt that the replica could be used by the missing hero to fight as well as any bo staff.

Timmy knew what he was doing, and he had created a home that was fully armed, and yet easily dismissed as harmless. Indeed, even the owner would be dismissed as harmless, because how could such a geek be dangerous?

Jason knew the truth though. Timmy was very much crouching geek, hidden badass.

“This is a pretty impressive pad for a kid.” Allen whistled as he looked around, “Wayne money, I presume.”

“Drake, actually.” Montoya corrected.

“I thought his father went bankrupt.” Allen frowned

“According to the files I found, he did.” Montoya nodded, “But they’d shuffled a large amount of money into a Trust Fund for Tim and other things like that. Tax dodging, I think. However, when Mister Drake had no money of his own…”

“He couldn’t touch Tim’s.” Allen laughed, “Ironic.”

“Yeah, sounds ‘bout right.” Jason agreed, “Timmy never told me where he got all the money from. But I know Bruce didn’t foot the bill. The brat would have caused way too much fuss if he had. Woulda demanded his own place. Plus, I’m not a hundred percent sure Bruce knows where this place is. Not sure he’d approve of it either.”

“Not fond of all the weaponry?” Montoya waved a hand.

“That wouldn’t be the problem. If Timmy wants to decorate with replica movie props, Bruce couldn’t give two hoots. But converting this building? That cuts a little too close ta home.”
“What do you mean?” Allen frowned, “I mean I can see this used to be a theatre. But it’s a good conversion.”

“Also the place that the Waynes were attending ‘fore they got killed.” Jason reminded, “I like what Timmy’s done with the place. But Bruce lives little too much in the past with regards ta it. I ain’t sure how he’d take Timmy replacing the place that has the last happy memories of his parents for him. Tainted though they are by what happened only moments later… I’ll let ya investigate as ya will. I’m taking the couch.”

“You could leave us here and go home. I’m sure your family will be missing you.”

“Like Hell I will.” Jason snorted, “I know Timmy well enough ta know that he don’t really like people in his space. ‘Specially strangers. So at the very least, I’m staying here, so that when he comes back he don’t completely slaughta me. I won’t get in your way.”

Jason slumped on the sofa. He wasn’t worried about the detectives finding, accessing or activating anything hidden around the place. The code he’d used locked down all of them. None of the panels would open until a different code was used. One Jason didn’t actually know.

Jason had thought Timmy was being paranoid setting up a security system like that, one that Jason had partial control over. But it was coming in handy.

Slumped on the couch, Jason let his fingers sneak into the nocks and crannies of the couch. It was a habit he still had from childhood, looking for dropped change. He didn’t find any, but his hand closed around what seemed to be a strap of some kind. Jason quickly released it and let it be. No need to reveal any secrets to the detectives.

To be honest Jason didn’t expect the detectives to find anything of any use. It was clear to him that whoever had grabbed Timmy had managed to catch Red Robin. And it would be the Bats who brought Timmy home.

“What do you know?” Bruce cut straight to the chase, as Dick came down the stairs into the Cave.

“Probably less than you do at the moment,” Dick shrugged, “Given that you’ve got the report open. I don’t know anything that’s not in that. Last contact I had with Tim was two months ago. I don’t recall anything more recent. I’ve got Babs looking for more details.”

“My last communication was nine weeks ago.” Bruce put in, “Jason might have more information. He went with the detectives to show them Tim’s home.”
“His home is here.” Dick snapped.

“Is it?” Damian challenged.

“Of course it is!” Dick returned.

“When did he last come here, Grayson?” Damian asked, “When did he last eat here? When did he last get a medical here? When did he last sleep here? This hasn’t been his home in a very long time.”

“When did you last see him?” Bruce redirected the conversation.

“Nine weeks ago.” Damian shrugged, “However, Drake sent me some information regarding a case six weeks ago.”

“You didn’t know he was missing.” Dick wanted confirmation.

“If I had known, I would have looked.” Damian stated firmly.

“Would you have told us?” Bruce frowned slightly.

“Tt.” Damian chuffed, “Depends if you had asked.”

“Any information you can give us?” Bruce tried again.

“I do not know anything, Father.” Damian replied, “This is nothing of my doing. Nor do I believe it has anything to do with Mother or even Grandfather. Neither of them would keep him in Gotham.”

“True enough.” Dick agreed, “But… Why didn’t you tell us about Tim drifting away?”

“Why should I?” Damian challenged, “By the time I realized the importance of his role in the family, he had already drifted so far that I could not bring him back. He would not believe anything I said about his importance. Besides, if I brought him back and you abandoned him again… We would never get him back a second time.”

“He chose to distance himself.” Dick reminded.

“I would not phrase it that way.” Damian returned, “Drake left after your failure to communicate with him and my failure to realize what Robin meant to him. He may have left to find Father; however, he never fully came back from that incident.”

“He said I was his brother.” Dick protested.

“He lies to Batman.” Damian countered, “It is something he is particularly proud of. A fact I was told by the Titans. Can you not comprehend the idea that he would lie to you? Particularly given that you were attempting to get him psychiatric help not too long previously? I would not be surprised if he feared you placing him in Arkham.”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Dick was outraged.

“Tt. Why not?” Damian’s voice was calm and steady, “You did place Todd there. If I recall correctly, it was Drake who got him out.”
If he recalled correctly? Dick knew that Damian never stated anything he wasn’t absolutely certain about. The worst part was that Dick couldn’t really argue with him. Everything he was saying as to the facts was true.

And it wasn’t beyond the realms of possibility that Damian was right about Tim’s view of everything. He certainly wasn’t wrong about Tim leaving them completely if he felt left out twice. Tim certainly subscribed to the belief of “Fool me once, shame on you; Fool me twice, shame on me”.

“Do we have any trackers in his gear?” Dick addressed Bruce.

“None that I can activate.” Bruce replied, “Alfred, did you have any input in the Red Robin costume?”

“I am afraid not, Master Bruce. I have not properly interacted with Master Tim since he left to locate you.”

“I’m going to investigate the crime scene, tonight.” Dick declared, “Hopefully I can turn up something the police missed.”

“Damian and I will check Tim’s base for information on his current cases.” Bruce stated.

“Do you know where his Nest is, Father?” Damian challenged once again.

“No.” Bruce admitted, “However, I strongly suspect that you do. If not, I am certain that Jason does, as he accompanied the detectives to show them Tim’s house.”

“I know the location of his Nest.” Damian stated, “I do not know how to access without Drake though. I have never actually entered his Nest, only the home above it… At least not consciously at least. I believe he may have brought me there when he was tending my injuries four months back.”

“Something I never properly thanked him for.” Bruce sighed, “We need more information. Dick, contact the Titans. See what information they can add to the situation.”

“Of course.” Dick agreed, “I thought you would have already started on that, though.”

The questioning tone in Dick’s voice was obvious.

“I was attempting to track Tim through the developments in those cases, which have his particular touch. In particular the action against the League of Assassins, which do appear to have been Tim’s ongoing focus for quite some time.”

“How are you doing?”

“I can find traces of his work up to approximately a month ago.” Bruce stated, “He also hasn’t swiped into the WE for the last month.”
“Pretty good indicators that he’s been missing for a month.” Dick nodded, “But how did we not notice, B? I mean… It’s Timmy!”

“I know.” Bruce’s voice was sombre, “I know. I just hope that this is all a misunderstanding. That Tim got away. That he’s safe.”

“He would have come to us.” Dick reminded.

“Would he?” Damian challenged, “I am not certain that even if we can recover him, that we will be able to bring him back into the family. I doubt he will trust us again. Certainly he has never trusted me.”

“Master Damian,” Alfred interrupted, “If you are heading out on patrol tonight, it is best that we ensure you have proper sustenance.”

Dick knew that Alfred was simply getting Damian out of the discussion. He was fairly certain that Damian not only knew, but was only going along for the promise of cookies that he could get out of the aging butler.

Damian’s words were cutting to the quick. The youngster clearly wasn’t pulling any punches. And Dick slightly despaired.

If Damian could see fractures in Dick’s relationship with Tim, then it was more than likely that Tim saw huge gaping chasms. The intelligent teen always had had a habit of seeing the worst case scenarios when it came to his own personal relationships. Of always seeing the bad side, rather than the good, which was where Dick preferred to live.

Sometimes Dick wondered if that was why Tim was able to forgive hurts against himself so easily… The kid had been expecting people to hurt him. So why wouldn’t he be able to forgive? He had always known the blow was coming. But that didn’t mean that he forgot. And he certainly never forgave hurts to those he cared about.

One day Dick was going to fix all the mental issues that Tim had gained, due to his parents. But that was for the future.

First of all was the far more important job, of getting Tim home.
“You believe he escaped?” Dick pressed.

“This is Tim we’re talking about.” Bruce reminded, “He is far more capable than people generally expect.”

“If he’d escaped we would have a multi-page report on the system, explaining who, what, where, why and how. Along with their capture. Not their deaths. Multiple bodies were found at the scene. None of them Tim’s, but…”

“Tim hasn’t been sending me reports for a while.”

“What? Why not?”

“I don’t know. They started coming in batch lots, which made sense. He was writing multiple reports at once. Then the reports started being smaller. Containing only the most pertinent details… Then no reports at all. I haven’t received a report from Tim in over six months. I don’t know if Babs has. I suspect she has been receiving something, because I occasionally get useful pieces of information on the system, that helps in searches. But…”

“But you can’t be certain.” Dick nodded, “Hold on… Babs? You got anything?”

“Not at present, Boy Wonder.” Her voice was light, “I’ve been going through old records. Last time Timmy dropped intel into BI, he hacked in. And that was five weeks ago. Useful data on a Poison Ivy bust he did.”

“His last day at WE was a month ago,” Dick informed her, “So that tracks. He took down Ivy? Damn. I didn’t realize.”

“I’m trying to go through the old comm data to find when he last spoke with any of us as Red Robin. So far I’m not getting much.”

“We suspect that he hasn’t made much contact with anyone since my return.” Bruce put in, “Certainly it dropped after the Captain Boomerang incident.”

“Why?” Dick frowned, “He did brilliantly. Stepping in to save the guys life. After everything? I was so impressed with his maturity.”

“He orchestrated the whole situation.” Bruce explained, “Captain Boomerang was only in danger, because Tim put him there. The fact that he changed his mind at the last minute and saved his life is inconsequential.”

“No.” Dick snapped back, “It’s pretty fucking huge, B. Captain Boomerang could have chosen a different path at any point and it wouldn’t have led him to his death. Tim was waiting and then changed his mind despite the fact that Captain Boomerang could have avoided the consequences. He chose to save the guy’s life. Think about it… Superman had to literally hold you back from killing the Joker. Tim plotted and planned, like he always does. He had it all laid out and running to plan. And then he stopped himself. You’re an adult and after that one attempt, you stopped yourself. You started blaming yourself rather than the Joker. Tim stopped himself and then
went back to blaming himself. Because, believe me, he’s blamed himself for Jack’s death ever since the man stopped breathing.”

“It was still attempted murder.”

“From what I remember and what you’re saying, there’s not a court in the world that would try him for anything more than Attempted Manslaughter. And not a jury that would convict him. You tried worse.”

Dick knew that he was speaking the truth. He also knew that sometimes Bruce held people to an impossible standard. It was understandable what Tim had done. And the fact that he had chosen a different path, albeit at the last moment, was a testament to his character.

The silence was broken by a familiar tune. Dick hummed along to “The Daring Young Man” as he dug his phone out of his pocket.

“Hey Jaybird.” He chirped, “You got anything?”

“Ya know why Timmy woulda have a gun?” Jason cut straight to the point.

“Who found it?”

“The detectives.”

“Where was it?”

“In his closet. In a shoebox. Need ta talk ta him about better gun security… Why is that important?”

“Was it loaded?”

“Was it loaded? Dickie, is there something I should know? Seriously? Why does the baby bird have a gun?”

“It was his father’s. Are they listening?”

“Not right now. Why?”

“Tell me… Was it loaded?”

“No. But the bullets were stored with it. Why’s that important?”

“I can’t prove it. And I don’t know for certain. But I suspect that at least once in Tim’s life, he has held that gun to his own head. And contemplated pulling the trigger.”

“You never told me that the kid had been suicidal.” Jason’s voice was hushed.

“It was a while back. He’d basically lost most of his anchors.”

“Which ones?”
“Parents. SB and KF. And BG, before she was BG.”

“What sort of time frame?”

“Apart from his mum, all in less than a year.”

“Ouch. Ya say ya ain’t sure?”

“No. He called me. There was an edge to his voice. God! I haven’t thought about that in ages!”

“Ya think it could be related?”

“How? I rather doubt he would be behind his own torture.”

“True. But there’s always passive suicide.”

“Not his style. He’d never leave questions unanswered. Nor risk our exposure. No. This is a kidnapping. Besides the whole suicidal thing? That’s long over. He’s not in that place anymore. Are the police gone?”

“Don’t think they’ll be much longer.”

“You staying on afterwards?”

“Ya betcha.”

“See what you can find. B and Little D are planning on checking his Nest tonight. But they don’t know how to get in.”

“Done it before.” Jason replied, “I’ll meet ‘em later. Goin’ ta check a few contacts first. What about ya?”

“Crime scene. But I’m calling Gar first.”

“Find out what they know, huh? Best give them a heads up that the cops will want to talk to them.”

“Good point. Catch you later?”

“Yeah, once I’ve checked this place out, I’m heading ta the crime scene.”

“Meet you there.” Dick hung up.

“A gun?” Bruce challenged.

“Like I said, it was Jack’s.” Dick shrugged, “I didn’t know he still kept it.”

“Suicidal?”

“Not anymore.” Dick refuted, “He’s better now. After all he got three out of the five back. Besides if he was going to… He would have done it before he realized you were still alive.”

“Then why were you worried about it being loaded?”
“Because… Because… Because my mind still goes there. Goes back to that time when I’m fairly sure I talked him out of it. Without ever talking about it. God, I don’t think we ever talked about stuff like that. Fuck!”

Dick ran a hand through his hair.

“Look, B… Tim’s not in that dark place anymore. I’ve seen that he’s not. I saw him smile… Really smile – with Kon. God, I haven’t seen that smile because of me for a long time.”

“We’ll find him.” Bruce laid a gentle hand on Dick’s arm.

“But how many pieces will he be in? You and I both know that torture breaks everyone eventually. And they’ve had him for how long? Four weeks at the outside. God! I hope it wasn’t four weeks. But it could be.”

“He could have gotten away.” Bruce reminded.

“Then where is he?” Dick braced his hands on the console, not looking at his mentor, “Then where the hell is he, Bruce?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's so short. But the chapter wanted to end here.
“Titans Tower. Sorry, there is no one here who can take your call at the moment. To leave a message for Super Boy, please press 1 then the hash key. To leave a message for Wonder Girl, please press 2…”

“Cut it out, Gar.” Dick interrupted, “I’m not in the mood.”

“Hey, former fearless leader!” Garfield’s voice was artificially chirpy; after many years you bet your ass that Dick could tell the difference, “What’s hanging?”

“When were you going to tell me that Timmy was missing?” Dick cut straight to the chase.

“How’d you find out?” Garfield deflected.

Dick could just picture the former teen sitting in the office chair… No, he’d be lounging on it. Legs over the armrest, back up against the other one. Presuming that he wasn’t in monkey form… Again.

“DNA at a crime scene. On the wrong end of torture implements… When were you going to report him missing?”

“To whom?” Garfield’s voice had a verbal shrug in it, “No one’s checked up on Tim for quite some time, Dick. When he came back as Red Robin… He said that no one was to contact the Bats regarding him… About anything! Rave and I just shrugged. Figured you’d check up on him shortly and we’d hint about it. Then you’d fix it. After four months and way too many close calls for my liking, we realized you weren’t ever gonna check up on him. I mean, you didn’t even check up on him after bomb explosions… We agreed not to contact you.”

“You agreed?”

“We took a vote. All of us… Well, except for Tim. We decided that if you had left Tim to fall or fly, you’d taken yourself out of the picture. Not like he’s the first Titan not to have a mentor.”

“He’s my little brother, Gar.”

“Not that you’ve exactly been proving that recently. This is the first time you’ve called me since Batman died. Probably even longer, but I can’t recall a better time-stamp. The first time any Bat has checked up on Tim since he became Red Robin… Probably even earlier. You said it yourself, when you got the Justice League to back off, we need to handle things on our own. We didn’t ask for help, because we didn’t need it.”

“How long has he been missing, Gar? And don’t deflect this time.”

“He hasn’t checked in for four weeks. We’ve been looking for three.”

“Why didn’t you start looking immediately?”

“Because he doesn’t make it every weekend. Sometimes he doesn’t make a weekend he
said he would. Something comes up. But if he said he would make one, he never goes a full week without contacting someone. This isn’t the first time he’s gone off the grid. We have protocols and plans.”

“And those plans don’t include us.”

“We tried once… Long time back. Couldn’t get through to you. Left a message. We got Tim back before you returned the call… In fact, you never did. We never told him we had called you. We didn’t damage your relationship with him. You did that all on your own.”

“I just want to find him. I want him home safe.”

“We’ll find him, Dick. We don’t need your help. And when we find him, we’ll make sure he’s safe.”

“He’s my brother.”

“You know, I never thought you’d be the kind of guy to toss a toy to the side, because they had a brand new shiny toy to play with. Shows what I know.”

“It wasn’t like that!”

“Then where were you? Because after the Insurgents… All the rest of us got looked after. People cared that we were hurting… And not just the physical wounds… The mental ones were even more devastating. But Tim? He had no-one. Not one of you so much as checked up on him. And Rave checked the records, so I know that’s the truth. We’re damn lucky that Bunk decided that he needed something from his room. Otherwise Tim would have been alone for nearly a month, while the rest of us got help in piecing ourselves back together… And we’ll piece him back together this time. No matter how many pieces he’s in. He doesn’t need you anymore, Dick.”

“Gar… I thought we were friends.”

“We are. Friends are the ones who tell you the truth. Even when it hurts. Dick, I am not trying to be cruel here. I’m just telling you the way I see it. Rave would be blunter, if she’d talk to you at all. Bart keeps telling Tim just to leave Gotham completely. Kon’s not far behind on that train either. Nor is Cassie. And Miguel? He doesn’t even know you. So he just tries to support Tim as much as he can.”

“Where have you checked?” Dick cut to the important details, “We can cut down on searching that way.”

“Bart’s checked Paris top to bottom three times over. Kon covered Hong Kong, just in case. We’ve done San Francisco thoroughly. But where was the DNA found?”

“Gotham.”

“Bart did a run through all of his safe houses and saw nothing. He’s done it three times, once a week, since we started looking. I tried to get Vic to trace his phone, but he couldn’t.”

“Vic couldn’t?”

“Couldn’t even turn it on.”

“But that means… Destroyed.” Dick breathed out.
“Not necessarily.” Garfield countered.

“I know.” Dick shook his head, “Without a battery or in a Faraday Cage. But what are the odds that Tim let his phone run out of battery?”

“Low, I give you.” Garfield shrugged, “But he had been potentially missing for a week at that point… There’s a chance.”

“He’s my brother, Gar. I have to find him.” Dick reiterated.

“I’ll pass the intel onto the other Titans.” Garfield avoided the topic, “Warn the Batman that we’ll probably be doing a sweep through Gotham tonight. Checking every plausible location.”


“If I can.” Garfield replied, “I might get outvoted.”

The pair said their goodbyes, before ending the call.

“And?” Bruce asked.

“They knew.” Dick sighed, “This isn’t the first time. And their estimation is four weeks also. They’ve checked all of his usual haunts. They’re going to check them again tonight. I didn’t object. They’d do it anyway. Save the fights for the battles we need to win.”

“They didn’t contact us? That was part of the deal with Tim being a Titan.”

“They don’t see us as his mentors anymore. Tim told them not to contact us. And they stuck with that.”

“Something to be discussed at a later date.”

“Up here, Big Bird!” Red Hood called out, as Nightwing was inspecting the warehouse floor.

“What have you found?” Nightwing started to leap upwards, to where Hood was perched on the roof beams.

“This looks like a camera housing.” Red Hood pointed to a piece of plastic that didn’t belong on the metal bar.

“Someone was recording it?” Nightwing breathed, “And then removed most of the evidence.”

“Reckon they didn’t think the cops would check up here.”
“They were right. I can’t see anything they missed down on the floor. The pictures they took were pretty accurate.”

“And they sure don’t paint a good picture, Dickie-bird.”

“I know. And the camera… That says whoever was doing this…”

“They were just pawns.” Hood finished, “Minions. There’s a boss behind this. Who was watching.”

“Who, most likely, killed his own men.” Nightwing reminded, “Who could still have Timmy.”

“Not sure.” Hood frowned, “Why would he kill his own men?”

“Maybe they learned something they shouldn’t. Maybe he escaped. I don’t know. I just know Timmy wouldn’t have killed them.”

“If he escaped where would he go?”

“I would hope to us… But I don’t think he would anymore. Not after what BB told me… We need to know who was here. What did they want?”

“He’s Red Robin. Ain’t that enough?”

“I don’t think so.” Nightwing frowned, “Think about it. Any of the usual suspects would either just kill him. Or find out who he is, then kill him.”

“And the gangs would just kill him.” Hood agreed.

“Let’s check the freezer.” Nightwing pointed at the old walk-in freezer that had been abandoned, “Five will get you ten that they used it as a cell.”

“No bet.” Hood fired back, even as they dropped to the floor.

The two of them paused at the open door to the freezer.

“Not very large.” Hood remarked, “I’ll watch the door.”

Nightwing didn’t verbally acknowledge the remark, he simply nodded his head as he entered the enclosed space.

He looked around at the foreboding metal walls, suppressing a shudder at the idea of being locked in there. A tiny patch of colour caught his eye.

He moved quickly to the far corner and knelt down to confirm his suspicions. There was a small
quantity of blood in the corner, right in the crevices of joint between the floor and the walls. Clearly an attempt had been made to clean up.

“Hood,” Nightwing rose up, “Could you shut the door?”

“Luminol?” Hood queried.

“Of course.” Nightwing held up the tiny spray can in one hand, “I’ll get pictures.”

Hood carefully shut the door and leaned against it.

Inside Nightwing covered the walls and the floor as evenly as possible, before taking a look at what had been washed away.

His fingers hovered over what was almost certainly a Robin’s R, situated between a S Shield and a Lightning Bolt. A Double W was on the opposite wall, alongside a Double B and a single B.

“Your friends.” Nightwing muttered, “You were thinking of them.”

Above the R was the Red Robin symbol.

“Where’s the message?” Nightwing looked around, “You did all this so they wouldn’t notice. So where’s your message?”

Then something caught his eye, just more symbols on the wall. But these ones were lower and more carefully placed, although they were more rough in their formation.


He quickly took photos of everything, along with a small blood sample, but he was certain he knew what it would come back as. Even if he’d believed it was all a coincidence up till that moment, the symbols had convinced him.
His heart sank though at some of the other evidence he could see. Either Tim had almost bleed out on the floor, or they hadn’t even allowed him to relieve himself in dignity.

The little traces of evidence as to the cruelty that had been inflicted in a thousand tiny ways were there.

Nightwing tried to treat it all as just another crime scene. Just another day in the mask. But it wasn’t and it never could be. He could even see tiny blood stains around the door, where Tim had clearly tried to force his way out of his prison.

Had Tim known they weren’t looking for him? Or had he believed they were searching for him? When had he given up hope? Or was he still hoping? Was he free? Or was he still trapped somewhere else?

With his heart somewhere in the region of his boots, Nightwing tapped lightly on the door.

“You okay, Big Wing?” Hood greeted him almost immediately.

“Not really.” Nightwing muttered, “There’s not a lot of space in there.”

“Hey, he’s tough.” Hood chided, “You know he is. He fought me, after all. Don’t count him out just yet.”

“Four weeks.” Nightwing reminded, “Four weeks and the bodies were only found two days ago. And he’s god knows where.”

“He’s a fucking badass!” Hood fired back, “He fights like he breathes. He never gives up. He has a fucking vicious streak that rivals my own. The only reason I’m not dead is that he don’t want me dead. The same for the brat! He’s a survivor! He walked the streets of this goddamned city long before he got out of elementary! This? This is nothing to him! He’s gonna be fine!”

“He’s still human. And I don’t know if he could survive something like this.”

“Don’t count him out yet.” Hood repeated.
Meanwhile, the two detectives were continuing a long day, at Wayne Enterprises.

“Miss Fox,” Montoya took the lead, “Can you explain why you haven’t reported Mister Drake missing?”

“I didn’t know he was.” She replied quickly, “I haven’t seen Tim since I left to go on holiday a month ago. It’s my first day back today. I only got back from Hawaii yesterday, and I was trying to readjust my body-clock.”

“A month in Hawaii? That is a very long, very expensive holiday.”

“It was a thank you.” Miss Fox shrugged, “I spotted a legal loophole in a contract. It would have cost us over a million dollars at the low end. Tim was furious that the legal department hadn’t spotted it. However, he was grateful that I had. He paid for the holiday to Hawaii. Put me up at the Four Seasons Hualalai. Everything paid for.”

“You didn’t contact him at all during that time?”

“I sent him a text when I arrived at the hotel. I sent him a text when I arrived back in Gotham. He didn’t respond to either.”

“You weren’t worried?”

“Tim doesn’t reply to texts unless it is necessary. And I don’t send personal texts to him that require replies. It’s an odd system, but it works for us.”

“You call him Tim?”

“He’s not a Wayne. He dropped that part a good while back. And referring to him as Drake upsets the Board. They still remember Drake Industries. Calling him Tim means that no-one objects. Besides my father and Mister Wayne have been very close for a long time.”

“And you were once engaged to him.”

“Publicly yes. Privately no. It was a rushed decision on my part to announce a lie, in order to cover up something going on in the business. I was reamed out by my father and my boss. Yes, they are the same person, but not the same people, if you understand me.”

“I think I do.”

“I had to attend multiple sessions on how to deal with the Press. I was trying to distract the world from the fact that Tim had just been emancipated and made CEO. Taking the place of a quite frankly, at the time, unstable Mister Wayne. Those of us who were aware of his instability were doing our best to keep it out of the Media. I panicked. I’d spent some time with Tim in a one-on-one setting. So, it was partly believable. From what I heard, Tim’s reaction when he found out was highly entertaining.”

“Do you know of anyone who had a grudge against Mister Drake?”

“That depends what you mean by a grudge. I know that he was disliked intensely by several
other CEOs, because he wasn’t a pushover. Several people have been fired since Tim took control, due to their own failings, but it isn’t unheard of for people to blame the CEO. A few members of the Board aren’t keen on him being in charge. There’s a few protesters who don’t believe we are doing enough to help protect the planet and animals and basically anything they can protest against. Neither Master Wayne nor Master Todd-Wayne are particularly fond of him.”

“His own brothers?”

“I rather doubt any of the three of them would claim that Tim was their brother. I’ve always had the feeling that Tim feels he let Master Todd-Wayne down and that he fears that Master Wayne is right.”

“Let him down how? And right about what?”

“I am not entirely sure why Tim believes that he let Master Todd-Wayne down. However, I do know that he used to look up to him very much. Set him on a pedestal almost as much as Master Grayson was at the time. As for Master Wayne… Spend a few minutes in his presence where the topic is Tim and you will understand Tim’s fears. I will say no more on the matter.”

“We have done so, though I doubt the outcome was what you would expect.” Montoya shrugged.

“Do you believe that either of them could be behind Mister Drake’s disappearance?” Allen pressed.

“I would like to say no. However, I do not feel I can. If I knew more information I could be more certain. What I can say, is that if either of them were involved… It would have been directly. There’s a certain attitude they have. They wouldn’t want anyone else to be able to take the credit. It would be down to them alone. I presume you have evidence of foul play?”

“We have evidence of torture.”

“Then neither Master Todd-Wayne or Master Wayne are involved.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“They want him out of the family. They don’t want him tortured. I wouldn’t say they would object to him being hurt in the leaving of the family. However, they wouldn’t consider torture to be necessary. In fact, I believe that both of them would deem it to be rather distasteful; as, in their cases, it would be torture for torture’s sake.”

“You are certain about that? You haven’t personally interacted with them.”

“There’s the little Tim has told me about them. However, I’ve learned more about them from talk around WE than you would think. Master Wayne is generally deemed to be a quite emotional young boy, who doesn’t quite realize that he needs to temper his arrogance. A boy who is so scared that he can be easily replaced he tries to push away anyone he sees as a threat. Though I have heard some softening towards him in the last year or so. Several people remarking that he’s a sensitive boy trying to hide it with arrogance and ego. Master Todd-Wayne… Tim respects the hell out of him, pardon my French. Master Todd-Wayne sees him as an intruder. Someone who forced their way into the family and then didn’t leave. I think there’s a grudging respect on Master Todd-Wayne’s part now. However, that’s purely based on things Tim has said in passing.”

“Has there been any contact that you are aware of? Any threats? Any ransom?”
“Threats would be filed with the Security Department. I’m not aware of any that were to be taken seriously. Ransoms coming to me? Unlikely, I don’t have the ability to authorise anything that could be deemed suitable for ransom. You would be better off talking with Mister Fox.”

“Would he have informed you of anything regarding a ransom?”

“I don’t know. Possibly. However, if he believed it could cause harm to Tim… He wouldn’t. Mister Fox… Dad, has always been rather fond of Tim.”

“Do you know why?”

“Tim is… He’s smart. I think he reminds Dad of what Mister Wayne used to be like.”

“Used to be like?”

“Look, the Bruce Wayne you know isn’t the man he always was. Go back far enough in his history and you’ll find out that he used to be a very smart man. Top of his class. Then he went away on a trip around the world… He never came back the same.”

“Drugs?”

“I’m not sure. I think he saw something. Something that changed everything. Something that made him what he is now. A man determined not to acknowledge his own intelligence. Because I know it is still there. Every so often he lets out a tiny glimpse of it.”

“I think you’re seeing stuff that’s not there.”

“May be.” Tam sighed, “But that’s my opinion. However, I believe I am not going to be of any more use to you.”

“Do you know what Tim’s schedule was for your holiday?”

“I can print you a copy.” Tam moved to her computer, “Bear in mind his schedule is very flexible. And I only get details for the WE business. Some sections will be blocked out and I can’t tell you what he was planning on doing at those points. Not because I don’t want to… But because I don’t know. All I know is that I have to plan around those blocks, or ask him to change them if I really have to… And he doesn’t talk about them. Ever. I don’t ask. He doesn’t say.”

“Understood.”

It was the work of a moment to print out the schedule.

“Why is it in different colours?” Montoya frowned looking at it.

“That’s how he arranges it.” Tam shrugged, “Different colours correspond to different things. But I don’t know the system. I can tell you that the black with yellow writing never gets moved. Never. The rest? He can be flexible on.”

“He booked the weekend after his last sighting down as black with yellow writing.”

“And the last appointment on the Friday was a lunch meeting, but there’s no mention of where or with who.”
“I normally put those details in.” Tam stated, “That must have been a last minute booking with Tim entering the bare details. He does that occasionally. All I can say is that there was no appointment on that day, at that time when I left for my holiday.”

“Thank you for your time, Miss Fox.” Allen decided to call the interview quits; there was nothing else they could learn at that time.

“Give me a moment,” Robin instructed Batman, “I am not certain if this will work.”

“When did you last come here?”

“Approximately three months ago,” Robin replied, “I needed his assistance with a group of technologically advanced criminals. However, I was only permitted into the house above, rather than his actual Nest.”

“And you didn’t approach Oracle?”

“Oracle was unavailable at the time.” Robin shrugged, “Besides, it has often been suggested to me that the best way to build a relationship is to find mutual interests to participate in together.”

“Crime fighting is not normally deemed a suitable activity.” Batman muttered.

“So far it seems to be satisfactory for us.”

“Brat,” Hood’s voice came over the comms, “In yet?”

“I am having difficulty with the lock.” Robin reported, “Red Robin has not yet entrusted me with the opening mechanism. Have you any advice?”

“Which entrance ya trying?”

“I only know of one. The one he utilizes for his motorcycle.”

“That’s locked down like Fort Knox when he’s not there. I don’t know how ta get past. Ya ever entered from the other side?”

“Not while conscious. As I have informed you previously.”

“Right, can ya get in without setting off the alarms? Not through the front door.”

“Tt. I have done it before.”

“Get inside, and I’ll try ta direct ya.”

“You do not believe I will be able to follow your directions?”

“That’s not the problem. I don’t know if the system will accept ya, and not Timmy.”

“Would it accept yourself?”
“I’ve only ever used it when he led me in. I don’t think so. And he once mentioned a pressure sensor. You’re closer to his weight.”

“It could be more sensitive.”

“Then be smart about it.” Hood snapped, “You know his weight. You know your own. Make up the difference. Move it!”

It didn’t actually take Robin long. There wasn’t much difference between the two of them in weight. The spine reconstruction and Damian’s heavier muscle mass making up a good portion of additional weight that most people wouldn’t have expected from his small size.

“Go to his Dark Room.”

“I do not know what that is.” Robin had an almost imperceptible frown gracing his face.

“Where he develops his photographs. You don’t know what a dark room is?”

“I do not see the point of film photography. It is an antiquated format of image capture.”

“Timmy considers it an art form. ‘Sides it is no less out-dated than your paintings. Anyway, find the Dark Room. If ya need directing…”

“I have found it.”

“Both of ya go in. And shut the door. Do not hit the lights or the switch by the door.”

“Understood.”

“Lock the door using the wheel. There’s a light switch behind the door. Flick it.”

“Done.”

“Hook on the door with the apron on it. Pull up.”

“The wall behind me has opened to reveal a bookcase.”

“Good. That’s Timmy’s diversion. Now turn on both taps. To full.”

“The bookcase just split to reveal a staircase. I take it that Drake’s Nest is at the bottom.”

“Correct. Fair warning, he’s got a wicked security setup on his computer. Watch yourself.”

“Where is the pressure sensor?”

“Don’t know. Just go first.”

“Tt. Typically useless.”

“Hey, I got you in brat! You’d never have managed it on your own.”
Robin led the way down the staircase, Batman following close behind.

The Nest was pretty much as they expected; organised and uncluttered.

Robin moved towards the lockers against the wall. The first two contained Red Robin outfits, each one complete and intact; albeit of different types. There were two variations of the outfit. Mentally, Robin catalogued them as the Gotham and Titan outfits, the first locker was green and the second was red. The third locker was yellow in colour and contained only a partial suit. The fourth locker, black, consisted of clothing that could be used to alter a body’s appearance; most notably from male to female.

A clothes rack was situated nearby, with hangers clearly ready to receive clothing of a formal or professional nature and keep them clean and neat. It was in front of a door. Robin opened the door and realized that the rack could be pushed in to keep it safely out of the way. However, the room was already containing a shelving unit. Multiple plastic boxes were on the shelves, in three colours: red, blue and purple.

Robin emerged from the storage room, there was nothing there to help solve the current situation. He easily spotted Batman inspecting the Forensic equipment set up near the computer.

Robin made his way over to the designated garage space. Where once upon a time he would have expected to see the Red Bird, there was a motorbike. There was also a mechanic's station, clearly used not only to repair the bike, but also build specialist equipment, such as the Wings.

“I can not find anything to indicate that Drake is currently working on a case.” Robin declared after poking around further.

“I concur.” Batman nodded, “All his files seem to indicate long term projects. Nothing that would have come to a head at the beginning of the missing period.”

“It would appear that all of his uniforms are accounted for.” Robin added, “I counted three Gotham suits and two for the Titans. One more suit appears to be in repair.”

“There’s one of each in the Batplane he ‘borrowed’.” Nightwing declared walking into the Nest.

“Along with a Robin, Nightwing and Red Hood suit.” Red Hood agreed, “Only they ain’t sized for us.”

“A Batman suit as well, I presume.” Batman asked.

“Of course not.” A new voice almost spat the words, “Don’t you know anything?”

“Course they don’t.” A second voice joined in, “If they did… We wouldn’t be in this
mess.”
Superboy and Kid Flash stood in the doorway to the Hanger.

“He’s not here.” Kid Flash declared looking around.

“We knew it was a long shot.” Superboy sighed, “He’s not been here since I last was.”

“Why not?” Red Hood cocked his head to one side, “Seen ‘im in one ‘fore.”

“During the Battle of the Cowl.” Kid Flash nodded, “We know. But it wasn’t something he was looking forward to. Batman… Batman isn’t a path he wants to tread.”

“We don’t need to tell them anything.” Superboy glowered, “They don’t deserve it. If they don’t know, they don’t need to know.”

“We have the right to know.” Nightwing stepped forward.

“You gave up that right a long time ago.” Kid Flash snorted, “If you don’t even know why Robs doesn’t want to be Batman, you haven’t been part of his family for a long time.”

“We’re leaving.” Superboy declared, “There’s nothing here for us. We’ll just have to make sure all the locks are changed before Robs comes back.”

“And fumigate.” Kid Flash returned, “Don’t want any Bats or lice left behind.”

“That goes without saying.” Superboy cast a glance at the Bat-Clan, his intent was perfectly clear.

“Back up, Clone Boy,” Hood spoke up, “Ya known ‘bout this since the start… Who isn’t ‘hind this?”

“We’ve got no evidence for or against anyone.” Superboy returned, “Though the Church of Blood isn’t a suspect. There’s no motive for them. It’s not something the Fearsome Five would do. Not public enough. And N.O.W.H.E.R.E. wouldn’t keep him in Gotham.”

“Ra’s wouldn’t either.” Kid Flash shrugged, “Though we haven’t ruled out the idea that he might have grabbed Rob before the police found where he was being held.”

“Raven and Beast Boy are checking that possibility out.” Superboy waved gently, “Bunk’s doing San Fran again, in case he made it to us. And WG is covering New York.”

“We’ll cover the usual routes between here and San Fran on our way back.” Kid Flash declared, “If he got away, he would be heading for us.”

“The police will want to talk to you.” Nightwing called out to their backs as they turned away, “As Tim’s friend.”

“We’ll contact them.” Superboy was blunt.
“Do you know Drake’s password?” Robin motioned at the computer.

“Noppe.” Kid Flash fired back, “If you want to try hacking it, go ahead. Vic reckoned it would only take a couple of centuries brute force.”

“If it helps,” Nightwing tried again, “He was thinking of you.”

“No,” Superboy fired back, “It doesn’t. We still haven’t found him. But we are going to find him.”

“And when we do,” Kid Flash stated, “We’re not letting him come back here, until he’s ready for anything.”

The two of them left in moments.

“They really hate us.” Hood muttered, “Still surprised they called me. Why’d you try for the password, brat?”

“I do not know his password,” Robin replied evenly, “I presume that the computer will have more information as to what Red Robin was working on. However, I am not confident in my ability to hack in. Particularly given that I am not certain what language the password is in.”

“What do you mean?” Nightwing moved over to the computer, where Robin was standing.

“I mean, there are five keyboards attached to the computer.” Robin elaborated, “Each one for a different alphabet. I can not be certain which language was used. Certainly he could utilize different letters from each set in order to increase security further.”

“English, Cyrillic, Pinyin, Hebrew and Arabic.” Batman pulled each one out in turn.

Hood noticed in idle interest that the keyboards were stacked one above another until they were pulled out, then they rose to the level required for typing, and it was impossible to pull out another until the first was returned to it’s original position. It would probably make switching between alphabets a relatively slow procedure, but not impossible.

He also doubted that Tim needed to pull the boards out to work on them; certainly not for password input.

“Let me try.” Nightwing stepped forward, “I’ve used his computers before.”

Nightwing’s fingers flew across the English keyboard.
The computer’s declaration of a failed password was disappointing, but not unexpected.

“It was a long shot.” Nightwing sighed, “Hold on, I’ll connect Oracle up.”

“Why?” Hood frowned, “Come on, Oracle’s good, but Vic’s half machine.”

“It is still worth a shot.” Nightwing argued, “Have you got a better idea?”

“No.” Hood muttered, “Never was trusted enough. Ya were once though?”

“I set it,” Nightwing sighed, “But it was just for a file. I hoped…”

“You hoped he kept it the same.” Batman laid a gentle hand on Nightwing’s shoulder.

“It was an in joke.” Nightwing breathed, “Something only the two of us would get.”

“Okay, boys.” Oracle’s voice came over, “I’m hooked up. I take it you want me to get into this thing?”

“You need to take into account the potential for multiple alphabets.” Batman stated, “There are Cyrillic, Hebrew, Arabic and Pinyin keyboards, as well as the expected English.”

“Well… He has never been in the habit of making things easy.” Oracle’s voice was tight, “Why would he start now?”

“Vic estimated it at a few centuries work, apparently.” Nightwing put in.

“Brute force, probably.” Oracle agreed, “But I doubt it’s a random password. Tim never does anything without a plan. Not even passwords… Besides I doubt even Timmy can remember a seventy eight random letter password.”

“What?” The cry came from Hood and Nightwing at the same time.

“That is an unusually long password.” Batman frowned slightly, “Are you certain about the length?”

“Don’t question me with regards to computers, B.” Oracle snapped, “The only reason it’s so long is that the system hasn’t been accessed in over two weeks. There are multiple levels of security. The base password can be voice activated. But if it’s not used in six hours a secondary password sets in. Then after twenty-four hours another password engages. A week engages another level of security. This level kicked in yesterday. From what I can see there’s an even longer password set to kick in after two more months.”

“He doesn’t take chances.” Batman muttered.

“He does not take chances anymore.” Robin stated, “This level of paranoia was most likely caused by my actions.”

“Most likely, yeah.” Nightwing sighed, “Not your fault though. That file…”

“Was a reasonable precaution.” Robin interrupted, “My mother managed to control me. I interpreted it not in the manner it was meant. However, I will concede that Drake’s words did not help the situation. I also should not have retaliated in the manner I did.”
“You tried to kill him, didn’t you?” Hood snorted.

“Yes.” Robin agreed.

“Back to the Cave.” Batman instructed, “This is something we will discuss later, Robin. Nightwing, Hood, did you discover anything pertinent at the crime scene?”

“Someone was watching.” Hood replied.

“Timmy left a message.” Nightwing added, “Although I confess I have no idea what it means.”

“We’ll look at it at the Cave.” Batman reiterated, “Straight back. No side tracking.”

A chorus of nods and agreements, before all four of them set out.

123456789

Back at the Station the detectives were going over their findings.

“I don’t know how Drake has time to breathe, let alone sleep!” Montoya hissed.

“What have you found?” Allen asked.

“He’s CEO at WE.” Montoya started to list, “He’s Majoring in Business, with a Minor in Art History. But he’s also putting credits towards an Engineering Degree and a Forensics Degree. He’s top of his class in all fields. He spends time in the R&D department at WE on a regular basis. Why’s he doing all this? He’ll kill himself with the stress.”

“I can explain the Business degree.” Allen shrugged, “Damian Wayne has attempted to throw Drake out of WE on six occasions that I have found records for. There are some very nasty proposals that have been put to the Board regarding “Drake’s future with the Company”. That’s a direct quote. On at least four occasions there has been a mention of Drake’s education being lacking for the position.”

“Who does he suggest take control instead?”

“Himself.”

Montoya opened her mouth to respond, even drawing in the air she would need. Then she closed it and let her hand hang in the air, not quite sure how to reply to that.

“I know.” Allen nodded, “He doesn’t seem to get the hypocrisy there.”
“He’s acting like every stereotypical rich kid that you love to hate all compressed into one tiny little package, isn’t he?”

“Not so tiny. Nearly Drake’s size according to records. He’s going to grow up big. And if someone doesn’t kick the entitlist bullshit out of him quickly, he’s going to end up a criminal. One with enough power and money to get away with serial murder. I don’t believe the codswallop he was feeding us back at the house.”

“Any of the other brothers try anything? Or even Wayne himself?”

“Not with the Board. And strangely there’s been no new motions for over a year.”

“Got a message back from Forensics, they got Drake’s voicemails. All of his registered cell ones anyway.”

“And?”

“Lots of messages. Including a very recent one from Grayson. The rest seem to be his friends. Two main callers are a Bart and a Con. Bart talks very fast. Possible people to interview. Both of them were worried about him.”

“Noted.”

“Did you get anything from the sister? What’s her name anyway?”

“Cassandra. And no. I actually got the impression that she likes Tim a lot. She just spends most of her time in Hong Kong. And she doesn’t keep the best of contact with people.”

“Anything else?”

“She’s not got very good English.”

“Ah, what is her native language then? Chinese?”

“I don’t think so. She came across as… Bright but disabled.”

“Might explain why Wayne shipped her off to China. Someone like that is good have around when a kid… Gives a good image, but when older… Becomes a nuisance for people like Wayne.”

“I’m not so sure. She… I think it’s just language she has a problem with.”

“Anyway, she can’t be involved. I don’t see any motive for her. Not like some of the others.”

“No way Cass would be involved.” A voice joined them, “Detectives, I understand you wanted to talk to me. I’m Con. Conner Clark. Tim’s friend.”

“How did you know we wanted to talk to you?” Montoya frowned.

“I was contacted.” Conner shrugged, “Look, I’ll be blunt, I don’t know much about what has happened to Tim. But I want… No, I need to find him. Tim’s my best friend. My rock, when everything is falling down around me.”

“Montoya,” Allen looked up, “Take him somewhere private.”
It didn’t take but a moment to find a spare interrogation room.

“How did the two of you meet?” Montoya frowned, “I’m sorry, but it seems unlikely given your backgrounds. You’re not a rick kid.”

“My cousin is Clark Kent, a reporter for the Daily Planet. I was spending a weekend with him, when he got told he had to go to a Charity Gala thing. Can’t even remember what it was for. Clark couldn’t find someone to babysit, and I told him I didn’t need a sitter, but he wouldn’t agree to that. He decked me out in a borrowed suit and dragged me along. Despite it being a Metropolis thing, Mister Wayne was there. And so was Tim. We were basically the only two kids there. All the others were much older. We met. We clicked. We kept in contact.”

“Okay. Why didn’t you report Tim missing?”

“We didn’t know we could.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We’re not his family officially. Although Ma and Pa would adopt him tomorrow. We thought only family could report him missing. And technically Tim wasn’t missing.”

“But you were worried? You were looking for him? We’ve heard the voicemail messages.”

“Yes. But Tim’s not exactly unknown for going off on his own at the drop of a hat. And not making contact for a long while. I mean… There was the whole therapy business…”

“Therapy?”

“Yeah. You heard how Mister Wayne went a little off the rails a while back?”

“I heard.”

“Well, Tim started making some statements about the same time. Crazy sounding statements. Dick wanted Tim to see a therapist. Tim didn’t want to. Said he was right. Dick managed to persuade some of Tim’s friends that he wasn’t. They tried to talk Tim into seeing a therapist. Including my girlfriend… Tim just disappeared on us. Didn’t reappear for some time… The thing is… He told me that he’d see me on the weekend. And usually if he changes his mind at the last minute he gives me a heads-up. Or messages me after whatever business disaster he’s had to deal with has died down… Only he never did. So we started looking.”

“We?”

“Our friends. Me, Bart, Cassie, Gar, Rave, Miguel.”

“Why didn’t you contact his family?”

“What family? Last time Dick contacted any of us it was to try to talk Tim into therapy. I don’t even think the guy knows that Tim lost his spleen. I don’t trust him with my friend. I don’t trust any of them with Tim… I’m not sure I trust anyone with Tim.”

“Except yourself?”
Especially myself… Look, I’ve hurt Tim. I know that. The thing is, he forgave me. I don’t know why. I didn’t deserve it. But he’s my best friend. The one person in the whole world I can trust to be on my side. No matter what. And sometimes I haven’t liked the way he’s got my back. But he’s never betrayed me. I don’t think he even knows how. It’s the three of us. Tim, Me and Bart. Best Bros. For Life.”

“So what have you tried to find him so far?”

“We’ve checked his usual websites, see if he’s updated anything. Checked his home. His usual haunts. Been round those several times. Just in case we missed him. I’ve checked in with his Uni. Tried to use Clark’s contacts. But I don’t think he realized what I was asking. I was trying to be obtuse about it. Didn’t want it to become a big news thing. Tim hates that.”

“Do you know if Tim had any enemies?”

There was a pause.

“I don’t know of anyone who would harm Tim. He’s like the nicest guy there is.”

“What about his family?”

“Bart keeps telling Tim to just walk away. I mean he can. He’s emancipated and everything. Even has the money to do so. We’ve offered him space with us until he finds somewhere else to go. But until the Waynes tell him to go… He won’t. And yeah, they’ve ignored him. And they’ve used him. But Tim doesn’t understand how family works. So he’s happy with what he gets…I think. He certainly doesn’t complain. He’s let them push him out of their day-to-day lives. But he still wants to be useful. So every time they need him, he goes. He does what they need. Because even if they don’t love him… He loves them.”

“He’s told you that?”

“No. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen him pick up his phone and ask “What do you need?”. Then he drops everything and does it. I used to think that Dick was the best big brother in the world. Now, I’m not entirely sure that he isn’t the worst. He turned all of his focus onto Damian. And dropped Tim like he was yesterday’s news. They don’t have to hurt Tim to get him out the family. They just have to inform him that he’s not wanted.”

“I rather believe that Damian has been doing that for them.”

“Telling him to leave the company? Tim would do that, if someone, who was actually legally allowed to, told him that they would take over. Tim’s just waiting for Bruce to say he’s ready to take it back. He even told me once, that he’s got all the paperwork ready. It just needs a signature.”

“That seems a little… Extreme. You must be exaggerating. Everyone knows how family works.”

“Detective, you have access to a lot of records. Go back to the day Tim was born and calculate the amount of time Mr and Mrs Drake spent in Gotham from that day to the day they were kidnapped. Then tell me how Tim was able to form his idea of family.”
Montoya decided to shelve that for a moment.

“So you have no idea what could have happened to Drake?”

“No. And I wish I did.”

“Hold on,” Her mind whirled, “Drake doesn’t have a spleen? How did that happen?”

“Never got the full story.” Conner shrugged, “I just know it happened in Iraq. During the
time he dropped off the grid when Mister Wayne went kinda crazy and when Dick was trying to
get him to go to therapy.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know that he has a scar. It isn’t pretty. So I don’t think it was an operation in a hospital.
And I know he wasn’t ill. Apart from that… He doesn’t talk about it. Just takes antibiotics
regularly and gets his flu shot every year. It’s a condition. He manages it.”

“So he could be seriously ill?”

“If he isn’t able to take his medication? Possibly. I don’t know. I’m not a doctor. I just
know what Tim tells me. Bart knows a bit more. He actually went away and looked it all up… I
did too, but I’ve forgot all but the highlights, which Tim hit anyway. Bart’s got an eidetic
memory.”

“Who is Drake’s doctor?”

“I don’t know. We don’t talk about stuff like that.”

“Who would he have talked about that with?”

“None of us. Yeah, if he was run down, we’d badger him about taking better care of
himself. I’d bring some food and Bart would cook… He’s a good cook. And the others would do
what they could. Cassie can’t cook for anything. But she’s pretty good at chess, so she gets Tim
playing that and watch sci-fi stuff with him. Rae talks philosophy with him. Talks round in circles.
I can’t follow it half the time. But it calms his head down. We do what we can. I don’t know what
happened out in Iraq. But I know he has nightmares sometimes. We can’t do anything really. All
we can do is be there. And we dropped the ball. We should have found him by now.”

“You should have gotten the police involved.” Montoya reprimanded gently.

“Which police?” A shrugged response came back to her, “We didn’t know where he had
gone missing. We didn’t know if he’d left Gotham or not. Besides, we didn’t think friends could
report him missing. Not when we don’t see him every day. And, as I said, this isn’t his first time
going off the grid.”

“And you weren’t worried those other times?”

“Of course I was worried! We all were. But he always came back. Talking about this deal
or that issue he’d sorted out. Tim has always been an overachiever. Even when I first knew him he
was smart.”
“You’re close.”

“He’s my oldest and my best friend. Bart comes in a close second. As I told you, it’s us against the world if need be. When we were younger someone once said we were like a single mind. Bart was the ID. I was the Ego, and boy did that that fit back then. Tim was the Super-Ego. Bart’s gotten better with his impulsive nature. And I’ve managed to grow up a bit more. Tim though? He’s not really changed. Still thinks five steps ahead on a bad day, and into double digits on a good one. But that’s Tim. Once he’s set his mind to a task, he’ll complete it to the end, unless there is a really, really good reason for him to change his mind. Quite honestly if Tim told me to walk off a cliff, I’d probably do it without asking why.”

“That’s blind loyalty.”

“No. That’s putting my loyalty in the hands of someone who would do everything in his power to make sure that I come back alive and unharmed. Even at the cost of himself.”

“That seems awfully precise. You’re just kids.”

“Tim’s never been just a kid. He’s got Gotham in his blood, in his bones. No one from Gotham is ever just a kid. Tim is tough. And he’s helped me through tough times in my life. Bart too. If I ever need a place to stay, Tim would offer it to me. Without thinking twice. And it wouldn’t be the spare room. I’d get the best of the best. The best he could offer me.”

Teenage exaggeration, Montoya decided. But whatever it was, Conner wasn’t involved in anything dangerous.

He also didn’t know anything useful. Nothing that they hadn’t gathered from other sources, apart from the spleen thing.

Chapter End Notes

I really, *really* hope that no one is watching my googling at the moment. Some of the questions I’m asking Google... Well, I wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea about me. But accuracy is something I try for in some areas of my writing.

Still, looking up pictures of injuries is not a good idea. Seriously, I'm glad I've got a strong stomach.
Chapter 10

Stephanie was waiting for them when they arrived back at the Batcave. She was clearly agitated and barely waited for Batman to get out of the Batmobile before she moved.

The sound of the slap startled a few of the bats roosting in the darkness of the cave.

“Why didn’t you tell me Tim was missing?” She spat.

“Because we didn’t know until today.” Nightwing stated, even as he removed his mask, “Besides Babs told you. And we told her.”

“But you didn’t tell me!” She retorted.

“We’re still trying to figure it all out.” Dick breathed softly, “When did you last see him?”

“Not really sure,” She shrugged, “We don’t talk or hang as much as we used to. Since he found out that I faked my death, things have been more than a little awkward between us. He’s not comfortable with me. I send him texts about random stuff all the time… He just doesn’t usually answer.”

“And how much of that is your own guilt?” Jason put in.

The way she looked away was answer enough. It wasn’t just Tim who was having trouble re-establishing their friendship.

“I haven’t managed to get him to come for waffles for a long while.” She whispered.

“If it helps at all,” Jason spoke up again, “He’s got a Captain America waffle iron.”

“Kinda does.” She managed a wan smile.

“Tt,” Damian interrupted, “Stop your whining and whinging Brown. Maybe your pathetic eyes might spot a clue that we have been left. A message addressed to you.”

“Doubtful, but I’ll try.” Her smile grew in strength slightly.

“As far as we can tell, he’s still alive.” Bruce declared, “Until proven otherwise, this is a Rescue Operation.”

“And our first clue is what Tim left in the warehouse.” Dick held up the small camera.

“Babs,” Jason put in, “How’s the hacking going?”

“Slow.” Babs returned, “First I have to write a program that accounts for multiple alphabets.”
“Multiple alphabets?” Steph frowned.


“Okay,” Steph paused for a moment, “The Arabic makes sense, I think we all know that he’s performing a one-man war against the League of Assassins. And Cass is in Hong Kong, so I’m not too surprised at the Pinyin. But the other two?”

“At least one of the Titans is Russian,” Dick put in, “Not one of the core team, but…”

“But Tim would seek to be able to communicate in their own language.” Bruce smiled slightly, “He is always seeking to establish a basis for communication.”

“But Hebrew doesn’t make sense.” Steph countered, “It’s a language used in one Country and by one Religion.”

“That’s not the only thing that doesn’t make sense.” Dick retorted, “Babs, you getting this image?”

“Clear as day,” Babs returned, “You sure that was the message that Tim left? Seems just to be a collection of hero emblems.”

“Unusual selection though.” Bruce almost chided, “Arsenal not next to Green Arrow? It’s a message. We just need to translate it.”

“Okay,” Jason snarled four hours later, his accent thick and heavy, “When we get Timmy back, somebody needs ta have a word with ‘im about making ‘is clues easier ta decipher!”

“He’s never been particularly blunt when it comes to things.” Dick muttered, “Always has to go round in circles. Or behind people’s backs.”

“Calm it, boys.” Bruce chided, “He couldn’t leave us anything obvious, otherwise his captors would have destroyed it.”

“He could have picked an easier password.” Babs put in, “But I know why he didn’t.”

“I’ve finished going through the mission logs.” Steph added, “There’s nothing clear in any missions where any of the named heroes were involved that could link to this situation.”

“Father.” Damian’s voice was soft and shaking; for that very reason alone he commanded all of their attention.

“What is it?” Bruce moved immediately to Damian’s side.

“I was looking at our logs. Trying to see if Drake had left us another message there.”

“And?” Dick took up a position next to Damian, “What is it, Little D?”
Damian didn’t answer, instead he unplugged the headphones he had been using and pressed a key.

“Marcia?” Tim’s voice came out over the speakers, “I need help. Please. Send someone. I’ll even take Cousin Oliver. Please. I can’t… I can’t move. I barely made it this far. They’ll be right behind me. Please. I know you can trace this. Someone? Anyone?”

The line went dead.

“When was that?” Dick demanded, “What was that?”

“It came on the Emergency Line,” Damian stated, “Four days ago.”

“Where were we?” Jason hissed, “I was with Kory and Roy, that thing in Ecuador.”

“The Birds were active in Europe.” Babs stated, “I was on the plane.”

“Justice League operation off planet.” Batman sighed.

“I was with Babs.” Steph breathed.

“Damian and I were in New York, following a drug lead.” Dick’s voice caught in his throat, “He was there. He was right there asking for our help… And none of us were there to help him. Why did we leave Gotham alone? Why did we leave Gotham unprotected?”

“Because we thought that Tim was around.” Bruce replied gently, “We thought he was in place to take over while we were gone. None of us realized that he was the one who needed our help.”

“I didn’t even tell him that we were leaving Gotham.” Dick sighed, “If I had…”

“Don’t go there.” Bruce instructed firmly, “That path only leads to pain.”

“Least it explains why they were killed.” Jason put in.

“What?” Steph frowned.

“Least it explains why the henchmen were killed,” Jason repeated, “Timmy got away. He escaped. So the big boss killed them.”

“But they were right behind him.” Dick reminded, “They probably caught him.”

“Don’t count Timmy out,” Jason reminded, “He got away. Even all busted up!”

“Then where is he?!” Dick demanded, “He called here! He called for me!”

“He called for Marcia.” Damian spoke softly, “I do not know anyone by that name.”

“It’s a nickname,” Dick confessed, “For me. An old in-joke the two of us have. I’m Marcia. He’s Cindy.”

“And Cousin Oliver?” Steph questioned.
“Damian.” Dick muttered, “I think Jason is Jan, but I’ve never discussed it with Tim.”

“Okay, that’s a little bizarre.” Steph blinked.

“What happened with the system?” Babs pressed, “That thing is meant to be set up so that all calls on the Emergency Line get forwarded to our comms, no matter where we are or what we are doing! Along with the location.”

“This mighta somethin’ ta do with it.” Jason remarked, holding up a cable that was chewed through, “I think yar fucking cat has a lot ta answer for, Damian.”

“And with that cable broken,” Bruce breathed, “It doesn’t report an error to the computer.”

“Stupid cat!” Dick snapped.

Damian bristled at the insult towards his beloved pet, but didn’t voice his objection.

“Gentlemen and ladies,” Alfred spoke up from the stairs, “If I might suggest that you’ve been awake for long enough. It has been a long day. If I may suggest that you will be able to more to help Master Tim if you are fully rested and nourished.”

Five sets of exhaustion filled eyes turned towards him.

“Oh my,” Alfred’s own eyes flicked towards the display, “Master Tim was turning towards religion in his captivity?”

“Why do you think that?” Bruce blinked in surprise.

“His message.” Alfred motioned to it, “Though I am a little surprised as to his choice of religion.”
Chapter 11

“What do you mean?” Dick demanded, “There is nothing to do with religion in that message. It’s about Heroes.”

“Master Tim once confided in me that he did count himself as a member of any particular faith. In fact, he classified himself as Agnostic with leanings towards Agnostic Theist; if only based on his interactions with Miss Cassie. However, he also stated that if he were to follow any religion, he would subscribe to his mother’s family’s faith of Judaism.”

“Alfred,” Bruce interrupted, “You said you saw a message?”

“Saint Anthony.” Alfred motioned at the screen once again, “A Catholic Saint is a rather odd message for Master Tim to leave behind.”

“Saint Anthony?” Steph turned to the message.

“Master Tim has, of course, used the traditional abbreviation for Saint.” Alfred continued, “However, his message is very clear.”

“Letters not symbols.” Bruce muttered, “He hid the letters in the symbols. Oh Timmy, you always were too smart. You out thought us all. We thought you would overcomplicate it.”

“And instead he kept it simple.” Dick smiled slightly, “Okay, next question. What does it mean?”

“The full title,” Alfred stated clearly, “If I remember my lessons correctly, is Saint Anthony of Padua, Master Richard. He is also most famously known as the Patron Saint of the Lost.”

“Not helpful.” Steph snapped, “We already know he’s lost.”

“Father,” Damian inserted, “There is a Project Padua at Wayne Enterprises. It is not a Project I am supposed to know about, however I overheard it being discussed by two scientists. When I mentioned it to Drake, he was upset that I knew about it. He told me not to talk about it, that it was beyond top secret. However, it was not anything to do with our Night Jobs, so I did not need to worry about it.”

“Babs?” Dick turned to the computer.

“Already on it, Boy Wonder.” Babs was blunt, “Project Padua is a DARPA Contract. Classified as Eyes Only inside WE. Although it could be classified differently for DARPA. The Project is developing a device known as Lily Stalk. Someone was having fun with the names, because Saint Anthony is often portrayed with one. It’s basically a tracking program.”

“Ya mean Timmy told us howta find ‘im?” Jason was eager to voice exactly what they were all thinking.

“No such luck,” Babs was clearly reluctant to puncture their hopes, “It’s reportedly still a prototype. Still in development. The concept though… This isn’t just something the government would be interested in… This is Bat-level tech. I’m impressed. If this was active… There wouldn’t be a place on this earth that could hide our Timmy.”

“Then why leave a message about it?” Dick frowned, “There’s no point.”
“No.” Bruce breathed slightly in fear, “Barbara, has the Project been hacked by anyone other than you?”

“No successfully,” Babs reported, “But there’s been multiple attempts. Dating back before Tim got snatched… Oh god. They grabbed Tim.”

“Tt. We already knew that, Gordon.” Damian chuffed.

“No, kid.” Jason hissed, “We found out Timmy was missing. We didn’t know who they took. They didn’t catch the Red Robin. They nabbed Timmy. They didn’t get the Hero.”

“They took the civilian.” Steph’s voice was barely more than escaping air.

“And Tim’s such a fucking idiot,” Dick hissed, “That he won’t fight with everything he’s got. He’ll keep the secret above all else. Oh god… He’s let them hurt him.”

“Nah,” Jason shook his head, “Don’t think like that. Timmy’s smart. He held back ‘till he could get away! He knew what to do. He’s fucking smart! It works in his favour. They need him alive!”

“Then why hasn’t Lucius received a ransom demand?” Steph countered.

“They don’t need to send one.” Babs answered, “Tim is the CEO. He has the access they want.”

“They just need to get him to use it.” Bruce agreed.

“Gentlemen and Ladies,” Alfred spoke up, “Sustenance and Slumber are required if you intend on utilising your deductive prowess in the future.”

“We can’t stop now, Alf!” Dick protested.

“No,” Bruce countered, “Go upstairs. Eat, shower and sleep. Preferably in that order. Alfred is right. We can pick this up in the morning. Damian, I will make your excuses with school for the rest of the week. Dick, you need to decide if you are going to work tomorrow or not. Jason, you have been running on far too little sleep ever since you came back Ecuador, and I doubt you got enough sleep there. Steph, you are welcome to stay the night as well, but you will sleep. Barbara, I cannot dictate to you, however you know the dangers of hacking while sleep deprived.”

“I’ll shut down for the night,” Babs conceded, “Once I have alerted the Birds. If nothing else having Black Canary and Huntress on the hunt means more sets of eyes looking for our lost Bird.”

“Good.” Bruce smiled, “We will find him. And we will bring him home.”

Alfred watched as all of his younger charges climbed the stairs up to the Manor.

“Master Bruce,” He turned to his oldest charge, “You also need rest.”

“I know.” Bruce pulled on his gloves, “But my son is out there. I can’t leave him alone for any longer.”
“You will be of little to no use to him if you are too exhausted, Master Bruce.”

“One more hour,” Batman promised, “I am just going to check the rooftop Tim called from. Then I will come back and rest. I promise.”

Alfred watched in silence as the Batmobile screeched out of the Cave.

“You fear what you will find on that rooftop, Master Bruce.” Alfred murmured, “Else you would let the others come with you. I pray you are wrong.”

Jason’s eyes narrowed as he followed Dick up the stairs to the bedrooms. Damian had gone before them; almost retreating with Titus into his bedroom.

Dick wasn’t headed for his room. Or rather he wasn’t headed for his room now. He was going into the room he had lived in for many years.

“Arrgh!” Jason heard a muffled scream.

He dashed into the bedroom. It was bland. A guest room. Nothing distinctive.

Unless of course, you counted one Dickie-bird face down in the pillows, screaming his head off.

“Get a grip!” Jason snapped, “You ain’t helping!”

“He was asking for me.” Dick snarled back, “Me. Not you. Do you have any idea how rarely Baby-Bird asks for help?”

“Ah got an idea.”

“He never told us he was spending Christmas alone. We literally had to trick him into coming over, so that he could spend time with us. I promised myself I wouldn’t do this again.”

“What?”

“Screw up! I screwed up with you. I blamed you for things that weren’t your fault. I took my anger at Bruce out on you. And I never forgave myself for that. I should have been there. I should have been there in Ethiopia. I should have been there for you!”
“I wouldn’t’ve wanted ya. I weren’t inna good mind then.”

“So? I could have helped. I screwed up with you. And I know it. Known it for years. I didn’t even get to your funeral. Although that was because Bruce didn’t tell me about it for weeks. I swore I’d never do that again. I’d never put someone else at risk because of my anger. Because of personal stuff. Bruce didn’t want Tim. Not at first. God! Tim had an uphill fight the whole fucking time! Tim was my second chance!”

“Okay!” Jason reeled back, “That’s not a good thing. I know I call him Replacement. But you’re making him sound like he is one!”

“Oh God no!” Dick reared up, “He was so different to you. Even from the start. You were confident and sure. He was nervous. He used to hang back after each training session to spend time in the Cave on his own. One time I spied on him. He spent about ten minutes talking to your costume about how he would never be as good as you. But that he’d do his best. He’d keep Bruce safe… For you.”

“I’m starting to think he weren’t right in the head back then.”

“Blame his parents. The rest of us do. But I can’t blame them for this… I screwed up. I left him. Alone and hurting. He wanted me! And I wasn’t there for him. I should have been. I swore that I wouldn’t let him fall! I swore!”

“You didn’t know.”

“I should have! I should have realized he had fallen off the grid! That he was drifting away from us!”

“He could ‘ave tried to…”

“No! He wouldn’t! Tim was different to the rest of us. He had parents at the start. For all that they didn’t fucking deserve the title. They never noticed him. Tim didn’t even have to lie to them at first. ‘Cause they weren’t around to notice what he was up to. And when Jack was fucking around… He might as well have not been. Took years for him to notice the bruises weren’t from Football tryouts!”

“A bit dim?” Jason ventured desperately.

“Didn’t play the blindest bit of attention to Tim. What kind of dad blows off his son on zero notice to make out with his Personal Trainer? That’s the king of family Tim’s used to! I should have seen this coming!”

“You couldn’t ‘ave known.”

“I should have! When Jean-Luc was running things Tim never said a bloody word!”

“What? When was Jean-Luc in charge?”

“You don’t know about Knightfall?”

“Knightfall?”

“Bane broke Bruce’s back. Bruce got Jean-Luc to take over while he recovered. Jean-Luc… Went kinda crazy. Fairly certain he killed a few people. But I’ve got no proof on that. I know he tried to kill Tim a few times. Threw him out of the Cave… Things got pretty bad. And Tim never
once asked me for help. Or even told me what was going on. And he was not doing well at the time. Bruce wasn’t around. And his own parents were kidnapped!”

“Never heard ‘bout that.”

“Guess no-one thought to bring you up-to-date on all the old stories. But that’s the thing… If Tim didn’t ask for help then… Him asking for help now! That’s a big thing. And I betrayed his trust. I wasn’t there. I wasn’t there.”

“So what?” Jason shrugged, “You screwed up? Won’t be the first time. Won’t be the last. And at the very least you’re in a better position than me… I knew he was missing.”

“What!?” Dick reared off the bed, “You never said…”

“I didn’t think it was anything serious. I mean, it’s Timmy. How many times has he dropped off the radar and no-one noticed. Or if they noticed, no-one cared. The Titans called me. But I didn’t say anything. I didn’t care.”

Blocking the blow that came for his head was second nature. It was the work of a moment to twist and take Dick down.

He knew that normally he wouldn’t have managed to overpower the older man so easily. However, anger and exhaustion were giving him an advantage.

“He’s our brother!” Dick snarled.

“He’s your Second Chance.” Jason returned, “He got everything I wanted. The big brother. The father figure. Everything I had he got… And more. So yeah, when I realized that I had your attention rather than him… I wasn’t going to point you in his direction. If you went of your own accord, that would be different.”

“You’re jealous?!”

“I was never as good as you. You always were the Golden Boy. Then I died and Timmy came along. And he got a fresh slate. Never compared to you. Not like me. I was never good enough. But he was.”

“You think we never compared him? We never had to. He always compared himself to you. You were his benchmark. But even if we never said it… We thought it. And he knew that. I once overheard him throw it in Bruce’s face. And he could never get it right. Either he wasn’t enough like you or he was too much like you. At least I was still alive. You could see that I’m still human. That I’m not perfect. You were dead. All your good points were perfection.”

“He still got you.”

“That was because I screwed up, not you. That’s on me, not him.”

“But I still wanted you attention rather than you giving it to him. I knew you’d go looking if you knew he was missing. I just… I just wanted your attention for a few more days. I never… I
“I know. You may not like him, but you’d never wish him harm like that.” Dick tapped out of Jason’s hold.

“Don’t like him? Have you any idea the number of times he’s pulled my fat out of the fire? Or the times he’s helped me out, without asking for anything in return.”

“Helped you out how?”

“Intel mainly. Fixed my computer once. Still don’t know what he did to it. Runs faster and better than it ever did before. He gets me gear sometimes. I don’t ask for it. It just turns up. Sometimes I hadn’t even told him what I was working on. But he just knew. He did it for me. And the brat. Reckon he watched out for you and the rest too… Just didn’t let on.”

“Sounds like Timmy.”

“Why’d you come into this room, anyway? It’s not yours anymore.”

“No… But it is Timmy’s.”

“Seriously? You gave him your old room? You really aren’t doing yourselves any favours. He stepped into your boots. He stepped into your room. Like I said, I may call him it… But you’ve been treating him like it.”

“I… I know… I expected… This room was filled with his stuff… And now it’s empty.”

“You really want him back?”

“How can you ask that?”

“Then make him a room for him. Not you. Not me. Not the brat. Make him a room that is his!”

“Okay… But we find him first. You’re taking me to his place tomorrow.”

“For what? There’s no clues there.”

“Because even Timmy can’t remember a seventy eight letter password without help. We’re gonna find that password.”

123456789

The rooftop was less than a block from the warehouse.

Batman landed lightly in the shadows. For a long moment he did nothing but observe. Silently watching and cataloguing everything he could see.
There were the usual structures: the air-conditioning units; the entrance to the stairs; and everything else. There was also the usual detritus that a building gained over time.

Ghosting silently over the broken bottles and plastic wrapping, Batman moved towards the rusting fire-escape. Without a grapple-gun it was the logical method for someone to use to access the rooftop; especially if they were attempting to avoid detection.

A dried blood stain on the retaining wall marked where someone had leant for a while. Batman studied it and the scuff marks on the ground. A fairly basic phone lay nearby, blood staining the numbers.

Squatting down, Batman could almost perfectly position his missing son into the space marked out by all the tiny signs. He could picture Tim climbing up the fire-escape, seeking shelter and refuge until he could be extracted.

Exhaustion had forced the youngster into sitting down; exhaustion caused by his wounds, still bleeding and extensive. One leg wasn’t fully functional and so had been stretched out in front of him. It wasn’t a position he could have easily risen from. It was likely that Tim would have preferred to have perched on the retaining wall, but either feared being spotted or didn’t have the strength to stay upright.

He knew what he hoped for, but also knew what was most likely.

A single boot tread could be made out in the dirt. It wasn’t Tim’s, too large. And Batman had already managed to pick out bare feet on the rooftop, stained with blood. Tim hadn’t been shod when he had escaped.

Once Batman had photographed extensively and collected samples of virtually everything, he rose to his feet. He collected the phone; he knew he was hoping in vain for some clue from it, but he had to try.

He moved towards the edge of the roof, to start the journey home, when he stumbled.

“Clark,” He murmured, “I need you.”

 Normally he wouldn’t ask for help. Not even when he really needed it. But sod his principles! This
was his son he was talking about!

A rush of air and his closest friend was standing in front of him, in full regalia.

“What is it?” Superman asked, “I can’t see any danger.”

“None here.” Batman was blunt, “Get me back to the Cave. I’ll explain there.”

The arms around his shoulders and knees were familiar, as was the shoulder his head was leant against. The key points of his body supported and protected against the speed.

Mere moments later they were both in the Cave, Bruce leaning against the computer console as he pushed his cowl down.

“Bruce,” Clark looked at the dishevelled man, “What’s the matter?”

“Tim,” Bruce choked out, “He’s missing.”

“You sure?” Clark frowned, “He could just be undercover somewhere. On a case. You know what he’s like.”

“GCPD found his DNA at a crime scene.”

“You see!”

“On torture implements. And in a make-shift cell.” Bruce continued, “Someone took my son and tortured him, Clark. And I don’t know where he is. Or how he is.”

“I thought… Kon called me last week. I didn’t… I didn’t take him seriously.”

“He asked for help and you didn’t do anything.” Bruce’s voice was two shades away from accusing.

“It’s Tim!” Clark fired back, “You know what he’s like. He’s always got some plan or investigation or something on the go. I thought it was something like that. I mean this isn’t the first time he’s gone off the grid. When he was looking for you… We couldn’t find him for months. Then he just turned back up. Calm as you like.”

“But this time.” Bruce’s voice was tight, “This time involves blood and pain and hurts. And they don’t have Red Robin… They have Tim. My little boy. My little detective.”

“The civilian.” Clark’s voice caught in his throat, “He’s defenceless. Who has him, Bruce? I’ll get him back. I swear.”

“We don’t know. We didn’t even know he was missing till the police told us. I let him stray so far from home that I didn’t even know he was gone! He could be dead and I wouldn’t know.”
“No. I won’t believe it. Tim’s resourceful. He’s a fighter. He *never* gives up. The kid is waging a one-man war against the League of Assassins. Have you checked if they have him?”

“Ra’s wouldn’t keep him in Gotham. And he’d never give Tim the chance to run for it.”

“Tim got away? Why don’t you ask him what happened?”

“Because he got away, but someone got him before we could.” Bruce fired back. “Not that it was hard. He’s badly injured, an issue with his leg, by the marks he left behind. And we didn’t get his message until four days after he got away.”

“You fear he got captured again.”

“With good reason. There was a boot print on that rooftop. Wrong size for Tim. The blood I am almost certain is Tim’s. As are the fingerprints I expect to find on this phone.”

“But you’re checking just in case.”

“Of course.” Bruce nodded, “I’m setting the tests to run.”

“Then you are heading to bed, I presume, Master Bruce.” Alfred’s voice came from the staircase, “Your sons are already asleep.”

“I won’t object.” Bruce sighed, “But get me up in the morning. I want to check out Tim’s office. Best to do it during office hours. As Brucie. Also can find out more about Project Padua. If we can figure out who might want it. We might figure out who has Tim.”

“I’ll set the Watchtower to look for him.” Clark promised, “There’s nowhere they can keep him hidden from us.”

“No.” Bruce’s voice was barely audible, “There’s far too many places.”

“Then we’ll search them all. You have my word, Bruce, we’ll find him. We’ll bring him home.”
“Mister Wayne!” Tam jerked as he walked into the office, “I… I didn’t… I didn’t know you were coming.”

“My son is missing.” Bruce replied, “Where else would I go?”

“Home, Bruce,” Lucius spoke from the doorway, “Home where the police can contact you if they find anything. You don’t need to be here. I’ve got things under control. Rest assured, everything is in good hands.”

“I know that, but…” Bruce tailed off.

“Come to my office,” Lucius motioned, “I’ll tell you what I know. Tam, you hold down the fort here. Standard press statements, you know the drill. Deflect.”

“Reduce. No comment.” Tam recited, “Confidence in the GCPD. Expecting Mister Tim home in the near future.”

“Good.” Lucius nodded, “Don’t forget your training.”

“I won’t. Not this time. Not even for Vale!”

“Good. This way Bruce.”

Lucius led Bruce to his office; after instructing his secretary not to disturb them for a few hours he locked the door and sat down.

“Has this got anything to do with the Family Business?” Lucius immediately cut to the chase.

“I don’t think so.” Bruce replied, “It looks to have be related to Project Padua.”

“Padua?” Lucius’ eyebrows rose, “Tim didn’t tell me that he’d briefed you on that one.”

“He hasn’t. Damian overheard something about it.”

“That would explain the memo and reprimand that Tim sent out regarding project security and secrecy.”

“What can you tell me about it?”

“Not a great deal. Tim’s got the project locked down tight. I know that it’s still in the development stages. But not much more than that. They were stalled about four months back, but then the block cleared three months back. I don’t know how it got fixed. To be honest I didn’t ask. I was just relieved that it seemed to be moving.”

“Do you know about potential applications? Or possible industrial espionage?”

“Tim was suggesting that it could be used to track shipments of weapons. The actual
trackers, from what I understand, are very small and easily hidden. Some of the scientists were considering if they could be used to track terrorists. I am not aware of any industrial espionage. But as CFO such things wouldn’t be brought to me.”

“Do you know what Tim was up to on his last day here?”

“No. As I told the police, Tim runs a pretty tight ship. He did tell me that he has a Lunch Meeting and then he was leaving for the weekend.”

“Why didn’t you tell me he was missing?”

“Because I didn’t know he was. I thought you knew where he was. Come on Bruce… It’s not like your sons haven’t gone for long stretches without checking in with me before. Maybe it was a little different this time, because Tim’s the CEO… But he’s got things organised so that it doesn’t matter if he’s away. To be honest, most people think he just took a holiday and timed it with Tam’s so that he didn’t have to put up with a different PA. Lord knows no-one else meets his standards.”

“What about his last Lunch Meeting? Do you know anything about it?”

“Not really. I believe it was a last minute thing. Else Tam would have known about it. Tim probably meant to produce a full report afterwards. He usually does.”

“Is there anything you can remember that might help?”

“No. I’m sorry Bruce. But Tim’s had me working on other projects. Long term things. It’s taking quite a bit of my focus.”

“Anything I need to worry about?”

“No. It’s mainly expansion and revising the Board of Directors.”

“Why? The Board works.”

“The Board works, because Tim and I have tight control over it. Tim spends quite a bit of time doing backstage work to get everyone moving in the direction he needs. If they had their way, I’d be gone and so would Tim. But they’re willing to put up with Tim at the moment and focus on getting rid of me. They think Tim’s controllable… They’re going to be surprised.”

“So Tim’s working on the Board.”

“His goal is to replace them with younger, more innovative minds. Preferably increasing the female and ethnic ratio.”

“Well, the Board is primarily older, white males.” Bruce conceded, “Is there anything you can tell me that might help?”

“ Technically I can’t tell you anything.” Lucius sighed, “Tim is an emancipated minor. You are not legally responsible for him… However, as owner of the company you have access to relevant information that might interfere with the running of the company.”

Lucius opened a drawer and removed a file from it. Bruce claimed the file and flicked it open.
“Tim’s medical records?” Bruce frowned, “I know his records inside and out.”

“You should read that.” Lucius repeated, “It won’t help you find him. But it might help when you do.”

Frowning Bruce took another look at the file. Then his heart stuttered.

“Acquired Asplenia? Please tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

“He lost his spleen? Yeah, it means exactly what you think it does.”

“When? How?”

“When… When he was looking for you. I don’t know how, exactly. Tam knows more, but she won’t say. All she has ever said is that the ninjas took it.”

“Ninjas?” His heart froze this time.

“I don’t know all the details. But from what little I managed to piece together; when I sent her to find Tim and bring him back, she found him in his room. Injured, along with a woman. Then the ninjas came and took all three of them. Tam never saw the woman after that. But she didn’t see much. She disappeared off the grid for three months. Then came back to Gotham. Shaken, but unharmed.”

“Ra’s Al Ghul.”

“I couldn’t say. Tam didn’t see much. Ninjas. An opulent room, that was basically her prison. An Albino. Tim. And violence. But only at the end. They didn’t touch her.”

“A hostage for Tim’s behaviour.”

“The only conclusion I can draw.”

“God!” Bruce ran a hand through his hair, “Nothing like that got into any report that I ever read… I’ll take that up with Tim later. The key thing is finding him.”

“If there is anything I can do to help. Just tell me.”

“I wish there was.” Bruce sighed.

123456789

“Okay, so this is our timeline,” Crispus pointed to it, “He swiped out of WE at twelve fifteen on Friday. Apparently headed for a Lunch Meeting. Have you got a trace on his car?”

“No point.” Renee sighed, “It’s still in the garage at WE. Where he is known for leaving it for months at a time. He might have walked.”
“Did I hear you mention cars?” Romy asked wandering past.

“Just in passing.” Renee shrugged, “It’s a bit of a surprise that a CEO owns a Honda Civic, even if he is under the drinking limit. Why do you ask? Linked with your case? A murder, right?”

“Solved it yesterday. No, I was thinking about a Cold Case. Caught it ‘bout a month ago. Murder, again. Victim was Jacob Spencer. Car mechanic. Found in a parking garage. He was all dressed up.”

“Fancy meal out?”

“No. Looked more like a chauffeur. But we couldn’t find his car. A Rolls Royce Phantom.”

“You tried Josie?”

“Probably ought to. It’s just weird. The whole case.”

“Why?”

“He ran a classic car restoration and mechanic shop in the suburbs. According to his staff, he very rarely chauffeurs anyone himself. But there’s one guy he does, Chen Rong. Usually books in advance, but he called Spencer, on his personal phone, and the guy dropped everything to transport him. Had less than two hours notice.”

“I presume you traced the call?”

“Dead end. Burner. But there was something about the guy that just didn’t sit right…”

“Montoya!” Crispus called her attention back to him, “You got anything from that footage?”

“Nothing useful.” She sighed, “Drake exits WE, turns right and disappears off WE’s cameras. Traffic cams catch him from there. He walks nearly a block, disappears into a dead zone, then disappears. He never emerges.”

“Must have gotten into a cab or something. I don’t see a CEO walking to a Lunch Meeting. Doesn’t give a good image… Besides you’d notice him on another camera.”

“Any luck with the restaurants?”

“Anyone who is willing to talk about their clients didn’t have a reservation for Drake for that day. Those who won’t talk claim client confidentiality.”

“That sucks. Anything we can try?”

“I’ll get the captain to try and lean on them.”

“Let me ask Fox. He might have some contacts.”

“Good idea. Might as well make his status work for us.”
“God!” Dick looked around, “Tim is such a geek!”

“And that’s new?”

“Not really. Okay, let’s check his study.”

“This way.”

Dick scanned around the room, two walls covered in bookshelves, a desk tucked under a window and photographs occupying most of the fourth wall.

“I’ll take the desk and the photos.” Dick declared, “You’ll do better with the books.”

“Don’t get too excited if you find a tablet. He keeps one around for games.”

“Noted.”

It didn’t take Dick long to find three tablets, all stashed in the drawers of the desk. He put them to one side, to look at the passcodes later.

“That’s wrong.” Jason frowned.

“What?” Dick looked up.

“These books, they’re filed wrong.” Jason pointed, “This is the Sci-Fi section.”

“Even I know that Asimov wrote Science Fiction, Jay.” Dick spared a glance, “Invented the Three Laws of Robotics. I don’t see a problem.”

“He wrote mostly Science Fiction.” Jason created, “This is a mystery collection that he wrote.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“Alfred’s a fan. Says he relates to one of the characters.”

“You don’t like mystery books. I remember that. You’re a literary snob. You don’t even like Agatha Christie or Ellery Queen. And you won’t touch ACD.”

“I just have taste. Something you never got.” Jason sniffed, “But I remember this. I got ill once and refused to do what Alfred said. He told me that if I was going to behave like a small child he would treat me like one. Complete with bedtime story. He chose one of the shorts in these books. ‘The Driver’ it was called. He chose it ‘cause I hate mystery stories. And ‘cause he knew I would like it the best out of all of them.”

“Well, it’s not like Tim to miss file things. Check the books.”

“On it. I am not reading these things though. Any joy for you?”
“Three tablets. An old film camera. Notebooks. Mainly filled with school stuff. A few draft essays, though why he’s drafting them on paper, I don’t know.”

“Any interesting topics?”

“‘Discuss Recruitment and the Related Legislation’,” Dick started, “‘Depictions of the Female Form often Support or Challenge Attitudes Towards Women within their Cultural Contexts.’. ‘Explore the History of Forensics, with a View Towards it’s Impact on the Criminal Justice System’.”

“Sounds like he’s doing some serious studying. I’ve got a bookmark in this book, ‘The Banquets of the Black Widowers’… Alfred said Timmy was Atheist, right?”

“Agnostic, but pretty much.”

“Then why’s he using a religious bookmark?”

“Why’s he left a bookmark in it? Timmy doesn’t usually put a book back until he’s either finished it, or given up. I presume it was in use.”

“Marking a story. The book’s full of short ones.”

“Check the Bible… If he’s got one. I’m getting nothing here. Would be more helpful if he had a computer.”

“He uses a laptop. Usually takes it everywhere with him. Which Bible? I’ve got a Bible, a Quran, a Hadith, a Shruti, a Tanakh, a Talmud, a Tao Te Ching, a Tipitaka and a whole host of other stuff. Most of this is in the original language. Either he’s a major polyglot…”

“Or he’s up to something. As per usual. Well, try the actual Bible. It was a Bible bookmark, right?”

“A Psalm. I’ll try the Bible first. Then the Tanakh.”

Dick moved over to the wall of photographs.

“Good to see he kept this up.” Dick smiled, “At least he’s still got a hobby.”

“Those are professional shots.” Jason remarked, “And historical things.”

“Nope. They’re his.” Dick returned, “He was good enough to be a pro, back when he was taking shots of us. Haven’t you seen his collection?”

“I knew it existed. Wasn’t in a hurry to look back at my days in the pixie boots and the scaly pants.”

“Pity. He’s got a good eye. These are all his work. I’m sure of it.”

“Even the historical one?” Jason motioned at an old picture.

“Check her wrist,” Dick snorted, “Her watch is modern. Even if the car and the clothes are old.”
“It’s a Pontiac Redbird.” Jason corrected, “Of all the Pontiac Birds, it was probably the prettiest. But I doubt that’s why the kid wanted a picture.”

“Nostalgia.” Dick nodded, “That’s what we called his car… Redbird.”

“Vanity licence plate,” Jason noted, “‘Psm 78’. Probably could even trace the owner if we wanted.”

“Anything of note in the Bible?” Dick asked.

“He’s been practicing his Hebrew?” Jason shrugged, “He’s written some Hebrew next to the start of each Psalm, as far as I can tell. But nothing long enough to be his password. And it’s against every Psalm. So there’s no indicator for us. Nothing useful in the Tanakh. I think the bookmark was just a mistake. Maybe a cleaner put it back on the shelf and misfiled the section.”

“Alfred would never do that.”

“Yeah, but Alf ain’t never been here. Look around, this is Tiny Tim’s home. Just as it’s always been… Full of stuff. Empty of people. Just pictures on walls.”

“At least they’re good pictures.” Dick tried to joke, “Bit confusing…”


“This one,” Dick pointed, “Babs brought one like it for her Dad for Christmas. Only it’s meant to say a word. That one doesn’t.”

“I’ve seen that guy before.” Jason moved to a different picture.

“How can you tell? It’s just a hand.”

“No, but that’s a very distinctive bracelet.” Jason stated, “Hold on.”

He moved to the bookshelves and pulled out a photograph album.

“Here.” He flicked over a few pages.

“He’s never the focus of the picture.” Dick frowned, “It’s always the car that’s the focus. But from what I can see, he’s what? My age?”

“Between the two of us I’d say. Male. White.”

“Physically fit. Probably a Classic Car Restorer.”

“Where do you get that?”

“None of the cars in the pictures are complete. They’re all missing stuff. There’s tools in the background and in his hands.”

“But classic cars? You can’t recognise what’s classic and what’s crap!”
“No. But there’s no way a normal mechanic would be rebuilding a car from the frame up. That leaves Hero or Classic Car Restorer. I know all the Heroes and all the gear builders on sight. Even from the limited angles on these, I know I don’t know him. Add in the other pictures on the walls being of car parts or classic cars…”

“Seems Tiny Tim has two hobbies. Photography and Classic Cars.”

“Never knew he was into classic cars. But it makes sense. He’s a history buff and likes knowing how things work. Any names written on those photos?”

“Nothing useful. All seems to be License Plates. And what use is that going to be? Tracing cars that have nothing to do with Timmy. He just took photos of them.”

“He obviously spent quite a bit of time with this man. But I don’t know him.”

“A case?”

“Unlikely, given that he wouldn’t bring a case up here. Never mind put it on his walls.”

“And we still haven’t found his clues regarding the password.”

“They’ve got to be here somewhere.”
“Babs,” Dinah looked at the red-head, “Are you okay? You’re a bit off today.”

“Tim’s missing.”

“Tim?” Zinda frowned, “That’s Red Robin, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry,” Helena laughed, “That lad is tough. He’s probably off investigating somewhere.”

“I’ll put money on the League of Assassins, again.” Dinah put in, “Kid has a vendetta against them.”

“No.” Babs shook her head, “His blood has been found on torture implements.”

“How long has he been missing?” Helena was instantly focused, “And where was the torture chamber?”

“A month. And the Warehouse District in Gotham.”

“Shit.” Helena breathed, “I hadn’t… I hadn’t realized I hadn’t seen him… Sometimes he drops me intel.”

“What do you need?” Dinah was blunt.

“I need this to be a bad dream. I need this to all be over… I need to know he’s safe.” Babs buried her head in her hands, “I can’t find him. I don’t know where he was. Or who he was with.”

“Well, what was his patrol that day?” Helena put in, “I know Bats keeps everything organised.”

“Tim has always been independent.” Babs sighed, “He was patrolling solo long before anyone else was. We didn’t realize that he had stopped reporting in to… Anyone. We don’t know what he was working on… But they didn’t… They weren’t tor… tort… Hurting Red Robin… They grabbed Tim… Off the streets as far as I can tell.”

“Who?” Dinah demanded, “Tell me who and I’ll go get him. No matter where, Babs. You’ve got us. Tell us where. We’ll bring him back.”

“We don’t know.” Babs choked, “He got away five days ago. But he hasn’t come back. We don’t know if he got grabbed again or what. But my little brother is missing.”

“Then we get him back.” Zinda swore, “You’ve got your Birds, Oracle. Let us fly.”

“We’ll find him.” Helena announced, “Wherever you need us to go.”

“Just say the word, Babs.” Dinah agreed, “And don’t worry. He’s tough. Really tough. He’s a fighter. He’ll hang on until we find him.”
“Okay, brat.” Steph looked at the youngest Wayne, “What do you know?”

“Tt. What makes you think I know anything, Brown?”

“You knew about Project Padua. Bruce didn’t. That tells me you’ve been in WE more often than he has.”

“I have been working there for part of the school holidays. If I am to rule, I must first learn what it is I am ruling.”

“Okay. Then how do we find out who Tim was having lunch with?”

“It is not on the schedule. I need to check his paperwork.”

“Then let’s go. Bruce can check with Fox. We’ll deal with everyone else.”

“I will not wait on you. Keep up, Brown.”

The pair made their way into Tim’s office, using the Bat-Clan secret entrance.

“Let’s start.” Steph started looking around the room, “I’m sure Tim has got a system.”

“I do not know it.” Damian stated, “Drake does not show me his paperwork.”

“The police will have looked through the paperwork. We need to figure out how Tim got invited.”

“It would have been a telephone invitation.” Damian stated, “The police will have checked the electronic mail as well as the postal.”

“Then Tim would have made a note about it.”

“Tt.” Damian turned away from the desk and moved towards the bookcase, “You can look for that if you want, Brown. I will pursue more profitable avenues of investigation.”

“You’ve bugged the office.” She sighed.

“Of course. However, I am unable to broadcast to a source, due to the high level of security. I have not felt the need to download recently.”

“You mean, you haven’t visited. Why bug the place, anyway?”

“I have to keep an eye on my investments. While Drake is competent, barely, at his job it is best that I know everything going on. Unfortunately, I have been busy with other investigations so I have been forced to leave the business in his hands.”

“Well, what did it record?”

Damian removed a small device from underneath the small table in the corner. He quickly linked it
up to a computer and plugged in a set of headphones. Steph sighed, realizing that Damian wasn’t going to let her listen until it was done.

Instead she started looking around the office. She could easily tell that she wasn’t the first to do so. Tim would never allow such disarray in his office.

She started pulling the papers into piles. Just neatening things up really. She wasn’t going to try and sort them.

Looking through the drawers she found a notebook. Well, it didn’t look like a notebook. It looked like a Cosplay Prop. But she’d played enough Zelda to be suspicious.

“Bingo!” She smirked when she opened it.

The first few pages had technical drawings on them, Steph didn’t recognise what they were of. She flicked past them, looking for more useful information. A single torn page was one of the two things she was looking for, and she found it.

A pencil and some quick rubbing, she was looking at Tim’s handwriting.

“Cus. McC.” She read aloud, “Damnit Tim! Why couldn’t you write longhand?”

She tore the page out anyway. The evidence would still be there for anyone else to find. If they knew to look.

“Tt!” Damian knocked his headphones to the floor, “He knew.”

“Knew what?” Steph frowned.

“Drake knew that I had bugged his office. He turned off the device when he did not want me to listen.”

“What did he let you hear?”

“He had a lunch meeting. It was booked for Cussler’s with another CEO. I did not recognise the name. It was Mister Myers.”

“Tim jotted down a shorthand. The first must be Cussler’s, but the second… Hold on a
Steph pulled out her phone, and hit a speed-dial.

“Steph, what have you found?” Babs spoke quickly

“Cussler’s. Lunch meeting. A CEO Myers. Company might start M. C. C. Not certain on that.”

“McCaffery Enterprises.” Babs came over the loudspeaker, “That’s a start. I’ll find out when it was set for. And who was going.”

“How long will it take?”

“Got the details… That’s unfair.”

“What?”

“Five of them verses Tim? This was a set up.”

“They grabbed Tim?”

“Tt. If Drake allowed a collection of businessmen to capture him, then he does not deserve to be counted as a hero.”

“I doubt they grabbed him. I can see who was going. No, they were trying to stuff him legally. They were trying to take advantage of him. They had the CEO, CFO and legal people.”

“I would hope that Drake did not sign any documents.” Damian huffed.

“That’s presuming he even got to the meeting.” Steph reminded.

“Looking at what I can see, he did.” Babs replied, “But I can’t see anything more than that.”

“We’ll go check it out.” Steph declared.

“No.” Babs countered, “I’ll get the Birds to check it out. You’ve got eyes on you. If you disappear off the radar for too long, the police will get suspicious. Best you head back to the Manor.”

“Have the police got anything new?”

“Nothing to narrow down his location. I think we’ve managed to overtake them.”

“Tt. That is to be expected.”

“Keep us updated.” Steph finished the call.

She then quickly started dialling again.
“Good afternoon, thank you for calling Cussler’s. How can I help you today?”

“Hi,” Steph bit her lip, “Um, this is a bit embarrassing. I work at Wayne Enterprises. My boss, Mister Wayne, the CEO, is looking to have a lunch meeting somewhere and he told me to organise it at that ‘wonderful place’ he went to last month. Only he didn’t tell me where he went. And I can’t figure out his handwriting. His PA is still on holiday. I’m just the temp. If I screw this up I’ll be fired. Please, did he go to you last month? I think he said it was a lunch meeting with McCattery, McCallery…”

“There was a table of six reserved for McCaffery. Young Mister Wayne was present. You may wish to check if he is recalling the place where he ate the salmon dish.”

“Thank you. Is there anything else I could use to help jog his memory?”

“The other members of the table kept forgetting that he was underage, and thus unable to drink. A fact young Mister Wayne kept reminding them of. Indeed even if he was able to drink I would have not approved of the wine.”

“Why not, Sir?”

“One should never drink such a full-bodied wine as the 1997 Cabassaou Bandol Domaine Tempier with such a delicate dish as salmon.”

“Thank you so much.” Steph even managed a little catch in her voice as if she was holding back tears, “I’ll check with Mister Wayne and then I’ll get back to you if it was Cussler’s he meant.”

“Happy to be of service.”

Steph hung up triumphantly.

“Well, he made it to the lunch.” She grinned at Damian.

“How did you know that he would assist you?” Damian frowned.

“It’s called being female and young.” She shrugged, “If you know what you’re doing, you can usually find an angle. He was probably the Maître d’ or Sommelier. Slightly arrogant and stuck-up. He wanted to prove he was superior to me. So I made sure he could.”

She headed towards the back exit once again, texting Barbara as she did so.

Damian paused for a moment, to plant a new listening device, before following her.
“What are you looking at?” Diana asked, spotting Clark at the Watchtower’s main station.

“The spreadsheets.”

“Which ones?”

“The League of Assassins ones.”

“Why? Bruce keeps those updated.” She leant up against the chair he was using.

“I just wanted to check… Have you realized just how much time Tim has been saving us?”

“Because he seems to enjoy taking down the League every week or so… It’s quite handy. Someone keeping a lid on Ra’s Al Ghul. Makes him easier to deal with.”

“It’s hundreds of hours.”

“Why are you looking at that? It’s not really important. It’s just handy.”

“Because I was hoping to find a clue.”

“A clue to what?”

“Where Tim is.”

“What do you mean? He’s in Gotham… Or San Francisco. He’s been spending quite a bit of time there… According to Cassie.”

“No. He’s not. Didn’t Bruce tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Someone’s kidnapped Tim. They’re torturing him.”

“Who?” Her voice lowered in tone.

“He doesn’t know. No one knows where he is. He got grabbed about a month ago. Bruce doesn’t know who or where. There’s just abandoned torture implements with Tim’s blood on them. And a failed escape attempt.”

“Failed?”

“He’s not reappeared anywhere. Bruce has checked all of the safe-houses in Gotham. And I know the Titans have checked everywhere they can think of. Plus, he apparently had a bad leg. So he can’t move quickly.”

“No. That’s got to be wrong. Cassie would have told me.”

“You sure? Kon only asked me to look a week ago.”

“Why didn’t you say anything then?”

“Because I didn’t think it was anything serious.”

“And now you know it is.”

“I swear, Diana, Bruce was nearly in tears. I haven’t seen him like that since Damian…"
And before that Jason’s…”

“IT was that bad?”

“Diana, this is Tim! His son! And they’re human. Not like us.”

“They never have been. They’ve always coped. We’ve never coddled them.”

“Bruce wouldn’t let us… But that doesn’t stop me from worrying about them.”

“He is capable. They are all capable. Bruce trains them well.”

“They are still human. What we shrug off could kill them.”

“They know the risks. They are good soldiers in the battle.”

“But they’re not soldiers.”

“Timothy knew what he was getting into. He was the first hero who became a hero, after the death of his predecessor. He knew the risks.”

“Don’t you care?”

“I care for him as a fellow warrior. However I will not diminish his achievements or his bravery by coddling him or deciding that he was unaware of the risks he would face. I do not wish him to die, but what you are doing isn’t helping.”

“I’ve got every system looking for him.” Clark motioned at the computers, “I’m trying to figure out where to look in person.”

“I presume Bruce has Gotham.”

“Of course.”

“Then we split up the rest of the world. If we involve the Flash, we can check the world in minutes.”

“And still miss him… But it’s a better plan than anything else. The computers will continue looking for him on any cameras, and update us if they find anything. If that fails… I don’t know… I’m not sure Bruce will survive losing another son.”
“Okay,” Jason sighed, “Let’s just do a recap here. Tim has been missing for over a fucking month. We’ve been looking for four fucking days.”

“Don’t remind me.” Dick murmured from between his arms.

“We still haven’t found his clues to crack his fucking password.”

“Honestly, a seventy-eight letter password is more than a little ridiculous!” Babs put in.

“He was last seen leaving Cussler’s at about 2 in the fucking afternoon.”

“Tt, at least the Maître d’ has a good memory.” Damian added, “The security cameras there are not worth a fraction of the price they paid for them.”

“Cussler’s guests have a certain expectation of privacy.” Bruce sighed, “Security is not usually something they expect the restaurant to provide. Certainly not at that time of day. I would normally insist on taking bodyguards. However, Tim isn’t comfortable with bodyguards.”

“It’s a high class restaurant.” Steph frowned.

“But just on the outskirts of one of the worst areas.” Dick returned.

“Gentrification.” Babs sighed.

“Are we sure that McCaffery isn’t involved?” Dick managed to lift his head to look at Babs.

“Checked their system, records and everything else.” Babs declared, “Dinah was very keen to get involved. And don’t talk to me about Helena… I practically had to hold her back from going and interrogating everyone involved. Zinda wasn’t helping either, she was offering to replace their drivers. But both electronic and physical files match… They were up to something. But no violence was intended. Browbeating was the worst thing they had planned. Tim managed to duck and dive out of it. Even the attempted alcohol consumption.”

“He wasn’t driving his crappy car. So we don’t know how he got there.” Jason carried on listing.

“Unlikely he walked.” Steph stated.

“He was taken for the fucking Padua Project, which would find him if it was fucking working!”

“And it’s Tim who made it work in the first place.” Bruce muttered, “Finally managed to dig through all the reports and find the document that proved it. He’s been spending time in the R&D department helping them out.”

“Tt, that would explain why he was not comfortable with me working in that department.” Damian sniffed.

“And we are going to talk about that at some point.” Dick muttered, “Not sure how happy I am that you are working already.”
Bruce laid a gentle hand on Dick’s shoulder to end the argument before it began.

“He’s been a busy little bird,” Jason continued, “CEO duties, R&D time, his scholastic studies. And who knew he had an interest in Art History?”

“I would have put money on Photography.” Dick stated.

“He has some kind of relationship with a man, none of us know about or can even identify.”

“I’ll get there.” Babs swore, “No one can hide forever.”

“What odds are we giving that this man was involved in Timmy’s kidnapping?” Jason queried.

“I am not prepared to make a judgement at this point.” Bruce shook his head, “We don’t even know how close the two of them are.”

“And we don’t know anything about him.” Dick felt anger burn within him for a moment, “Tim used to tell me everything.”

“Tt… Do not sully yourself stating such a falsehood, Grayson.” Damian fired back, “Drake has always kept things to himself. He is more of my father’s son than he ever was his own.”

And that one stung. It was the truth. Something that Dick had often thought about. Of all of the Bat-Boys, Tim was the one who was the closest in nature to Bruce. Even Damian didn’t have Bruce’s taciturn nature; his was more brusque, more defensive.

Bruce lived in the shadows. He was the Night.

Tim lived in silence. So what did that make him?

Dick knew that he had always been the Flying Robin. Even before the idea that there would be another Robin had even existed. Even in his earliest of days.

Jason had always been the Fighting Robin. Fierce and bold and brave. It had been part of the reason Dick had had a hard time accepting his new brother. He had been scared that he was being replaced by someone better than him. Because Jason had always had the potential to be a better fighter than Dick. It was only the anger that Jason had never been able to shake that stopped him from achieving that.
Nobody knew what Damian would be remembered as. It was not as clear as the others. He was changing little by little every day. He had once been an angry youth. Almost as angry as Jason had been. Now he was outwardly cold, but it was just a wall of ice protecting his very fragile heart.

Tim… Tim had always, always been the Thinking Robin. Clever. Intuitive. Smart. Capable. Self-sufficient. Unwilling to ask for help… Or perhaps unable. Even a baby crying in their crib stops crying when no-one comes to help. Even a baby learns silence, when noise does not help.

Had he caused this? Had Dick not been there enough? Had he not shown Tim that he could be relied upon?

Okay, maybe he had kinda sucked at being Tim’s big brother recently… But everyone screwed up now and again…

But wasn’t that what Tim was used to? To being the favoured child and then ignored for months at a time?

Dick had actually gone and researched the amount of time Tim had spent with his parents before their deaths… Scarily Janet hadn’t even spent a single year in the same city as Tim before her death, in total! Jack didn’t fare much better, even with his extra few years of life.

Tim was used to being put on the shelf and ignored when he wasn’t wanted or needed…

He probably thought it was the same way with them… With him!

It was just… There had been so much to do! Jason had been weakening in his stance of hatred. And Dick was going to do whatever it took to bring Little-Wing back home.

Damian had needed help adjusting. The changes he had had to go through had been disturbing and troubling. He had needed a steady presence and companion through the emotional upheavals.

Bruce had been reaching out to Damian and Jason. His efforts at reconciliation with Jason and compassion with Damian occasionally clumsy. Needing Dick to help him realize where he was going wrong and how to resolve it.
Babs had been dealing with some PTSD flare ups, along with keeping the Birds out of trouble. Which shouldn’t have been a full time task, but it pretty much was. Dick had been helping her with the PTSD and doing whatever grunt work she desired to help the Birds. Besides, although she considered Tim her younger brother, he was quite firmly in her mind catalogued under “Dick’s People”. Thus unless she had a reason to worry, she didn’t go hunting him out.

Steph was still uncomfortable around Tim. Uncomfortable because of her guilt. She knew that she had hurt Tim badly all those years ago when she faked her death. And so she didn’t go out of her way to encounter him. She wouldn’t shy away from him, if they crossed paths. But if she suspected he was avoiding her, she wouldn’t force a confrontation. Of all of them she had noticed that she hadn’t seen Tim in a while, but had thought he didn’t want to see her. So she had said nothing. Instead sinking slightly into a low mood, which Dick had tried to chivvy her out of, without knowing the cause.

Everyone had needed Dick to some degree or another. And he had given himself to all of them…

Meanwhile Tim… Tiny Tim had needed Dick. But hadn’t said anything. He had just let everyone forget him.

Tim had just… Slipped through the cracks.

Until he was painfully brought to their attention once again.

And it hadn’t just been the Bat-Clan… Every single hero, outside of the core Titans, hadn’t noticed Red Robin’s disappearance.

“We’ve scoured Gotham twice over.” Jason continued listing, “The League and others have searched the world and we still can’t fucking find him!”

“To be fair,” Steph muttered, “We still could have missed him.”

“It was a rough search.” Babs agreed, “There’s hundreds of places he still could be.”

“And to top it all off,” Jason carried on, as if he couldn’t hear them, “He’s missing his fucking spleen! That’s the flaming cherry to this entire fiasco! How come we didn’t know he had lost his fucking spleen?!”

Babs had found out about the spleen thing, when she had hacked into the Police Database, to keep an eye on the case. She wanted to make sure that the Bats had up-to-date data at all times. Any development she wanted to be made aware of at the earliest opportunity.
She hadn’t been expecting that titbit of information to be tucked away in an interview file.

To be fair, it had blindsided all of them.

“It is perfectly possible to live a full life without a spleen, Master Jason.” Alfred put in.

“Yeah,” Jason nodded, “But considering Timmy’s current situation? It ain’t a good thing.”

And that was a truth they all acknowledged.

123456789

The Desk Sergeant looked up as he heard crutches approaching. Looking up he could see three teenagers approaching the front desk. One of them with a pair of crutches jammed up under his armpits, clearly due to the casted leg. The other two hovered in the background, clearly wanting to help, but also nervous about doing so.

“Good morning, Officer,” The boy on crutches addressed him, “Could I speak to the Detectives investigating the Drake case? I have some pertinent information for them.”

“One moment,” The Sergeant turned away.

He quickly made his way to where Montoya was looking over case files.

“Montoya,” He interrupted her, “There’s three kids up front. One says he’s got information for you. On the Drake case.”

“A lead?” Montoya looked up hopefully.

“ Possibly,” The Sergeant returned, “But I wouldn’t give it much credence. The other two kids look really nervous. Could just be a prank.”

“The case was dead before we got it.” Montoya shrugged, “I’ll take anything. Even a prank.”

“Well, they’re up front. It’s the kid on crutches. Do you want me to tell Bullock?”

“He’s out on another case. I don’t want to call him back if it’s just a prank. I’ll figure out how legitimate it is, then call him in.”
She rose and wandered over; if nothing else it was a distraction from the endless case files which were going nowhere.

She scanned her eyes over the trio of boys; she recognised one of them. It was Conner, he gave her a sheepish smile and ducked his head, before returning his gaze to the central boy. The other boy resembled the few pictures she’d seen of Bart Allen. She was starting to get a feeling that this lead wouldn’t be another dead-end.

“I’m told you might have some information for me?” She addressed the central figure.

“Detective Montoya,” The voice was hoarse, but familiar, even if she couldn’t place it, “I’m glad you were assigned to this case, it makes everything much easier.”

“Why?” She frowned.

“Because you should recognise me,” He raised one hand to brush his long hair back out of his face, “Tim Drake, at your service.”
Chapter 15

It had been quite some time since Montoya had seen Timothy Drake. Even then it had been a fleeting glimpse at some gala, probably a Charity one for the police. In fact, in every picture that Montoya had managed to obtain Timothy Drake was dressed in either a suit or a school uniform. There were no pictures where he was just a kid.

The teenager in front for her had longer hair and was dressed in a fashion that wouldn’t get him a second look at pretty much anyone in the poorer areas of Gotham. The hoodie was old and tattered, even patched in a few places, the khaki shorts were clearly cut-down trousers repurposed for summer use.

However, despite the clothing choices, she could spot the resemblance to the photographs. The hair was longer and there were some visible healing injuries on his face, alongside a few fading scars. She wasn’t certain, but she was fairly convinced that he’d lost some weight as well; even if the clothing hid it superbly.

“Rumours of your demise have been exaggerated I see.” She smiled at him.

“So far,” He returned, “I apologise for causing you such trouble, but I only found out about your investigation a few hours ago. Conner and Bart were kind enough to provide transport for me.”

“Let’s take this somewhere more private.” She motioned, “I’ll need a statement, you understand.”

“Of course.” He smiled at her.

For a moment, she was struck by the similarity between his smile and Grayson’s; even if they weren’t blood related, the smile was so familiar. However, she then looked closer. Grayson’s smile always reached his eyes, it was clear in every part of his body that he was smiling.

Tim’s wasn’t like that. It only showed as wide on his face for a moment, before being pulled back and hidden. His body language was neutral, and his eyes had never shown the smile that his face had shown. It had been a lie. A very well crafted one, but a lie none-the-less.

His eyes told the truth though. There was pain in them.

Montoya knew, just knew, that this wasn’t going to be a simple case of a misunderstanding and a poorly timed holiday.
“Detective Allen will be joining us as soon as he gets back to the Precinct,” Montoya stated, as she settled into one of the Interrogation Room chairs, “Do you mind if we start before he gets here?”

“I would prefer it, actually.” Tim was blunt. Strangely his back was ramrod straight; his facial features were relaxed, but his body screamed tension.

She knew she couldn’t keep her emotional distance from him. He seemed so fragile; she’d seen how the other Waynes were and could easily see how Tim could be so easily ignored. He wasn’t loud or bold like the others. He was coming across as very quiet and thoughtful; reserved would be the term her old English teacher would have used. He seemed to be quite able to fade into the background of any situation. Part of the reason that she’d asked to talk with him without either of the other boys; something he’d easily acquiesced to, which made her suspicious.

“Mister Drake.” She began.

“Please,” He interrupted her, “Call me Tim. I… I don’t… I can’t be called Mister Drake… Not right now. Please.”

A touch of desperation in the tone alerted her to a potential trigger. She wasn’t going to push it.

“Tim then,” She smiled, trying to radiate calm and peace, “Can you tell me what happened? From the beginning.”

“What do you already know?” He countered her.

“You’ve been missing for some time; how long we can’t determine. The last person who remembers seeing you was Mister Fox approximately five weeks ago. You told him you had a lunch meeting, however, he doesn’t know where or who with. You stated that you’d be going home straight after and then going out of town for the weekend.”

“It was at Cussler’s,” Tim easily mentioned the exclusive Two Michelin Star Restaurant, “I was meeting with McCaffery Enterprises. It was basically a ‘Meet-And-Greet’. A sounding out of each other’s sides. Trying to see if there could be co-operation between our two companies.”

“Your Honda Civic wasn’t found on any traffic cameras for that day.”

“I didn’t use it. Going to these sort of places, you’re expected to show a certain type of class. The suit and general appearance isn’t enough. The car you drive is very important. However, the amount it would cost to insure me to drive anything other than a fairly beat-up old car is not worth the occasional outing. Besides I like my Civic and I hate the usual Learners’ Permit jokes
that come out. So I have an arrangement with Jake.”

“Jake?”

“Jacob Spencer. He’s a mechanic. Restores classic cars. Has a shop in the suburbs. We met years ago. Classic Car Show. Kept in contact ever since. We’ve got a standing agreement. When I need a chauffeur with a posh car, he’s the guy I call.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Implicitly. He’s been there for me through some rough times in my life. I wouldn’t have passed English Literature or History if it wasn’t for him.”

“He drove you to the meeting?”

“Yes. We were talking on the way. Discussing Architecture.”

“A real Renaissance Man, your Jake.”

“Not really. He loves Art. Architecture is Art we live in. Literature is Art with words. Cars are Art we drive. His passion is Art. You should hear him talk about Food or Music. Art we eat and Art we listen to.”

“What happened at the meeting?”

“There were five members of the McCaffery board there.”

“Five? And no-one else on your side?”

“No. I was given the impression that it was a one-on-one meeting. Usually I would have brought Tam. But she was in Hawaii, so I had gone alone. It did raise my suspicions that there were so many of them.”

“How did the meeting go?”

“Badly. They were trying some dodgy dealings. Their plan seemed to get me to sign an agreement which would prevent WE from developing our products into anything that could encroach on their territory. Which covers a lot of areas. We would also have to pull out of certain areas where we have been extremely profitable in the past few years.”

“They thought they could get away with that?”

“Apparently. They’d brought a lawyer to try and convince me it was all legit. But I have a policy where I don’t sign anything that hasn’t passed through the hands of my lawyers and that I’ve spent at least two hours pouring over, just in case. Particularly after last time, when Tam caught it.”

“Paranoid?”

“Cautious. Businessmen are ruthless. If one of them could find a use for my soul they’d try to get me to sign it over. I’m young in the business world. That makes me fresh meat in their eyes. Blood in the water.”

“What did you do?”

“Humoured them. Prevaricated. Played up the unsure, innocent, naïve CEO. I’ve gotten
quite good at it.”

“And you just left at the end of the meal?”

“Pretty much. I’d discreetly recorded the conversation, just in case. And I think they knew it was a long shot. They were more resigned than anything. I’d asked one of the waiters to tell the valets to tell Jake to come pick me up.”

“He’d waited the whole time?”

“He usually does. Give Jake a good book and he’s gone for hours. It’s why I don’t text him, but send a person to tell him. He really can ignore his phone if he’s wrapped up in something.”

“You left.”

“I got into the back of the car. Privacy divider was up and the windows are tinted. I wasn’t in the mood to talk. As much as I get on with Jake, after a meeting like that I like silence to get my head in the game. I was writing up notes from the meeting, who and what and where and everything. I downloaded the recording and saved it. I realized the journey was taking longer than it should have. I looked up thinking that Jake had decided that I needed to spend some time at his shop. It’s a good de-stress. Only I wasn’t anywhere that I should have been. I tried to talk with Jake, but I got no answer. That was when I realized it wasn’t Jake.”

“You’re certain about that? He could have been bribed or blackmailed.”

“Jake’s not that kind of guy. Never has been. He doesn’t care about money. And he wouldn’t give up a friend because of violence. Not against him. Not against anyone else.”

“Not even if they threatened you?”

“No. Jake would have grabbed me and legged it. He would have taken out anyone trying to hurt me. The only way they got control of that car was if they restrained him or killed him… Do you know if they killed my friend?”

“I’m afraid not.” Montoya stated, although the name rang a bell, “I’ll find out though. What happened next?”

“I shut my laptop down, while I tried to phone for help. They must have had a signal jammer, because I didn’t have service. The doors were locked and the controls for the privacy divider weren’t working. All I could do was watch and try to figure out where we were. It was in the warehouse district. However, I couldn’t give you more details.”

“Did you see who was driving?”

“Not right then. Not until the car stopped. It was inside a warehouse. I tried to fight, but there were too many. They made it pretty clear that no-one would be able to find me. That the only way I was leaving was if I co-operated.”

“What did they want?”

“WE has a contract with the DoD. We’re working on some DARPA contracts. They wanted access.”

“You don’t work in R&D.”
“I’m not employed there. But I often pop down to work alongside them. And I’m the CEO. I have access to everything. At first they were focused on getting into my laptop.”

“I take it they failed.”

“I know that my laptop is a potential weak point in the WE security system. So I have a thirty-character password. A deadlock on it, so if it doesn’t connect with one of three wi-fi spots in forty-eight hours it locks you out unless you get the right password, which is different from the other password, and you only have three goes to get it right. Get it wrong and the hard-drive wipes itself, writes over itself about twenty times, so you end up with a laptop that has no operating system, never mind anything actually useful.”

“How difficult is the password to crack on that setting?”

“Well, it’s over a hundred and seventy characters, so I wouldn’t bet on anyone managing to brute force it. And it’s not really predictable.”

“How do you remember something that long?”

“There are methods. I ended up using something along the lines of an old story I read, years ago. Sixty Million Trillion Combinations, I believe it was called. Once I refused to give them my password, they just stuffed me in an old industrial freezer and I presume they tried to hack it. I could hear them swearing as my system kept them out. They didn’t give up though. They really wanted that information. After what I presume was two days they tried me again. That’s when things got not so nice. Up till then they’d basically ignored me, just chucked me a few bottles of water when I was thrown in there.”

“What did they do?”

“What I presume is the usual, based on the stories and films I’ve seen. Fists and cuts. I tried to fight back. I tried to run. They broke my leg for that.”

Montoya was slightly impressed that Tim was managing to stay so detached from the situation. It was clearly a coping mechanism.

“At what point was that?”

“Day four or five,” Tim shrugged, “I’m not entirely certain how long they ignored me at first. I should have waited longer. Waited for their attention slip more. I just took the first chance I saw. It was stupid. I was stupid.”

“No. You did what anyone would do.”

“I was stupid. I should have waited. I should have waited. I couldn’t run after that. I didn’t have a chance to run. With only one leg, I couldn’t run. I thought I was going for freedom. Instead I just trapped myself. They avoided my arms… Well, my hands anyway.”

“How long did it go on for?”

“I’m not certain. The initial beating was only a few days. It wasn’t all that bad. Even combined with food and sleep deprivation. I’ve done worse to myself when I’ve pulled a couple of
consecutive all-nighters. Although I do usually have more caffeine. I think it was seven or eight
days of sleep deprivation. Certainly no longer. I was still fairly lucid. I think that annoyed them.”

“What happened next?”

“They got more serious. I think there were two torturers. They kept arguing about what was
the right method to use. One liked passive methods, using my body against me. He liked dumping
water over me, throwing me back in the freezer and turning it on. The other was all violence.
Knives and bats and fists. He didn’t always do it himself. But he was always there. He always
directed it though. The two of them didn’t get on. Violence said that Passive was giving me time to
recover. Passive said that Violence was giving me something to fight against. Giving me an enemy
to defy. They argued a lot.”

“They let you hear it?”

“They didn’t know I did. Sometimes when they hit me I would be dazed. I’d seem
unconscious. But I was still aware of what was going on. I’d fake it for as long as I could. Just to
make the pain stop for longer. And when I was in the freezer, sometimes I’d press my ear against
the wall to try and listen to them. I figured anything I heard was useful.”

“You expected to be found.”

“Yes. I knew someone would be looking for me. I just had to hold on. I was hurting. But I
was managing to stay optimistic. But then the Boss got impatient.”

“There was a Boss? Not one of the two torturers?”

“Yeah. I don’t know his name. Don’t think I ever saw him. I just remember Passive and
Violence used to say “He’s getting impatient”; “He’s not happy”; “He thought it’d be done by
now”. There was definitely a Boss. And he got impatient. He sent Phobos. Everyone was scared of
him.”

“Phobos?”

“I doubt it’s his real name. Name of the God of Fear in Greek Mythology… I had a module
on Mythology once.”

“Stop this nonsense!” Allen barrelled in, “You ran off on holiday and broke your leg. And
now you’re covering your backside.”

Montoya knew what Allen was doing; it was a set-up they’d used many times before. Allen would
be antagonistic and generally the “bad cop”, while she was the “good cop”. Admittedly they didn’t
usually use it on witnesses, but she knew Allen wasn’t a fan of the Upper Class.

“What would you accept as evidence?” Tim asked calmly.

“A doctor’s report. Chosen by ourselves. And we sit in on it.” Allen declared firmly.

“Set it up.” Tim stated, “My only conditions are that no Waynes are informed about it and
that my two friends are present.”
“Why?” Allen demanded to know.

“Because they know me better than you. I have triggers. A lot of triggers now. Some that even I’m not aware of. And they’ll know if you step on one. They’ll stop things from getting bad.”

“Is that a risk? We’re trained police officers.”

“And I’m a Gotham kid born and bred. I may have grown up in a fancy house for most of my life, but that doesn’t make you immune to the violence on the streets. I know how to fight. And you both should know that the worst creature to fight is one you’ve backed into a corner.”
Chapter 16

It didn’t take long to organise a doctor. Quite literally they just went to Gotham’s Central Hospital and asked to see one. There wasn’t a disaster going on, so it didn’t take long.

Tim was perched on a hospital bed, as a doctor fussed around him. His two friends watching from the side-lines.

“Well, the leg is most certainly broken.” The doctor declared quickly, “Every scan agrees. But there are a large number of other fractures showing up on the x-ray. Some going back many years. You would have only been a child at the time.”

“Abuse?” Montoya queried gently, “We have discovered that your home wasn’t a normal household.”

“Not abuse.” Tim shook his head quickly, “As a child I had a fascination with Batman and Robin. Particularly Robin. I wanted to take photographs of them. I would sneak out the house at night, go into Gotham’s darkest places and wait to try and capture them on film. It wasn’t a safe hobby. I’m quite lucky I got off as light as I did.”

“Seriously?” Allen stared, “Why would you do that?”

“I was a kid. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Did you ever get a photograph.”

“Not a single one.” Tim sighed, “At least not of Batman or Robin. I got some pictures of the Arkhemites though.”

“We should have heard of such pictures. The developer would have reported it.”

“I develop my own photographs. Always have done. I prefer it. I can get the style I want.”

“He’s actually really good.” Bart put in, “They look professional. I’ve got one of his landscapes on my bedroom wall.”

“Ma put hers in the sitting room.” Conner agreed, “Beautiful shot. He could make a living out of it, if he wanted.”

“Guys,” Tim looked embarrassed, “It’s just a hobby.”

“What about the more recent breaks? The ones that still predate your disappearance?” The doctor pressed, “Your arm for example.”

“That was me.” Conner admitted sheepishly.

“Not his fault,” Tim was firm, “Someone slipped something into his drink. He was kinda out of it at the time. I just got in the way.”
Montoya and Allen exchanged a look; they’d seen expressions like Tim’s before. Usually on the really good liars amongst the abuse victims. The ones who actually believed the lies themselves. However, it was Conner’s expression that was interesting; he clearly blamed himself, despite Tim’s words, so perhaps Tim wasn’t so far off.

It was Bart’s look that clinched it though. The tightness in his eyes, the tension in his body. He knew exactly what had happened, and while he wasn’t blaming Conner, he certainly wasn’t going to let it happen again.

“Very well,” The doctor conceded, “You must have been very lucky with that bullet wound on your hip. There’s no related mark on the bone. That could have been much worse.”

“I was lucky.” Tim smiled, “What about my leg?”

“I can see the signs of a very bad break, which also started to heal wrong. So it was rebroken and set properly. You will not be able to remove the cast for at least four months.” The doctor stated, “You should have sought medical attention immediately after the break. Then you wouldn’t be in this situation. It could have knocked a month off your healing time. As it is, you might still require surgery. Usually a misaligned bone is repaired with a rod or a plate and screws. A cast might not be enough. I would recommend that you spend as much time as possible off that leg.”

“He will.” Conner and Bart chorused. Judging by the glare that Tim levelled at them, he was not on board with the plan, but that didn’t seem to matter to them.

After a short glaring competition Tim sighed and deflated a little.

“Now that the x-rays are done,” the doctor continued, “I would like to look at your ribs. Top off.”

Tim had steadfastly kept an old cotton shirt on during the examination. Refusing to swop it out for a hospital gown. Neither of the two detectives really blamed him.

“It’s not pretty.” Tim stated, “Phobos had a fair bit of fun.”

“What do you mean?” Montoya frowned.

“Phobos likes fire. Likes making sure you can’t get away from his memory.” Tim had awkwardly risen to his feet.

He turned his back to them.
“He found it amusing that I had taken and then dropped the surname Wayne. Called me their servant. Their pet. Their slave. Said I needed to be marked as theirs.”

Montoya watched as the soft cotton shirt was lowered down Tim’s back, and slowly bandages were unwound; no-one dared to step forward and help, there was a tone in Tim’s voice that rejected any and all help.

The reason why quickly became clear. There were burns across his back, still in the early stages of healing. At least Second Degree if not Third, by her inexperienced estimation. In some places it could never have formed First Degree burns, due to a lack of skin to burn. Lash marks and bruises could be made out. No wonder he has sat so upright. Montoya was reminded of cases of abuse she had responded to in the past. The markings were similar, albeit smaller. A whip of some kind had been used; the marks were far too thin for a belt. The skin had been literally flogged off his back in places. Gauze littered the floor, previously held in place by the bandages.

There was not enough skin to tape the gauze in place.

Montoya felt her stomach churn as she took in the markings. Redness, swelling and yellow pus showed clear signs of infection. She could almost imagine the heat radiating from them.

The burns themselves were infected, yellow filling places where flesh ought to be.

The worst part was that it looked to be forming letters.

“How did he manage that?” Crispus’ voice shook slightly in shock.

“Two different lengths of brands. I had to watch him heat them up.”

“What does it say?” Montoya breathed.

“Wayne.” Tim’s voice was quiet; barely audible in fact.

“And the flogging underneath?” Crispus managed to hold down his nausea to ask.

“I did say that Violence didn’t like the fact that I wasn’t talking.”

“And the cuts underneath the burn?” The doctor queried, even as he started drawing an antibiotic into a syringe.

“The Boss turned up. I didn’t see his face. I was so out of it in pain that I couldn’t take in
his voice. Only the words. He liked the brand. He suggested scarification. More words. But I don’t know what they decided on. I passed out from the pain, part way through.”

Montoya couldn’t help herself, she moved closer and tried to make out the words; looking for the deeper wounds amongst the cuts

“Bruce, Dick, Jason, Damian, Titus.” She managed to make out; many years of reading Harvey’s bad handwriting paying off.

“He even put the dog on there.” Tim’s voice was only a few degrees away from hysterics.

Montoya could see and hear the pain in Tim. He was hurting, and not just from the physical pain; the emotional pain was clear.

The doctor crept closer, obviously intending to inspect the wounds. The wounds clearly needed tending, and so it made sense. The syringe nearby to deliver bolus dose of antibiotics.

The tension in Tim’s shoulders increased as the first light touches made their way across his back. Given the injuries it was only to be expected that Tim would find having someone behind him unnerving.

However, neither detective was prepared for the reaction when the doctor caught a particularly bad spot.

Suddenly Tim moved.

Later, Montoya would reflect that she hadn’t been fully able to follow Tim’s movements. Despite the splint the boy had moved like lightning. She had been too much in shock to react either.

All that was left was the aftermath.

The doctor was on the floor, clutching at his right shoulder, while the associated arm hung limply.

Bart stood in front of the detectives, his arms spread wide to stop them from moving any further.
into the room… Towards where Tim and Conner were.

Tim was backed into the corner; his badly injured back pressed hard against the painted plaster. Only the grace of the fact that he was in a corner relieving some of the pain, in Montoya’s opinion. In his white-knuckled grip, he held what had once been an IV stand. The top and the bottom were both missing now, leaving only the light-weight metal pole.

Light weight though it was, it no doubt could cause pain, if used properly. Judging by the grip that Tim had on it, Montoya wasn’t certain that Tim didn’t have the training.

Conner, though, seemed to have no fear of being harmed. He had both of his hands pressed against Tim’s cheeks. Forcing the smaller boy to look him in the eyes.

“Tim. Tim. Tim! Listen to me! You’re not there! You’re not there!” Conner was desperately trying to break through Tim’s panic.

He was far too close for Tim’s staff to be of any real use, though Tim was still lashing out as best he could.

“He’s not hearing you.” Bart put in, “Kon… You need to do something. He’s going to hurt himself. If he hasn’t already.”

“I know Imp!” Conner fired back, “You think I like this?”

“We could help.” Allen put in.

“He doesn’t know you.” Bart shook his head, “Not like he knows us… We’re the closest thing he has to family. Leave this to us.”

Conner closed his eyes; Montoya thought it was from pain, due to a particularly strong strike from Tim. However, then she saw his posture. It was resignation.

Then the boy turned his head to face them.

“If any of you talk about this ever I will end you!” He declared.
Despite his voice never rising above a pleasant speaking volume, the fury and determination in Conner’s eyes verified that he was speaking the truth.

He turned back to face Tim; took a deep breath.

“I didn’t know what you were going through, I thought that you were fine.” Conner began to sing.

His voice wasn’t bad. And the song seemed to be getting through to Tim. If only because the frightened boy couldn’t imagine his captors singing to him.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this!” Bart breathed, “Disney? Seriously?”

Conner clearly heard Bart, but ignored him, to continue singing.

The two detectives couldn’t see Tim very clearly from their position, so they weren’t aware of exactly when Tim’s mind returned from wherever it had retreated to.

“Kon?” Tim’s voice was gentle and cautious, “What… Where… Who did I… Oh, God!”

A twist of the body and Tim started to heave. Clearly trying to empty his stomach of its contents. However, judging by the clear liquid leaving his lips, he didn’t have anything to empty it of.

Conner shifted to support his smaller friend, his hands staying clear of as many injuries as possible. Bart moved to hold back hair, and position a bin to catch as much as possible. A gentle hand rubbed the back of Tim’s neck, clear of the majority of the wounds.

“We got you, Timmy. We got ya.” Bart murmured, Montoya having to strain her ears to catch the words.

“Did I hurt anyone?” Tim asked.

“Nothing serious.” Conner shrugged, “Bruises mostly. Don’t worry about it.”

Montoya watched as Tim was wracked with heaving once again. Although she couldn’t see him
clearly from her position, with his two friends blocking a lot, what she could see caused her heart to sink.

“I can count his ribs.” Allen murmured.

“You can count his vertebrae.” She returned, “They starved him.”

“Are you okay?” Allen addressed the doctor.

“Minor bruises. I’ve had worse from druggies before now.” He shrugged, “Although the nerve strike was new. He was just desperate. I’ve seen it before. I’m sure you have too.”

“Yeah,” Allen nodded, “Just never expected it from him. He’s a rich kid.”

“A rich, traumatised kid.” The doctor countered, “I’m going to recommend a psychiatric assessment. But I doubt he’ll take it.”

“Why not?” Allen asked.

“Our best psychiatrists are in Arkham. And I’ve heard that the Wayne’s have a bad history with Arkham. They won’t go there. Plus, despite the oaths, some psychiatrists would only see him as a payday. Either from himself or from the media. I’m not blind to the faults in the profession. I know a few who would quite willingly sell out a rich kid. A Wayne? That would be enough money to retire on.”

Allen knew it was true, as much as he hated to learn it. It certainly didn’t surprise him.

“Do you have any alternative suggestions?” Allen tried.

“I might give those two boys some leaflets on PTSD. But that’s about it on the mental front. I’ll give him a prescription for some strong antibiotics and painkillers. As well as one for dressings… There’s not a lot I can really do.”

After a few minutes the three boys straightened up and Tim returned to the hospital bed.

“Is it okay, if we take some photographs?” Montoya asked gently.

“Don’t… Don’t let Alfred see them?” Tim countered, “I couldn’t… I couldn’t deal with that.”

“Not the other Waynes?” Allen frowned.

“Doesn’t matter what you do, they’ll manage to find them.” Tim shrugged, “It’s just how they are.”

“But Alfred?” Montoya tailed off.
“He hurts when we hurt. I won’t do that to him. He’s never been anything but kind to me…
Despite everything.”

“Everything?” Allen queried, “What was everything?”

“Let’s just say I wasn’t always the best of kids.” Tim shrugged.

“What happened after…?” Montoya tailed off; her attempt to distract from the camera being poor, at best.

“I’m not entirely certain. I have a compromised immune system. And my wounds got infected. Next thing I really knew for certain was when I was in a bed. I’d been rescued.”

“By who?” Allen was surprised.

“Pru… Prudence. Don’t ask me her last name. I’ve never known it.”

“Who is she?” Montoya pressed.

“There was a time when I had major argument with Dick. He thought I needed therapy, and wasn’t shy about telling me or getting my friends to try and lean on me.”

“I know Cassie tried.” Conner put in, when eyes flicked to him, “I wasn’t involved. Nor was Bart.”

“I went off the map for a while.” Tim continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “Started investigating different avenues for WE to go down. As part of that I went to Iraq. It’s not safe for a young businessman to be alone in Iraq. So, I hired bodyguards. Three of them. Owens, Z and Pru. Pru didn’t like me. The others I got along with. One night I wanted to see the stars. So we went out into the desert. That was a mistake. We got attacked. Owens and Z died outright. I lost my spleen. Pru her vocal cords. We were left for dead. I managed to get Pru into the jeep and we got to safety. Pru felt she owed me one. That I saved her life.”

“Even though it was your enemy who crippled her and killed her friends?”

“That’s just it. It wasn’t my enemy. It was theirs. There was a group that decided the best way to prove they were the best killers was to go after the best killers.”

“Then why go after bodyguards?”

“Because their organisation doesn’t just provide bodyguards. Sometimes they provide what you need bodyguards from.”

“So she came to rescue you?”

“Yeah. I don’t know who the doctor she used was. I don’t know where she was keeping me. But she knew I was missing. She found me. She saved me.”

“She could have filed a missing person’s report. She could have informed us.”

“Yeah, Pru wouldn’t do that.” Tim shook his head, a small smile on his lips, “I don’t know her story. But I do know she doesn’t trust many people. Certainly not after Iraq.”

“Could she have killed your captors?”
“Certainly. Would she? I don’t think so. Do you have any more questions?”

“You didn’t check in with anyone?”

“Pru didn’t let me have any tech. I couldn’t call anyone. When she deemed I was capable enough to cope on my own, she took me to a park and gave me a phone. I called Kon. I knew he’d come.”

“I’ll always come.” Conner swore, “Any time. Any place.”

“That goes for me, too.” Bart added, “You’re ours Timmy.”

“I contacted Bart,” Conner took over, “We told Tim about you. He insisted we come straight to the police station.”

“Could you describe the men who held you?” Montoya asked.

“Here.” Tim pulled a bunch of papers out of a bag he had with him, “This is everyone I remember, with the names I overheard for them, and the identities I gave them.”

“You’ve used police identity-kits. Where did you get them?” Montoya blinked in surprise.

“My uncle works for the Keystone City Police Department.” Bart shrugged, “Tim asked me to bring some kits. He did them on the way here.”

Conner and Bart had taken over the job of bandaging Tim’s back, once the photographs were taken. Tim seeming more at ease with their hands than the doctor’s.

“Is there anything else?” Tim inquired politely.

“We may need to ask you some questions later. Please make sure you are available.” Montoya stated.

“I’ll give you my number.” Tim started scrawling on a piece of paper, “I’m going out of town to recover. I don’t think it’s a good idea to be on my own while I’m limited in mobility.”

“Where are you planning to go?”

“In country.” Tim replied quickly, “I’d rather not state any further. I know what pressures could be brought on you to locate me. This way, you can’t say what you don’t know.”

“Who are you avoiding, kid?” Allen demanded.

“The Waynes.” Tim shrugged, “Bruce always gets a little strange when he nearly loses someone. I’ll be honest, I forced my way into the family in the first place. And it hurt when they… I wouldn’t say pushed me out… But forgot me. I can’t let myself get that invested again. You know the saying: ‘Better to have loved and lost’?”

“Yeah.” Montoya nodded.

“I’m not sure I agree. But I’m not willing to let myself get hurt again. Bruce and Dick will try to cling to me. Jason and Damian won’t want me around. There’ll be fights. Better if I’m not
around to cause the conflict in the first place.”

“Do you know where Prudence is now?”

“No. I never do. She drops in. She goes away. That’s how things work with us. I don’t even know if I’ll see her again. She might consider us even now.”

“We found a number of dead bodies in the warehouse where you were held prisoner.”

“So Kon said. I don’t know what happened. Either I was locked up or delirious. I got sepsis. I’m more prone to infections these days. Are there any other questions?”

“We’ll contact you if there are.” Montoya declared.

“I need to check you further.” The doctor put in.

“Why?” Tim frowned, “You have all the evidence they need. There is nothing left for you to gather.”

“I need to check lower.” The doctor countered, “There could be damage that you have not informed us of.”

“And why would I not inform you of it?” Tim challenged.

“Shame.” The doctor responded quickly.

Conner and Bart froze, both of them turning towards Tim in absolute horror. Both of them managing to follow the suggestion the doctor had made.

“No.” Tim shook his head, “There was no rape.”

“You cannot be certain. By your own words, you don’t remember much towards the end.”

“I would have remembered that!” Tim snapped, “And while I don’t remember faces, or words, or actions… I remember pain. I remember hands on my skin. And stone under my hands. I remember metal beneath my knees. They never went that far. And I will not allow you to investigate further, just to disprove your own theories. The worst that happened to me, was my back. And the ensuing septic shock.”

Tim started towards the door, his back stiff and straight; before pausing at the threshold.

“One last thing, detectives,” He spoke softly, “Please find out what happened to Jake. Find out who hurt him. Who stopped him from coming to me. He’s a good man. A good friend. He didn’t deserve whatever they did to him.”

“He means that much to you?”

“Jake was there for me in some pretty dark times. And he did a lot for me. If you need me,
Tim continued hobbling out the room, quickly being joined by his two friends. It was slightly amusing watching the pair of them try to offer help without actually offering help.

It was also heart-breaking, given what Montoya had seen.

“I always knew Wayne was going to ruin one of those kids one day.” Allen muttered, “I just never thought it would be like that.”

“Not just him.” Montoya agreed, “Grayson bears a good portion of the blame.”

“Did you see how he flinched when I walked in and accused him of lying?”

“Yes. He’s known violence before. That was an old flinch. That wasn’t new. He covered it too well.”

“I never thought he’d be the damaged one.” Allen sighed, “I thought he’d just be another rich kid going from rich family to rich family.”

“Well, doesn’t mean he’s not damaged. I don’t know if he can bounce back from this.”
Chapter 17

Tim had settled himself in his office chair.

“Okay,” Kon looked at Tim, “Just how much of that was bull?”

“’Bout fifty, fifty.” Tim shrugged, as he rustled through the papers on his desk, “Bart, can you ask Tam for a laptop for me?”

“Here.” Bart held out a laptop in a case, “She had one prepped to your specs.”

“Good.” Tim nodded, “I can set up the rest.”

“What didn’t you say?” Kon returned to the topic.

“I got out on my own.” Tim shrugged, “Pru found me passed out on a rooftop. Not the first time I’ve done that. Probably won’t be the last.”

“No… You call me next time.” Kon was firm.

“I was about to.” Tim confessed, “I just… I passed out first.”

“Not surprising.” Bart put in, “You can’t have been in a good condition. I haven’t see you that bad before…”

“This bad.” Kon confirmed, “You really got away?”

“Yeah. One of them… He wanted me to himself… I was fairly out of it, but I was aware enough to realize it was my best shot.”

“Tim…” Kon’s voice was low, “You said they didn’t…”

“And they didn’t. Doesn’t mean they didn’t talk about it. Doesn’t mean they didn’t try. But you really think I was going to let them?”

“No.” Bart sighed, “You’d fight. No matter what. And we’ll be there for you. No matter what.”

“Yeah. We’ve got your back… We don’t work without the SuperEgo.” Kon added, “But you are not going back to the Perch. Not in this condition.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” Tim returned, “I knew you guys would never let me. So I’ve got a plan.”

“Of course you do.” Bart grinned, “You always do. Nothing to do with the Bats?”

“They don’t need me. They don’t want me.” Tim was blunt, “And until I’m capable again, it’s best I stay away. Safer. Besides I can run pretty much everything from computers, until I’m up to it. Natch.”

“Natch.” Bart agreed.
“Tim,” The door opened and Lucius Fox was standing there, “I heard you were back.”

“Tam told you.” Tim smiled, “Is there anything you need me for, Lucius?”

“No. I just wanted to check you were okay.”

“I’m as good as I can be.” Tim returned, “Is there anything on the books?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself about.” Lucius shook his head, “Tam’s set you up with a new laptop?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll send you all the files to update you on what’s happened. Do we need to take any security measures here?”

“Lock down the security on Padua. If necessary put a security detail on every person involved. Or even sort out hotel accommodation, so that they’re safe. They want this system bad. I want it finished as quickly as possible. Then we can get it out of here and to the DoD. Then it’s safe.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?” Lucius frowned, “It wasn’t up for testing last time I looked.”

“It wasn’t far off.” Tim shrugged, “I’ll check on the details once I’m set up.”

“That’s okay then. You focus on getting better though Tim. You’ve been looking rundown for a while. Get your rest. You need it.”

“I’ll be fine Lucius. You hold down the fort here. You need me, call.”

“I will.” Lucius stepped forward and pulled Tim into a loose hug, “Anything you need, you tell me. You’re important to me. I missed you. I was so worried about you.”

“I’m okay. Don’t worry about me, Lucius. You know I’m a survivor.”

“You always have been. That doesn’t mean I don’t worry about you. Again, you need anything you call me.”

“I will.” Tim agreed, “I’d best be going, Lucius.”

“You need to get off your feet, of course.” Lucius smiled, “Look after him, you two. I’m entrusting him into your care.”

“We understand.” Kon and Bart chorused.

“Good.” Lucius shrugged, “Take care, Tim. I’ll see you soon.”

“Got everything Tim?” Kon asked.

“Everything from here.” Tim stated, “Just need to pick up some changes of clothes, check in with my home computer and I’m set.”
Montoya and Allen were still filing the reports from the hospital visit when they heard hurried footsteps across the bullpen.

They looked up to see Grayson descending upon them.

“Where is he?!” Grayson demanded.

“Due to confidentiality,” Montoya was terse, “All I can say is that he is safe and he is where he has chosen to be.”

“He’s my brother.”

“And that is why I can tell you that he is safe.”

“He’s just a kid!”

“He’s an emancipated minor. That makes him autonomous. And before you protest that, remember that you let him become CEO of a Fortune 500 company. You never objected before.”

“But he’s hurt!”

“And he knows that. He also knows that you know that. And he’s choosing to stay away from you. I think that says a lot about the sort of relationship you have with him.”

“He’s my little brother. I love him.”

“If that’s how you treat someone you love, I’m glad you don’t love me. Piece of advice, Grayson, let him go. You’ve damaged him enough. He’s learned enough not to come crawling back for whatever scraps of affection you’re willing to toss him.”

That blow hit. Montoya watched with satisfaction as Grayson visibly flinched; his eyes showing pain, embarrassment and shame.

“He’s still my brother. I want to know where he is.”

“We don’t know.” Allen put in, “He wouldn’t tell us where he was going. Only that he’d stay in country.”

“And you let him go?! He was tortured! He was hurt!”

“He was upright and mobile.” Montoya returned, “Besides he had two friends with him. Conner and Bart.”

Some of the tension left Dick’s body. He knew that the pair wouldn’t allow any harm to come to
“Tell me he’s safe.” Dick pleaded, “Tell me he’s alright.”

“He’s alive… He’s safe, for now. But I don’t think he’ll ever be alright. Not anymore… I don’t think he was alright even before all of this… You damaged him, Grayson. Unfortunately I don’t think you were the first to do so.”

“What are you talking about? Timmy wasn’t damaged. A little strange. Always. But he’s Timmy. He rebounds from everything.”

“Not this. Give him what he needs. Right now, he needs space. Leave him alone. Let him go, Grayson. Let him be his own person. Not whoever you think he should be.”

“Go home, Grayson.” Allen put in, “You’re done for the day. And in my opinion? You Waynes never deserved Tim. He’s given you everything and you gave him nothing. Don’t go mourning what you never appreciated.”

Dick found himself standing in shock in the middle of the bullpen. People milling around him.

“Romy,” Montoya turned to her fellow detective, “You still got that Cold Case file we were talking about the other day?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Think I’ve got a lead. Ties in with our case. He was the chauffeur.”

“Drake was Chen Rong? He’s not even Chinese.”

“Go figure. But he said he was good friends with Spenser.”

“Wonder if he knew about the aliases?”

“Aliases?”

Oh, like Dick was going anywhere now! He had a name and a link to Tim’s abductors. Dick moved across the bullpen and pulled himself into the shadows. He knew that anyone who saw him wouldn’t think he was trying to hide, but that it was equally unlikely that anyone would actually notice him.

“Yeah, turns out that Jacob Spenser was a doctor. PhD not MD.”

“Uh-oh.” Eyes flickered towards the looming building in the distance.
Fair was fair. Arkham Asylum had the largest concentration of PhDs in the whole of Gotham by population. They were just mostly crazy.

“No!” Romy laughed, “Nothing like that. Turns out he had multiple doctorates in Art, History and Architecture. From what the guys at the University told me, he was like five of the top ten experts in his field. First guy to be called to authenticate a new painting. But the one guy you didn’t want to call. He could just look at a painting and tell if it was a forgery. Never wrong.”

“Drake did say he was an Art fan.” Montoya snorted.

“Jacob Spenser wasn’t even his real name!” Romy snorted, “He was Jacob Stone from Oklahoma. Son of a construction worker. Took his mother’s maiden name when he left.”

“Why’d he leave?”

“Considering we found records giving him an IQ of 190… His father thought he was an idiot. With nothing to contribute but his brawn.”

“Ah…” Montoya blinked, “Drake declared that he was the reason he passed English Lit. or History.”

“Considering everything else, we were betting on the father being oblivious.”

“Genius intellect. Ignorant parents… You sure he wasn’t an Arkhemite?”

“Nah. Made enough money legitimately. And didn’t seem to have any twisted tendencies. Worst thing he ever did, as far as I can tell, was write one published paper where he only referenced papers written by his other aliases. Unless you got anything?”

“No. But he got along with Drake. Met at a Classic Car Show.”

“Go figure. Apart from that, he got in the occasional bar fight. But nothing serious. Most people described him as a touch simple with a good heart. Bit of a womaniser. Loyal to his friends. Generally reserved, didn’t give much of himself away. Few sightings of him with a younger man. Most people assumed it was his brother.”

“Most likely Drake.”

“Most likely. Problem is that most of our background work is useless for you. This case is focused on Drake.”

“But the forensics might help us. Plus we have photo ID kits to work with. Hopefully they won’t all come back to the dead bodies in the warehouse.”

“And we have an alias.” Allen put in, “Phobos. Torturer. Likes fire.”

Dick stilled. He could connect the dots. Tim had been burned. Most likely badly. They needed access to the medical file.

“Ohay,” Romy nodded, “You run with that. I’ll get the files from storage. Let’s play snap.
“See what matches.”

Dick slipped out of the room. He had all the information that he was likely to get right then.

And he’d also left a few bugs behind. Just in case.

123456789

“He’s okay?” Jason’s whole body was filled with tension as he looked at Dick, “You saw him, right?”

He wasn’t the only one. Each of the Bats was just as tense and desperate for answers from the oldest Robin.

Even Alfred was letting some of his nerves show through his usually impeccable veneer of calm and English Stoicism.

“No.” Dick shook his head, “He had already gone when I got there. But he was with Kon and Bart. So we know he’s safe. As to okay… I don’t think so. Montoya and Allen were talking as if there was some permanent damage. Not just physical. But mental as well… I don’t know if he’s still our Timmy… Or if he will ever be again.”

“Tt. That is presuming he is still ours.” Damian pointed out, “Drake has been ostracized from this family for so long that he may not wish to return.”

That was a truth that none of them wanted to acknowledge. A possibility that none of them desired, but still had nightmares about.

“I did get a name for the man in the photographs.” Dick declared, “Jacob Stone. Although he’s been working under the name Jacob Spencer. Murdered about the time Tim got grabbed.”

“On it!” Babs announced, “I’ll get the Birds to check him out. Just in case he helped set Tim up. Although looking at the notes from the interview, Tim didn’t think so.”

“Follow that lead,” Bruce instructed, “We’ll work the case from this end. Anything useful in the notes?”
Dick knew what Bruce was fishing for… Details on exactly what had happened to Tim.

“Nothing on Tim’s condition.” Babs replied, “Just a reference to a Medical File. Most likely being kept on paper at the moment. I’ll need someone to actually retrieve it. There is one odd thing… Tim apparently made reference to a story: Sixty Million Trillion Combinations. Apparently, it was how he set an even more ridiculously long password than seventy eight letters.”

“Oh my,” Alfred’s voice was almost reverential, “I certainly never considered that to be Master Tim’s method. However, it most decidedly makes sense.”

“Alfred?” Bruce turned to his pseudo-father.

“Master Jason,” Alfred turned to the former street-rat, “The book on Master Tim’s bookshelf that contained a bookmark, was it The Banquets of the Black Widowers?”

“Yes.” Jason nodded.

“Did you perhaps peruse the story marked by the bookmark, Master Jason?” Alfred pressed.

“No.” Jason frowned, “Why?”

“I am of the belief that it would have been the aforementioned story.”

“Alfred,” Bruce interjected, “Clearly the rest of us are missing something. Could you please elaborate?”

“The Black Widowers is a series of short stories, Master Bruce,” Alfred explained, “Each being a self-contained mystery. The Sixty Million Trillion Combinations is a story where, as one of the characters puts it, the Black Widowers have to be the Wise Men of Nebuchadnezzar the Second. They have to deduce how a password was cracked, but are not told the password. The password in that situation was fourteen letters long, hence the name of the story.”

“And did they?” Steph demanded.

“Indeed they did, Miss Stephanie,” Alfred announced, “The password was an Acrostic. Taking the first letter of each line of a sonnet.”

“A sonnet being fourteen lines long.” Jason breathed, “So what poem is seventy eight letters long?”

“A Psalm.” Dick realized, “They vary in length. And the bookmark was a Psalm.”

“None of the Psalms are seventy eight lines long, Dickie-bird.” Babs replied, “However, Psalm Seventy Eight is Seventy Two lines long.”

“Then the Hebrew written beside the Psalm in the Bible,” Jason sighed, “Would be what comes first. He even referenced in on his wall! The personalised number-plate.”

“He gave us all the clues.” Dick breathed, “We just failed to put them together.”

“You mean I did.” Jason corrected, “I missed the first clue. I didn’t read the book.”

“We all knew which book had the marker in it.” Bruce pointed out, “We all could have
checked out the contents. The fault does not lie with you, Jason. Laying blame does not help right now. What matters is making sure that Tim is alright. Finding the people behind it. And making sure it never happens again.”

“I don’t know where he’s gone.” Dick stated, “He wouldn’t tell the detectives.”

“We have a lead.” Babs countered, “Name: Phobos. Torturer.”

“Likes fire.” Dick’s voice was hollow.

“That’s pretty specific.” Jason pulled on his jacket, “Reckon I’ll hit the streets. Should be able to rustle some intel up.”

“Anything else?” Bruce pressed gently, easily seeing the distress of his eldest.

“Nothing I gathered.” Dick shrugged helplessly.

“I’ve got a few things.” Babs interjected, “Tim’s claiming a Prudence rescued him.”

“She is in the employ of Grandfather.” Damian stated, “I do not believe that she would rescue Drake without direction from him.”

“You might be wrong.” Steph frowned, “I’ve seen her before. Bald. Not much of a voice. She may be part of the League of Assassins, but she came to warn Tim about the threat against all of us. And she came with her guns empty. Her loyalty isn’t just to the Demon’s Head. Somewhere along the line, Tim got a portion of it… Though I don’t know why.”

“While searching for me,” Bruce spoke softly, “Tim spent a good portion of time amongst the League of Assassins.”

“Voluntarily?” Jason fell back into a chair in shock.

“Tam was a hostage to his good behaviour.” Bruce elaborated, “But I don’t know many details. Tam hasn’t explained further. It may have traumatised her.”

“I wouldn’t blame her.” Jason snorted, “That vipers nest isn’t somewhere for a civilian to be.”

“Given the information we have already collated,” Damian put in, “I am dubious that Prudence rescued Drake. He may simply be using her as an explanation for conveniences sake. Certainly the police will be unable to confirm or deny his story.”

“I’ll retrieve the medical file.” Dick declared, “Might give us an idea as to how mobile Tim was at the time of his escape.”

“I will check Drake’s home for his residency. While I doubt he will be present, there might be information as to where he has gone.”

“I’ll check his safe houses.” Steph declared, “Babs can help me find them all.”

“Keep in contact.” Bruce instructed, “You too Jason.”

“Will do.” Dick nodded.
Jason shrugged in response. Damian huffed.
Chapter 18

It wasn’t uncommon for the Kents to find strays turning up on their doorstep. Ever since they took in a baby from the fields, it was second nature to them (in Martha’s case it had been the case even before then).

They were quite used to their son and grandson (no matter how Clark viewed it) turning up with a friend in tow needing feeding, watering or sheltering. Whether that was for a moment or a while or longer.

They would never turn anyone away.

Certainly not this time, with a far too thin boy. With large bags underneath his eyes. Crutches underneath both arms. And a look in his eyes that made Martha and Jonathan shiver, because of how haunted it was.

He didn’t need the two boys standing either side of him to persuade them to open their arms and their hearts to Tim.

They both knew that Tim was special to both Conner and Bart. He was their oldest and truest friend.

“I hate to impose on you, Mr and Mrs Kent,” Tim spoke very formally, “But I find myself in the situation where I have been advised to reside with someone for the near future. While I expect that the Titans Tower would be sufficient…”

“Nonsense!” Ma Kent interrupted, “You need help, you have it. Any friend of Conner is welcome here, at any time. And it’s Ma and Pa Kent. Or Martha and Jonathan, if you prefer. Come on in, lad. Take a load off. I’m sure you shouldn’t be putting too much weight on that leg anyway. I’ll get you something to drink. Lemonade?”

“I’d prefer apple if you have it, please. Or orange.”

“Fresh apple juice coming right up. Conner, could you tidy the guest room? Jonathan, give him a hand.”

“Sure thing, Ma.” Conner dashed away, followed by Jonathan at a slower pace.

“I’ll head out.” Bart declared, “See you guys later.” He dashed off, leaving a dust cloud in his wake.
“Now sweetheart,” Ma Kent placed a glass down in Tim’s reach, once he was settled in the living room, “Is there anyone I could or need to contact for you?”

“The only people who really care where I am know.” Tim shrugged, “Those who need to know I’m safe either already know or will know shortly. And those who might need to contact me, know how to do so.”

“What about Alfred?”

Tim froze at the name.

“I… I can’t…” He tailed off before regaining his conviction, “He has enough on his plate without me butting in. Best he looks after the Waynes. I can take care of myself.”

“You’re a Wayne too.”

“I haven’t been one for a long time. It was all just a formality, after all. They couldn’t let me keep wandering around unchecked. Not when they knew that I knew. Far too dangerous. And I filled a hole until it could be properly filled.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“Why shouldn’t I? It’s the truth after all.”

“All sorted.” Conner interrupted.

Ma Kent turned to glare at him, but Conner just shook his head. The interruption may not have been when she had wanted, but it had been best placed for Tim. Conner wasn’t going to let his best friend down again. He was looking out for his friend, first and foremost.

“Let’s get you some rest.” Conner stated, “You need sleep to heal.”

“I need to catch up on my workload.” Tim countered, “I’m behind. Mister Fox needs me to catch up as quickly as I can.”

“Tim, sweetheart,” Ma Kent smiled, “You need to rest to heal. Mister Fox is a very intelligent man. I’m sure that if there was anything urgent, he would have informed you.”

“And he didn’t.” Conner put in, “Come on Tim. Get some sleep. Heal. Get stronger. Everything will be waiting when you get up.”

“I’ve missed a month!” Tim exclaimed.

“You could have lost the rest of your life!” Conner snapped, “Please. For my sake? I was worried about you Tim. We all were. All the Titans have been looking for you. We even braved Gotham for your sake.”
Tim visibly wilted.

“You didn’t... There was...”

“Your friend. My Robin. Our Robin. Our leader. Our friend.” Conner was firm, “We were worried. We were scared. We feared you were dead... Please... For our sake?”

“Okay. Okay!” Tim snapped, “But I’m fine.”


Conner continued to grumble as he helped Tim up the stairs. Martha didn’t fail to notice that although Tim was moving his legs, he was bearing only a fraction of his own weight. Conner was giving him his dignity, while not letting him suffer.

It only took a few minutes for Conner to return. A flit of his eyes indicated the kitchen, before the three of them entered it.

“Conner,” Jonathan breathed, “What happened to him?”

“I can’t betray his confidence.” Conner countered, “But this... It wasn’t on the job.”

“Then what happened?” Martha sighed.

“I can’t say.” Conner sighed, “But I would expect nightmares. Flashbacks...”

“PTSD?” Jonathan queried.

“To the extreme.” Conner agreed, “And he won’t admit anything. Because he doesn’t. I’ll come back to change his dressings. Or Bart might, I... We’re still working things out. This has... This has happened really fast. Twelve hours ago, I didn’t even know he was alive. I hoped he was... I believed he was. But I didn’t know. Then he calls me. Just my name. That’s all I needed... That’s all I’ve ever needed from him.”

The two adults exchanged glances, as Conner rubbed a hand over his tired face.

“We know you’re close, Conner.” Martha started to comfort him.

“I have to ask...” Jonathan started.

“No!” Conner exclaimed, “God, no! That would just be weird! Tim’s my best friend. He’s got my back, no matter what. He’s like a brother. I’d like him to be a brother... Is there such a thing as adult adoption? Because he needs it. Besides, I’m dating Cassie and so not going there. I don’t know what Tim’s orientation is anyway. Default says Straight... But I’m not certain. It definitely
comes in the category of Complicated.”

“We wouldn’t judge.” Martha reminded.

“I know.” Conner smiled, “But I’m not. What Tim and I have got… I’m not sure it has a label. We’re closer than brothers. Same as with Bart. We’re more than just friends. It’s not the same as soldiers. I don’t know how to explain it. But it’s not the same as with others. I’m nowhere near as close to anyone else as I am with those two. Even with Cassie, we’re not as close. And she gets that… But whatever it is we have… It’s one hundred percent Platonic.”

“Okay.” Jonathan nodded, “Do we need to contact anyone about the wounded bird we have upstairs?”

“No.” Conner snapped, “The Bats have only been looking for him for a few days. The Titans? We’ve known he was missing for a month! And we were looking long before the Police got involved. He’s not… He doesn’t… He’s better off here. With people who care about him. I’d’ve taken him to the Tower, only we’d end up leaving him alone when we headed off to school each day. This was safer… I know you’ll be here. You’ll take care of him. The way he needs to be taken care of… But will never say. Because he’s not used to other people taking care of him.”

“We’ll take care of him.” Martha promised.

“And promise me,” Conner breathed, “Promise me that you won’t tell the Waynes where he is. I don’t trust them. Two out of four have tried to kill him at some point or another. And the other two… Didn’t do anything to stop it.”

“We won’t say a word to them.” Martha declared, even as Johnathan opened his mouth to protest, “We promise.”

“Thank you. I love you.”

“You haven’t said that for…” Jonathan blinked in shock.

“A long time, I know. Just… I’m glad I have you. And not someone like them. And I don’t say that enough.”

“But we know you do. And that’s enough for us.” Martha smiled, “Get going, Conner. You don’t want to miss out on your own rest or fall behind on your school work.”

“And don’t let Bart do it this time.” Jonathan reminded, “He’s good but we’d rather you failed as yourself than passed because of someone else.”

“Besides,” Martha laughed, “His handwriting is very different to yours.”

“I know, I know.” Conner snorted, “I’ll see you later. Tim’s asleep. I won’t disturb him. Don’t open his door when he’s asleep. Not even just to check on him. He sleeps light.”

“That’s to be expected.” Martha smiled, “Go. We’ll keep you updated.”

“Bye. Love you.” Conner smiled, moments before he dashed away.

The couple sat for several long moments.
“We’re really not going to tell Bruce?” Jonathan asked softly.

“We made a promise.” Martha replied.

Then she smiled.

“However, Alfred’s not a Wayne.”

123456789

“Wayne Residence. How may I assist you?” Alfred spoke crisply, hoping against all hope that he caller was the one person in the world he wanted to hear from.

“Alfred,” Martha’s warm voice reached his ears, “I just called up for a chat. And to try and steal that cookie recipe of yours.”

“You know I believe in keeping family recipes in the family, Martha.” He replied smiling slightly, despite his disappointment.

“Not even if I inform you that I have someone here who would very much appreciate them. And has been missing them for quite some time?”

“He’s safe?” Alfred breathed, “Master Tim is safe? He’s with you? How is he?”

“Safe. Hurting.” She sighed, “He doesn’t want to disrupt the family. He doesn’t count himself as family.”

“I suspected as such.” Alfred responded, “I have been remise in my duties. I have not let him know how special he is. How much I love him.”

“I thought that was the case.” She agreed, “He won’t come back. Not yet anyway. He’s still hurting.”

“Take care of him for me?”

“As if I would do otherwise. You need to tell him you love him.”

“Unfortunately, if I do so now, he will suspect it is due to his current circumstances.”

“And if you don’t he will think that you don’t care at all, Alfred… That boy needs someone. He’s hurting. And not just the physical.”

“How bad is it?”

“I don’t know… But he believes that he is a replaceable part. A stand in until something better came along. Always temporary. Never permanent.”

“Never.” Alfred’s voice was filled with anger, “He is my grandson. No matter what he may
believe.”

“Then you had best find a way to prove it Alfred. All of you. You’re going to get no help from Tim’s friends. My grandson won’t let us tell the Waynes where he is.”

“However, I am not a Wayne.”

“Exactly. You kick those boys into gear. If they don’t, they’ll lose him. Forever.”

“They are aware of that fact.”

“No, they’re not. That boy just came into my home on crutches. His back is too tender to lean back in a chair, so something happened there. He’s tense. Like he expected me to just turn him away. I’ll keep him here for as long as I can. However, I doubt it will be as long as I’d like. He’s already stated that he would be just as happy at the Tower.”

“Over my dead body.” Alfred’s tone was just a shade away from lethal, “He would not get the care and attention he would require to recuperate there. He would also involve himself in cases long before it would be advisable.”

“Agreed. His two best friends are apparently going to organise all of his dressing changes.”

“Which implies that he has wounds that require dressing.” Alfred latched onto her meaning.

“I will attempt to get him to let me sort it out.”

“I would not anticipate success in that endeavour. Master Tim has always been exceedingly private in nature. He would rather suffer pain than ask for help or allow another to see him in pain, if he could prevent it.”

“He’s not come up against a determined Kent before.”

“He has faced down Conner.”

“I’m not Conner. I’ll take good care of your boy, Alfred. You just make sure he knows that he still has a home to go to when he’s ready.”
“Drake is not at his residency.” Damian reported bluntly, “I also could not locate any data regarding where he has chosen to recuperate. However, I did access his computer. There was nothing useful on the system. He has no information regarding his kidnapping.”

“Not on that system.” Babs put in, “I’ve got everything he gave the police. But I’m willing to bet half of it was baloney. No way Tim just waited. He’s too smart for that. He knows more than he’s told them. He just hasn’t told anyone else yet.”

“Anything from his friend?” Bruce pressed.

“Nothing useful.” Babs shrugged, “The Birds took his place apart. He knew nothing about our Night Work. But he was a good friend to Tim. They’ve known each other for a while; it looks like Tim’s been restoring cars and selling them through Jake’s company. Reckon it was a hobby.”

“Tim always has liked figuring out how things work.” Dick muttered, “Equipment, cars… People.”

“You get the medical report?” Bruce looked at Dick.

“Yeah.” Dick held up a camera, “I didn’t really look at it, but what I did see… Well, it’s not the worst I’ve ever seen, but…”

“It’s Tim.” Steph countered, “All his safe houses are empty… How bad is it?”

“I don’t know. Give me some time to upload these. Then we can take a better look.”

“The case files for Jacob Spencer are of little use.” Bruce redirected the conversation, “Stabbed. Some defensive wounds. He knew what was coming. He just couldn’t stop it.”

“According to the Birds,” Babs put in, “Jacob was a fighter. Bar room brawler. But he didn’t consider himself an amateur. He was a smart guy. Really smart. Just never showed it to anyone… Except, maybe Tim. There were a few signs in the place that Tim knew just how smart Jacob was. I can’t track when they first met, but looking at things they’ve known each other since before Jack died… May be even back when Tim was retired.”

“Drake has worked hard at keeping Spencer private.” Damian remarked, “My mother has extensive files on all of us. There was no mention of Spencer in any of them.”

“Sometimes,” Bruce sighed, “We all need a place to go. Somewhere safe. Somewhere where we can just be ourselves. Clark has the Fortress. I have always tried to make this our safe place. With varying degrees of success.”

Each of them nodded. Even Dick had to acknowledge that there had been times when the Manor had not been his first port in a storm. Had not been his refuge from the world.

“I had always believed that Tim’s safe place was his home.” Bruce spoke softly, “That despite the emptiness of his house, it was home, because it was filled with happy memories. It
seems that I was blinded by Tim’s family status.”

“You mean the fact that he weren’t an orphan.” Jason drawled.

“Precisely,” Bruce agreed, “I believed that any family was better than no family at all.”

“You should have learned from me.” Jason retorted, “Mine sold me to Joker.”

“I didn’t know that.” Bruce admitted, “I had always believed she was tricked.”

“No. She sold me.”

“I am sorry.” Bruce murmured, “No one deserves that… And no one deserves what Tim got.”

“You went back and looked.” Dick sighed, “What did we miss?”

“A lot.” Bruce stated, “Jack wasn’t typically violent. But… He was definitely negligent. And borderline abusive. All those little things? Things we thought were just a bad day or one-offs? Those were the days he slipped enough for other people to notice.”

“Well, both or either.” Bruce declared, “It’s all there in black and white. Just nobody ever looked.”

“Nobody ever does.” Jason sighed, “Not until they have to.”

“Going back to the topic,” Babs redirected the conversation, “I doubt Tim had that as his safe place… Jacob knew nothing about us. Nothing about Tim’s Night Job. So Tim couldn’t use it as his harbour…”

“Because Jacob didn’t know everything.” Dick realized, “Okay. Well, that just makes me wonder where is his safe place. But we’ll figure that out at some other point.”

“No one of his other Safe Houses are inhabited.” Steph put in, “But I wasn’t expecting anything.”

“Jason?” Bruce turned to face him, “Did you find anything?”

“He’s an Out-of-Towner.” Jason reported, “Some say New York. Others say New Jersey. He scares quite a few people. But for all that fear… The usual henchmen… They reckon he’s thick. Dumber than dirt. That he won’t last long.”

“Why?”

“He thinks we’re myths. Legends. Fairy-tales. Or if we do exist, our reputation is vastly exaggerated.”

“He is not scared.” Damian stated, “We will teach him to be scared.”
“The problems we’ve got is that no-one knows his real name,” Jason started tick off on his fingers, “No-one knows what he looks like. No-one knows who he works for. But they all agree on one thing… He has a boss.”

“And they’re even more scared of his boss.” Dick sighed, “Makes sense.”

“I do not follow.” Damian frowned.

“What kind of person can keep a monster in line?” Steph explained quickly, “Do we have anything on his boss?”

“New to the circuit.” Jason stated, “Ambitious. No name yet, but I’ve got people looking. Word is that he’s trying to establish himself. Deliberately recruited Phobos, because he’s not from Gotham. No old ties to other Gothamites. Don’t know what his gig is. But everyone agrees that he’s focused… Not even sure it’s a He.”

“Basic mystery.” Dick was over by the computer downloading the pictures, “Anything else?”

“Has money. Don’t know how much. But certainly more than he would if he was starting out from nothing. Either he’s done some work before, or he has another source of financing. Came onto the scene about six months back. Been working quietly to establish a base on which to build.”

“Managed to stay off our radar.” Bruce acknowledged.

“More by luck than judgement,” Babs countered, “We’ve had a string of high priority cases. Arkham has had more than a few escapees in the time. Jay, you manage to link this boss to any particular crimes? Something that I can start working on?”

“Nothing.” Jason shook his head, “Rumours and whispers at the moment. I might manage to get more over the next few days. I’ve put feelers out. Some of my CIs should get back to me fairly quickly. Even if all they know is nothing, it’ll allow me to eliminate sectors.”

“Pass everything you get on to me.” Babs instructed, “It’ll allow me to follow leads. At the moment I’ve got all the crime in Gotham to correlate to narrow down this Boss.”

“Sure thing, Babs.”

“Oh God,” Dick’s voice was no more than a whisper, “Oh God.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

Dick was ashen, one hand over his mouth, his cheeks bloated behind the hand; his eyes wide and watery. Unshed tears held back by sheer force of will. His throat was desperately swallowing.

“What is it, Dick?” Bruce moved to his oldest son’s side; his arms going to brace the younger man’s shoulders.
Dick waved a hand at the screen, even as he moved to throw up in the nearby bin.

“He might have to retire from the field.” Dick whispered, “His leg is so badly injured… The physio is going to be long… I don’t know if he’s going to bounce back from this. And that’s just one injury… Then there’s… His… His… Oh, God!”

“Don’t you dare count Tim out!” Babs snapped, “The Field is not the be all and end all. He is still alive. That’s the important thing. Everything else is secondary. Besides, he survived the Clench. I wouldn’t put anything past Tim… Ever!”

“May be this time he won’t manage it…” Dick tailed off, “You look at what I’m looking at… The burn… Oh God. They… They branded him.”

Bruce reached past Dick and closed the screen.

“Everyone upstairs.” He instructed, “Babs link to the kitchen. We need to discuss this as a family.”

“You read it?” Dick asked, “You need to read it…”

“I will.” Bruce promised, “But if it can reduce you to this… Then I need to…”

“You need to read it first.” Jason muttered, “Damn controlling…”

“I will not lie about the injuries.” Bruce was blunt, “But there is no need for everyone to see the pictures… I still keep logs of injuries. I just keep the pictures of them secured.”

“And then you use them to drive yourself deeper into depression when you’re in a fowl mood.” Babs sighed, “My back was never your fault. It had nothing to do with you. It had nothing to do with your choices.”

“But this is.” Bruce countered.

“No.” Steph shook her head, “It’s on all of us. Any one of us could have realized. Just none of us did.”

“Kitchen.” Bruce repeated, “Not down here… This isn’t a discussion for down here. We need Alfred cookies for this.”

123456789

Bruce settled himself in one of the kitchen chairs, as he quickly read through Tim’s medical report. Around him the rest of his family, minus one, bustled as they settled themselves. Alfred was pouring rounds of hot chocolate, even as Dick flinched a cookie from the cooling rack, instead of the plate on the table.
“Alfred,” Dick frowned, “Why are you making Timmy Cookies?”

“Timmy cookies?” Jason blinked, “These are Alfred cookies.”

“No.” Dick shook his head, “They are Alfred’s Timmy Cookies. Dick Cookies are Triple Chocolate Chip. Jaybird Cookies are Mint Chocolate Chip. B Cookies are Vanilla Chocolate Chip. Steph Cookies are Caramel Chocolate Chip. Dumi Cookies are Pistachio Chocolate Chip. Babs Cookies are Chocolate Fudge. Cass Cookies are Peanut Butter. Timmy Cookies are Brown Sugar Blueberry. These are Timmy Cookies. Where’s Timmy, Alfred? You wouldn’t cook these if you didn’t know.”

“I have been reliably, if circumspectly, informed that Master Tim is currently residing in Smallville.” Alfred caved, when all sets of eyes were trained upon him, “Mrs Kent, additionally, informed me that Master Tim has no desire to contact any of us. He believes we do not care for him and she was instructed not to communicate with any Wayne.”

“Then why did she tell you?” Jason frowned.

“I am a Pennyworth.” Alfred reminded, “I am part of this family. However, I am not a Wayne.”


“I’ll take it.” Steph grinned, “Least we know where to fetch Timmy from.”

“No.” Bruce interrupted.

“What?!” Everyone exclaimed.

“We have to!” Dick protested, “It’s Timmy! He’s hurt!”

“And if we take him from where he feels safe right now, we’ll only do more harm.” Bruce countered, “Besides, no one knows where he is. He’s safe there. We can use the time to find Phobos and his boss. Take them down and deal with everything. We go after Tim now, he’ll think we just feel guilty. Tim never accepts words. He’ll never accept what he deems to empty words and empty actions. A show. We try approaching him now… He’ll never believe.”

“And if we do nothing?” Dick challenged, “He’ll believe we don’t care. That we never cared!”

“We do. We always will.” Bruce countered, “But we can’t force anything. Right now, Tim’s hurting. Badly. And it’s not just the physical. The emotional and mental will be just as bad, if not worse. We need to give him space. Space to sort himself out.”

“But we need to show him that he is important to us!” Dick argued.

“Now is not the right time.” Bruce chided, “He’ll believe it is guilt. Find another way, Dick. We need him to understand that he is wanted and needed and loved and cared for. But if we try to pressure him now, it won’t help our case. We’re going to have to be very careful… And Dick? It’s going to be the hardest for you.”

“Because you’re the one he trusted the most.” Jason sighed, “You’re the one who betrayed him the most. Once bitten, twice shy. He won’t let you close for a long time.”

“I’m just as bad.” Steph muttered, “He still hasn’t really forgiven me for the whole faking my death thing. We’re still… Rocky.”

“Don’t look at me,” Babs put in, “I love the kid and all, but… Well, I sent some of the Birds looking for him just after we all thought he was crazy and he knows I normally take Steph’s side.”

“Ironically Jason and Damian may find it the easiest to bring Tim closer to us.” Bruce returned.

“There’s always Cass.” Dick suggested, “She hasn’t hurt Tim. Not that I’m aware of. Not without a damn good reason.”

Both Bruce and Alfred nodded at his words. Mind manipulation was always catalogued as a good reason in their books.

“Tt.” Damian snorted, “She is not good with words.”

“And that’s probably why Tim might still trust her.” Bruce agreed, “She relies upon actions. And Tim trusts actions over words. They always were a good pairing. Good partners.”

“Then why isn’t she here?” Jason frowned.

“She said that she would check China.” Dick stated, “Apparently there’s a gang there that Tim’s dealt with in the past. She thought they might have targeted him.”

“She went after them.” Steph nodded, “Good call. She could have been right.”

“How do we fix this?” Dick asked, “How can we prove to Tim that we’re serious?”

“We find the people who hurt him.” Bruce stated, “We find out why. We find out everything. And we give Tim proof that we care about him. Things that aren’t just a show for other people to see. Personal things. Think long and hard. Find something that means something to him. The important thing is to give Tim time to heal.”

“But make sure Tim knows that we still care about him.” Steph countered.

“Give him time.” Bruce reiterated, “Tim needs time to heal.”

“We give him too much time and he’ll pull his mask back on.” Dick reminded, “Then we’ll never manage to convince him.”

“It’s a balancing act.” Bruce agreed, “But right now he doesn’t need the stress. We’ll only do more harm.”

“What are his injuries?” Jason frowned, “The way you’re acting… This is bad.”

“Dick’s right,” Bruce breathed, “These could potentially mean his retirement from the field. But they didn’t just injure him. They set out to humiliate him and psychologically wound him. I
doubt they meant to, at first. But he’s stubborn. Runs in the family. So they tried to break him. Scarification was attempted. Whether it takes is another thing entirely. Tim denied he was raped.”

“But you suspect.” Dick whispered.

“I do not believe this is a topic for the kitchen table.” Alfred reprimanded.

“Alfred, we need to know.” Jason countered, “Tim’s gonna have all kinds of traps in his head after that. I know I did. Still do.”

“So we watch out for his back,” Dick remarked, “Don’t focus on his scars.”

“You’re not going to see them.” Bruce corrected, “They focused on his back. He might be touchy about names. Ours particularly.”

“Why?” Damian frowned, “That makes little sense, father. Names have never been particularly important to Drake in the past.”

“Be very careful if you call him that.” Bruce reprimanded slightly, “It looks like they made a big thing about the fact that he wasn’t a Wayne.”

“He is.” Dick snapped back, “He is.”

“Not in their eyes.” Bruce replied, “And possibly not in his. We’re going to have to be very careful.”

“What did they do?” Jason asked bluntly, “No beating around the bush, B.”

“Starved him. Drowned him. Broke his leg. Let it heal wrong. They had to rebreak it to fix it. Whipped him. Burned him. Branded him… With our name. Then they carved our names into his back. Even included Titus… But forgot Alfred.”

“Then we are dealing with ignorant thugs, Master Bruce.” Alfred was indignant, “They do not count me as a part of this family. Ranking the hound as higher in status than myself.”

“And they put Tim at a similar level.” Steph breathed, “God, that’s not going to be good. Tim’s not got great self-esteem at the best of time.”

“Are you blind Brown?” Damian snapped, “Drake has power, influence, wealth. Why would he have poor self-esteem?”

“Because of everything he perceives he lacks,” Jason sighed, “Even as a kid I knew my mother loved me. I doubt Timmy even got that.”

“He never fit in at school.” Dick agreed, “Always too smart. Always on the outskirts of anything. He’s intellectually superior, but socially…? Well, Jason’s better at making friends.”

“He always has been a bit clumsy about it.” Steph put in, “He was worse when I first met him. Robin was where most of his social confidence came from.”

“But how do we tell him that we love him, when he doesn’t really understand?” Dick asked.

“We’ll just have to find a way.” Bruce shrugged, “There’s always a way.”
Chapter 20

Martha had to give Tim credit. Despite his casted leg, the stairs were no obstacle to him. He also had a focus like no-one else she’d ever met… Well, except for the boy’s father.

“Lucius,” Tim smiled, “I think we’re over extending in that area. Is there any way to pull back temporarily? Wait until the revenue stream is more established?”

“I agree. We don’t want to poison the market for future ventures. I’ll sort it out for you.”

“Anything else I need to be aware of?”

“Damian turned up yesterday to work.”

“He’s still doing that? What section is he working now?”

“Catering. They had him working the canteen on the fifth floor. Bussing tables and such like, seeing as how he’s not got the Food and Hygiene Qualifications.”

“Okay. Looks like he took my advice seriously. Working from the bottom up. How’s it going down with the employees?”

“As you expected, they were a little nervous and cautious at first. But word’s getting around. They’re starting to trust him a little more. They’re starting to like him. This recent escapade, has certainly cracked his idea that he’s perfect. So he’s really starting to show some humility. Real humility. Not the fake stuff he’s been using up till now.”

“What did he do?” Tim sighed.

“Flooded the kitchen using the Hobart.” Lucius laughed, “Because he didn’t listen to instructions. They made him clean it all up. Which he did without complaining. Your plan is working.”

“Which one?” Tim smiled, “The one designed to turn Damian into a functional human being or the one designed to make sure that every employee loves him?”

“Both?”

“You’re doing well, Tim. The footage of the canteen is hilarious though. More than one Board Member is chuckling away. They don’t deem Damian a threat.”

“How did that get out?” Tim frowned, “I didn’t want Damian to be embarrassed, Lucius. Find out who released the footage and I want them reprimanded.”

“On it. But it has helped Damian’s image.”

“I know it will be.” Tim agreed, “But I’d rather it was word of mouth. Besides I was planning on releasing something like that myself at the right time. Find out which Board Members find it funny. I want to know who I need to target first.”

“I’ll rank them by reaction.” Lucius declared, “There’s a few moving onto Damian’s side. I know you don’t like the fact that the footage got out, Tim, but it was a good thing.”
“But it was uncontrolled.” Tim countered, “Besides when Damian finds out… It’ll break what little trust he has towards me. If I’ve taken steps… If I’ve been trying to control the fall-out… It might not destroy it completely.”

“You’re doing a great job, Tim.”

“No.” Tim shook his head, “I’m adequate. I just need to keep everything under control. I’ll set up Damian’s kingdom so that it’s ready for him. But I need time. Six or seven years to get it all perfect.”

“I know.” Lucius agreed, “I’ve seen the plans. I know what you’re doing. And I’m behind you one thousand percent, if this is what you want to do. You know my opinion with regards to it. But I’ll support you in the direction you want to go.”

“This is the way things have to be, Lucius. I won’t make the same mistake twice. Is there anything else?”


“No. I do not. I’ll check in tomorrow. Speak to you then.”

“Get well soon, Tim.”

The connection was cut.

“You really do care for him,” Martha smiled as she placed a glass of apple juice and a plate of cookies next to him, “You’re a good brother.”

“No,” Tim shook his head, “I’m just Damian’s Regent.”

“You care.” Martha chided, “I know a brother when I see one.”

“Can you be a brother if only one part of the pair sees the other that way?”

“Yes. Easily.”

“Then yes, I’m a brother. But it’s safer if I don’t think that way. Then I won’t slip up when I talk with them.”

Martha noticed the use of the plural. This was more than just about Damian.

“Why not let things slip? It would get your feelings out.”

“When one has a weak point, you do not point it out so that someone can stab you in it.”

“And why would they stab you? Surely they would protect it for you.”

“That’s never my luck. Love is something I give. Not something I get.”
“That’s not true.”

“If my own mother and father could not love me, how can I expect anyone else to?”

“They did love you.”

“You never even knew them.” Tim countered, “I like to think that my father was fond of me. And that my mother liked me. But I don’t know if they actually did. Or if it was all simply a show for other people to see. It certainly wasn’t for my benefit. Because very little of their care went on behind closed doors.”

“If they didn’t love you, they wouldn’t have had you.”

“There is a certain level of Class, Breeding and Wealth where women are deemed to be little more than Breed Stock or Chattel. My mother was of that Class, Breeding and Wealth. However, she was also intelligent enough to realize it. She knew that she would be subject to my grandfather’s reign until she married. If he died first, she would be expected to obey her younger brother in all things. So she decided to get married. Her criteria for a husband was one that was Wealthy enough and of good enough Class to satisfy her father; Wealthy enough to ensure that she could live the life she desired; weak-willed enough so that she could control him, rather than the other way around; and a man she could come to care for given enough time.”

“That explains her marriage, but you. She loved you.”

“I’m not entirely certain that my mother knew how to love. I said women are viewed as Breeding Stock. As long as she had not produced a male heir for my father, she would be subject to condemnation and gossip. She had me to complete her duty. Then she would be free to do as she liked, without anyone looking down on her for her choices. All she had to do was attend a few Charity events, Galas and such like; build a few schools and hospitals and dig a few wells in the countries she visited and no-one so much as made a peep about her lifestyle choices. I was a strategic decision. My life for her freedom.”

“That’s not true.”

“She told me so. I think I was three at the time. Certainly it was before the Circus. My mother never loved me. I was simply a piece on a chess board. The more I impressed other people the higher her social standing was and the more she could get away with. The more she could get away with the less time she spent in Gotham. The less time she spent in Gotham the happier she was. The happier she was the more I felt that I was being a good son. And the more I felt I was being a good son, the closer I believed she would be to actually start loving me.”

“And your father?”

“I think he cared in his own way, but I was never the son he wanted. He wanted a sporty, athletic, outgoing son. A jock. What he got was a geek and a nerd. He didn’t know how to love me. I was so far away from what he expected that he didn’t know how to love me. I guess I was always broken.”

“You are not broken!” Martha snapped immediately, “That they didn’t let you know that they loved you, is on them not you.”

“It’s not that they didn’t let me know, it’s that they didn’t.”

“No parent cannot love their child.”
“Mine managed. Don’t fret about it. It is simply the way things are. I don’t think my grandfather really loved my mother either. Love isn’t a common commodity at a certain level.”

“This is unlike you.” Martha frowned, “According to Conner you are a very private person.”

“I am.” Tim nodded, “But you raised an Investigative Reporter. I’d be foolish to assume that curiosity was developed purely on his own. You’re a true Yenta. You want everyone to be Perfect and Happy and Shiny… Well, I’m not. I’m not Perfect. I’m Broken. But I’ve learned how to live with my broken pieces. I’m Happy the way I am. Don’t try and fix this. This is how things are. And how things will continue to be. This is my life. Let me live it the way I want.”

“But it could be so much better.”

“And it could be so much worse. Don’t interfere. I’m here because Kon and Bart both think I need someone nearby. But I’d be just as happy on my own. I’m here for their sakes. Not mine. And if you try to interfere again, I’ll leave.”

“I haven’t interfered.” She tried to argue.

“These are Alfred’s cookies.” Tim held one up, “I know them. I know them very well. He doesn’t give the recipe out. I barely got him to agree to leave me the recipe in his will. He made these and sent them here. You told him I was here. Kon forgot to include Alfred in his embargo. Who ran them over? Clark?”

“Wally.” She admitted.

“Hmm.” He blinked in surprise, “Dick must have called in a favour. Leave things be, Mrs Kent. I’m not something you can fix.”

She turned and went to leave the room, still reeling from everything Tim had said.

“You don’t need fixing.” She murmured pausing in the doorway, “You’re not broken.”

“Yes, I am.” He whispered back, just as quietly, “I always have been.”

“He thinks I’m a busybody.” She muttered to Jon as they lay in bed that night.

“He’s sort of right.” Jon shrugged, “What? Martha! You know it’s the truth. You always have been. You want to fix the world. It’s part of what attracted me to you. You’re a good person. You want to make things better for everyone.”

“And that’s wrong?”

“No! But sometimes people don’t want help. You know that the first step is accepting you have a problem.”
“He knows that it isn’t normal. He just thinks that he’s broken. He just doesn’t want any help.”

“You can’t force someone to let you help… Do you remember Rebecca? When she was dating that jerk Steve?”

“Yeah. I told her he was bad news. I still can’t believe she stayed with him so long, before she realized that he wasn’t good for her.”

“She stayed, because everyone was telling her to leave him.”

“What? That makes no sense.”

“She wanted to prove everyone wrong. She always was stubborn. She stuck it out, partly to prove everyone wrong. And partly because she didn’t want people telling her that they told her so. She didn’t want help. But everyone was trying to force her to get it.”

“And I was one of the most pushy about it. I didn’t realize…”

“You never do. You always want to protect people, even from themselves. It makes you a little blind to their desires. You’re like a Fairy Godmother, trying to give everyone what you think they need. What you think they want. And you’re usually right.”

“But sometimes I’m wrong?”

“Sometimes. What you need to do is give a person what they know they need. Ask if they need help. And just be there if they say they don’t and you can see that they really, really do.”

“What do we do now?”

“We give Tim space. He came here for sanctuary. Whether or not that’s how he thinks of it, that’s what this place it. What it has always been. A place for people to recuperate and rediscover who they really are. We love that boy and we care for him. But we don’t force him to do anything he does not wish to do.”

“And when Alfred asks?”

“We tell him that Tim is safe and that we are respecting his privacy. When Tim leaves we tell him that. This is their problem Martha. If we interfere in the fixing of it, Tim will always be wondering if it got fixed because they wanted to fix it, or because we made them fix it. Any interference only lessens the worth.”

“It’s not fair. It’s not fair, Jon. That boy has a heart big enough for the entire world. I can see it. But he’s hurting. And you’re telling me I can’t help?”

“I’m saying that it’s not our help that he needs. And you know it’d be both of us. You lead, I follow. Remember?”

“I remember. I just…”

“You want to fix the world. You always have. You gave that part of yourself to Clark. Even when he was just a kid. And I love you for it. But you can’t fix this. You shouldn’t even try. They need to fix it.”

“Otherwise it won’t be fixed. I just…”
“You hurt for him. I know. I do too. But he’s tough. And they’re not stupid. Bruce and his boys? They’ll figure this out. You just have to have faith… Prayers wouldn’t hurt though.”
Chapter 21

“Welcome back Cass.” Dick pulled her into a hug, as she entered the Cave.


“And you’re not much better.” Dick remarked, “Your vocabulary is suffering.”

‘Tim is…” Cass frowned for a moment, “Special. Little Brother.”

“You thought you had a lead?” Jason remarked, “Can it help?”

“No. Torture… Not them.”

“Who?” Damian put in, “They might still be involved.”

“Daughters of Acheron.” Cass managed carefully.

“I’ve not heard of them.” Dick frowned.


“Was part of plan.” Cass nodded, “I killed him.”

“What?!” Multiple voices screeched.


“Tim never mentioned that part of the plan.” Bruce was scrolling through the report, “I presumed the Daughters wanted to win as well.”

“Winning not first goal.” Cass’ eyes flicked away from everyone, “Daughters not nice.”

Dick noticed her body language. It was practically screaming. Something was very wrong. Cass was holding something back. She was keeping a secret. Something to do with Tim.

“Cass,” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, “What aren’t you telling us?”

She tried to turn away from him, but Dick held fast. Everyone knew that if she wanted to get free she could easily do so. But she wanted his comfort.

He ushered her to a chair, but she refused to sit.
“Up.” She managed to get out.

Dick easily translated and let her get changed, so that they could all retreat upstairs. Cass chose the small sitting room, where Dick preferred to relax as it had more of a family feel than some of the other rooms.

“What was Tim keeping from us?” Bruce asked gently.

“Daughters wanted Damian.”

“Tt.” Damian sniffed, “That would be an inefficient way of capturing me.”


There was a long pause as everyone tried to think around Cassandra’s words.

“No.” Bruce breathed, “No, Cassandra. Tell me that’s not true. Not Timmy.”

“What?” Damian frowned, “I do not… I do not understand.”

“God, no.” Dick froze, “Please, Cass… Tim wouldn’t.”

“Daughters take. Daughters not ask.”

“How far did they get?” Jason put in, calmer than the rest; although Damian was still confused, “We need to know.”

“He was dressed. She was not. He joke. How we got Damian. No clothes off him.”

“That’s good.” Bruce sighed in relief, “That’s good. God, what have I come to? That I’m considering it a blessing that my son was almost raped?”

“Key word there being almost.” Dick retorted, “I’m not trying to diminish what happened, B. But at least he doesn’t have that burden. I wouldn’t want that.”

“Sometimes the near misses are just as bad as the actual hits.” Jason pointed out, “Look I’m not disputing that it’s a good thing that he wasn’t actually raped. But it’s not a good thing that they got as close as they did. No offence Cass.”

“I think it might do us some good to do some research on PTSD.” Alfred put in, “Help us to understand what we could be dealing with.”

“That’s a good idea.” Bruce agreed, “Some research would help us.”

“Fuck that!” Jason snapped, “Timmy needs people there for him. If you want him to be part of this family, we need to go and be there for him! You heard that recording from his office, same as I did. He’ll be having flashbacks and nightmares. Even if it was only nearly. Even if it never
“Actually happened… It’s still there. Inside his head. And it’ll only get worse the longer he’s alone.”

“He’s not alone.” Dick argued.

“Yes, he fucking is! Ma and Pa Kent are great people and all. But they’re not his fucking family! I’m not even sure that we are! But we’re the closest thing he’s fucking got! He needs us right now. Kidnap? I know he could deal with. For fucks sake, I’ve messed with him before now. And that’s messed with his head… But I’d wager he’d rather I was there than no-one was! Because what he’s gone through… Torture? He’d handle that like a fucking boss! No shit there. I had him beat. Had his blood on my hands and he knew he was going to lose. He had no more fucking cards to play. But when I asked him if he thought he was good enough… He said yes. That’s what I’ve never told him. That little word… That’s why I didn’t kill him. God, I went there to kill him. I went there to fucking beat him into paste. Had it all set out. All planned. But when it came down to it… I couldn’t kill him, because he… He reminded me of me. All fire. All fury. Determination. Guts. I couldn’t kill him. Not like that. Not while he wasn’t able to fight back. It made me too much like the Joker… Like the Joker when he was killing me… I didn’t want to feel like that again. But he needs someone. Someone who understands. Ma and Pa Kent are good and all… But they’ve never dealt with the darkness the way we have.”

“Give him space.” Steph fired back, “Tim knows what he needs. If he needs us, he’ll say.”

“No. He will not.” Damian shook his head, “Drake does not believe he has any right to ask anything of us on a personal level. I am doubtful that he would ask for assistance on a professional basis, unless there was no other option available. He will endure through this on his own. He will not burden another with his pains. That is not his way.”

“You can’t know that.” Steph argued.

“He right.” Cass put in.

“Consider the evidence,” Damian retorted, “Drake gave each of us one chance. He went looking for Father, when we all believed he was dead. Each of us told him that he was wrong. Not one of us believed him. He was alone.”

“No.” Bruce shook his head, “From what I’ve managed to piece together there was one person who believed him… Ra’s Al Ghul.”

“Oh God.” Dick muttered, “That’s why he was there. I basically drove him into Ra’s arms.”

“Explains.” Cass nodded, “Ra’s likes Tim.”

“What do you know?” Jason frowned.


“He was nearly raped by Ra’s Al Ghul’s sister?!” Dick gulped.

“Half.” Cass countered.

“Grandfather would not ever acknowledge such a woman as his sister,” Damian declared, “Half blood would make her unworthy. She may be of his father’s blood, but she is not his legitimate offspring. Therefore, she would not be deemed suitable to continue the line further. Certainly, she would not be deemed suitable to associate with myself, a true child of line. Although, she might have been permitted to serve as a maid or a nurse. Grandfather takes his debts seriously, a child of his father, even illegitimate would be offered a way to provide for themselves,
unless they acted against the legitimate line.”


“We’ll look into that.” Bruce nodded, “I want to know exactly what Ra’s wants with my sons. He seems to have taken an unhealthy interest in Tim.”

“I could investigate, Father.”

“No.” Bruce cut that suggestion off, “I don’t want you anywhere near them. I don’t trust them with you. I will never trust them with you. They were willing to sacrifice you to Ra’s insanity. I won’t risk you. I won’t risk any of you.”

“It might be too late for Tim.” Dick muttered, “I know that Tim has fought Ra’s. Sword to Bo. I won’t say Tim won… But he certainly didn’t lose.”

“He was kicked out of the window.” Damian was dismissive.

“The fight was on more than one level, little D.” Dick returned, “Tim had everything else covered. Ra’s never meant to kick him out the window. It was anger that drove him to that. Anger that Tim had out thought him.”

“Which puts him at risk.” Bruce nodded, “So I need to know how much risk there is.”

“And you want to do that before we reassure Timmy that we still care?” Jason challenged.

“Ra’s won’t risk angering Superman.” Bruce reminded, “He’d risk going after Tim, if he was pretty much anywhere else. But in Clark’s home? No, he won’t touch Tim. He knows how protective Clark is about his parents.”

“That still doesn’t solve the problem.” Jason snapped, “Timmy needs to know we care.”

“Right now, he’s asking for space.” Bruce countered, “We need to respect that.”

“Fuck this shit!” Jason snarled, even as he stormed out the room, “If you don’t want him back, B, just say. Don’t do this half and half shit! Let him go! Or keep him! Don’t keep him dangling. He doesn’t deserve that. No-one deserves that.”

“He is right, Father.” Damian fixed Bruce with an unwavering stare, “You need to make your intentions clear.”

Then Damian turned and marched out the room.

“You hurt him. I’ll hurt you.” Steph declared, “I may have hurt him before… But you have the potential to destroy him. I won’t let you do that.”

She followed the others.

She darted forward touching both Bruce’s forehead and chest, giving Bruce a firm gaze, before darting after Steph.

“You have a careful balancing act to perform here, Master Bruce.” Alfred’s voice was only a shade or two away from a reprimand, “I would recommend that you not fail.”

Alfred then smartly left the room.

“You know,” Dick’s tone was slightly shell-shocked, “If I didn’t know what was going on, I’d think you were receiving Shovel Talks.”

“Shovel talks?” Bruce frowned.

“A-and you don’t know what those are.” Dick sighed, “Let’s just put it this way. That sounded way more like you’re dating Tim than being his dad… But I do have to agree with them. I’m not losing Tim.”

“Would it help you to know that I have a plan?”

“Depends upon the plan.”

“First we get intel. Then we move from there. I have no intentions of losing Tim, Dick. I love him just as much as the rest of you. It’s just that he’s the good son…”

“He’s the one we’ve never really had to worry about.” Dick muttered, “Damn it! When did I stop watching out for him?”

“It’s the squeaky wheel that gets the grease. The sticking out nail that gets hammered in… Tim… Doesn’t. Never has. I don’t think he knows how to.”

“Oh, he knows.” Dick laughed bitterly, “Just every time he has… We haven’t given him the time he needs. We haven’t been there for him. He’s learned that he isn’t important enough. That he’s just a stand in. Just a patch job, until a full repair can take place… We taught him that. We didn’t mean to. But we did.”

“Once we have the intel we need, we can teach him the truth.” Bruce reminded, “We just need intel. So, we know how bad things are.”

“So, what’s the plan, B? It doesn’t matter what questions Alfred asks Ma Kent. Tim keeps his secrets close to his heart. He won’t tell her about nightmares or flashbacks. About triggers or pain. Anything useful he’ll keep tucked away.”

“That’s why we’re not going to rely on gossip… Dick, you need to leave the room.”

“What? Why?”
“Because what I’m about to do is underhanded, devious, and likely to really, really upset both Alfred and Tim, if they find out. Better you don’t know, so that I’m the only one in trouble then.”

“I don’t think I want to know.” Dick threw his hands up, “But you promise you’ll share the data? Help put together a plan?”

“Of course. Go and calm the others down. I’ve got this… I swear to you, Dick. I’ve got this. I’ll get the intel we need. Then we can plan with calm heads and all the information we need… You know as well as I do, that we can say all the words we like. Tim only believes actions. It is our actions not our intentions that he will judge us by.”

“Agreed. And understood. Just don’t take too long. I don’t know how long I’ll be able to hold Jason back.”
Chapter 22

Bruce waited until Dick had closed the door behind him, before he moved. He retreated to his office, careful not to bump into anyone else. Sitting behind his desk, he picked up the phone and quickly dialled a number from memory.

There was a moment of ringing, then the phone was answered.

“Bruce?” Clark’s voice shook slightly, “I take it there’s news?”

“He’s alive.” Bruce ran a weary hand over his face, “He’s alive…”

“Be right there!”

Bruce barely had time to register the dial tone, before Clark was in the room. He quickly covered the space to where Bruce sat.

Clark removed the phone and replaced it on the charger, before wrapping an arm around Bruce’s shoulders.

“Okay, I know something is wrong.” Clark spoke clearly, “How can I help? What do you need?”

“I need information. I need to know how to convince Tim that I love him. That we love him. That he is an important and vital part of this family. Not just the business. Not just the Job…”

“That he’s your son. And you have wanted to call him that since the day you met him?”

“Not quite the day.” Bruce confessed, “It took a few months. I… I wasn’t in a good place after Jason. I tried to keep my distance. Let Alfred and Dick take the lead. I didn’t want to kill another child… Kill another man’s son… I didn’t realize that he was more mine than he ever was theirs.”

“What changed your mind?”

“When he decided that my life was more important than wearing the Suit. That I was more important than becoming Robin. And I’d fought with him over it, not that long before. He was full of fire and fury at me. Because I denied him. He was everything that Jason was. But then…”

“Then he wasn’t.”

“He didn’t even put on the Suit to rescue me. He didn’t want to ‘Disgrace’ it. He held Robin up on some sort of pedestal. An ideal. He saw Robin as a Symbol. That’s when I finally
realized what sort of person he was… The sort of person he still is.”

“Which is?”

“He’s not me. He’s not Dick. He’s not Jason. He’s not Babs. He’s not Alfred. He’s… He’s Tim. A thinker. A planner. A Chess Master. But someone with the right kind of heart. He was willing to give up Robin to save my life. For the chance to save my life. Then he didn’t even try to talk me out of the decision. He accepted it. He plots and plans… But always with the betterment of others as his goal… Except for once…”

“Once?”

“He almost manipulated Captain Boomerang to his death.”

“Can’t really blame him for that… He didn’t try to kill him directly?”

“No.”

“Then, it’s understandable… You didn’t even try manipulation when you went to kill the Joker.”

“Tim will do anything for a friend… Or family.” Bruce ignored Clark, “He gives. He gives everything he has… And everything he is. And he asks for nothing in return… Unfortunately, he has often received it. And I am to blame for that.”

“We all bear some of the blame… I didn’t take Conner’s fears seriously.”

“You are not his father!” Bruce snapped, “I am. And I haven’t let him known that he is loved. That he is wanted. That he is precious to me.”

“Then go tell him.”

“I can’t. Words don’t mean anything to Tim. He’s heard them all before. Actions are what Tim needs.”

“Then go show him.”

“I need intel first. I need to know how bad it is.”

“You mean you don’t already? Thought you would have the police file… I presume there is one?”

“Oh, Tim’s gone to the police. But he didn’t tell them everything. He didn’t tell Conner or Bart everything. He won’t tell anyone everything. I need to know more. So that I know how to help.”

“And you Bats can’t just talk it out.” Clark sighed, “Why me? Why do you need me? I’m no good at intel gathering… Your words, not mine.”

“In this situation, you have an advantage. You can gain access where I cannot.”

“Where?”

“Tim is in Smallville. To be precise, he is on a farm in Smallville.”

“Conner took him home.” Clark breathed, tension leaving his body, “He’s safe there,
Bruce. You know that."

“But I need to know more. Go home for lunch. A Sunday meal. That won’t be too suspicious. You can get me an up-to-date view of his health.”

“Ma would tell you anything you need to know. Anything you want to know. She loves you, like another son. You know that.”

“She can only tell what she knows. Tim will hide things from her. You will be able to see exactly how much damage he has sustained. At least physically.”

“You’d need J’onnz for mental.”

“Unlikely to be productive. Tim has a very strong mind. He has natural mental barriers. And my training only enhanced them.”

“Sucks when your lessons are used against you, doesn’t it?”

“It simply means that I need to utilize different tactics. Now pay attention, these are small audio/visual devices…”

“I am not bugging my parent’s house!”

“I am not asking you to bug their bedroom.”

“Can’t you Bats just talk?! I mean this is a little extreme Bruce. Talking is an acceptable communication method, you know.”

“Tim doesn’t want to talk to us. He doesn’t feel that he is part of the family. I gave him too much space.”

“What?”

“When Dick was growing up, how many times did you all joke about me coddling him? All the DaddyBats jokes? Yes, I heard them… I held onto Dick so tight that he became desperate to be free. He finally ended up storming out. We didn’t talk for months. Despite Alfred’s attempts. And Dick’s anger at me was partially taken out on Jason. Who didn’t deserve any of that. Even if things got better, the rocky start was all my fault. This time, I didn’t want that. When Tim came along, I gave him more space. I thought it was better that way. That I had learned from the past. But I gave him too much space. He doesn’t believe we care. He thinks it’s guilt that is causing us to reach out. I could have stopped that… By keeping him close. I went too far the other way.”

“No. You’re a great dad. You always have been.”

“I screwed up. This is all on me. So, I have to fix it. He’s my son. I love him. I need him to know that. Actions are more important than words to Tim. So, I have to use the right actions. I need to know how to fix this. To do that, I need information. I need to know, Clark. And I have no other way to get the information. How far would you go for Kara?”

“You’re going to guilt me into this, aren’t you? Come on, Bruce! I can’t do it. I can’t bug my parent’s house. Can’t you get Barbara to hack into his computer and use the camera to check up on him?”

“And somehow in your mind that’s better?” Bruce stared.
“Well, it’s not worse. And I’m not involved.”

“No, it’s worse. That also allows us access to Tim’s personal files. Things that he keeps secret for a reason. Anything bugs pick up could be seen or heard by a person. Rummaging through his files? No.”

“You’ve already tried.”

“Babs has. Tim keeps his internet security very tight.”

“Understandable. But I’m still not bugging my parent’s house. I’ll give you a report on what I see and hear. But I won’t bug it. Not even for you. And that’s my last word on it.”

“Fine. Then I want you to visit at least weekly during Tim’s convalescence and give me full reports on his health. And I mean everything.”

“Okay. I’ll do that. I’ll see if Lois can come as well this Sunday. She usually gets away with more intrusive questions than I do. I’ll report back to you soon, Bruce… It’s going to be okay. You’ll succeed. I know you will. Tim cares too much for all of you to stay apart for long.”

Clark flew away.

Bruce leaned back in his chair, a smile on his lips.

A knock at the door caught his attention.

“Yes?”

“You done being sneaky and evil now?” Dick put his head around the door, “Only Alfred has food and wants us all to eat.”

“I’m done, for now. Clark is still as easy to play as ever.”

“Horse trader?” Dick cocked an eyebrow.

“Horse trader.”

“What did he end up agreeing to?”

“Weekly visits and full reports at the very least.”

“One day, he’s going to catch on to what you do.”

“Doubtful. He hasn’t spotted it yet.”

“True. But I wouldn’t count him completely out. If nothing else, I’d expect Lois to catch on at some point.”

“Depends on whether she’d tell him. I’m half convinced she uses the same tactic
occasionally.”

“Now *that* I wouldn’t put past her. She is a very smart, very capable, very sneaky woman… Just your type. Why haven’t you dated her yet?”

“I did, once. A very long time ago. We weren’t going to work out. That was clear very early on. So we made an amicable split. She spun it into a good news report actually.”

“Sounds like her.”
“Clark!” Ma Kent smiled as she opened the door, “And Lois! How nice to see you. Are you joining us for lunch?”

“If we’re not intruding, Mrs Kent.” Lois replied easily.

“How many times do I have to tell you, it’s Martha. And no, you’re not intruding. You could never intrude. Come on through. We have quite a full house for lunch today. I hope you enjoy roast beef.”

Clark was preparing to act surprised when he saw Tim. But then he didn’t need to act. He wasn’t expecting Conner to be there too.

Although, in retrospect he probably should have. After all, if it was Bruce, Clark knew that he wouldn’t have missed a meal with his parents and time with his friend for anything.

What was truly shocking was Tim’s appearance.

Oh, he was trying to hide it. Clark could spot traces of make-up, not properly blended into the skin, that no doubt were hiding deep bags under the eyes, given the location of the smudges. Puffy eyes were visible with a keen eye, albeit enhanced by SuperHuman abilities. Red eyes were being controlled by eye drops.

Tim wasn’t sleeping… Or if he was, he wasn’t sleeping enough or well.

Then there was the almost imperceptible trembling of his hands. He was controlling it well, but the tension in his arms betrayed him.

The flicking of his eyes between various people could easily be taken for a Bats caution or curiosity… But it lingered too long over the various exits, potential threats and things that could become weapons.

He sat too stiffly in the chair. As if his back hurt. Tiny creases in the corners of his eyes. Far too relaxed face… He was trying to hide the grimace his body wanted to do in response to the pain he was in.
Clark focused his hearing and easily made out a slightly raised heartrate from the former Robin. No doubt the careful breathing, Clark could also make out, was an indicator that Tim was maintaining a meditative state in order to control his heartrate and breathing as well as he was. Clark had heard a rumour that Tim had the ability to slow his heartrate down to a level where it was virtually imperceptible, and he could be believed to be dead. Merely a story he had thought.

He was starting to believe.

There were a thousand and one little signs of Tim’s pain and exhaustion and insomnia. And possible PTSD.

Clark wasn’t sure. The eyes that flickered around the room, almost constantly could simply be a sign of Bat-Paranoia. Of checking in with everyone. Of checking possible escape routes and weapons, should anything happen.

But there’s a furtiveness in those eyes, beyond what he’s used to seeing in Bruce’s. As well as a touch of fear.

A leg, in it’s plaster cast, was displayed almost defiantly on a footstool. The once white cast already festooned with signatures and pictures. Clark could make out most of the current Titans’ marks.

And all of this Clark spotted in the first few moments. Including the narrowing of the eyes as Tim took him in. One hand retreated automatically behind his body, before Tim made a conscious decision to relax and it remerged empty.

Conner’s actions were just as betraying. A narrowing of his eyes. A tension in his body. A shift of his posture, moving forward on the sofa that he shared with Tim. Sliding forward, so that less of Tim could be discerned. A twisting of his torso to angle slightly towards Clark, but also presenting his back to Tim.

If Clark didn’t already know about the protective nature Conner had towards Tim, he would have been blind to miss it now.

More worryingly there was tension in the air. And it seemed like it had been there for a while. Conner was shooting furtive glares at Ma and Pa; alongside looks of betrayal.
In return there were more than a few sad gazes and silent entreaties for forgiveness from the adults.

Right then, Clark was *wishing* that he’d agreed to bug the house. Because if this is what he saw in the first *minute*? Then there was a lot more going on behind the scenes.

“Mr Kent,” Tim nodded in welcome, “I was not expecting you to bring Miss Lane to dine with us today. Miss Lane, it is good to see you again.”

“I’ve told you before, Tim,” Lois smiled, “Call me Lois. You’ve been through the wars.”

“In recovery now.” Tim returned simply, “Mr and Mrs Kent have been kind enough to agree to host me, during this portion of my recovery.”

That veneer of politeness… So polite so as to be positively insulting… Clark knew that meant Tim wasn’t happy. However, how far it would go, he didn’t know.

“Your disappearance has been making front pages.” Lois remarked, “I hadn’t seen anything about your rescue.”

“I haven’t spoken to any other members of the Fourth Estate.” Tim replied easily, “It is possible that the GCPD believe that keeping my safe return under wraps beneficial to their investigations.”

“That is likely.” Lois shrugged, “However, given that fate has thrown us together, would it be possible for an interview? Release dependant upon the whims of the GCPD, of course.”

“Fate?” Tim quirked an eyebrow, “Nothing so ethereal as that, Miss Lane.”

“I assure you, Mister Drake,” Lois returned, “I had no knowledge of your presence here.”

“Perhaps.” Tim conceded, “However I doubt your escort was.”

“That’s on his conscious, not mine. I came to enjoy some spectacular home cooking and friendly conversation. If that is all I get out of this, then fair enough. But I wouldn’t turn down anything extra… If you can’t talk about the kidnapping, then maybe a puff piece? There’s a rather amusing video going viral at the moment, featuring your little brother…”

“That got out?”

“And then some. There’s memes.”

“I knew I should have kept a closer eye on that. Okay, this is not going to be fun when Damian finds out… Assuming he hasn’t already…”

“Well I haven’t heard any screaming or death threats from Gotham’s direction.” Lois shrugged, “Nor have I heard of anyone being cut up into small pieces by a katana, so either he’s taking it very well, or he doesn’t yet know.”
“You are a very dangerous woman, Miss Lane.”

“No more than you, Mister Drake. Although I believe any further discussion on this topic would be detrimental to the digestive process. Shall we eat before we retire to discuss the world in which we both move?”

“It would be discourteous to allow the food to grow cold. May I escort you?”

“As best you can, I won’t let you take my arm though. You use your crutches.”

“Your consideration is appreciated.”

It seemed strange to Clark, that the two people in the room who weren’t related were getting on the most civilized. There was increasing tension amongst everyone else. He wasn’t even sure why Conner had issues with him, but it was clear that he did. In fact Conner seemed to have lumped him in with his parents.

It would be nice to know what crime he had committed if he was going to be punished for it.

Ma and Pa clearly knew what they had done, and they were slightly ashamed of it.

The tension didn’t abate during the whole meal. Lois and Tim carried the bulk of the conversation, discussing the food, politics, celebrities and even discovered a mutual love of Australian MasterChef, as well as Ninja Warrior. The others managed to provide polite remarks, but it was clear that their attention and heart wasn’t in it.

“So, how far along the course of Ninja Warriors do you think the Bats would get?” Lois challenged at one point.

“Depends on which one.” Tim pondered for a moment, “Both Batman and the Red Hood would have difficulty with some parts of Stage One, seeing as it is the stage most focused on agility. Both of them favour strength over agility and so would be at a disadvantage. However, they would do better on the Second Stage where strength is more of a primary focus. Nightwing, on the other hand, would find both the First and Third Stage relatively easy, but lacks a lot of the force that the previous two have. So he might find the Second Stage more challenging, but I believe he would manage to power through… It would be interesting to see a Superhero Ninja Warrior competition.”

“There would have to be allowances of course. Otherwise Superman could just fly over everything.”

“It might be interesting to do an unpowered course. See how the superpowered heroes cope without their powers against their unpowered colleagues.”

“Oh I would pay to report on that!”
“Charity event?”

“Certainly would work.”

The meal was over, Lois and Tim still going strong. Now comparing the differences in attitudes of the contestants in MasterChef USA to MasterChef Australia; and how the shows set up contributed to the differences.

Clark caught Conner’s eyes and tilted his head. The pair of them quickly extracted themselves from the conversation and headed outside.

“Conner,” Clark started the discussion, “What have we done? You’re angry. And I don’t know what we’ve done to upset you.”

“They told the Bats.” Conner declared.

“What?”

“I asked them… I begged them to keep Tim’s presence here secret. And they promised. But they didn’t keep it. They chose you over me. Just as they’ve always done. You’re the true son. I’m just the clone. The failed copy.”

“No. Not that. Never that. You’re their son. Just like I am.”

“No. Else they would have kept their word.”

“Did they both promise?”

“Ma promised.”

“Then maybe Pa told.”

“No. It was Ma. I know it was. Besides they’re like that old couple in the joke.”

“What joke?”

“An old couple had been married sixty years,” Conner started to recite, “A young couple asked them how they had managed it. The husband replied: “When we were first married, we agreed that I would make all the major decisions, and she would make all the minor decisions.” Then the wife continued: “And in sixty years of marriage there has never been a need for a major decision.””

“Ah.” Clark blinked, it sounded about right actually.

“Ma promised for both of them. And then Ma broke that promise.”

“How do you know that? Did Tim tell you?”

“No. He didn’t need to. Dick asked Wally to run some cookies over. Wally let it slip to Bart, who told me.”
“They could have figured it out.”

“Not that quickly… I mean, I never expected to keep it secret forever. I knew that as soon as you came for a visit, you’d probably tell Bruce. But they promised and they broke that promise.”

“But if you ever expected it to stay secret…”

“That’s not the point! I trusted them. And they betrayed that trust. And now I can’t trust them. I hadn’t asked for much. If they’d invited you over and released it that way… I wouldn’t have objected… But they didn’t. They deliberately broke their promise. They didn’t just betray me…”

“What?”

“I gave my word to the Titans… My word that Tim would be safe here. That the Bats wouldn’t find out from me or from Ma and Pa. I never put such a burden on you. I knew you’re a good friend to Bruce. I knew you’d most likely tell him. I’d certainly do that for Tim, so I could hardly expect you to put Tim before Bruce. But Ma and Pa? I trusted them. They broke that trust. And they broke the trust the Titans have in me.”

“I’m sure you’re wrong. They still trust you.”

“They trust me. But not my word. They trust me to have their backs. They won’t trust someone I say to trust.”

“I’m sure they…”

“Ma and Pa are the two people in the world I should know the best. But they picked you and your friends over me.”

“And if they had kept quiet? They would have been picking you over me.”

“No. They wouldn’t have been picking either of us. There were ways around the promise. Inviting you over for a meal… I could have lived with that… But they deliberately broke their promise not to tell a Wayne by telling Alfred.”

“He’s not a Wayne. It was still working around the promise.”

“It was breaking the Spirit of the promise. While keeping the Letter.”

“And inviting me wouldn’t have been breaking the Spirit?”

“No! That would be putting the burden onto you. I left the loophole… I left the loophole hoping that you wouldn’t tell. That you’d understand that Tim needed space… They took… They took so much from him, he needed control back… I hoped that you’d feel guilty enough not to tell, because I asked you for help finding Tim and you did nothing! You said you would help. But you didn’t do anything.”

“I didn’t think he was really missing.”

“You thought I was lying?”

“No. But you know what Tim’s like. He’s always going off to investigate this and that.”

“And how many times have I asked you for help in finding him?”
“Only the once.” Clark admitted slowly.

“And you didn’t think that if I was asking that I hadn’t checked everywhere? I asked you for help… Two weeks ago… Tim underwent torture for an extra week because you didn’t believe me.”

“I…”

“You dismissed me. You ignored me. I hoped that I could use your guilt to keep quiet about Tim’s location… But that’s pointless now… If I had any other option, I’d take him away right now. But we don’t. Because if we leave Tim anywhere without people to look out for him, he’d be back at work in an instant. And we don’t have anywhere else to go. Cassie can’t take him in, her mother doesn’t have the space or the time to take care of him. It’s too frantic at the Flashes; he’d never get a moment’s rest, what with the twins and the rest of them going at a thousand miles an hour on a slow day. Gar and Raven don’t really have a place, he’d end up at the tower and he’d go right back to work. Bunk doesn’t have the space either, so this was the best option… Until Ma and Pa told… I thought this was the safest and best place ever… Now it isn’t. It’s just the best option available.”

“Bruce and the others just want to fix this.”

“Fix it? Fix it?” Conner laughed, “Trust is like a vase. Once it’s broken, you can fix it. But it’ll never hold water again.”

“Kintsugi.” Clark countered.

“What?”

“Kintsugi. It’s a Japanese art. They repair something that is broken with gold or silver or platinum. Honouring the break, acknowledging its existence. But making it better and more valuable than before.”

“That’s pretty and all. But that’s got nothing to do with this. They can’t fix it. Because Tim isn’t broken. There’s nothing to fix. Their relationship with him? It isn’t broken. Because it never existed.”

“Conner…”

“Don’t.” He shook his head, “I always had you held up to me as this perfect person. This true Super Hero. You’re human. You have flaws… I always knew they had to exist. I just didn’t think they would be this big.”

“I never…”

“Don’t. Just don’t. We’ll wait until Tim is better… Not healed, just better enough… Then we’re moving him. And this time, we’ll make sure you can’t find him. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“Deserve what?”

“This scrutiny. This putting of his life under a microscope. This analysis. This checking to see if he’s still a hero… He will always be a hero. No matter what. You have no idea how strong he is.”

“I know Bruce.”
“And I know Tim. If you trust me about anything, trust me about this… Tim is not Bruce. He’s a lot stronger than you realize. He doesn’t deserve this. He doesn’t deserve any of this! You know he wasn’t even surprised that Ma and Pa broke their promise? He knew it was coming… Because he has never had an adult in his life he could count on. Not his parents. Not his housekeeper. Not Bruce. Not Dick. Not Barbara. Not Red Tornado. Not Cyborg. Not you. Not anyone. The only real family he’s got is me and Bart.”

“Bart and I.” Clark automatically corrected.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s us three. Always has been. Brothers. Friends… God I don’t know what we really are. But we’re what he’s got. And we’ll be there for him. Until our last breath and beyond if we can manage it. We won’t betray him. Not like everyone else… Go away Clark. And take your meaningless platitudes with you…”
“That boy is hurting, Clark.” Lois murmured as they flew back.

“I know. I saw the signs… They weren’t gentle on him.”

“That he can handle… It’s the emotional hurt that’s tolling on him. He’s just a kid… And he’s shouldering an adult’s burden… No, several adults’ burdens. He’s a CEO. A Hero. A Mentor.”

“A Mentor?” Clark interrupted.

“Yes. He’s the leader of the Titans. Even if it isn’t official. He has got so much going on… I’m surprised he hasn’t burnt out. Then you add in the death of his friend.”

“Who?” Clark felt his gut sink; he hadn’t heard of a death in the community.

“No-one you’d know. A civilian. But one Tim was close to… He’s hurt and there’s only Conner and Bart there for him.”

“He has Ma and Pa.”

“Who put other people before him. He doesn’t trust them with his secrets. And if he doesn’t trust them, they can’t help him heal.”

“What about Bruce?”

“And where is he?”

“In Gotham.”

“ Exactly. Tim takes that as validation that he doesn’t matter.”

“Then I’ll tell Bruce to go.”

“Then Tim will take that as guilt and fulfilling your expectations… I don’t actually see a route for Bruce to win here. Not while Tim is with your parents.”

“He loves him. I know that.”

“I believe it too. The problem is that Tim does not. And he has a great deal of evidence for his side. Along with logic that isn’t faulty, just… Misconstrued… I don’t know if Bruce can fix this.”

“He can do a lot of things that seem impossible at first.”

“Tim’s locked his heart away. He loves all. Trusts few. And does wrong to as few as possible. He won’t trust them again easily. Trust takes years to build. And it only takes seconds to destroy it… And this wasn’t a matter of seconds.”
Blood dripped from the Red Hood’s knuckles.

Not his own. He had just landed a beauty of a blow to a small group of drug smugglers.

It was a way of getting his anger out.

And Jason was furious! Tim had been in Smallville for nearly a week, and not a single Bat had tried to contact him yet.

B hadn’t allowed it. Was instead waiting on a report from Superman.

“Hey, Little Wing.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Look, I know you’re worried. I am too. But he’s tough. He’s going to be fine.”

“Who you trying to fucking convince? Me or you? Because, yeah. He’s tough. He’s going to recover. But he’s not going to be fine. He’s not gonna be part of this family. Not if we keep leaving him on the outskirts like this. He should be here. With us!”

“And we can’t drag him. He’ll just pull further away. If we try to hold onto him, he’ll slip through our fingers.”

“And by not holding on he’s leaving us anyway!”

“We need a plan.”

“We need to fucking act!”

“Come back. Let’s end patrol here tonight. Supes should be giving his report soon. Then we can figure out what we need to do.”

“Fine.” Jason snapped.

He would listen, then he would make his own plan. He had no intention of losing Tim. Even if everyone else did.
Jason found Damian settled on the floor outside of Bruce’s study. A sketchpad ostentatiously placed in his lap and Titus pressed up against his side. However, it was notable that the page open was blank, and the pencil in Damian’s hand wasn’t touching the paper.

“Father has expressed his desire to converse with Kent on his own.” Damian’s words were clipped.

“Guess he’s going to be fucking disappointed then.” Jason reached out for the doorknob.

“It is locked.” Damian stated, “Kent will arrive within the next three minutes.”

Guess that explained why Damian was sitting outside the room. Defeated Jason turned away from the door. There was more than one way into the room. The door was virtually impenetrable in the time left.

On the other hand, there was that exceptionally large chimney. Which although the office wasn’t accessible through it from the roof… Jason had found an entrance into the flue shaft many, *many* years ago…

(Jason didn’t want to think about how many, because that brought up too many memories with holes in them. Things he couldn’t quite fully remember. Things that the Pit had never let him regain. Going near them brought the Pit close to the surface and then he only needed to get a little angry… and he was gone.)

Jason wedged himself inside the flue, close enough to hear, but not too close to be heard… At least not unless Clark decided to… Cheat. Which he generally didn’t in someone else’s home. An invasion of privacy, Clark called it.

Eyes completely closed, so as to increase his focus on his hearing; Jason waited.

“Clark.”

“Bruce.” Clark returned the greeting, “Tim’s securely with my parents.”

“His health?”

“What do you already know?”

“Don’t mess me about, Clark.”

“Broken leg, messed up back, insomnia, PTSD, chronic pain… Do you want me to go on?”
“Anything he told you?”

“He doesn’t trust me. Doesn’t trust my parents. I’m not entirely convinced he trusts Conner. He’s certainly not telling Conner everything. Though I’m not sure if that’s distrust or trying to protect him. Conner doesn’t trust me either now. I failed him. And now he doesn’t trust me.”

“You didn’t look for Tim.”

“I didn’t look for Tim. And now I’m paying the price. What little I got, is that Tim’s healing physically. Mentally it’s going to take a lot longer. And Tim doesn’t trust any adults at the moment. Quite honestly I’m not sure he can. Lois managed to get more out of him than I did. Although that was probably because he knew that I’d been sent. And that Lois was just an invited guest… She doesn’t think he can trust you again. You broke his trust and now he’s working the principle of once bitten, twice shy.”

“Fool me once, shame on me.”

“Fool me twice, shame on you. Exactly. Bruce, you’re going to need to do something drastic and soon. I don’t know how I’m going to get Conner’s trust back. I don’t know how to help you with Tim. Ma and Pa are now trying to stay out of it. Don’t rely on getting information from them… I was tempted to just bug Tim’s room, after I saw him… He’s running thin. I don’t know how much he’s got left to give. But it can’t be much. You raised him tough. You raised him strong. But even the strongest has to give.”

“You didn’t bug his room?”

“Conner would have checked it. And I think Tim would have too. He’s being polite. A guest in someone else’s home. But he’s not thinking of himself as anything other than a guest and an unwanted burden. He won’t open up to anyone there. I don’t think he knows how to anymore. He’s close to burning out. And I don’t know how to help him… Or even if I can.”

“Just give me any information you can.”

“I don’t see how you can win here, Bruce.”

“This isn’t about winning!” Bruce snapped, “I am not beating anyone. This is not some competition! This is about looking after my son!”

Jason managed to restrain a flinch. That was pure fury in Bruce’s voice. Anger that Clark was deeming it to be a game.

“I have screwed up over and over again, Clark. But I love my sons… I love my children… All of them. From Dick to Damian. Covering Babs and Steph and Cass as well. My marvellous daughters. It’s just… I screwed up with the boys far more than the girls. Dick, I failed to realize his nature to fly free and held him too tightly. Jason, I failed to recognise his anger and failed to help him through it. I practically gave him to the Joker. He died because of me! Damian, God I don’t know where I’m going to screw up with him. Though you can count on me doing so. It’s not like I’ve got a good track record. So far I’ve only managed minor screw ups. Dick’s protected me from the worst of them; God knows how bad it would be if I didn’t have him around… And Tim? I tried not to let him into my heart. He was another man’s son. And I don’t care what his relationship with his father was like… I would give almost anything for just one more second with my father. So
how could I steal another man’s son, when he was still alive? But Jack never realized what he had. And I couldn’t stop myself from loving Tim. He was so different from Dick… And from Jason… But just the same. He had the same fire, the same determination, the same heart! He became my son… Maybe he always had been. Maybe they all always had been my children, just waiting for me to find them."

“How did you screw up with Tim?”

“I didn’t realize that Tim was the different. I stifled Dick and Jason. Causing one to hate me. And the other to walk to his death.” Bruce’s voice caught on the last word.

“That wasn’t your fault.”

“You weren’t there. You don’t know. And yes, it was. Something I will never forgive myself for. I swore that I wouldn’t do that again. So, I gave Tim plenty of space. Gave him room to spread his wings and fly on his own… Long before I let the others do so. Not because I trusted them less, but because I knew that if I didn’t… I would be preventing him from growing into the man he would be. The way I interfered with Dick and Jason… They all deserve to be the people they have the potential to be. And I couldn’t mess with that. But because I tried my hardest to suppress my instincts to hold him close, I pushed him away… And now he thinks I never wanted him. He thinks I don’t love him. When it is a knife to my soul that I can’t be there for him right now! That I can’t bandage his wounds. That I can’t take away his pain. That I have to keep my distance, because if I try to pull him close right now… He’ll believe it is guilt talking. Rather than the love I have for him. I need every detail so that I can do this right! I screwed up by reacting rather than planning. I will not make that mistake again.

“I can’t.”

There was grief, and guilt, and pain, and sorrow, and love in that tone. A thousand emotions.

But only one intention.
Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in posting. My right hand woman at work has gone on holiday... She does about a quarter of my work! And no-one else can do it apart from the two of us. So I've been flat on my back from exhaustion.

I hope this chapter doesn't disappoint though.

Tim was working on his laptop when a Skype call came through.

“Damian?” Tim blinked, “What do you need?”

“I require your assistance, Dra… Timothy.”

“Please don’t call me that. What do you need?”

“I… I was told that it was impolite to refer to a friend or colleague by their surname.”

“In some cultures, yes. However, at the turn of the Twentieth Century in the UK it was extremely common for men to refer to their closest friends by either their surname or a nickname, often derived from the surname. This was due to the common usage of surnames as an identifier in British Boarding Schools; so it was also an indicator of being of upper class. You may choose to address your friends in whatever manner you see fit, providing that they also agree with the designation. However, I personally am uncomfortable with the use of my full first name. I would prefer it that you either address me by my surname or by my preferred nickname. What is it that you require?”

“I need to know how better to interact with people.”

“In what capacity?”

“I do not see a need to make friends with my educational peers; however, I do not wish to stand out as a loner amongst them. I have seen the results of being perceived as weak. I am of the belief that Father would disapprove of my rectifying the misassumptions of a bully. So I desire to not be perceived as alone and thus defenceless.”

“You need to know how to make allies.” Tim clarified.

“That would be suitable to my purpose.”

“Dick would be a better person to approach in this matter. He is the Social Butterfly of us.”

“I do not wish to become such a creature. I am satisfied simply with the creation of allies.”

“First I need to know about the kind of people you wish to ally yourself with.”

“What details are pertinent to your inquiry?”
“General age. Are they a group already? If so, what is their common interest? Why this group? Current social status? Are they the popular kids or the bullied? How do the other students refer to them?”

“They appear to be loosely allied with each other. But I believe this is due to mutual wariness of other cliques in the school. They are referred to as Geeks… Or Nerds.”

“A… First of all, Geeks are not necessarily Nerds. Geeks have a keen interest in a hobby of some kind. A Nerd is more academic in their hobbies; and those hobbies are more likely to have an academic bent. A preferable turn of phrase would be Boffin or Professor. More respectful as well.”

“Understood. How would you advise I approach them?”

“First you need to know their hobby. Any clues that you’ve noticed?”

“One of them has a t-shirt with the phrase “Arwen is a Horse Thief” on it. It seems to be his favourite.”

“A… Does any of them wear a ring on a chain around their neck? It would be a gold ring, but a silver chain.”

“Yes.”

“You have some bonafida Tolkien fans. Probably into other stuff as well. But that’s a good place to start.”

“Tolkien?”

“The author of a book series that later got turned into films. The books were better than the films, which the t-shirt reiterates. Pointing out a discrepancy between the books and the films.”

“How should I approach them?”

“First we need to get your knowledge of their specialist subject up to speed. We’ll cover Tolkien so that you have your icebreaker. Then we’ll look into other subjects as needed. You can’t fit too perfectly. Otherwise they might get suspicious.”

“Nothing is ever perfect. They might suspect a mole.”

“No. Only criminals would do that. But they might think you’re faking it. Trying to set them up for a prank or something along those lines. We can reduce that by finding things that you can enjoy to portray to them. I can already think of a few you might enjoy.”

“How would I best learn about this Tolkien?”

“As I said, the books are best. I would recommend reading them… Or using Audiotapes. You could put them on while you work on your art. I would suggest that reading is better, as the books come with maps that help put things into perspective.”

“You mentioned a film series?”

“Yes. You would need to watch them. Although I have to warn you, they are very long. Very good, but very long. The full series is over twenty hours long; consisting of six films.”

“I would need a guide through the series. Someone to inform me of pertinent information.
“Would you be willing to do so?”

“I’m invalided at the moment. It would not be advisable for me to return to Gotham in my current condition; I also promised Kon and Bart that I would not leave for a while.”

“I believe that by utilising Skype we would be able to overcome this obstacle.”

“You sure you wish for my assistance in this matter? Dick or Jason or Babs or Steph could help.”

“You are my best resource in this matter. They do not have the knowledge you possess… Besides, I would rather they did not know about this.”

Tim’s mind flashed to all the things he had to do. All the tasks he needed to complete. Everything he wanted to check up on.

Then he looked at Damian’s hopeful face. Despite all of his years amongst the League of Assassins, Damian had never learned deception. Merely masking of his emotions. And Tim was very good at seeing through such masks.

“Okay,” Tim smiled gently, “First thing you need to know, is that we’re not going to watch them in the order they were filmed. It is better to watch them in the order of the books. So we start with An Unexpected Journey.”

“What language are they speaking?”
“Sindarian. It is a constructed language.”

“Is it a complete language?”

“It has a vocabulary and grammar. It is as complete a language as any.”

“Is it possible to learn?”

“With time and patience.”

“Do you speak it?”

“Yes.”

“He is too kind. It is not wise to leave behind someone so filled with anger and hate.”

“It is interesting to note that in the original story Gollum bet the ring in the Riddle Game and parted ways amicably with Bilbo. However, in order to ensure continuity between the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings Tolkien rewrote the chapter. First edition copies of the Hobbit contain the original story, which was explained to be a lie that Bilbo told.”

“That does not excuse his actions.”

“Tauriel is a movie only character. But I don’t feel she detracts from the series significantly. Additionally it never states anywhere that all Elvish Warriors are male.”

“A female warrior… I approve.”

“A foolish King to be so enamoured by gold and jewels.”

“Perhaps, but everyone has a weakness.”

“Tt.”
“This character is called Figwit.”

“That is a strange name, even considering the other names in this world.”

“It was created by fans. It stands for ‘Frodo is Great… Who is that?’ Apparently the phrase that ran through a fan’s head when she first saw him.”

“He was called Lindir in the first film.”

“Well remembered. Yes. Due to his popularity he was brought back for successive appearances.”

“And this is the Trope Namer for ‘Kneel Before Frodo’.”

“I do not know that word… Trope.”

“A Trope is a literary stereotype. A common pattern in stories, whether literary or visual. Such examples would be ‘Disguised in Drag’, which is used in at five separate stories of Scheherazade. Or ‘The Corpse Stops Here’ which is basically the entire plot of The Story of the Hunchback.”

“I follow. How many Tropes are there?”

“Far too many to count.”

“What is the significance of this particular one?”

“It is the action of an entire crowd bowing to one character, who up until that moment wasn’t perceived as important to the scene previously. It is usually for one of two reasons, either the character is ‘King Incognito’ and has just removed their disguise; or they have performed a heroic act and saved the kingdom, and the King is kneeling to them, thus everyone else does so out of courtesy.”

“This being an example of the second.”

“Precisely. In Mulan, there is another very good example.”

“People recognise these Tropes?”

“They may not know the names. And they may not consciously recognise them, but they recognise them.”
“That was an interesting series. I can see why some of my peers are fascinated by it.”

“How far are you through the books?”

“I have just completed the Fellowship of the Ring. The books are significantly slower to progress through.”

“Yes, Tolkien was good at that. You are progressing well. Do you have a plan as to how you are going to approach the group?”

“I have failed to identify the best angle to utilise.”

“I would suggest combining it with your art. Shows a softer side. Draw one or more of them as an Elf, a Hobbit or even a Dwarf. You could take the other option and draw one of their bullies as an Orc or a Goblin, but I’d advise against it. You’d make an unnecessary enemy, even as you made allies. You are a gifted artist. Something I suspect you have been keeping hidden from your school-aged peers.”

“You are correct in your assumption. You believe that my creative endeavours would endear me to these people.”

“Yes… It’s a Trope.”

“I do not follow. You informed me that Tropes were literally devices. Creative devices that occurred regularly in media.”

“Yes. However, humans like to find patterns in their lives. We compare what we experience to what we have experienced before. Whether in reality or in fictional media. If people see a pattern they recognise they assume the rest of it is true. For example, when you started occasionally volunteering with the animal charities, you invoked the Trope ‘Pet the Dog’, which implied that you weren’t as nasty as you were initially appearing. That lead to the Trope ‘Jerkass with a Heart of Gold’ and the ‘Rule of Empathy’. I used Tropes to make people like you.”

“Utilising patterns that they had already established, albeit potentially subconsciously, and projecting those patterns onto me.”

“Precisely. The artist side of you will invoke the ‘Bruiser with a Soft Centre’. A strong character, who appears intimidating, but turns out to be kind and protective to those he cares for. Give yourself a few years and some growing, and it’ll be the ‘Gentle Giant’ Trope we’re invoking. Or potentially the ‘Troubled, but Cute’. Or even the ‘Genius Bruiser’. I’m assuming that you’re going to take after Bruce’s build rather than Talia’s. There’s already leanings in that direction.”

Damian accepted the comment with a touch of pride.

“Is there a place where I can research Tropes more thoroughly? I had not anticipated them being useful for interactions in real life.”

“There’s a website. I’ll send you the link.”

“What other facets of popular culture do you believe I should investigate? In order to flesh out my appreciation of them, so that I may portray the character required to ally myself with my
peers.”

“There’s a few I’d suggest. Although some I’d like to suggest, but I believe you might perceive them to be beneath you initially.”

“Tt. It would be foolish to dismiss something, before investigating it fully. Particularly something a trusted ally had suggested.”

Tim blinked for a moment at the last sentence. That… That was not something he had ever expected Damian to state.

“Okay, I’d suggest some Japanese Manga, although you may prefer the Anime versions. Particularly Yu Yu Hakusho and Bleach. However, I wouldn’t suggest watching either of them around Jason. I don’t think he’d appreciate it. Particularly the Yu Yu Hakusho.”

“What wouldn’t I appreciate?” Jason’s voice cut into the conversation, moments before his face appeared on Tim’s computer screen, “And why not?”
Jason was headed to his room. Hair still wet from the shower he’d had after a training session. Bruce and Dick had been planning for nearly a week now. Jason had pretty much left them to it. After all, he didn’t know Timbo all that well. And despite the fact that he wanted Timmy back as part of the family; he knew that he had a pretty high chance at mucking it up, by stepping in some unspoken trap.

As he wandered past the brat’s room, he heard voices. Damian was talking to someone. But Jason knew where everyone else was. And none of them were in Damian’s room with him. It couldn’t be a friend… Damian didn’t have any.

He slipped into the room.

Damian was sitting on his bed, with his laptop open and in front of him. Conversing with someone.

Jason had no illusions that Damian wasn’t aware of his presence. But didn’t want the other participant in his conversation to be aware of him. So was carefully ignoring him.

It only took a few words from the other end of the Skype call for Jason to realize who Damian was talking to.

And more importantly what Damian was up to.

Jason kept his mouth shut. He wasn’t going to risk closing down a line of communication. Even if the topic of conversation was just plain weird.

However, when his name was mentioned, Jason couldn’t hold back.

“What wouldn’t I appreciate?” Jason cut in, moments before he moved into position to see Tim, “And why not?”
While Tim blinked in surprise, Jason assessed the younger vigilante. There were large bags under his slightly bloodshot eyes and his skin was pasty, but not as bad as it could be. The tightness in his expression could be due to either pain or surprise, and Jason was betting on a combination of both.

“Yu Yu Hakusho.” Tim stated after a moment, recovering quickly, “The main character reminds me of you. But there’s other things going on, that I don’t think you’d appreciate.”

“Is it violent?”

“A bit. Nothing I wouldn’t feel bad about showing most kids Damian’s age or younger. Give Liam a few years and I wouldn’t be mad about her seeing it either.”

“Tt, of course I am above such trivial things.”

“Then show me.” Jason instructed, “Let me make my own mind up.”

Tim tensed for a moment, before bringing up a video.

“And so it all begins. This boy's name is Yusuke. He's 14 years old and is supposed to be the hero of the story…but oddly enough, he's dead.”

Jason felt his hackles rise with the utterance of the line, not two minutes into the show; but he forced his anger down. He would not confront, yet. The comparison was obvious.

And yet, he couldn’t believe Tim would make that sort of connection. It seemed unnaturally cruel from the teen.

Then as the episode developed, Jason saw other things that allowed him to emotionally connect with the main character. He was a punk, with a bad reputation, who didn’t really care about things like that. Throw in the alcoholic mother and Jason was easily able to get where Yusuke was coming from.

“What happens next?” Jason demanded as the episode finished, “What sort of ordeal does he have to go through? Does he come back to life? Does he become a zombie?”

“Okay,” Tim blinked, “I didn’t think you’d like it.”

“Why not?” Jason challenged.

“It’s popular literature. It’s Anime. It’s Manga… You’re a Classicalist. You prefer the Classics. You read Shakespeare Plays… For fun… I’ll watch the things, but I won’t read the plays unless you force me to.”
“That way they have the interpretation I see.” Jason defended himself, “Rather than the interpretation of others.”

“You compare and contrast the works of the Bronte sisters. You state that ‘Pride and Prejudice’ is not the greatest of Austen’s works. And is promoted to the detriment of her other works. You even critic the dramatizations and rank them compared to how close to the original text they actually are! I’m fairly certain that it would be brilliant entertainment for the rest of us to watch you watch ‘Pride and Prejudice and Zombies’.”

“I do not follow.” Damian frowned slightly.

“He’ll be screaming at the tv the whole time. Upset at the interpretation. It was fun enough watching Jake, and he focused more on art.”

“Jacob Spencer?” Jason put the name in gently.

“Yeah.” Tim’s eyes flicked away from them.

“You are aware that that was not his real name?” Damian pressed.

“I knew.” Tim shrugged, “He was Jacob Stone by birth. He was hiding… From his father. That’s part of the reason why we got on. Neither of us meet the expectations our parents had for us. He was way too smart. He could just look at a painting and tell you if it was a forgery or not. He was always right. All the testing in the world, couldn’t beat him.”

“What was he like?” Jason asked gently.

“Fun. Smart… Genius level smart. You’d have liked him. He believed that Christmas wasn’t Christmas without a bar fight. And he never missed a year.”

“Sounds like my kinda guy.”

“You would have gotten on well. He loved the history of art. And had a wicked sense of humour. It didn’t take much to persuade him to write a paper under one of his alias where he only referenced papers by his other aliases. I was trying to talk him into writing a paper as himself. Not Jacob Spenser. But Jacob Stone.”

“He did not want to receive the credit he deserved?” Damian was confused.

“Jake never liked anyone knowing about his intelligence. He was big and strong. He was a jock. His father ran the family business, oil rigging and construction. It was expected that Jake would take over. But he couldn’t… He was too bright to do that. He had this way with history… He could really bring it alive. I’ve always loved history. But I focus mainly on the people. Not on dates and locations. He could link everything together in a way that made sense to me. He used to walk through museums and tell me about the art, explaining how it fit into the cultural, historical and sociological situation of the time.”

“He would take you to Gotham Museum of Art?” Damian blinked.

“No. Jake would go do authentications around the world. Sometimes he’d let me tag along. I’d be his younger brother, a cousin, a nephew, a student… Whatever fit with his alias. No one ever questioned it. I’d help him set up decoys so that no-one could trace his origin point.”

“Sounds like a cool guy.” Jason smiled.
“Drake,” Surprisingly Damian’s voice had a touch of tenderness about it, “You’re tired. Get some sleep. I will speak with you tomorrow.”

“Night, Damian. Night, Jason.” Tim agreed before cutting the connection.

Jason barely waiting a heartbeat, before turning to face his youngest sibling.

“And just what was that? How long have you been talking with him?”

“Every day since Kent brought his report to father.” Damian returned calmly, “While Grayson and father are meticulously planning, I decided to try and establish a line of regular communication. We have been spending up to four hours a day watching and discussing popular culture. In particular focusing on the works of Tolkien.”

“Why would he agree to do that?”

“I may have alluded to an attempt to establish an alliance with some of the Geeks in my school. Drake is educating me in popular culture. I chose the works of Tolkien, partially as they are popular with the Geeks, but also because I had researched enough to know that they are particularly long. Thus I have been able to prevent him from working for at least two and a half hours a day. This, combined with his work ethic, has caused him to neglect his own health; in that he is not sleeping the requisite number of hours a night.”

“Thus leading to sleep deprivation and the loose tongue he just displayed.” Jason remarked.

“That was not my original intention. Although it has the potential to be useful. I was attempting to provide time during which he could relax. I was anticipating him dozing during the films.”

“He wouldn’t do that. Not if it could potentially benefit you. Why did you start this? Beyond an attempt to get him to sleep more… A losing battle, by the way… At least without drugs being involved.”

“According to my research the best methods of repairing a broken relationship involve active listening and communication. In addition, participating in activities that the other person enjoys is also recommended as a good bonding experience.”

“You’re trying to make friends with him.”

“The first overtures of friendship were made by Drake. I was a foolish, arrogant child who failed to realize what I was being offered. I gave him nothing but scorn and violence. He has learned not to offer such things to me again. I receive offers of allegiance. Offers of servitude. However, I receive no offers of friendship. Any such offers must originate from myself.”

“But he’s too cautious to accept them.”

“He does not believe they are my true intentions. I have learned much since I left the care of my Mother. I should not have rejected the overtures. I believed they were a method Drake was utilising to put me in a subordinate position to himself. When in fact they were a method of establishing a relationship where he would enable me to grow into my true potential. I could have learned much from him by now, had I realized his true intentions, rather than my biased
perceptions of him.”

“Yeah. I made that mistake too. Probably for the same reason you did. Talia told me about my Replacement. I built my whole perception of him around her words. Which was pretty dumb of me. I knew she was manipulative. I should have known better.”

“Mother also coloured my beliefs about Drake. I previously believed that she believed him a threat to my position as Father’s Heir. Now I am reconsidering that belief. Perhaps she knew even then he was a threat to her position.”

“What do you mean?” Jason’s voice grew suddenly cold.

“While I find it difficult to believe that Grandfather has a Half-Sister still roaming the world, I know she would not be interested in Drake, unless Grandfather was interested in him. Unless possessing a piece of him would be to her advantage.”

“A method of one-upping Ra’s.”

“Precisely.”

“Why would Ra’s be so interested in Timmy? They had little interaction that I am aware of.”

“I do not know. That is what worries me.”

Chapter End Notes

This is where I admit that I have very little idea where this story is going. I seem to be using it as catharsis for a lot of thing in my life right now. So I apologise if some chapters end up rambling without significant plot development.
“Keep the communication going.” Jason instructed, “I’ll see what I can find. And open my own line of communication. Hopefully between the two of us, we can fit a few more pieces of this puzzle together.”

“You are not going to inform Grayson or Father?”

“No. So far they are all talk, no action. We make sure that Timbo will be our brother. Our family. They’ve screwed up. Let them fix their own mistakes. It won’t work if they don’t.”

“I know. We also need to get him to take better care of himself. He still isn’t sleeping enough. It is possible to OD on caffeine. It takes a lot. But it is possible.”

“We cannot restrict his caffeine intake. It would require allying ourselves with the Clarks. Something that would put us in opposition to Drake at the present moment in time.”

“No. I know. But what we can do is ensure that he has healthy meals ready at his place. I’ve got a few other ideas. But best you don’t know, so that it all looks natural.”

“I will focus on strengthening our relationship. However, I will also investigate into the relationship Drake has with my Grandfather. I know Grandfather, he does not stop until he has what he wants, or he knows that it has been forever taken out of his reach.”

“That doesn’t bode well. Get what details Timmy will give you. But hunt around for anything else. I don’t want this biting us in the ass later.”

“Tim,” Martha looked at the boy currently working on her couch, “Would you care to join us at Church tomorrow?”

“I’m not Christian.”

“You don’t have to be. The Fellowship is good. You’d get to talk to someone other than us and your business contacts.”

“And Conner.” Tim smiled, “I suppose I could do with the change of scenery.”

Discretely Jon let out the breath he had been holding. He wasn’t sure if it was meddling, but he knew it wasn’t healthy to work as much as Tim seemed to. He wasn’t actually sure if Tim had insomnia, but Tim was certainly treating the Land of Nod as a foreign enemy country not to be associated with or messed with.
Something that Jon did *not* deem to be a healthy situation.

On the other hand, the Priest was rather prone to long, rambling Sermons that could easily put people to sleep. So it was worth a try.

123456789

“Alfred,” Jason wandered into the kitchen, “Can you help me produce Microwave Meals?”

“Master Jason,” Alfred’s voice was cold, “As long as I reside in this house, *no* one will be forced to resort to such means.”

“I didn’t mean the supermarket things… Look, we all know that eventually Timmy will go back to his home… The Theatre. And he gets so caught up in his work that he forgets to eat. And if he *does* remember, he grabs whatever he can find. If I’ve noticed that… Then you sure as hell have. What I want to do is stuff his freezer and fridge with easy food. Food that he only has to stick into a microwave or an oven to get something that’s actually good for him.”

“I believe I understand your point, Master Jason. You have a good idea there; it would certainly be beneficial for Master Tim’s recovery if he were to continue receiving proper nourishment.”

“Exactly. Can you help? I’ll get them into place. If they came with simple instructions it would probably help. I’m not entirely sure Timmy can boil water.”

“Master Tim is more competent at basic household tasks than you would expect, Master Jason. The difficulty is persuading him to put the time required into them. I would also like to reduce his caffeine intake where possible; at least temporarily.”

“Why?” Jason frowned, “Timmy drinks coffee. Never with sugar. It’s probably healthier than the Energy Drinks that Dick prefers. And Bruce drinks coffee every day.”

*Except on those days when he is recovering from an injury, Master Jason. A fairly recent article has managed to prove a negative correlation between caffeine intake and wound recovery.*

“I didn’t know that.” Jason stared, “But you won’t get Timbo to put down his coffee mug… Send me the article. I might have more success.”

“Master Jason? Am I to presume that you have established communication with Master Tim?”

“Not technically. I was merely present while communication took place. Don’t ask me any questions, and I won’t tell you any lies, Alf.”

“Understood, Master Jason. I will forward you the article. I hope you find it as enlightening as I did.”

“I’m sure I will… Do you have any ideas of what good food for Timmy would be?”

“Chicken Noodle Soup is known to have restorative properties. It is also easy to freeze and
still equally nutritious and tasty after reheating. Also Master Tim has always preferred lighter meals than yourself and Master Bruce.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your preference is for red meat, as is Master Bruce’s; in particular steaks; although you favour bread and chips, while Master Bruce prefers Dauphinoise Potatoes. Of course, you are aware of Master Damian’s current vegetarian predilection. Master Dick, his habit of devouring cereal at every point in the day aside, enjoys stews. Miss Barbara is not particularly picky with regards with to her main courses, but has strong opinions on desserts. Miss Stephanie favours what she regards as traditional American. While Miss Cassandra enjoys Italian; although she has never verbally expressed an opinion with regards to food, except that there is sufficient of it to satisfy her. Master Tim leans towards chicken and fish as his preferred proteins. Overall Master Tim tends towards lighter meals, tending towards a Mediterranean Diet in most respects.”

“Which might explain why he weighs a buck twenty soaking wet. I’m amazed he can put anything decent behind a punch some days. He needs to put on weight… Don’t caffeine increase the body’s metabolism?”

“Indeed, well remembered Master Jason. In particular it favours the utilisation of fat as an energy source.”

“Problem is, he’s addicted… And some days it’s probably the only thing keeping him going… You realize he’s juggling too fucking much, right Alf?”

“You understand that asking him to put anything down will be deemed as an implication that he is incapable of doing the task?”

“Fuck.” Jason slumped against the counter, “Yeah, he would. And that would just push him further away. This would be fucking easier if he weren’t so… So Timmy!”

“We’re not, he would not be the person we are fighting to regain.” Alfred reminded, “We cannot change him. Else he will not be Master Tim anymore. We are the ones who need to change. In our thoughts and actions.”

“We need to stop taking him for granted. I fucking know Alfred. I just… I wonder if he’s gone too far for us to wrap around him. He’s drifted further than I ever did.”

“Dead is very far, Master Jason.”

“Which is why I’m fucking qualified to make that statement! I may have been violent towards everyone… Damn near killed Timbers. But I wasn’t trying to stay away. I was throwing my existence in your faces every fucking moment! I wanted you to know I was there. I wanted you to know I existed. I was spending so much time making damn sure I was in your thoughts… The first of your thoughts, every moment of every day… Timmy… Timmy’s just fading away. I fought. I raged. I screamed… Timmy hasn’t even tried. That’s what hurts the most… No…”

“Master Jason?”

“No, what hurts the most is the fact that I knew. I knew he was missing and said nothing.”

“What was your reasoning, Master Jason?”

“I didn’t believe he was in any danger. I didn’t really care. I didn’t want anyone to focus on him instead of me.”
“You were jealous, Master Jason. It is a natural reaction. Unfortunately it had unexpected consequences on this occasion.”

“Yeah, and isn’t that just my life? I do something for me and I screw up. I got myself killed…”

“You are not responsible for that fiasco!” Jason jerked back at the vehemence from the usually softly spoken butler.

“Alfred?” Jason breathed.

“Forgive me, Master Jason. However, you need to know that you did nothing wrong in that entire situation. You are not responsible for the fact that others betrayed you. You are not at fault for believing you could trust the very person who brought you into this world. You were cruelly betrayed by someone who could not see what a gift you were; both to them and to the world! You are my precious grandson, something I do not remind you of often enough. I mourned you. I love you. As much as I love all of my grandchildren and my son. Blood does not make family. A fact you should well know.”

“Blood is thicker than water, Alfred. Bruce has his blood son. And the son he chose. The rest of us? Me and Timmy? We’re the replacements. The unwanted. The undesired.”

“Master Jason, you have the quotation wrong.”

“What?” Jason blinked in surprise at the apparent non sequitur.

“*The full quotation is ‘The Blood of the Covenant is thicker than the Water of the Womb’. Thus the saying actually states that blood shed between fellow warriors binds them closer together than mere genetics. Blood does not make a child. It does not create love. I thought my heart was complete when Master Bruce was born. I loved him. I will not say that I loved him as much as his parents did. However, I grew to love him more. I never believed that my heart could accommodate another… Until Master Richard came to this house. Within the first day he had carved out equal space in my heart. Though I do not know how, for Master Bruce had taken up the whole of my heart up until that moment. Yet, my love for him did not diminish. Nor did it diminish when you came and stole your equal share. Master Tim quietly laid claim to his portion; slower than the others, but with no less success. Master Damian did not demand his space, but I surrendered it to him anyway. While Master Bruce has difficulty expressing his emotions, I know that he loves all of his children equally. Sometimes his focus is on one or other of you; however, he tries to give all of you the attention that you deserve.”

“He’s just not always successful.”

“No. Unfortunately, he is not. He focuses on what is making the most noise; which means that he misses the quiet important things. If it helps at all, I still have to remind him about his own birthday; to say nothing of anyone else’s. Although he never forgets the anniversary of his parent’s death, nor your own.”

“I don’t know how to react to that.”

“You don’t have to, Master Jason. Just simply know that I love you. I always will. I may not always approve of your actions; however, I will never reject you.”

“You don’t hate that I didn’t say anything about Tim being missing?”
“No. I can understand why you did not. I do not approve of your actions. However, they are excusable, Master Jason. They are understandable. We never did reassure you that you were a valuable part of the family. Not in a way that you understood.”

“No. And you couldn’t get Timmy to understand either. Dick seemed to get it.”

“Master Richard has always been capable of accepting love in all it’s forms, no matter how it is expressed.”

“He speaks the universal language of love.” Jason snorted, “I still don’t understand how he’s on such good terms with all his ex’s.”

“Master Richard is a special kind of person, he’s charismatic in a way that very few people are. Yourself, Master Jason, are particularly good with people from disadvantaged backgrounds. You understand them in a way that no-one who has not experienced their situation cannot. From someone else, it could come across as patronising. However, you don’t patronise at all.”

“Although my sarcasm is fully developed.”

“Indeed, Master Jason. Did you have any suggestions for suitable meals for Master Tim?”

“Roy’s got these microwave bowls and mugs with lids… He does cans of soup in them.”

“I think I can produce something more inspiring and nutritious than canned soup.”

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“Just who do you think you are?!?” The words were spat at Tim.

“Tim,” Tim replied evenly, “And you are?”

He didn’t even set down his glass of lemonade as he adjusted his gaze upwards to meet the face of an angry teenager.

Heavy set and broad shouldered. Dressed in leather and a scowl. Tim quickly identified him as someone that Conner had occasionally complained about. Eric. The local jock, bad-boy, heart-throb.

Aesthetically Tim could see the potential attraction for girls. But the attitude, so far, was a warning sign.

“You been bothering my girl?” The question was more of an accusation than an inquiry. Punctuated by a heavy hand slamming into the stone wall just past Tim’s head.
Work is getting a bit better. Although I think we almost sent the Apprentice into a Nervous Breakdown yesterday. He's used to having three constants:
1. Customers
2. Always needing to do the same task (I won't say what it is - but it's not making Tea or Coffee)
3. Us being three days behind.
Yesterday we caught up. He's not used to that.
“Your girl?” Tim spoke softly, “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

To be honest, Tim had already figured out six different ways to take the bully down without badly breaking cover. But he was curious and wanted to see just how far Eric would go.

How far people would let Eric go.

That and Tim was really confused. He certainly hadn’t been bothering any girls. He’d spent the entire service, sitting relatively quietly; alternating between listening and reading the Bible.

“Christina.” The name was almost spat into Tim’s face.

Tim blinked, as he collected his thoughts.

“A very pretty girl.” Tim replied calmly, “I wasn’t aware that she belonged to anyone other than herself.”

“She’s my girlfriend!”

“Then that would make you her boyfriend.” Tim returned politely, “You are very lucky that she has chosen you.”

Tim wasn’t entirely confident in his ability to talk his way out of the situation. He didn’t know enough details. He didn’t know enough about Eric and didn’t have the time to learn.

“And you were hitting on her!”

Not again, Tim mentally sighed. He’d missed someone flirting with him again. And she had been upset. So she’d set her boyfriend on him.
Tim was merely a piece of meat to entertain her.

Casting his eyes past the jock, Tim managed to see her. Standing on the edges, watching with gleeful anticipation. This was Tim’s punishment for not flirting back with her.

Judging from her eyes, Tim would have gotten beaten up, no matter what he had done. This was her form of entertainment. This was a game to her.

Tim wondered just how much of Eric’s reputation as a bully was down to Christina’s meddling. And how much was what had attracted her to him.

“No.” Tim stated evenly, “She asked me if I wanted something to drink. I cannot move very easily at the moment, so it was only logical to accept her offer to fetch me something. I apologise if she interpreted my friendliness as flirting. However, I have no interest in her as anything other than a friend at present.”

“Are you saying that she’s not good enough for you?”

“I currently have a broken leg. Are you so determined to beat someone up that you will target a stranger with a cast and crutches?”

“Are you so pathetic that you’ll hide behind them? Either you were hitting on my girl or you don’t think she’s good enough for you!”

“Or I could be focusing on my healing for the moment. Not just physical, but mental. I don’t have the emotional capacity to start a relationship at the present moment. It would not be fair on any would-be significant other to start a relationship where I carry so much unsorted baggage. A friendship would be a far more sensible place to start.”

“So you’re all screwed up in the head are you? Freak!”

“Possibly, yes. Are you going to hit me? Or are you going to walk away? Trust me, I am so many different kinds of injured right now that an honest to god bruise is going to be a refreshing relief.”

That got a reaction. Eric reared back. It seemed that he did have some limits.

“I am currently being held together with sticking plaster and thread. Almost literally.” Tim continued, “I have a broken heart and a broken soul. I have so many sharp edges I should come with a warning label. Just leave me alone. I am no threat to your relationship. Although I would ask you to take a good hard look at it. Looks to me like she’s manipulating you.”
Eric took a step back and then another. Then he clearly seemed to realize the image he was portraying. He turned and stalked away, as if that had always been his intent. As if he had done everything he had intended to do.

Tim’s gaze flicked to Christina. She wasn’t happy. The momentary scowl on her face was clear to see, before she wiped it away for a fake smile. Tim quickly categorised her as dangerous. She liked violence and she liked to watch. She was the King on her little chessboard and enjoyed watching other people dance to her whims and fight at her command.

And Tim was sure that she had her sights set on him. Her reasons, he wasn’t sure about, but he was betting towards him being a stranger and not attracted to her being the top two possibilities.

“I was expecting that to end in violence.” An older woman sat down next to Tim.

“I have always had a fast tongue.” Tim smiled back at her.

She was old enough to be his mother, if not his grandmother; depending on when she started.

“Are you alright, son?” She asked him gently, “Eric is not known for being kind.”

“Kind, no. But I also don’t think he has a reputation for being cruel either. I’m Tim.”

“Josephine. Eric is known for being tough. A bully, also.”

“I’d ascribe more of his actions to Christina. I don’t know why she chose me as a target…”

“She was flirting with you. You didn’t respond.”

“She was… Flirting?”

“You didn’t notice?”

“I’m… I’m not good at spotting flirting aimed at me. All of my exs will agree to that.”

“All of them?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“How did you end up dating them, then?”

“You know… I’m still not entirely sure. I think I just drifted into the relationships. I certainly wasn’t a good boyfriend. I was inattentive so Ariana cheated on me. And I didn’t listen when she tried to tell me. Zoanne… There was a spark… But it died. I could have fought to keep it alive, but I didn’t. Steph… She threw a brick at me.”

“I hope that was when you broke up.”
“Oh, no. That was *before* we were dating. She thought I was following her. She didn’t live in a good part of town. I ended up helping her through her pregnancy.”

“Pregnant?”

“Not mine. I wasn’t even a suspect, as she put it. But he wasn’t going to hang around. So I helped out. She needed someone.”

“And yet you still broke up?”

“We were too different. We kept too many secrets from each other. It wasn’t a good break-up actually. But we’re friends now. Though we’ll never date again.”

“And you aren’t dating anyone now?”

“You’re curious, aren’t you? I suppose you would be. A stranger in town. Someone new. Got a daughter or a niece you’re thinking of setting me up with?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“You’re staying with Jon and Martha. They’re good people. You’d be the right age to be a friend of Conner. And he’s a good kid. So you must be a good kid too.”

“You don’t want me dating anyone.”

“Why not? You didn’t resort to violence. You talked your way out of that whole situation.”

“Loving me isn’t easy. I have sharp edges, I have missing parts.” Tim stated bluntly, “I’m not the kind of person you love. I never have been.”

“You can’t mean that. Everyone is loved by someone.”

“Not me. Look Josephine, I appreciate you wanting to make the stranger welcome. But I don’t like people meddling in my business. It has never meant anything good for me. People only ever want to use me. I accepted that a long time ago. I’m not staying long. I’m not someone you want your… whatever involved with. Just leave me be. Focus your attention on Eric. He needs more help than anyone in this town.”

“Eric’s a bully.”

“I doubt it is by choice.”

“We keep hoping that Christina will redeem him. She’s a good girl.”

“She has a love of violence and a sadistic streak.”

“She’s the Vicar’s daughter.”

“I have often found that the professions of a parent do not dictate the nature of a child. She’s dangerous. A vicious mind behind a pretty face.”

“You just don’t know her. She’s a beautiful soul.”

“I wonder who you’ll blame when she gets someone killed.” Tim remarked, “I wish you
He rose to his crutches and made his way out of the Church. He didn’t fail to notice the calculating gaze of Christina that was fixated on him for a moment.

“How did you find the service?” Jon asked gently, as joined Tim at the pick-up.

“Confusing.” Tim shrugged, “I don’t understand enough to understand the reasons.”

“The reasons?” Jon frowned.

“Why does a Font have eight sides? Why was the predominant colour today green? I know purple is used. Why does Saint John have an Eagle? Why does Saint Laurence have a grid?”

“Symbology.” Jon realized, “You want to know why things are the way they are.”

“The more I know, the more I can understand and the more I can use what I know.”

“Use?”

“Knowledge is a tool. I enjoy learning for learning’s sake. But I enjoy being able to use it just as much. You never know when a little snippet might be relevant.”

“You must be hell to play Trivial Pursuits against.”

Tim broke into the first honest smile that Jon had seen on his face.

“You know, that’s what Conner always says. He always tries to get on my team.”

“There’s that smile.”

“What smile?”

“A real one. Kid, I know I don’t have any right to interfere. And I certainly don’t want you to take this the wrong way… But I’d rather see a real smile than a fake one. And if it isn’t real… Then don’t put it on. I like being able to see what you’re feeling. Even if that’s nothing at all… Even if it’s something negative.”

“I’m not sure I can do that. No one’s ever wanted me to show what I feel… Certainly not the negative stuff.”

“I’m not No-one. I’ve never been to sea. And I’m not all that fond of sheep… Plus my archery is terrible.”

“You’re a closet Geek, aren’t you?” Tim snorted.

“I just liked Mythology as a kid. Thought you’d get the reference.”

“Thanks. I think I needed that.”
“Kid, you need a lot more than that. You need to laugh more.”

“Not been all that in my life to laugh at… By the way, Christina? She’s dangerous.”

“How dangerous?”

“I don’t know yet. But I’m thinking at least low level Sociopath. Possibly Psychopath. I don’t know. I’d need to know more. She could be a Sadist or just cruel. But she’s dangerous. She’s the kind of person to organise violence, stand back to enjoy it, before putting the blame on someone else. She’s smart enough and manipulative enough for that. It wouldn’t surprise me if she’s done it already. Maybe nothing big, but…”

“But there’s someone out there who got hurt because of her.”

“I believe so… Just… watch yourself. I don’t know how far she’ll go.”

“I understand… Don’t tell Martha… She might try to fix things.”

“I think I agree with you on that one. She is a bit of a fixer.”

“She means well.”

“We judge others by their actions and ourselves by our intentions.”

Chapter End Notes

I find it interesting that all of you thought my antagonist was Eric... He's just a lackey and a patsy.
Tim stretched moments after Damian cut the Skype link. He was stiff from being in one position for too long, but the healing skin on his back didn’t appreciate the stretch. He could feel blood soaking into the bandages and knew that he’d broken the fragile skin once again.

It was a repeating cycle. But Tim knew it would eventually get better. At least this time it seemed that he’d only broken the skin in one place rather than multiple. His back was healing, albeit slowly.

Then a new call came through. Tim frowned at the screen, before accepting the call.

“Hey Timbo.” Jason smiled.

“What do you need?” Tim asked, by rote.

“Will you be my Oracle?”

“Is this a ‘Will you be my Robin?’ thing? Because I remember how that ended.”

“Yeah, I was not exactly sane back then. Look, you want to get the guys who hurt you. I know you do. I would want the same. But you can’t do the job at the moment. I don’t care how good you are with computers, you need boots on the ground. And the longer you can’t walk the beat the colder any leads get. You need a partner… I guess what I’m saying is… I’ll be your Black Canary, if you’ll be my Oracle.”

“Will you wear the fishnets?”

“Fuck you, no! Is that a yes?”

“I have conditions.”

“I figured you would. I have some of my own.”

“I need to have eyes and ears on you at all times.”

“Most of the time. I have some sources I need to protect. Even from you.”

“I can concede that. But my sources also need protecting. You don’t tell anyone about them.”

“Sure. That seems fair.”

“We keep in constant communication. Any suspicions… Any details… Anything… You tell me.”

“Of course. I need to take advantage of that big brain of yours. No one knows more about this case than you. I doubt you told the police everything. And you certainly didn’t tell B or
“Dickie-bird. And you wouldn’t tell the Demon either. What are your other conditions?”

“You don’t tell anyone we’re working together.”

“That’s fair. Neither the Demon nor I have told anyone about our contact with you. We don’t plan on it either. And I ain’t telling the Demon about this. What else?”

“It’s redundant to say it, but no live rounds in your guns.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less. But thank you for saying it’s redundant.”

“Sometimes I’m going to give you strange instructions. I need to know that you’ll follow them.”

“I might ask why, but I trust you.”

“Then we have a deal.”

“Agreed. What tech do you need to watch over me?”

“Get into my Nest. I’ll direct you from there.”

“Okay. I’ll call you from there?”

“No need. I’ll know when you get there.”

“I trip an alarm?”

“Everyone who goes in there trips an alarm… By the way, you told Damian how to get in there, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. We were worried.”

“You were looking. So you checked my places… At least the ones you know about.”

“Of course you have more.” Jason sighed, “You’re a fucking sneaky bastard.”

“It’s kept me alive this long. You go to my Nest. We’ll move from there.”

123456789

The Red Hood crept into Red Robin’s Nest, his eyes scanning for the indicators that told Tim he was here, but he couldn’t see anything.

“Welcome to the Nest.” Tim’s distorted voice came over the speakers, “You took your time.”

“Had to make sure I wasn’t followed. What are we calling each other during this team up?”

“Just stick with Red and Hood. Works for me.”
“Whatever you say Baby Bird. Where’s the tech?”

“Workbench. Everything is filed. See what you can get to work with your gear.”

The Hood moved to the workbench and took a moment to look at it. He didn’t want to disturb the organisational system currently in use.

Fortunately Tim believed in labelling. Everything was easy to find. Hood quickly retrieved a bone-conduction earpiece.

“Good choice.” Red remarked, only moments after Hood slid it into place, “I’ll link up.”

“Of course you’ve got fucking cameras in here. Nice job hiding them.”

“Thank you. What about eyes?”

“Can’t you just patch into the camera in my helmet?”

“I didn’t want to presume. And you don’t always wear the helmet.”

“We’ll figure it out as we go.”

“Okay.”

“What intel have you got for me? Where do you need me to go?”

“I don’t need any of my contacts right now. The key detail is finding Phobos.”

“I’ve been trying, kiddo. So far, no luck. All I’ve got is that he’s not from Gotham.”

“He sounds like Matches.” Red supplied, “Nasal twang and all.”

“So New York or New Jersey. That’s a start.”

“Light skin. Very light.”

“Did you see his face?”

“No… But I saw his arm.”

“Yeah, that’s not really going to help in a line up.”

“It does when he has a tattoo.”

“What of? Because I can get my contacts running on that. Assuming it’s not a common thing like a heart or ‘Mom’.”

“It’s an eye of fire.”

“Eye of fire?”
“An eye with the iris on fire. On the wrist. His left wrist. He’s also left handed.”

“Don’t tell me you figured it out from the writing. I know that’s almost impossible to tell.”

“No. But he was in the corner of my right eye while writing.”

Hood stopped for a moment as he figured it out. It made sense.

“That is certainly something I can give to my sources. We’ll get this fucker Red. I promise it.”

“What’s on the cards for tonight?”

“Standard patrol. I’ve got no cases currently on my books. And I want to get my sources on the hunt. The faster they start looking the faster we can get results.”

“I’ll carry on with my searches online.”

“B, N and O searched what they could. They didn’t find anyone who had a reason to be going after you.”

“And I’m sure they checked everywhere they thought of. But there were a few threats I never logged.”

“Spoken?”

“Overheard. At events and galas. Words passing in the street. Nothing I could really trace. Most of them from reading between the lines.”

“Okay. You trace those. I’ll work the streets. You have overwatch.”

“I’ll open the front door for you. You can take a bike if you want.”

Hood cast a glance over at the bikes. One was very clearly Red Robin’s and another was obviously a civilian bike. However there were two others with no obvious markings, while still incorporating armour.

He quickly straddled one and started the engine.

“Anything I should be aware of?”

“Standard set up… Just avoid the blue button.”

“Do I even want to fucking know?”

“Probably not. Just don’t touch it… Ever… Like seriously.”
Hood looked at the button warily. He suddenly didn’t want to know what the button did. If Tim was nervous about it. Then it wasn’t a good thing. Which did beg the question of why it was there in the first place.

“Let’s get this show on the road.”
“Mrs Kent?” A voice called out from the front door, “Are you in?”

“Christina?” Martha emerged from the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel, “What are you doing here, sweetheart?”

“I feel bad about what Eric did on Sunday. I came to apologise and brought cookies for Tim. Is he in?”

“He’s working at the moment.” Martha smiled, “But that was kind of you.”

“Working? Oh, I suppose he can’t fall behind on his schoolwork. But isn’t it a little late in the day for that?”

“It’s not schoolwork. It’s business.”

“Isn’t he a little young for that? I mean I’m just about old enough to do Saturday work at the local shops.”

“It’s a family business. His father was ill a while back. Tim stepped up to take some of the strain off.”

“Not the first time I’ve heard that story. Although it’s usually the farm.”

“Well, family run businesses do have a lot of things in common. Everyone sometimes has to pitch in.”

“I guess so, Mrs Kent. I never thought about that. But surely the end of the day has come and gone?”

“Some international business thing. I didn’t really ask, and Tim wouldn’t tell even if I had.”

“Big company then.”

“Very much so. I know Tim was talking with the CFO when I last dropped off a drink. I’ll tell him you came by. He’ll probably be another few hours yet. And I know you need to be home for supper.”

“Thank you, Mrs Kent. I’ll see you later… Tell Tim, I look forward to seeing him again?”

“Of course dear.”

“Oh, and the cookies are double chocolate chip. Always the best when you’re not feeling well.”

“I’m sure he’ll enjoy them.”
It was strange having a voice in his ear. Red wasn’t like Oracle. There wasn’t a constant stream of information. Just details filled in. Intel that just made things easier.

Like a chase:

“If you take a left at the next turning you can cut him off.”

“He’s going the other way!”

“But his usual territory is the other way. He’s trying to throw you off the track.”

“So I’m getting ahead of him?”

“Yes.”

Leverage:

“She’s on parole. Ten years if she goes back. And she’ll lose custody of her kid.”

Finding stuff:

“Agender… Check the chest area, it’s too padded.”

“I don’t even want to know how you know that!”

Certainly Hood had no objections to that last titbit. Seeing as it finally explained how a good quantity of drugs had been moved between different hideouts. And while the Hood would fight a woman seriously, he did draw the line at seemingly molesting them.

Normally he would get Kori or Batgirl to sort it out. But that always took time.

But that wasn’t the important thing. Even with the extra intel, Hood still hadn’t gotten any further on investigating Tim’s case. In fact, anything that Red had fed him since that first day had been nothing to do with the case.

It had been a full week and nobody was talking. This Phobos still nothing more than a whisper on the wind. Not even the Ladies of the Night had anything on him.

What made it worse was the fact that Tim didn’t seem upset by that fact. Nor was he sending Hood on odd errands or to visit any of his mysterious contacts.
He suspected that Tim was giving a little bit of trust and seeing what happened. Once bitten, twice shy…

Only Tim hadn’t been bitten once. He’d been bitten over and over and over again.

“Hood, I need you to visit someone.”

“Of course. Where do I need to go, Red?”

“Colorado.”

“That’s a bit of a trek to find Phobos.”

“It’s for another case. Something cropped up.”

“Okay. I’m your Black Canary. What do you need?”

The phrasing was deliberate. Neither Hood nor Jason had failed to spot Tim’s automatic question. The four words that defined his very being at the moment. Flipping them, gave Tim back some of the power that he had had taken from him.

“There’s a resident at a juvenile psychiatric home. I believe she has information that I need.”

“I’m not good with loony bins, kid.”

“Understandable. I just need you to talk to her. I don’t actually believe she’s insane.”

“Am I busting her out?”

“No need. She gets discharged in a week’s time. I just need this intel before she disappears.”

“Disappears?”

“Let’s just say she’s got reasons not to be found again. And I don’t have any reason to keep her on edge.”

“Okay. I’ll head out. What’s my cover?”

“Concerned family member to the staff. Interested party for the resident. She’ll keep your secret. It’ll only make her sound crazy if she tells anyone.”

“You’re not helping here. Just tell me where to go… And what to ask.”

“Depends on her answers. I’ll be listening in. I’ll direct you from there.”
“B,” Dick was slumped on the top of the bookcase in the Manor’s office, “This is taking too long.”

“We can’t rush it. We rush it and we’ll ruin any chance of fixing it.”

“What if we’re ruining it by not doing anything!!” Dick waved his hands frantically, “I missed his birthday, B. His birthday!”

“I know. I did the same.”

“The only person who actually remembered was Jason. And his present for Tim was a bunch of data to catalogue… The worst part is that Tim probably thought it was great.”

“Tim needs space and time to heal. We will get nowhere if we pressure him.”

“And we’ll get nowhere if we don’t do something!”

“We have invaded Tim’s personal space. His life has been laid bare for us. We have violated him just as badly as his torturers.”

“We were trying to help!”

“And you believe that our intentions change our actions?”

“Well… No. No, they don’t. But…”

“Give him time to come back to Gotham. Then we can approach him. When we can’t trap him in place. When he has the ability to walk away.”

“And what if he walks away?”

“He won’t. It’s not Tim’s way. If he feels penned in, he closes off. He fights to get free. If he knows that he can leave at any time, he will stay fast and make you to be the one to leave. And he’ll watch you do it.”

“He always has done the opposite to what I expected. Kept a secret when I expected him to tell. Stay silent, when anyone else would have yelled. Stayed when I expected him to run.”

“Run when you expected him to stay. Searching for me.”

“Saw the truth in the lie that everyone believed. Always coming from a different angle to everyone else. Listened when I thought he wouldn’t…”

“Huh?” Bruce frowned.

“Time travel incident. I never told you about it. Was locked in my memories until long after the event happened in the now… I didn’t even know about Jason and I threw it his face.”

“Impressive. How did he react?”
“He calmed down. Listened more… But looking back… If I’d known… I never would have said it.”

“You didn’t know.”

“But he did… And he’ll never blame me, but I still regret it.”

“Then we make things better. We explain our decisions to Tim. We stop assuming that he understands our points of view… He doesn’t. Because he doesn’t have the same frame of reference that we do…”

“He’s missing love. That’s what our research states… He doesn’t understand family.”

“Bonds of love are not part of his context. He sees relationships as a give and take situation. He believes that everyone wants something from him. And the worst part is that he’s actually right!”

“What?!?” Dick protested, “I don’t want anything from him!”

“You want a brother… You want your little brother back…”

“I guess. But that helps him too. Makes things right.”

“You know things will never be as they were.”

“I know. But it could be better.”

“It could be. But it will take a lot of work. From all of us. Initially from us. We have to prove that we mean it. And keep proving it.”

“So first we explain…”

“And then we’re there for him. No matter how many times he pushes us away. We’re there for every call he makes. We invite him to every event. Even the things we would just expect him to turn up to.”

“Like Christmas dinner?”

“And birthday meals. Nothing big. Nothing public. We make sure that he knows this isn’t about putting on a good show.”

“So Movie Nights and everything else?”

“The invites have to be obvious and clear. No tricking him. We make it evident that it’s his choice. Each and every time. I don’t care if we invite him to something every single day for a month and he never comes. We keep inviting him.”

“It’ll be slow going.”

“Nothing worthwhile ever happened quickly… Except your fostering… God! I have no idea how Lucius managed to organise that so fast.”

“We take it steady. We take it slow.”

“And we try lots of different things. Movies, supper, lunch, coffee. If he’ll only do short things with us, then we do short things. If he’ll only do things where he doesn’t really have to
interact, like the cinema…”

“Then we do that. Whatever he’s comfortable with.”

“We’ll need to be patient. We’re trying to undo years of damage. Not just our own. There is no quick fix. Dick, this will never go back to how it was. Accept that. And try to make our future better than the past.”

“Got it Boss!” Dick mock-saluted.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jason tried to supress a shudder. He had too many bad memories of Arkham to be completely comfortable in another lunatic asylum. No matter what the name on the door was.

His main source of comfort was the tiny earbud that linked him back to Tim. Tim had gotten him out of Arkham. He wouldn’t leave Jason to rot in this one.


“I’d never leave you there.” Tim’s voice was gentle in his ear, “You don’t need this sort of treatment. You’re going to walk out of there… Besides, if I left you there you’d organise a riot and break out before bed check.”

“Please,” Jason smiled, despite himself, “Like it would take me that long.”

“I don’t know,” Tim had a trace of amusement in his tone, “I think it would take you a little bit of time to get out of the straight-jacket and padded-room before you started. Then there’s getting all the crazies going in the same direction. Trust me, not easy.”

“And how would you know that?”

“You’ve never tried corralling a bunch of thirteen-year olds. They’re just about as crazy as it gets. Especially when they’re driven by their hormones… To this day I don’t think Cassie’s told Conner why she stopped glaring at Cissie and started being best friends. That’s assuming he even realized why they were fighting in the first place.”

“Why were they fighting?”

“Cassie had a crush on Conner and Conner was interested in Cissie.”

“Love triangle? How come you got all the fun teammates?”

“I thought you were fond of Kori and Roy?” Tim teased.

“Yeah. They’re good people.”

“Look, you have any trouble just say ‘Manners maketh man’ and I’ll get you out of there. I promise.”

“Seriously?”

“Hey, I could have gone with ‘Oxfords not Brogues’.”

“Where are you getting these from?”
“You’ve not watched… No, you wouldn’t have… It came out during your…”

“Sabbatical?” Jason suggested.

“No… The anger part… Look, get through this, and I’ll tell you the name of the film. You should enjoy it. There’s a lot of violence, swearing and dogs.”

“Dogs?”

“It makes sense in context… It’s a film that I certainly wouldn’t watch around Lian… And would watch around kids Damian’s age either… I don’t think Damian should watch it, but more because I think it’d give him ideas than anything else.”

“O-kay. Intrigued now. How long do you think this’ll take?”

“Depends how talkative she is. I’ll be listening in.”

“I remember. Don’t sweat. I may prefer the violent method most of the time, but I’ve done this kinda thing before.”

“I know.”

That caused Jason to pause. Tim knew that… That implied that he’d been keeping an eye on the Red Hood.

Jason wasn’t sure if it was fear, apprehension, satisfaction or appreciation that caused him to feel warm inside.

“I’m here to visit Jacqueline.” Jason told the nurse, “Friend of the family.”

“Have a seat,” He replied, “I’ll see if she’s up for visitors.”

Jason settled down. There weren’t any other visitors.

“Bit quiet here.” He murmured.

“Most patients only get visitors at the weekend. If they get visitors at all. Don’t worry, you’re a little unusual, but nothing that’ll stick out. Give them a week and they’ll have forgotten about you.”

“Good.”

A nervous-looking girl came into the room. She glanced around before sitting down opposite Jason.
“Why are you here? My mother disowned me when she got remarried. She’s paying me a good amount of money to never contact her or the family again. So who are you and why are you here?”

“Who I am doesn’t matter. A private investigator. I’m investigating Christina. My research brought me to you.”

“Tina.” Jaqueline replied quickly, “I always called her Tina. She thought it was a bit silly a Priest’s daughter being called Christina. Only thing worse would have been if she’d been a boy called Christian.”

“Okay, yeah, that is a little ridiculous.” Jason snorted, “What can you tell me about her?”

“She’s dangerous. She’s a rose. Pretty flower. Pretty scent. Vicious thorns. And no-one notices the thorns until it’s far, far too late. I thought she was my friend.”

“What happened?”

“I was the undertaker’s daughter. Mother was stretched thin running the business and trying to look after me. Da died when I was really little. Mother was so busy keeping a roof over our heads that she didn’t pay me much attention. Didn’t help that I’d always been a Daddies’ girl and his spitting image. She was relieved when I became friends with Tina.”

“How old were you?”

“Oh… Four when we became friends. Everyone loved Tina. She was pretty and smart and sweet. The perfect little princess. No-one saw the cruelty in her eyes… I wanted to be a vet. I’ve always loved animals. I wanted to be a vet and be the best in the country. No… The world… And Tina locked onto that.”

“What do you mean?”

“It started off innocently enough. We’d play vets. Using toy animals. She was the nurse or the owner and I was the vet. Then she pointed out that I couldn’t tell what had gone wrong with the toy if I didn’t look inside. She’d even brought me a knife to ‘help’ me.”

Jason stared as Jacqueline made air-quotes around ‘help’.

“So I started cutting the toys open. I always sewed them back together. Because that was what a vet did. They put animals back together and made them well again.”

Jason felt a chill run through him. He was fairly certain this story wasn’t going to end well.

“By the time I was seven, she would bring me animals. I thought they were dead. Roadkill, she would tell me… I suppose I didn’t want to know… They weren’t dead. She’d used my mother’s sleeping pills and muscle relaxants to knock them out. Then she would watch me take
them apart. I think she found it entertaining.

“When I was nine, she told someone. Only she put her own twist on it. That she had caught me torturing animals. I ended up locked up here.”

“Didn’t you tell them? What she did?”

“I told them. She told them her story… They believed her. Not me. It was my hands. I got written off as psychotic. Paranoid. Delusional. My lawyer decided that crazy was better than incarcerated.”

“And yet you got both.”

“I get out of here in less than a week. My record is being expunged. I’m getting a new name. I have a million dollars waiting for me. And I’m going to disappear. Make sure that Tina can never find me. I have a plan. And it involves never seeing her again.”

“What about your mother?”

“She disowned me, remember? She remarried after I was locked up. A rich guy. He’d been making moves towards her for some time, but she’d always rebuffed him. Without me there… Well, she has kids she’s proud of now. I’m pretty sure that Tina’s kept an eye on them. Wouldn’t surprise me if she’s blackmailed them.”

“How dangerous would you say she is?” Jason veered off script.

“Very. She’s got manipulation down. And she’s always been pretty. Unless something went wrong since I last saw her. She knows how to use people. I don’t think she’ll have gotten any better.”

“You’re very lucid for someone in here.”

“Been cheeking my meds for the last three years. I know how to fake just sane enough to stay here, but not have my dosages changed.”

“My partner admires your dedication.” Jason relayed, “He has found your initial bank account and has supplemented it, to thank you for your time today. I hope you succeed in vanishing.”

“Thanks. Just… Stay clear of Tina.”

“Don’t you want her locked up?” Jason frowned.

“I’d love it. I just know she’s too smart to be easily caught.”

“I’ve got someone smarter in my corner. And if Tina’s appeared on his radar… Well, I don’t rate her odds.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Jason watched as she left the room.
He didn’t speak to Tim, until he was back at his motorbike.

“Timmy, do you know where this Tina is?”

“Do you believe Jacqueline?”

“Yes. This Tina is a villain in the making. Do you know where she is?”

“I have her under control.”

“Timbo… She’s not going to be under control unless she had no-one she can manipulate.”

“I can handle this.”

“Yeah, I know Tim can handle this. I know Red Robin can handle this. But Tim Drake? With a busted leg? With a battered soul? I’m not sure you can. Not alone. I’m your Black Canary. You send me where you need me.”

“Where I need you is Gotham. I can handle this. Oracle doesn’t need anyone to protect her.”

“I know. Just… Stay safe kid. I’m worried about you.”

“Since when?” Jason could hear the bitterness in the laugh.

“For some time now. I just didn’t tell you about it. And particularly since I figured out that about half of my animosity towards you was created by Talia… She was trying to get me to kill you… She set Damian on you as well. Why does she have it in for you?”

“What makes you think she does? That’s just your interpretation.”

“I spent some time among the League. I still have a few contacts. Fewer than I used to. Not many assassins live to cash in their 401K. Even fewer ninjas. But they have confirmed that you’re not Talia’s favourite Robin. Even discounting Damian.”

“Think about it logically Jason. It’s nothing personal on Talia’s part.”

“Not personal? She wants you dead.”

“No. She doesn’t. Not really. Think about it. What is Damian?”

“Robin?”

“Bruce’s son. His biological son. His heir.”

“The default inheritor of the Wayne wealth… Dick would never step up to being the head of Wayne Enterprises… I’d never be in the running… You’re the only one who would… You’re a threat to Damian’s future.”

“I was the only one of the Robins who could step into Bruce’s shoes.”

“And B doesn’t care about blood… You’d be the natural successor. That explains a lot. But
not why she’s started gunning for you a lot more recently. Not overtly. But people are aware of it.”

“I’ve heard the same rumours.”

“Of course you have insider information from the League… But why has it stepped up?”

“You sure it has? Maybe it’s just Talia finding a different route now that you and Damian aren’t actively trying to kill me.”

“I’m not so sure. She hates you… Rumour has it, she’s keeping it from Ra’s.”

“I doubt you can keep anything from that man.”

“Look, Tim… I know we’re not close or anything. I’d like us to be, but we’re not. But if you need me… For anything… You call. I’ll help. I don’t trust Talia. I don’t trust Ra’s. I think you’re in danger from them. I know you can look after yourself… But they only need to lucky once. I don’t believe you when you say that this hatred of Talia is all down to you being a threat to Damian’s place as Bruce’s son. But I’ll take it for now… Just… Be careful. I do care about you.”

There was a long silence.

“Come on.” Jason smiled wanly, “Let me get somewhere secure and you can show me that film of yours.”

“You’re not coming to me.” Tim was firm.

“No. But you can show me the same way you showed Damian the Lord of the Rings.”

“Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Please be patient with this story. I am taking November off for NaNoWriMo where I will be attempting to write an Original Fiction.

Once that's over, I'll be back on this. Hopefully with a little more regularity.
“Where were you yesterday?” Dick almost demanded when he saw Jason.

“Out.” Jason shrugged.

“You were off the grid for several hours.”

“I’ve been off the grid for longer.”

“You didn’t tell anyone where you were going.”

“I don’t usually.”

“What were you doing?”

“None of your business.”

“I was worried.”

“You’re a fucking fuss pot! Leave it be!”

“Master Jason.” Alfred put in, “With the situation as it… I’m sure you can understand our concern.”

“Look… I was working a case. That’s all.”

“Anything useful?”

“Nothing to do with Tim’s kidnapping, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then what case? There’s nothing else important going on at the moment.”

“Did you know Talia wants Tim dead?”

“What?” Dick stared.

“When I… Came back, I was fucking angry. And yeah, I was fucking right to be. But who was I angry at? The fucking Joker? Yeah, completely justified. B? Deny me that and I’ll fight you. Tim? A little would be justified… But the lengths I fucking went to? I focused nearly all of my anger on him. All of my rage. I kicked the shit out of him. Bloody nearly killed him. And why? Because Talia fucked up my head.”

“You can’t be sure about that.”

“Yeah, I can. Because Damian did the same.”

“Mother directed me to target Drake.” Damian entered the conversation, “She did not state it explicitly. However, she did imply very clearly that Drake would be my most difficult obstacle. In the immortal words of Shanpu: ‘Obstacles are for killing’.”

“Talia wouldn’t do that.” Bruce declared, “She knows how much I care for all of you.”
“Talia wouldn’t let you find out she was doing that.” Jason snorted, “She’s smart enough to
know you’d never forgive her for killing one of us. But she also deemed me expendable.
Damian… She knew you’d write his actions off as a product of his upbringing. You’d forgive him.
She wanted Tim dead. I believe she still does.”

“But Ra’s wants Tim.”

“That might be exacerbating the situation.” Damian stated, “Mother could view Drake as a
potential threat to her position as Grandfather’s heir. Although Grandfather is known for his
misogynist tendencies with regards to leadership; it has long been known that Mother is the only
logical successor to his position. Many have assumed that her persistent chase of yourself, Father,
was not only due to her romantic leanings but an attempt by herself to strengthen her position.
Utilising yourself as a Prince Consort to her Queen, thus gaining Grandfather’s approval. It has
been known for some time that Grandfather would prefer yourself as his heir. However, he is
aware that you do not approve of killing and has attempted many times to blur the line between
your current stance and his.”

“You believe that Tim is a threat to her position?” Jason blinked.

“Originally I believed that Mother perceived Drake as a threat to my position as Father’s
heir. However, given that Drake is no longer a threat, due to a mutually agreed compromise, I
cannot hold that as a valid hypothesis. Besides, I have recently learned that I am nothing more than
a chess piece for my Mother to wield as she sees fit, in her eyes. I was a method of strengthening
her position as Grandfather’s heir. Even if I was named heir, Mother would have become Regent
and ruled in my place, utilising my youth as a reason, an excuse and a weapon against me. Anyone
I believed was loyal to me amongst the League I have discovered is actually loyal to Mother. For
Mother to target Drake in the manner she has been doing implies that he is a threat to her position.
However, I do not know how she came to this conclusion.”

“It’s old too. So it can’t be anything to do with the recent stuff.”

“You actually believe Talia would kill Tim?” Bruce countered, “That’s not the woman I
know.”

“Mother is not the woman she let you know. I once believed that Mother loved me.
However I was merely a chess piece on the board of her life.”

“Talia loves you.” Bruce was firm.

“If she loved me, then she would not have replaced me so easily. That was a mark of
weakness. She showed part of her hand. Her position was weakened without me by her side.
Otherwise she would not have aged Heretic so quickly. While some might assume that my mother
had romantic leanings towards establishing a full family unit with you by her side, Father, I am
more inclined to believe that her position as Grandfather’s heir was becoming tenuous. Else she
would not have aged Heretic so quickly.”

“You think she would do that?”

“My Mother acts swiftly when she feels it is necessary. Her only mistake was not thinking
through how Heretic would perceive me. Although he had been artificially aged I was still the first
born blood son. I was the true heir. That was not a fact she had factored into her calculations. I do
not believe that she intended for me to die. In fact, I believe she was simply attempting to garner
favour in Grandfather’s eyes.”
“Do you think she’ll try again?” Dick paled.

“No. Grandfather would not approve. That particular DNA sequence has failed twice. He would not allow for a third failure. The only method Mother could use to produce another child would be to recombine the DNA from both original sources.”

“Alfred, remind me to book a vasectomy. As soon as possible.” Bruce breathed.

“What?!” Jason stared.

“Damian,” Bruce went down to Damian’s level, “I will never regret your existence. I will never wish that you had never been born. However, I do not approve or condone how you were raised by Talia and Ra’s. You came out of their care a fierce, brave, bright soul. A warrior and a hero. I do not believe that many other would have your resilience. I will not let Talia steal another childhood from someone. If she wishes to have another child, it is most likely that she will focus on me as the father. I can prevent her from stealing another child from me.”

“You could just not have sex with her.” Dick countered.

“Talia is a hard woman to say no to… And I still have a soft spot for her.”

Jason slipped out the room. He did not want to listen to anymore of this. Bruce’s sex life and romantic situation were not a topic of conversation he was getting involved in.

Besides it was a perfect distraction from the original topic.

Jason managed to get into his room and shut the door.

“You didn’t tell them.” Tim’s voice was slightly in awe.

“What?!” Jason spun around to find his room empty, “Fuck! Have I still got this thing in?”

His hand flew to his ear to feel the comm unit still safely tucked in. Invisible, unless you knew what you were looking for.

“Fuck!” Jason dropped his hand, “I didn’t… I didn’t mean…”

“You didn’t tell them.”

“I said I wouldn’t. It’s your secret. To keep or to tell as you see fit.”

“I just…”
Jason blinked in shock as he realized what Tim was trying to say… He had expected Jason to tell. That he hadn’t trusted Jason to keep his word.

And yet, had partially revealed a secret anyway.

Had it been a sign of desperation or a test?

Did Tim even know himself?

“Okay, so what was this film of yours?” Jason changed the subject, “I hope it’s good. I need a little chill out time.”

“Kingsman.” Tim’s voice was still a little awed, “You want to watch it now?”

“Of course. Bring it up Little Bird.”

“Don’t call me that.” Now there was tension and ferocity in Tim’s tone.

“Okay,” Jason conceded immediately, “Why?”

“It has bad connotations for me. Only one person calls me that. And I don’t want to see her again.”

“Do I need to worry?”

“If she wants to see me, she’ll see me. No one can stop her. Don’t… Just leave it, Jason. It’s between me and her. No one else.”

“Understood. Your secret, Timbo. But if she, whoever she is, lays one fucking hand on you, I reserve the right to break it in fifteen places.”

“Just… Bring up the film Jason.”

“You know I don’t hate you, right?”

“I think I’ve figured it out.”

“Good… Because you’ve got a fucking wicked sense of humour sometimes!”

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas everyone!

Sorry about the delay in posting. Things got hectic at work and I got all stressed again. Plus side, I now have a new job that I will be starting in a few months, so looking
forward to that. Should be a lot less stress on me and thus, hopefully, the creative juices will flow easier.

I also got plot stuck, however I then proceeded to write a rant, which *really* helped. Still don't know where this is going, but I'm getting there.
“Drake,” Damian declared, “I require your assistance. This *infantile* essay is not sufficiently *inspiring*! However I *refuse* to present a failing mark.”

“Easy,” Tim smothered a laugh, “Let’s start at the beginning. This is school work?”

“Yes.” Damian snapped.

“English, Science, Languages, History, Geo…”

“English.”

“Literature or Language?”

“Literature.”

“Book, Play or Poem?”

“Play.”

“Shakespeare?”

“Yes.”

“Tragedy or Comedy?”

“Tragedy.”

“Revenge or Romance?”

“Romance.”

“Who thought it was a good idea to assign your year Romeo and Juliet?” Tim sighed.

“I do not know. I do not care. I will not present a poor essay. However, all of the suggested topics are infantile.”

“Okay. You want something that is not stupid to discuss. So the concepts of archetypal love are completely off the table. Unless you are deconstructing the trope… What do you understand of the plot? Just to get an idea of where you are at the moment.”

“Two fools from feuding families fall in love. They marry. They both kill themselves over love.”

“A basic summary. But fundamentally true. What is your major objection?”

“The stupidity of their plans.”

“How old do you believe that Romeo and Juliet are?”

“They are portrayed as teenagers.”
“Not quite true. Juliet is stated to be thirteen. However Romeo’s age is never actually stated. Instead he is believed to be somewhere between thirteen and twenty-one. He is usually portrayed as sixteen, which would fit with his nature. Given that at eighteen he could be reasonably expected to lead a military unit and his impulsive attitude would not be sensible.”

“You produced more sensible plans at a young age.”

“I had an unusual upbringing. It is to be expected that most people of this age would not be able to put together a coherent plan. There is also the fact that you have to consider just how quickly Romeo fell in love.”

“I do not follow.”

“At the beginning of play, Romeo is in love with Rosaline, as you no doubt recall. He is dismayed at the fact that she doesn’t return his love. Then he transfers this love with the same intensity to Juliet with barely a thought. The only true difference in the targets of his affection is that Juliet returns his feelings. Many people have considered the love for Rosaline as being the love of a child, compared to his mature love for Juliet. However it could easily be argued that Juliet was the Forbidden Fruit that was attainable. Rosaline having sworn chastity. Take into account the fact that Rosaline was Capulet’s niece, compared to the daughter that Juliet was, and it seems that Romeo had a preference for those he was not meant to have.”

“It is possible that he did not know whose daughter Juliet was at first.”

“Probable. However, by her very attendance at a Capulet party it could be concluded that she was an ally of the Capulets.”

“Romeo was an enemy.”

“True. However, you have to take into account the sexism of the day. A male sneaking into an event wouldn’t be deemed scandalous. A female of Juliet’s age and social standing would be deemed incredibly scandalous. It would never have been allowed.”

“I had not considered the time period as being a factor.”

“The time period is a crucial feature in the story. At least for us as modern day scholars reflecting upon it. Consider how different the situation would be in the modern age. Juliet could have sent Romeo a text. Probably using emojis in order that no one else could understand it.”

“That would be an intriguing concept. It would certainly prevent the failure of the message due to the fear of the Plague.”

“It should also be noted, that the Friar was an adult and should have been able to see the flaws in the plan and was in fact partially responsible for the outcomes that were the consequences.”

“You blame the Friar for what happened?”

“I think that he didn’t come up with the best plan available to him at short notice. He also failed to ensure the message’s delivery. It would be quite easy to argue that he was complicit in the deaths. Finally he failed to take into account the inherent sexism of the era.”

“How could sexism be advantageous?”

“Damian, in the current time period it is expected that a woman be a virgin at sixteen.
Indeed that is why it is often referred to as Sweet Sixteen. It is not always what happens, however it is expected in Polite Society and the Upper Class make a big thing about the purity of their daughters. Consider the furore around the Debutante Balls. Where a young lady is presented for the first time to Polite Society. Dressed in white to display her purity. Whether it is real or feigned. If that is the case now, in Tudor Britain it was even more important. Similarly for Verona in the same time period.

“I do not see how that would be relevant.”

“Men, on the other hand, while not actively encouraged are expected to have lost their virginity by sixteen. Certainly by eighteen it is considered rare for a male to still be a virgin by society. Even if that is not the actual case. If a young male is caught having sex, it is written off as “boys being boys” or “sowing his wild oats”. A young woman is more likely to be called derogative names for the same actions. The double standards are clear to see. In the relevant time period it would equally be the case, if not more so.”

“I still to fail to see how that is relevant.”

“Consider it from Lord Montague’s point of view. His hated enemy, Lord Capulet, has a daughter, who has married Montague’s heir, Romeo. Therefore Lord Montague has won. He has stolen something from Lord Capulet that can never be taken back. Divorce was not an option back then. And with the traditions of the day Lord Capulet would be obligated to pay a dowry. A significant financial outlay, even if we assume that it was only money. At the time, it was quite common for land to be given as a dowry. In the marriage of Romeo and Juliet, Lord Montague gained a great deal of ground in the battle, without conceding anything. Had Juliet approached Lord Montague with the evidence and facts, there is a very high chance that she would have been welcomed with great joy. Then Lord Capulet would have been unable to disown her without losing face.”

“That would have happened?”

“Possibly. Without further information I cannot be certain. However, it is a relatively good theory.”

“What would you suggest as a topic for my essay?”

“Compare and contrast the portrayed role and expectations of Juliet in this play, and how those expectations would be in the Modern Age. You could draw a great deal on casual sexism and the #metoo movement.”

“What you are suggesting could be interpreted as a feminist analysis of the play.”

“Precisely. Most of the focus of analysis treats Juliet as an object. Look into the reasons as to why. You could even reference some of Shakespeare’s other female characters. Such as the doomed Ophelia, the regal Titania, the bold Viola, the trapped Miranda or the feisty Beatrice.”

“You pose an intriguing question. I could use Romeo and Juliet as my starting point before performing a meta-analysis of the representation of women across the whole of Shakespeare’s literature.”

“You got it.” Tim grinned, “That give you enough to work with.”

“I believe I can produce a satisfactory essay upon the topic.”

“Satisfactory for you will mean that it will skew the grading curve wonderfully!” Tim
laughed, “Good luck, Damian. I have to go.”

“Au revoir, Drake.” Damian replied easily.

“Do you want a cookie before bed?” Martha asked Tim, “Christina brought over some lemon cookies.”

“No thank you.” Tim was firm, “I’m not going to bed yet. Jason needs me tonight.”

“You need to sleep.” Martha chided.

“I know my limits.” Tim returned coolly, “If it wouldn’t be too inconvenient I would appreciate another bowl of your chicken soup. It is delicious.”

Martha hurried off. She still felt off-balance around Tim. He was never rude. Never impolite. But he was only just tolerant of her. She could tell by his tone. Surprisingly to her, he was a lot more relaxed around Jon.

Tim seemed to spend most of his time behind his laptop doing god only knew what. And Martha wasn’t going to ask. It was only at meal-times, which Tim religiously attended, or when he slept – if he slept, Martha had yet to actually catch him asleep – that he wasn’t using the thing.

Well, including the time that Conner was over. Tim would always give Conner a hundred percent of his attention when they were talking. Conner had even brought some of his homework to do alongside Tim. Often causing Tim to tutor him through the mathematical portions. The discussions that the two of them had had on the Literature sections had gone right over Martha’s head.

It wasn’t that she was stupid, or anything like that. She had managed to understand most of Clark’s work when he’d been at College and University studying Literature. It was simply that Tim had such a different viewpoint that it didn’t make a great deal of sense with regards to the classics.

“Hood,” Tim spoke calmly, “What is on the books for tonight?”

“Nothing in particular. Pretty standard sweep. Want to check in with my snitches though.”

“If you have time, could you do a swing by for me?”

“Sure. I don’t see any problem with that. What do you need me to grab? Intel? Gear? Couple of molars?”
“I… You’d kick them out of someone’s head.”

“Anything for you Baby Bird.”

“I’m not quite sure how to take that… There’s some information that Jake held for me. I’d like to grab it before someone else finds it.”

“Fair warning… O’s Birds picked that place pretty clean looking for evidence.”

“You thought he set me up and got double crossed.”

“We had to check the possibility. Although N didn’t think it likely.”

“I’ve known Jake for longer than I’ve known Blue and KF. He knew I had secrets. And I knew that he had secrets too. We just agreed not to poke.”

“Why’d he call you Chen Rong?”

“Chinese Painter. Painted this thing called Nine Dragons. Depicting the nine sons of the Dragon King. Nine also being associated with the Emperor in China. Drake… Dragon. He used to call me the Little Dragon Emperor. Ruling the Kingdom. You can see where the jokes went after that.”

“Yeah.” Hood snorted, “He was a good friend.”

“He was a good business partner.”

“Business partner?”

“What do you do to get rid of stress?”

“Punch something usually. Go looking for molars. Blow something up.”

“I restore cars. Jake got me into it. We had an arrangement. I did the bodywork. The engine work. All the stuff apart from the interior. He’d sort out the seats. Sell the things on for me. Send me my share. He’d also find me the cars. I’d give him a list of what I was looking for and he’d find me something on the list. If he couldn’t… He’d give me other options.”

“What were you looking for… Don’t tell me, a Redbird.”

“Don’t judge me.”

“I’m not. Just… That’s more N’s gig, you know? Making puns like that.”

“I just really want one.”

“Do a lot of people buy your cars?”

“There’s collectors. One guy… He’s really keen on them. Lives in DC, so not too far to ship them.”

“You don’t mind? Selling them I mean. You must put a lot of work into them.”

“It works for me. Like painting to get stress out. But you can’t keep paintings with that much negative emotion in them. Wouldn’t be good.”
“I think I get it.” Hood frowned for a moment, “You trusted him, didn’t you?”

“He was a brother to me. Got me through some tough times… I owe him to find out who killed him. And why. It won’t bring him back. But…”


“I know. I just… I need to know why before I figure out what.”

“That’s fair… What do you need me to pick up?”

“I’ll tell you when you get there.”

The link went silent. Hood quickly went about his business.

“Sorry hun,” Sapphire smiled at him, “Still ain’t heard anything about Phobos.”

“That’s okay.” Hood replied calmly, “Anything else you reckon I oughta know about?”

“Heard there’s a new boss. Street boss. Reckon he’s taken a few girls. Ain’t seen them on the streets.”

“Which ones?”

“Helio and Dancer.”

That was troubling. Helio was a risk taker, so it wasn’t too unlikely that the young prostitute might get in over her head. Dancer was much more careful. With a young baby at home, she had to be.

“What about Dancer’s little one? Who’s looking out for him?”

“He’s in safe hands. Don’t worry.”

“How long have they been missing?”

“Helio… A week, maybe two. Dancer only two days.”

The different times made sense. Dancer checked in with people regularly. Helio wouldn’t. She was far more at risk. Even amongst the at risk folk. Sometimes Hood wondered if Helio had a death wish; she took far more risks than was safe. And coming from a vigilante who had actually died that was pretty serious.

“Tell me if you hear anything.” Hood was firm, “I’ll do what I can… Are any of the kids missing?”
“Not so far… But we’re keeping an eye out.”

“Good.”

“Helio,” Red’s voice whispered in his ear, “Short for Heliotrope. Real name Teresa Lloyd. Foster child. Aged out of the system. But had tried to run away multiple times before. Suspicions of child abuse in the home she was in. No activity on her bank account for about a month. Not surprising given her previous record of access.

“Dancer. Real name Jacqueline Argyll. One child. Boy. Name Bobby. Probably being looked after by Dancer’s sister. Eliza. She’s wheelchair bound. Former veteran. She’ll keep Bobby safe. Dancer used to work as a waitress, until the manager fired her for “unsuitable conduct”. Otherwise known as she pushed him into the walk-in freezer when she refused to sleep with him.

“No missing person report for either of them. Not surprising really. They aren’t the kind of people whom the police would take any attention of. I’ll see what I can do.”

Hood suppressed a shiver at the torrent of information what had come through the earpiece so quickly. He took himself off.

“Sometimes you scare me, kid.” He muttered.

“What?” Red replied confused.

“Two names. Two aliases and you got all that information without trying.”

“I still don’t know where they are.”

“We’ll find them… And thank you… I know missing prostitutes aren’t top of anyone’s list of priorities…”

“Small strokes fell big oaks… Besides if we focus on the little things, we usually find clues to the bigger things.”

“Thanks anyway… What do you need from Jake’s?”

“Get yourself there, then I’ll tell you.”

It didn’t take too long to get to the Car Shop. Jake had a little apartment over the top of it.

“Okay, head to the office.” Red directed, “There’s a little program on the computer I need to access… And then there’s a few things to pick up.”

“You couldn’t access it from where you are?”
“I designed it so it couldn’t be remotely accessed without permission.”

“You scuppered yourself.” Hood snorted.

“It was sort of the point… Jake really loved that car. But I didn’t want anyone else to be able to find it.”

“Hold on… It had a tracker?”

“Bat level… I did say Jake loved that car.”

“He didn’t ask questions?”

“He knew I had access to stuff normal people didn’t… Jake wasn’t big on asking those sorts of questions. He knew the value of secrets.”

“Okay. What do I need to do?”

Red carefully walked Hood through accessing a program and allowing Red to access it remotely.

“Now what?”

“I need a few other things rounded up. Jake kept a ledger for me. And a few photographs.”

“Where do I find them?”

“The ledger is in the safe. You’ll have to crack it. He never told me the code. Changed it regularly, so that I had to keep on cracking it. He found it funny.”

“Funny that you kept on breaking into his safe?”

“Pretty much. Besides he keeps the cash in the other safe. The actually secure one. I made sure he got the best one available.”

“So this was just for fun?”

“Amusement… And apparently his cousin might visit.”

“And his cousin would try to crack it?”

“It was an ongoing joke… I think. I never met his cousin.”

“Got it.” Hood removed a leather ledger.

“Right, there should be some photographs there as well.”

“There’s a small photograph album.”

“That should be it. Jake knew I didn’t like them being bandied about.”

Hood tucked both books inside his jacket. He wanted to look at them. But he also didn’t want to
betray Red’s trust.

He checked that there was still stuff in the safe, just in case anyone checked it later. He doubted that anyone would. The police had investigated after all. But it was always worth being cautious.

“Where do you want me to put them?”

“Stuff them in my Theatre Office. I’ll need to check them. I’ve nearly finished a car and Jake told me he had a potential buyer.”

“You’re still going to do it?”

“I need to. It’s going to be delayed… But I think I’ll need the focus.”

“If you need any help. Just ask.”

“How are you with upholstery?”

“What?”

“I told you. Jake did the interiors.”

“I’ll ask around. There must be someone who can give me a hand… Or at least instructions.”

“I’m tracking where the Phantom went. I have a current location. Seems it’s current holders didn’t find the tracker. You up for getting some information tomorrow?”

“Not tonight?”

“It’s early. You need your sleep. And besides… The car hasn’t moved for at least a week. I doubt it’s going to move before tomorrow.”

“You get the history on that thing?”

“I told you… Top of the line. I’m tracing it backwards. Might find a clue that way.”

“Good thinking. You sleep as well. Catch you tomorrow.”

“You mean tonight.”

“I mean later. Get some sleep, Red. I want you at the top of your game for it. I’ll need your brain firing on all cylinders.”

“Sleep well.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year to Everyone. Hope things are going well.
Chapter 34

“Okay. So where am I going?” Hood asked the next night.

Red’s confident voice in his ear directed him to the warehouse district… To an empty chop-shop.

“No-one’s here.” Hood sighed, “Looks like they don’t work right now.”

“Odd… See what you can find.”

It was odd. Most chop-shops worked throughout the night at least. In Gotham often running twenty-four-seven.

However, not all of them. And Hood had known a few that paused work when they felt the police were closing in. And a few had paused work when things were quiet on the car stealing front.

Even stranger the Phantom sat virtually untouched amongst the various parts and tools. By now it should have been in pieces and shipped out. Instead it was pristine.

A bit of poking around produced fingerprints on tools and coffee cups, which he sent to Red. While Red looked at them, Hood started peering at various bits of paperwork, tracing where the money was coming and going; as well as the parts.


“Not names I recognise,” Hood frowned, “But I don’t often deal with chop-shops.”

“True. Drugs and pimps are usually your main targets… But how would you like to meet them personally?”

“You know where they are?”

“One of them just used a credit card to buy a round of drinks.”

“Where?”

“Lucky Thirteen.”
Hood knew the place. How could he not? The name was a bit of joke in the neighbourhood.

“Lucky for some.” Hood smirked, remembering the common catchphrase everyone used for the place, “Lucky for me.”

He had an idea. And he knew it was going to be fun.

123456789

Nightwing didn’t have anything in particular planned for the night. Sure, he was still trying to trace Phobos and everyone involved in Tim’s kidnapping and… Everything else.

But with no clues he had to wait. And Nightwing didn’t have any patience for waiting.

With Tim currently out of reach and B’s instruction to give him space; Nightwing was missing his little brother something fierce.

So he was clinging to other people. Desperate not to lose anyone else.

Robin was with Batman. So he was safe.

But Hood kept going out on his own. Often disconnecting himself from Oracle’s overwatch. Spending hours and days off the grid.

However, he still had his tracers active. So Nightwing was going to join Hood.

“Lucky Thirteen?” Nightwing cocked an eyebrow as he took in the place, “Don’t know this one.”

He crept in through the vents. No need to come bursting in and spoiling the Hood’s plans. At least, not until he knew what play was going on.
What he saw would stay with him for many years.

Hood had left behind his helmet and was relying upon the domino mask to obscure his identity. It looked like he was getting up to leave, seemingly being chased out by a group of six.

Nightwing narrowed his eyes. He knew his brother. If Hood was getting up to leave then either he had chosen to leave… Or something else was going to happen.

And the umbrella over Hood’s arm was an anomaly.

Then again, so was the simulation of Alfred’s accent easily leaving Hood’s lips.

Although the beer glass smashing into the forehead of one of the group was a return to a semblance of normalcy. Jarred only by the fact that Hood had used the umbrella to propel it through the air.

After watching their companion collapse on the floor unconscious, the group turned, one at a time to face Hood as he approached them, slowly and calmly.

“Are we going to stand around here all day, or are we going to fight?” Hood asked pleasantly, still in the British accent.

Almost as if that had been a trigger the first true punch was thrown. Nightwing got to watch an incredibly one-sided fight…

Which to be honest he had been expecting. What he hadn’t been expecting was for Hood to not draw a weapon. All he used was the umbrella, no matter what happened, what was drawn on him.

When everyone was unconscious, Hood walked calmly over to a booth where a half-drunk drink was waiting. Sitting down he seemed to return to drinking it.

“Did I really just see you do that?” Nightwing breathed sliding out to join him, “And was that A’s accent you appropriated?”
“Yes.” Hood replied. The word had unusual weight behind it. As if it meant more than just a simple answer to Nightwing’s question.

“What’s this about?”

“Which one do you think’ll wake up first?” Hood turned to face the unconscious crew, “I’m betting on the skinny guy. I hit him first after all.”

“I wouldn’t peg them as drug dealers.” Nightwing took a punt.

“That’s because they’re not… They’re chop shop pros.”

“Okay.” Nightwing frowned slightly, flopping into the seat opposite him, “Not your usual gig.”

“This one I’ve got a personal investment in.” Hood shrugged.

“Need a hand?”

“Won’t turn it away… Ah, Sleeping Beauty awakes.”

Hood slid out of his seat, barely restrained menace obvious in every step that he took. Nightwing took to perching on the booth wall, easily spotted, but not in the way.

“Hello, Spanner,” Hood smiled with a vicious grin and plenty of teeth, “I’ve got some questions for you.”

“What do you want?” Spanner’s voice shook, “We didn’t… We didn’t mean anything by what Digger said. He’s always had a mouth. Gets him into more trouble than his fists can get him out of. If you know what I mean.”

“I am not too concerned with the yammerings of fools,” Hood had maintained his facsimile of an English Upper Class accent, “I want to know how you came by the Phantom.”

“The Phantom?” Spanner frowned, momentarily confused.

“The Rolls Royce Phantom. It is still in your Chop Shop.”

“Oh! The Classic? Sorry, I didn’t… We’ve just been calling it the Rolls. D-Lock brought it in. About a month and a half back. He always brings us the class stuff. Top end BMW, Lexus, Mercedes, Maserati, Ferrari. But the Rolls? That was in a class of it’s own. It’s too good to chop. Be a crime that.”

Nightwing managed to restrain a facepalm at the statement.
“Speedie managed to find us a buyer for the whole piece. We’re due to ship it out next week. That’s why we’re celebrating. It’s a cool mill. What’s it matter? It’s just a car. An expensive car, sure. A Classic, yeah. But it’s just a car.”

“I want to know where D-Lock got it from.”

“You’d have to ask him. We don’t ask questions. We pay by the car. We chop. We sell.”

“How do I find him?”

“I don’t know. He turns up when he’s got something. About once a month. Always an expensive one. He’s got a way of getting high quality merch easily. We don’t ask questions.”

“I’ll be taking the Rolls.” Hood stated firmly.

“Oh come on! It’s not like we’re hurting anyone. It’s just a car! It’s easy money. Let it go.”

“No.” Hood almost growled, “I’ll be taking the Rolls.”

Hood turned and started to walk away.

“It’s not like it matters to anyone!” Spanner snarled, “It’s just a car. The owner is some rich, hot-shot businessman who probably doesn’t even realize it’s gone. He’ll just buy another one.”

“No he won’t. And no he wasn’t. He worked in a garage. That car was his pride and joy. He was killed for that car.”

“We… We didn’t… D-Lock wouldn’t do that.”

Hood didn’t stop as he walked out the bar. Nightwing only a beat behind him.

“What was that about, J?” Nightwing asked sotto voce.

“I need to find D-Lock and grab the Phantom.” Hood ignored the question, “And I don’t have time to do both. Fuck! I shouldn’t have…”

“What’s done is done.” Nightwing declared quickly, “How can I help?”

~Send him after D-Lock. I need the forensics from the Phantom.~

“Can you find D-Lock?” Hood asked, “I need to know when and where he stole the Phantom.”

“Of course.” Nightwing nodded, “You’ll get the Phantom?”
“I’ll process it and leave enough for the GCPD… Can’t have them getting lazy after all.”

“I’ll meet you back at the Cave? With details?”

“Well understood.”

Hood screeched around the corner on his motorbike.


“Working on it.”

“Also if you could grab the last half an hour of footage from Lucky Thirteen, I’d appreciate it.”


“Sushi?”

“Pizza. At one of the higher quality places.”

“Go figure. He on shift right now?”

“Yes. I can get you his location. Give me a moment. He goes off shift in about an hour though.”

“Nah… Stick me a delivery on the end of his shift.”

“I can do that. Any particular location you fancy your pizza delivered to?”

“I don’t really mind. So long as you get me pineapple on the pizza.”

“You heathen. I’ll get you your usual. How does the North East corner of Yeavely Park sound?”

“He works in the posh end.”

“I did say it was high quality. He does the Upper Class areas. Apparently he can approximate a high Middle Class accent, which goes down well with the arrogant sods who actually care about things like that.”

“Ah,” Nightwing grinned as he took off towards his pizza’s destination, “Low enough not to be one of them. But high enough not to be scum.”

“You got it.”

“Snobbery at it’s finest.” Nightwing snorted, “How you doing on that footage? You should watch it. It’s highly amusing.”
“The cameras seem to have been on the fritz.”

“What? They were on, I’m sure of it.”

“I’m getting about one frame every minute or so. Just static for the rest of it.”

“ Weird. Some sort of computer glitch?”

“ You would think. I wouldn’t be suspicious about it. Only it starts about seven minutes after the timeframe you told me to grab. There’s not a single frame of Hood either… That’s too coincidental not to be suspicious. So I took a closer look… You know how every hacker has a certain style?”

“Yeah. A MO. A signature.”

“Well I know this one. I know this one very well… It’s Red’s.”

“Tim.” Dick’s voice catches in his throat, “You sure?”

“One hundred percent.”

Nightwing narrowed his gaze slightly. Once he had interrogated D-Lock, he had another interrogation to perform.

They had discussed this. They had all sworn that they wouldn’t use Red Robin for intel. They were going to break their habit of using and abusing Tim.

And Jason wasn’t helping.

Dick knew that it probably wasn’t intentional. Just a backsliding of habits.

But it still made a fire burn in his heart. He loved Jason and Tim equally. Just as much as he loved Damian, albeit in different ways.

He didn’t want to upset one for the sake of another. He hated it when his family fought.

But he was probably going to have to start this fight. Because Tim would let them walk all over him and never say a word. They had to police themselves when it came to Tim’s care.

Because Tim had already proven that he wouldn’t speak up if he was being misused or abused.
“Okay,” Hood sighed, “How do I do this?”

“Don’t you remember your forensic training?”

“It’s been a while… Okay, I never paid that much attention. I was a fighter. Not a research guy. It was B’s main issue with me when I was a kid. I never could do the science stuff brilliantly… Or the detective stuff really.”

“You’re better at the people stuff.”

“No. That’s N.”

“No. You’re good at seeing how people will move. You can get people to talk. And you know how to make people feel safe. You don’t charm the pants off them, like N. You’re just… You. And it works. You know who will talk and who will run. You know whether someone needs a kind word or a threat.”

“Thanks. But the key thing is that I have got no idea what to do. If you want me to dust this whole car for prints it’s going to take some time. What do you need me to do?”

“Grab the coffee pot, superglue, plastic cup of water and extension cables. We’re fuming this thing.”

“Okay. What do I do?”

“Put the coffee pot in the footwell of the passenger side, run the cable out, so you can plug it in. The superglue goes in the pot over the keep-warm part. The cup of water goes near the heater. Then close the whole car up and turn on the power.”

“Done that.”

“Give it about twenty minutes. Check in through the windows, regularly though. This can go too far.”

“Right… Did I just Macgyver the shit out of this?”

“You could say that.”

“Brilliant!… You know you could give him a run for his money, I’d bet.”

“Maybe… Did you want a copy of your Kingsman impersonation?”

“You got one?”

“Of course I did! I took all the footage of that. Made sure no-one else could have it either. I don’t think you want that going viral.”

“I didn’t even think about that.”

“I am so not allowing you to watch the sequel.”

“There’s a sequel? We are so watching that shit!”
“I shouldn’t have shown you the first. You’re getting too many ideas.”

“Hell, just because I want a lighter grenade…”

“You want more than that.” Red chided.

“Okay, so yeah, maybe I want JB as well.”

Hood smiled to himself as he heard Red laugh again. It was a good sound. Free. Innocent. Pure.

It was a step forward. A significant step forward.

Red… Tim had lowered some of his barriers. He was unguarded.

And it was probably the first time he had been that way for Hood… For Jason.

Okay, so they were separated by miles and miles. So the younger warrior was safe from his older counterpart…

But it was still a step forward.

123456789

“Anything useful?” Hood asked, once he’d sent pictures of all the fingerprints to Red.

“Not so far. But I’ve got over a hundred prints here. This chop-shop gang touched everything in that car. It’s going to take me time.”

“Don’t forget to sleep.”

“I don’t have time to sleep.”

“Make time. You can’t heal if you’re tired. You know if Alfred was with you he’d be giving you the look about now.”

Red was silent for a while.
“You’re still one of us, Timmy. One of Alfred’s grandsons. No matter what has happened… If what I did couldn’t change that, then you certainly haven’t.”

“No names in the field.”

“Okay. Hint taken. You’re not ready for this yet… But I am always going to be here, Red. And so is he.”

“I’ve contacted the Police. They’ll be there in five. I put it as a tip off to Homicide.”

“I’ll be gone… You don’t want me to luminol the car?”

“No point. There won’t be any blood inside. Jake was pulled out before he was… Before…”

“How do you… The crime scene photographs… You shouldn’t have had to do that. I should have done that for you.”

“I had every right to do that.”

“I’m not saying you didn’t have a right. I’m saying you shouldn’t have had to. I… I still… I don’t… There’s pictures from Ethiopia… I… It’s not… Anything from that time… I… I just… I can’t. You shouldn’t have had to. I should have done that for you. Made things easier. It’s not that you don’t have the right… It’s that you should have had the right not to if it was your choice.”

Hood took a sample of mud from the tyres of the Phantom. He doubted it would be helpful given how clean the tyres were. But he wasn’t going to let any clue pass him by.

“You know,” Hood remarked as he watched the GCPD charge into the warehouse, “This is why the Commish comments that his forensics people are getting fucking lazy.”

“Why?” Red’s voice was deceptively light.

“Well they don’t have to fume the car now. That’s gonna save them some time.”

“There’s still a lot of prints to work through.”

“Which you are going to do after you get some sleep. Or let it run on your computer while you sleep?”

“I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“It can wait. You need to look after yourself.”

“I can cope.”

“No.” Hood was firm as he took a corner on his bike, “You need to look after yourself. Because if you don’t… Well, I’m not there to do it for you. Nor is Agent A. So you have to make sure that you look after yourself… I don’t want to have to attend your fucking funeral because you neglected yourself into an early grave.”

“Aww, you care.” Red teased.
“Yes.” Hood decided not to pull his punches, “Yes. I fucking care. Because despite every fucking thing I did to you… Every fucking wall I put around my heart you still managed to wriggle in there. And I don’t fucking show it enough. I don’t tell you fucking enough that I care about you. You would cut your fucking heart out for the rest of us. And we don’t give you the fucking time of day… Well, that stops now.”

“Hood… I didn’t… I didn’t ask you to care.”

“You didn’t have to… You never should have had to. I can’t speak for the others. They need to make their own apologies in their own time. But this is me… I care about you. I hated you at first. And while some of that was Talia twisting me all around… Part of that was jealously. I looked at you and you seemed to have everything I ever wanted. You had parents. You had a home. You had money. You had brains. You had everything I didn’t.”

“You’re smart, Hood. You just don’t always show it. Sometimes your fists and your heart take control instead of your head.”

“That’s certainly true. But while you seemed to have all of that… You didn’t. You had an empty house. Parents who were never there. Money doesn’t help with all of that.”

“Hood…”

“You’re not ready for this… I’m sorry. I really am sorry… Just make sure you make time for yourself. You spread yourself so thin, I’m surprised we can’t see fucking daylight through you. Though you probably don’t see enough of it as it is.”

“Didn’t you know,” Red’s voice was deceptively light, “Bats are nocturnal.”

“But not necessarily Robins. Approaching the Cave.”

“Hood… I might require you to go somewhere for me soon… Meet someone.”

“Whatever you need.”

“You won’t like it.”

“So what? You tell me when and where, I’ll go. You have my word. I’m your Black Canary, remember? You’re my Oracle. My Overwatch. When do you need me to go?”

“I’ll have to co-ordinate with the other party. Check what their availability is like… You’ll need to be careful… I wouldn’t send someone else if I didn’t have to… They’re… Not safe.”

“Our whole lives aren’t safe.”

“This is different… I’ll sort these prints out first. If there’s an easy answer I’ll send you after them first… If I can I’d rather put that meeting off for a bit.”

“Your call… I’m almost there… Stay on the line, I’ll try and get N to tell me what he found out, before he tries dragging me upstairs.”

Hood found the steady breathing in his ear a comfort more than an annoyance. It was strange how quickly he had managed to get used to the constant sound. At first Red had connected and disconnected after each remark, but it had gotten to be too much of a hassle. Now Hood deemed the
breathing little more than white noise in his ear. He had a suspicion that Red’s unit was far less sensitive than his own, given that he never heard the surroundings around Red, but Red could hear around him.

But he didn’t mind that. Whatever it took for Red to feel safe. To feel in control. To provide Overwatch.

“Hey,” Hood called out to Nightwing, removing his helmet as he did so, “You find D-Lock?”

“You find D-Lock?”

“Yeah.” Dick replied, already without his domino, “O gave me a hand.”

“So did he talk?”

“Yeah. He stole the car from the Linseed Condos.”

“That ritzy place with all the penthouses?”

“Penthouse style. Yeah. With the multi-storey carpark under it for all the cars.”

“Did he say when?”

“He saw it there untouched for about a week before he stole it.”

“Great.” Jason nodded, placing his domino back in his locker.

“Fancy some pizza?” Dick held up the box, “D-Lock works at as a pizza delivery boy. It’s not’s Alfred’s, but…”

Jason turned to face Dick, and saw that the lid of the pizza box was already open. Written on the inside was a clear message.

~Cut comms with Tim. Now!~

“In a minute,” Jason made it clear that he was answering the written instruction, not the spoken one, “I’ll be right with you.”

He took a few steps back and holds up a finger, clearly asking for silence.

“Hey, Timbers. I’ll catch you tomorrow. Don’t forget to get some sleep. It’s late.”

“You’re in a different time zone. Remember?”
“It’s still late. You need sleep. The prints can wait until the morning. Or even the evening. We made a step forward. But somethings take time. Get yourself to bed.”

“I just need to…”

“No. No, Timmy. You need to sleep. All good little vigilantes need to sleep. Remember Alf’s rules? Sleep. Food. Drink. All these things are necessary. So you are going to sleep, okay?”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Hearing the connection switch off, Jason removed the unit from his ear and placed it in it’s little container in the locker.

“Okay, so about that pizza?” He turned to Dick, “It’s your usual, right? Because if you put anchovies on it, I’m not going to be happy.”

The cold ice chips that had replaced Dick’s usual sparkling sapphires told Jason that this was not going to be a friendly chat.

The swift tilt of a head towards the computer, told Jason where it was going to go down.

The pair walked over to where Bruce and Alfred were waiting. Jason felt his hackles rising. This was going to be a fight.

And he wasn’t entirely sure he could fight this on his own. But he was damned if he was dragging either Tim or Damian into it.

Keep the kiddos out of it. Keep their communication open and a secret.

And it was going to be a cold fucking day in Hell before he stopped helping Tim.
“We agreed to give Tim space.” Bruce was firm.

“No.” Jason shook his head, “You declared that we would. And no-one said anything against it. I never agreed.”

“We need to give him space.” Bruce countered, “Otherwise we’re not giving him time to heal.”

“And you’re using him!” Dick accused, “Making him do your work for you.”

“No.” Jason spat, “He is my Oracle. And I am his Black Canary.”

“So you’re using his computer skills for your own use.” Bruce chided.

“Wait,” Bab’s voice cut in, “I think you’re misinterpreting things.”

“Babs?” Dick exclaimed.

“You didn’t think I was going to be left out of this did you?” She challenged, “Who suggested the team up, Jason?”

“I did.”

“And how did you phrase it?”

“I said if he would be my Oracle, I’d be his Black Canary.”

“Did you offer to wear the tights?”

“Fuck no!… But he did ask me if I would.”

“Good to know I taught him something… B… Dick… You’ve got this all wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Dick frowned, “Jason is using Tim’s skills.”

“When I first set up the Birds of Prey, I recruited Dinah. To be my legs… My hands… To do the things I could not… I was in control. I gave the orders. We may be more collaborative now. But back then, I was the general and she was my soldier… Just like Jason is. You’re taking the orders. Not giving them.”

“It’s a touch more give and take. But basically.”

“Why?” Babs asked, “Why ask him? Why approach him? You could have let him heal. Like he needs to. I know you boys think you’re indestructible sometimes… But I would have thought you realized that he needed to heal before he went charging back into the fight.”

“That’s exactly why I did it.” Jason countered.

“What?” Dick frowned.
“I’ve been there… Kind of. I knew who to blame for my death. I knew who and I knew why. The Joker is just fucking crazy. I even understood why my… mother sold me to him… I had all the answers. Maybe some of them were wrong… Like the fact that Timbo wasn’t a Replacement, but I believed I knew everything… Timmy doesn’t have that. He doesn’t fucking know who. And any investigator worth their salt wouldn’t stop investigating until they had an answer. No matter what.”

“You knew Tim would keep investigating.” Bruce realized, “Despite his injuries.”

“I knew he would try to get onto the streets as soon as he could.”

“Yeah, he would.” Dick sighed, “Tim’s like that. Doesn’t know how to stay down.”

“And that wouldn’t be good for him.” Jason reminded, “We’d go out too early. You know that. I know that… Fuck! Even he knows that. Probably why he agreed so easily. I’m his legs and his hands. Whatever he needs… Whenever he needs it… I’m his Huckleberry.”

“His Iolaus,” Alfred murmured, “An ally and a friend, Master Jason.”

“He needs one.”

“He has the Titans.” Dick argued.

“Does he?” Jason returned, “He’s in an Overwatch position. He calls the shots.”

“He is in Command.” Bruce nodded, “He bears the weight of leadership. However, you could argue that he is in the same situation with you.”

“Depends upon the stage of their relationship.” Babs put in, “With time it can become more collaborative. But it takes a long time.”

“Then you’re in this for the long haul?” Dick raised an eyebrow.

“I’m in this for as long as it takes for Tiny Tim to realize that I’m not going anywhere… And then I’m in this for all our days after that. Or has the definition of Brother changed somewhere along the line?”

“No.” Dick shook his head, “It’s just… You haven’t… You haven’t been keen on him in the past.”

“The past is the past.” Jason shrugged, “Things can change. At least I’m trying to bring him back to the family. Not this whole passive hands-off shit that you lot are pulling!”

Deliberately he took a step forward, reminding them that he was not afraid to fight if he felt it was necessary.

“We need to give Tim the ability to walk away from any conversation we have with him.” Bruce explained, “Otherwise we are forcing his hand. We are giving him time to heal, before we have a difficult conversation with him, because every conversation that involves emotions and myself is difficult… Doubly so when it involves Tim as well. We are making sure he is in control when that conversation happens.”
Jason took a step back in surprise. The logic was undeniable. And remarkably sensible, given the members of the family involved.

“He doesn’t deserve to feel forgotten or neglected.” Jason challenged, “And he does… He does right now… Even if he has never said it and would never say it.”

“What else have you learned?” Dick demanded.

“Nothing I would reveal to you.” Jason retorted, “I won’t break his trust. Everything he’s told me… He told me in confidence.”

“Even the stuff that could help find his torturer?”

“Even that.” Jason nodded, “I can’t stop you from making figuring stuff out from what you already know.”

“But it could help us!” Dick protested, “Jay! Don’t do this to us. We want to bring this man to justice.”

“I know. But if Tim hasn’t given me permission, I won’t break his trust. You’ve got pieces of the puzzle. Use what you’ve got. I won’t give you anything more to play with.”

“So what does a car thief have to do with Tim’s case?” Dick demanded, “I rather doubt D-Lock had anything to do with torture. All he did was steal a Phantom.”

“A Rolls Royce Phantom?” Bruce pressed.

“Yes.” Dick shrugged, “Just another fancy car.”

“No, Master Dick.” Alfred shook his head, “Master Tim was kidnapped while he was in a Rolls Royce Phantom.”

“You’re following the car!” Dick breathed, “I didn’t… I didn’t even think… I never made the connection… Babs! The police should have the car by now. What can you give us?”

“On it… Okay, I really need to tell dad to get the security updated. This is way too easy… Give me a moment… And I’m in… Jason… Did you print the car for Tim?”

“Fumed it.” Jason laughed.

“I thought so. The prints are arriving in the system too fast… Dad’s going to be moaning again. He really hates it when Forensics can be lazy… Although it works in Tim’s favour. Red Robin is the worst of us for leaving evidence for Forensics to use. Giving them the least amount of work to do possible. Okay, I’ve got the prints, but there’s a lot of them to work through… This will take some time… But Jason? You did a good job… Although I still think you could really work the fishnets.”

“Not on your life.” Jason laughed.

There was a pause as the four men looked at each other.
“Is he alright?” Dick asked softly, “As… As alright as he can be… Given everything?”

“I don’t know.” Jason shrugged, “We don’t… We don’t really talk about that. We’re not at that stage in our relationship. And even if we were… I couldn’t tell you much without damaging that relationship. Possibly permanently. Trust is not easily earned. Not with Tim. He’s worse than some street-kids I’ve met.”

“Worse than you were?”

“Back when you first met me? Definitely. I still had some hope in people. Me after Talia turned me loose? No way. But it wouldn’t take much to push him over that ledge. I’m not going to push him off that building.”

“And this isn’t?” Bruce challenged.

“No. This is me drawing a line. Stating something that you should already be aware of. Now, I’m going to bed. Tim’s got more jobs for me tomorrow. It’s been a busy few nights. And I don’t see it letting up anytime soon. Tim’s got a lot on his plate. And I’ve got a lot on mine.”

“What was that whole thing at the bar?” Dick caught Jason’s arm as he turned away, “That wasn’t your usual style.”

“It’s a scene from a film Tim likes.” Jason shrugged, “I was trying to make him laugh.”

“Did you succeed?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.”

“Master Jason,” Alfred spoke up, “It is advisable to eat before bed. I have a pizza in the oven.”

“Way better than takeaway pizza.” Jason smiled, “Thanks Alfred. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

Jason wasn’t going to ask if Alfred had believed Dick’s conclusion jump. If he wasn’t convinced by the man’s denial he would always doubt. And doubt wasn’t something he wanted to bring into their relationship. Despite all the animosity he had directed at Bruce and Tim and Dick in the past, he had never blamed or even been angry at Alfred.

He wouldn’t let doubt colour his relationship with his grandfather. He couldn’t.

So, he would never ask.

But why would Alfred have homemade pizza ready in the kitchen if it wasn’t meant to be a special treat for Jason?
It was even his favourite toppings, the type that Alfred used to make when Jason had done particularly well at school.

It had a lot of good memories that pizza. Nothing like that Hawaiian heresy that Dick was still eating.

“How’s the essay going?” Tim was stretched out on the spare bed, barely looking at the laptop screen.

“I believe I will have a satisfactory essay produced by the end of tomorrow.” Damian replied calmly, “I am having difficulty with the portrayal of Kate in the Taming of the Shrew.”

“Ah, Stockholm Syndrome or Battered Wife.”

“It is an incongruent portrayal of the role of a woman, even for Shakespeare’s time.”

“There’s a theory that it was meant to be Satire.”

“I am not certain that I can agree with that theory.”

“You don’t have to use her.”

“I feel that the essay will be incomplete without Kate.”

“You could mix in different cultures.”

“I do not follow.”

“You are used to the idea that woman are strong, independent people in themselves. And that the world is encouraging them to be that world. However, that is a Western perception. In some parts of the Middle East it is not so. Women are the subjects of their male relatives. Servants in their own houses in some cases. Kate could be drawn as a parallel to that. Or you could use her as a contrast. The representing the ideal woman in time gone past. The perfect wife from the Medieval period.”

“I will consider your suggestions. Would you be able to read it through for grammatical errors tomorrow evening? I still occasionally construct sentences that do not flow as well as they should.”

“Could you send it to me then? It’ll probably take me a little while to read it through. I could point out areas for improvement after a day or two.”

“That would be acceptable. How long before you anticipate leaving Kansas?”

“Missing me already?”
“I am of the belief that the Titans require a responsible presence to keep them on track and out of danger. You fulfil that role. Without you present to provide your influence I fear that I will be expected to. They are your contemporaries not mine. I find that I expect them to have a level of maturity that they do not possess, and this causes me to be unsuitable to lead them in the manner they are accustomed to.”

Tim paused for a long moment as he tried to wrap his head around Damian’s statement. In its own weird way, it was almost a compliment.

“Two more weeks at most,” Tim replied, “And I should be fit enough to be alone. I’ll be moving into the Nest at Titans’ Tower.”

“You will be capable of sustaining your recovery at that point?”

“Be careful, Damian,” Tim smiled, “You almost sound like you care.”

“Is it so difficult to believe that I do?”

“Past experience does not allow for any other conclusion. Should I expect your essay for proof-reading tomorrow evening?”

“It will be with you by eight in the evening Gotham time. Also while past experience can be an indicator of future events, you must remember that you are not the only person who has experienced things. I have become aware of my faults and I have begun to accept them. Thus I can change.”

“I’ll send you back the essay by the day after tomorrow then. We can discuss any issues you have with my proof-reading that evening.”

Tim then ended the call. One hand rising to scratch his suddenly itchy nose, while the other arm wrapped over his torso.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the abrupt end. But Damian's doing his own thing and Tim's not cooperating right now.
Chapter 37

For a long moment he lay there, staring at the ceiling. Then he realized what he was doing.

“I am not uncomfortable.” He snapped at himself, forcefully returning his arms to his sides; stopping one from scratching at the increased blood flow to his face – particularly his nose – and the other from protecting himself.

Things were changing. Damian was changing… At a faster rate than expected. And in a direction that Tim had never anticipated.

Was it a good thing? Was it a bad thing?

Damian had needed to change. To adapt to a Western culture. To a more peaceful nature. Something that he had already taken the first steps along the path by his choice to stay with Bruce rather than Talia.

Tim had intended to herd Damian down the path of change. But now the boy was going down it at speed and taking turns that Tim had never even anticipated appearing on what he had believed to be a straight path.

“Can’t go backwards. Gotta go forwards.” Tim sighed.

Somewhere in all of his machinations he had screwed up. Damian had started to care for him. Or at least believed that he did.

“He just thinks he cares.” Tim murmured, “It’s not real. It’s not real, Tim… You… You’re not the kind of person people love. You never have been.”

He levered himself upright, pulling the crutches into position. He couldn’t stay in the room. He needed space. He needed fresh air.

He needed to swing from rooftops, putting as much distance between the issue as was physically possible…
But he couldn’t do that. He knew it wasn’t safe or sensible.

He made his way down the stairs and out onto the porch.

For a long moment he paused there, breathing in the air. So different from what he was used to. He still felt a twinge of pain across his back as he took deep breaths in and out. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture himself standing on his favourite rooftop perch. But the scent of the countryside in his nostrils dispelled any illusion his imagination and memory could conjure.

Looking around, Tim’s eyes lighted on the barn. With careful steps he made his way over to it and slipped inside.

There was the old tractor Conner always complained about. The rusted thing that didn’t run and that no-one had managed to fix.

Pushing a box over to rest next to the engine, Tim sat down on it and started taking the engine to pieces.

It was cathartic. The engine couldn’t judge him.

Tim wasn’t sure how long he spent dismantling and cleaning the engine.

“Need a hand?” Jon’s voice cut through his semi-meditative state.

“Why do you keep this thing?” Tim asked in reply, “I reckon it’ll cost more in parts than it’s worth in scrap to get it going again.”

“But the sentimental value is much higher.”

“Really? What makes it so special? Conner complains about it a lot. Claims it’s always in the way.”

“I took Martha out for our first date on this tractor.” Jon ran his hand down the side contemplatively.

“And she gave you a second date?” Tim teased, “It’s no convertible.”

“Well, it wasn’t our first date.” Jon smirked, “Just our first intimate date.”
Tim’s movements came to an abrupt stop. Then he very slowly turned to look at Jon.

“Have you ever told C…”

“Clark or Connor?” Jon snorted, “No. Clark accepts the first date excuse and writes it off as a sentimental man’s folly. Conner hasn’t ever bothered to ask. For all that they are supposedly inquisitive, they can be very accepting of what they are told.”

“That or they just don’t want to know.” Tim snorted, “You could have spared me the mental images.”

“That was all you, kid. How you doing there? You need something to fiddle with?”

“That obvious?”

“I raised Clark. I’m raising Conner. I’ve seen a fair bit. Besides you aren’t the only person who uses this old thing when they’re having difficulties with other things. I’m just as guilty. Probably even more so. Do you want to talk about it? Or do you want me to just pass you tools? Or even just go away?”

“Am I allowed to say I don’t know.” Tim shrugged.

“Of course. Everything is a decision. Even the decision not to make a decision.”

Jon leaned against the old tractor, not looming over Tim, just simply being there.

After quite a few minutes, Tim’s hands paused in their motions.

“Jon, I don’t understand something, and I hope it’s not too personal to ask…”

“Just ask, kid. If it’s too personal I’ll tell you.”

“How come everyone bought the story about Clark being your son? Surely someone should have realized.”

“And again you ask the question that Clark never thought to ask.” Jon sank down onto a tyre, “This… This isn’t easy. But I think I need to say it… Probably more than you need to know it.

“That was a hard winter. Really bad. We literally didn’t leave the farm for almost six months. And… And… Martha had been heavily pregnant before the winter started. No-one could get to the farm. I had to deliver our baby myself. No worse than a calf really. Oh, she was gorgeous. My colouring, but Martha’s face in miniature… One night she just slipped away. Sudden infant death syndrome they call it now, I think. She was still so small. We buried her. We mourned. Then Clark came. Our Miracle.
“We knew we’d never manage another child. It’d taken us years trying. Most people had told us to just give up. To try adoption. But we’d tried that. The State decided that two farmers weren’t a stable family for an orphan. Martha wasn’t going to let anyone take Clark from us. We just told one small lie. Everyone else filled in the rest.”

“He is your son.” Tim was firm, “Blood doesn’t always matter.”

“I know.” Jon smiled, “And I’m glad that you do too.”

“What was her name?”

“Emilia. We called her Emilia. Beautiful little thing. We planted a rose over her grave. Sometimes I think Martha still misses her. I certainly do. But we wouldn’t give Clark up for the world.”

“Bet you never expected what he would be like.”

“If you ever want to be a good father… A good dad… You can never put limits on what your children will become. I never wanted to put limits on my son… On my daughter. I just wanted them to be happy and healthy. That Clark does what he does… I couldn’t be prouder. But I like to think that I would be just as proud if he worked on the farm all the time.”

“And if he worked for the IRS?” Tim teased.

“Then we might have issues. But I’d still love him.” Jon laughed.

“Sometimes I want to check if you and Martha are real.” Tim sighed.

There wasn’t really anything Jon could say to that. Not without crossing that line he had already mentally drawn in his head. He wasn’t going to get himself involved in trying to solve the problems that the Waynes had.

“Okay, Red.” Hood paused on a rooftop, “So who am I meeting and where?”

“Hood, I need your word that you won’t reveal anything you learn.”

“Of course… Red, I am getting worried though.”

“I have a contact inside the League of Assassins. I need to check in.”

“That is a very dangerous situation… You know what Ra’s will do if he finds out.”

“Yes. But I’m hoping the fact that it’s me might give them a little protection… Ra’s has an interest in me.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better. How do you know he’s not a plant? Double agent?”
“I don’t. But I’d be a fool to turn down information. Even mis-information. Sometimes knowing what your enemy wants you to know is incredibly valuable.”

“Sometimes Red, you really scare me.”

“Only sometimes? I’m not working hard enough then.”

“Okay, stop with the comedy act. Where do you need me to go?”

The directions were succinct and it wasn’t long before Hood was perched in the shadow of a chimney watching the rooftop in front of him.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Red Robin, but…

Okay, fine! He didn’t trust the League of Assassins. Any of them. All of his contacts in the League were people he had leverage on. And most of them he didn’t trust as far as he could throw them. They were good for gossip, but nothing else. And even that was suspect.

Plus most of his contacts had gotten killed since he had been under Talia’s care. In fact he only had two left.

As the clock ticked around to the scheduled time, the Hood watched as a shadow detached from a wall and emerged into the half-light of the Gotham rooftop world.

Dressed entirely in blacks and greys, with ammo packs and guns visibly strapped to her, she made an imposing figure, even to the Hood. Add in the bald head and pale skin, it was a study in contrasts. The pair of dangling cross earing didn’t quite fit in with the image, but also fit perfectly. This was someone who kicked ass and didn’t bother about asking questions.

“Hood.” The voice was bizarrely soft. “I don’t play games.”

“Good.” Hood emerged onto the rooftop proper, “I don’t like playing with Assassins.”

“A necessary evil, Hood.” Red’s voice in his ear calmed him, “Pru, you are still safe?”

“Safe enough.” Pru replied as Hood dutifully played his part as a telephone, “You are in a safe place?”

“Safe enough. Thank you for your assistance.”

“A small part of the debt I owe.”
“Do you have any information for me?”

“Ra’s Al Ghul had no involvement in your kidnapping.”

“I never believed he did.”

“Nor did Talia or the White Ghost.”

“Again, I suspected them. Though I thought the White Ghost was completely obedient.”

“When it comes to you, the White Ghost is quite irrational.”

“I should expect that… Anything else that I need to know?”

“Ra’s is looking for you.”

“I’m not too hard to find. But I doubt he’d try approaching me at the moment.”

“Nowhere is safe. You know that.”

“I know. However, some places are less dangerous.”

“Ra’s Al Ghul has no knowledge of who kidnapped you.”

“It was worth a shot. Keep your head low. You and the rest.”

“They look forward to seeing you again.”

“When I am fit and well, I will ensure that you know. Then we can have another poker night.”

“Stay secure. I would hate to have to rescue you again.”

“Watch your back. Ra’s Al Ghul’s moods can be mercurial at times.”

“I know the risks. We will talk later. I didn’t save your life for you to waste it.”

“Careful Pru. You almost sounded like you care.”

She didn’t reply to that one. Simply turned and disappeared into the night. Hood knew that he could track or follow her through Gotham with little difficulty.

But he wouldn’t. Red Robin had shown him a lot of trust revealing his insider of the League of Assassins.

The other thing that confused him was that Pru actually seemed to care for Red somehow. Not something that he ever expected from one of Ra’s people.

He wasn’t sure how to think of her.
“I hope you know what you’re dealing with there, kid.” Hood murmured.

“You don’t trust her.”

“I don’t know her to trust her. And Ra’s people… They’re like vipers… I don’t want you to get bitten.”

“I’m careful. And Pru… There’s reasons I trust her… To a certain degree. Just as there are reasons she trusts me… To a certain degree.”

“Do I need or want to know?”

“I didn’t completely lie to the GCPD. Lies work best when mixed with truth after all.”

“You saved her life?”

“Pru may be part of the League. But she is in no hurry to die. She appreciated the save.”

“I’m not sure about how safe they are.”

“I’ll take the risk.”

“As long as you know what you’re doing.” Hood backed off from the topic.

He hadn’t imagined the terse tone in Red’s voice. He didn’t want to make an enemy. This wasn’t the hill he was going to die on.

“I do.”

“Good. Get some sleep.”

“Later. I have an essay to proof-read.”

“Can’t your teachers give you an extension? You’re not exactly up to a hundred percent yet. And you’re not failing any of your classes.”

“Not my essay.”

“Cool. How are your fingerprints going?”

“Taking a while. I’ve got a collection of unknowns that I still need to identify. No named match in any Local, State or Federal database so far. Interpol has also turned up a blank.”

“No named match?”

“I have a few prints that match up to unidentified prints in databases. But that doesn’t really
give us much to go on. Apart from a timeline. I can tell where they have been and when. But not who they are.”

“Fuck. Oh well. Can’t be helped. A dead-end is a dead-end.”

“Not necessarily. Just because it’s not in a *Law Enforcement* Database, doesn’t mean it’s not somewhere. I’m trying a few other places, before I write this off as a dead-end.”

“Okay. You’re the Oracle.”

“No… Just an oracle.”

“Schedule yourself some sleep, kiddo. You’ll burn yourself out if you don’t… And I don’t want that… I couldn’t deal with that.”

“Happy hunting.”

Hood breathed out as the line went dead. He wasn’t too happy about Tim carrying on working. But he knew that he couldn’t interfere. It wouldn’t be appreciated and would probably work against him.

He was walking a thin tightrope between showing Tim that he was wanted and needed; and scaring Tim into running off. Thinking it was all just a joke or a game or a ploy.

123456789

“It’s just so hard!” Jason moaned at the only person who he knew would listen.

“Family always is, bro.” Roy stretched out on the couch, “Which one is the problem at the moment?”

“Tim… He’s just… Aughh! He doesn’t pay any attention to his own health. He keeps dangerous secrets… I’m worried. He’s a lot further than I realized.”

“And you don’t like that.”

“No. I want him back. I want him safe. So I need to know what he’s hiding. But…”

“But what?”

“It’s confusing,” Jason sighed, “I know he’s keeping secrets. And I need to know them. But I don’t want to betray his trust. I don’t want to demand answers. And I don’t want to go digging. I don’t want to set the rest of the Bats onto it either.”

“So you’re basically reduced to moaning at us, then.” Roy sighed, “We’re not your personal sounding boards, Jay.”

“Sorry,” Jason muttered, “But I know you and Lian won’t rat me out.”
“Yeah, that’s true enough. What’s your main issue?”

“He’s too friendly with certain dangerous people.”

“You aren’t going to give me details? You come here to moan at me, and you won’t give me any of the actual useful details?”

“I won’t betray his trust like that.”

“What can you tell me?”

“A woman calls him ‘Little Bird’.”

“That’s… That’s odd.”

“What?”

“I’ve heard that phrase before.”

“Not another of Ollie’s nicknames for Dinah.” Jason groaned.

“No. It was in context with Tim. I remember that much. But it wasn’t a woman who used it… Aww, damnit! Why can’t I remember who used it?”

“When was it? Where?” Jason started to prompt.

“At Ollie’s.”

“So Ollie, Dinah or that new kid Speedy.”

“No… No… It was Conner.”

“Blue? What was he doing there?”

“No,” Roy sighed, “Not that Connor. GA Conner.”

“This gets confusing every time.” Jason muttered.

“Tell me about it. It’s worse when Miah starts talking about Connor, because I always think she’s talking about Conner.”

“But you said he called Timmy ‘Little Bird’ once?”

“Yeah, but I can’t remember why… Hold on, I can just ask. Hey, baby girl, think you can call Uncle Conner for me?”

Lian looked up from where she was playing on a tablet. Heaving a deep sigh, she quickly called Connor.

Jason had to smother a grin. It was clear that Lian was simply copying actions she’d seen adults do when asked to call someone (Jason was betting Ollie or Miah). She was trying to be all grown-up.
“Connor speaking. How can I help?” Connor’s clear voice came through the tablet.

“It’s Roy… Look, a while back you called Robin ‘Little Bird’. What was the context? It’s not like you to nickname someone.”

“That was a while ago. I don’t enjoy thinking about that. Why do you ask?”

“This is Jason. I need to know.”

“Need or want?”

“Both?” Jason hedged.

“I fought the Silver Monkey, trying to regain the Ashram for my former Master. I lost. He did not leave it at that. He came after me. And I defeated him. He came from a Cult. They took the insult personally. They decided to kill me.”

“Not the first time. Won’t be the last.” Roy sighed, “You beat them?”

“Some. It strayed into Gotham though. Still not sure how. Batman, Nightwing and the then Robin got involved.”

“Timmy.” Jason stated more than asked.

“Exactly. That was when things got serious. Lady Shiva decided that I was interesting. That I was talented. I had risen to a level where I was on her radar.”

“That’s not a good thing.” Roy breathed, “What happened? I mean, you survived…”

“Not by my own actions. I was good enough that I got her blood on my hands. But not good enough to beat her. That was when the then Robin stepped in.”

“Timmy fought Lady Shiva?” Jason leaned forward, his gut clenching.

“Not then. He may have before. He may have since. But he didn’t then. He simply stated that she owed him a life. And he claimed mine.”

“What?” The exclamation came from two mouths.

“I wasn’t exactly conscious. So I can’t be certain. But at some point he saved her life. So, she owed him a life. And sparing mine was the price he asked.”

“And she agreed to that?” Roy frowned, “Jade once said that Shiva didn’t have honour. She wouldn’t agree to something like that.”

“And she doesn’t have a heart.” Jason added, “So that doesn’t enter the equation.”

“I think she agreed because she likes him. She wants to see what he’s like when he’s all grown-up.”

“That’s worrying.” Roy breathed, “Jade may not like the woman. But she respects her.”

“What’s this got to do with ‘Little Bird’?” Jason asked, although he now feared the answer.

“That’s what she called him. Shiva. She called him Little Bird. And it wasn’t the first time. He didn’t object. He didn’t back down. He barely flinched.”
“I thought you weren’t fully conscious.” Roy accused.

“It is amazing what the mind can remember.” Connor returned, “I never told anyone about how Shiva treated him.”

“Then how come I remember the nickname?” Roy was puzzled.

“I must have used it once.” Connor gave the verbal equivalent of a shrug, “I guess I tried to forget that incident. I certainly don’t like to remember it… Did you know that in some countries being killed by her brings your family eternal honour?”

“Definitely something I could have lived without knowing.” Jason muttered, “Well, it explains why Timmy reacted the way he did.”

“How did he react?” Roy frowned.

“I said I’d break the arm of the woman who called him ‘Little Bird’ if she made him feel uncomfortable. He didn’t respond.”

“He knew you couldn’t.” Connor breathed, “And didn’t want you to know who to target.”

“Yeah. And now I have to deal with the worry that Lady Shiva has an interest in my younger brother. And if that doesn’t send chills down your spine, you’re not sensible.”

123456789

Jason was still trying to take in the fact that Tim was on Lady Shiva’s radar hours later, while he was in the Batcave, getting ready to head out on patrol.

A sound from the stairs caught his attention. Damian was coming down them at a rate of knots.

He didn’t acknowledge anyone in the Cave. Not even Dick, who headed over at the first sight of his littlest brother.

Damian’s fingers flew over the computer’s keyboard. Moments later the Titans could be seen on the screen.

“Where is Drake?” Damian snarled at them, “He is not where he is supposed to be!”

“What do you mean?” Cassie’s voice was challenging, “What does it matter to you? You don’t care for him.”

“Do not presume to know whom I care for, Sandsmark. Drake informed me that he would contact me this evening. It is now half an hour past the latest point when he has ever contacted me.
I have attempted to contact him without success. Now, I will ask one more time. Where is Drake?"

Chapter End Notes

Okay, yes my private life has just taken a beating. And I probably need some hugs right about now...

But that has *nothing* to do with what I just did here. I swear to you all this was planned. I *planned* this!

That probably doesn't make it any better though. So... sorry not sorry.
Tim was halfway through analysing the most recent R&D data he had been sent. Most people didn’t know how much Tim liked knowing how things worked. Figuring out all the details and the mechanics behind something.

He knew that it was unlikely that the Bats knew about that. They probably didn’t even realize how much of his time he gave to the R&D department. Lucius had a suspicion, but Tim didn’t think he would pass it on.

Looking at the data, Tim could already see little areas where things could be improved. Even if he didn’t know how to improve it, he could see that it could be better. A few notes about different groups talking to people outside their groups for a new opinion. Even if Tim didn’t know everything, he knew how to find out almost everything.

A far more useful skill in Tim’s mind. It was why he was more in awe of Babs’ skills over Dick’s gymnastic abilities.

A few more recommendations got sent off, while Tim took another look at the yearly budget. He knew that Lucius would have checked it over. But Tim had to know what he was in charge of. Otherwise he wouldn’t be being responsible. He was quite optimistic about getting it past the Board. Most of them wouldn’t argue with him any more. He’d figured out how to best present things so that they would agree with his decisions. It was a careful manipulation game, but one he was rapidly becoming extremely competent with.

He took a quick look at upcoming events that he knew there would need to be an appearance by a Family member. A charity ball? Pass the invitation along to Brucie, copying Alfred in on it. Add a note stating key personages who were likely to also be in attendance. A product launch? Needed a bit more of a delicate touch… Write begging letter to Tam to cover for him. Promise a new pair of shoes and compare her favourably with Pepper Potts.

A few business ventures he wanted more details about. He sent messages to the various researchers he had on staff. He wasn’t going to invest in something he wasn’t sure about.

One last quick e-mail to his most reliable researcher… He wanted more information about McCaffery; something was bugging him and he couldn’t quite put his finger on it.
Then Tim was deep diving into Project Padua and McCaffery. Just because he had other people working on it, didn’t mean that he wasn’t going to investigate himself. Two sets of eyes often spotted more than one.

He heard a noise from the front door. Ensconced, as he was, in the family room, Tim couldn’t see anything from that part of the house.

However, it did catch his attention. Too loud to be Connor or Clark; despite their size, there was always a certain lightness to their steps. Too quiet to be Christina; and yes, Tim had known every time she had visited the house. She made sure that she could be heard, no doubt trying to lure Tim out into her presence by being a mystery. Tim had no intention of interacting with her, no matter how many different cookies she brought over to entice him.

Wrong pacing to be Jon or Martha.

It had the sound of someone… No, someones… who were trying to not be heard…

And failing rather spectacularly at it.

Tim reached for his phone. He wasn’t sure, but something felt wrong.

A ding on his laptop distracted him. He looked at the screen, his phone in his hand. One of his background searches had finally returned a result. It caught his attention for a moment. Distracting him from the sound and his intent to call someone.

A moment that was to prove crucial.

“Put the phone down!” The order was snapped from the doorway.

Tim looked up from the screen to face a gun pointed at him. Automatically he catalogued it as a semi-automatic. A Winchester. Not well maintained. Not held with particular competence either.
But still a threat.

Tim slowly closed the laptop lid. No need to let anyone get their hands on the information on there. He lowered the phone to rest on top of the case.

He raised both hands in surrender, already calculating how to disarm the teen should he need to. For it was a teen, by Tim’s estimation. It was slightly hard to tell, with the balaclava over his face, but Tim was ninety-five percent confident that the male was between seventeen and twenty-two years old. And of that he was sixty-three percent confident that he was between seventeen and nineteen.

“Get up!”

Tim reached for his crutches.

“No! Get up!”

Tim internally sighed.

“I can’t.” He spoke carefully.

“What? Stand up!”

“I have a broken leg. I cannot stand without crutches. My doctor would prefer that I didn’t stand at all at this point in my recovery. If you wish me to stand, I have to use the crutches.”

There was a long pause as the reality sank into the gunman. Tim wasn’t hiding his plaster-cast leg.

“Get up!”

Tim reached for his crutches once again. This time without reprimand.

“Kitchen!”
The order didn’t surprise Tim. He had already figured out that the others were in the kitchen. It was the most logical place. Tim made his way slowly to the kitchen. He played up his disability as he moved. It would work in his favour later, he knew. He also knew it would buy him time later. He wasn’t at full stamina. He knew he had to conserve energy to be able to fight later.

He wasn’t too surprised to find two more gunmen in the kitchen. Both menacing Jon and Martha along with a third figure.

Or rather trying to. Oh, the teenaged girl was cowering, but it was clear that the couple weren’t too impressed with everything. It wasn’t that they didn’t see what danger they were in, but that they could tell the gunmen were amateurs. It was clear in their every move and action. In their posture and their use of the space available.

It was clear to Tim that Jon was just about managing to hold back his desire to grab the boys by their necks and bash their heads together until they started making sense. It was only the knowledge that amateurs were sometimes far, far more dangerous than their professional counterparts.

Professionals were predictable… Amateurs weren’t.

And there was the additional hostage in the mix. The old farmer and young vigilante knew that Martha was smart enough and good enough to take care of herself in a fight. But the innocent in the equation? Tim didn’t know which way they would go.

Tim quickly labelled each of the gunmen: Blue T-Shirt; Red T-Shirt and Black T-Shirt (the gunman who had come after him).

“What kept you?”

“You didn’t tell me he was crippled!”

Tim bit his tongue not to lash out. He didn’t need to bring attention to himself. Not right then. Bide his time.

It actually wasn’t that hard. He had gotten so used to biting back the cutting remarks he wanted to let rip at Damian that the accusation of being a cripple barely registered.
The only reason it registered at all was his deep hidden fear that it was the truth. He knew the odds were against him making a full recovery.

But he wasn’t going to think about it until he had to… Well, not right then anyway.

“That doesn’t matter! He’s our meal ticket here. Isn’t that right, Master Wayne?” Blue T-Shirt’s voice had a smirk in it.

Tim kept his mouth shut, and he closed his eyes.

This was likely a money grab, but he wasn’t going to rule anything out.

“She scurried towards the Kents, with shaking hands she bound them to the chairs they were sitting in. Tim assessed the rope as he caught a glimpse of it. It was good quality. Certainly not something that a few moments with a sharp edge could cut through. This had been planned.

“That hurt one hair on their heads and I’ll kill myself.” Tim narrowed his eyes.


“Bite my tongue off and choke on the blood.” Tim returned.

Okay, so that wouldn’t actually work, Tim knew. But not many people did and it worked as a good threat.

“Tim,” Jon breathed softly, “Be careful.”

Tim nodded his head gently in acknowledgement. The warning he knew was doubled edged: Don’t risk yourself; Don’t risk the secret.

Okay, so maybe Jon meant more about not risking himself, but there was always the second warning there. Tim couldn’t afford to be incautious. He had more than his own secret to protect.
With the Kents now bound to the chairs, the girl scurried back to Blue T-shirt’s side.

“We’re leaving.” Blue T-Shirt announced, “Get him to the car.”

A gun barrel prodding him in the back directed him, along with a hand on his shoulder.

Tim went willingly, tamely.

Deep inside his mind a wolf howled and a line hissed in a voice that he almost recognised: “He’s mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf…”

The car was actually an old Ford truck with a SuperCab. Certainly something that could cope with terrain, but not be noticed in the area. It would blend easily into the hundreds of similar cars on the road.

Climbing into the cab would have been hard, and it should have been excruciating given his injuries. But Blue T-Shirt helped him gently into the cab and got him settled in the centre seat. Red T-Shirt and Black T-Shirt took up position either side of him, Red T-Shirt digging a pistol into Tim’s left side.

Tim watched as the girl got into the passenger seat, while Blue T-Shirt became the driver.

Then Tim didn’t see anything else as Black T-Shirt tied a blindfold around his eyes, before securing Tim’s hands behind his back.

Tim listened as he heard three balaclavas being removed almost in sync. Then the engine was started before they headed down the farm’s drive to the road.

“I hope Kon checks in on the Kents soon.” Tim remarked calmly, “I wouldn’t like them to be tied up for too long.”

“Shut up, Master Wayne!” Blue T-Shirt demanded, “The only thing you should be thinking about is how much money your company is going to pay us to get you back.”
“Can I speak to the Organ-Grinder?” Tim kept calm.

“What?”

“If I keep speaking to the Monkey, this is going to get very tiresome.” Tim shrugged, “So how about we skip all the bluster and I talk to the Organ-Grinder… The Ringleader here.”

“That’s me!” Blue T-Shirt snapped.

“No.” Tim shook his head, “It isn’t. I’d like to speak to the Organ-Grinder please.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who sympathised with RL being nasty to me. I'm finding my balance on my new normal, but don't be surprised if things take a downswing for a short while in the future. I'm not yet back on solid ground.

My friends are supporting me in the right way for me, so I just need time. Thank you once again.
“We don’t know.” Kon met Damian’s glare head on, “He told me to check on Ma and Pa. I found them tied up in the kitchen. They told me Tim had been kidnapped.”

“What do you mean he told you?” Dick interjected, “I rather doubt kidnappers allowed Tim to contact you.”

“I’m tuned in to Tim’s voice to a certain degree.” Kon shrugged, “If he says my name I know about it… Well, if he calls me Kon, I hear it. He said Kon. He told me to check on Ma and Pa. In a roundabout way. He hasn’t asked for me since.”

“What do you know?” Bruce glowered.

“Three kidnappers.” Kon replied, “Approximately late teens. All armed. Wearing Balaclavas. They left Tim’s crutches on the drive.”

“He shouldn’t walk without those.” Dick breathed.

“He currently can’t walk without them.” Bart put in, “I know that for a fact.”

“When were you going to inform us of this development?” Batman demanded.

“We weren’t?” Kon half asked, half told, “It’s not like you noticed last time.”

“He is my son.” Bruce returned, “It is my job to keep him safe.”

“Fine job you’ve done of it so far.” Bart fired back bitterly.

“Guys!” Dick cut across everything, “Stop! This isn’t the time for this. Right now Tim needs us to focus on him. So we don’t end up duplicating work, what do you know so far?”

“Ma and Pa couldn’t id two of the gunmen. But they recognised the voice of the third as well as a distinctive scar on his arm. It was Eric.”

“Eric?” Jason frowned.

“The creep even dragged his girlfriend into it.” Cassie put in, “He’s taken her as a second hostage too.”

“There’s no-one else missing in town.” Kon declared, “I checked. Whoever the other two were, Eric found them elsewhere.”

“Babs?” Dick addressed a second computer screen.

“Working on it, Boy Wonder.” Oracle announced, “Anyone got a last name for Eric?”

“Eric Siemon.” Kon replied, “S. E. I. M. O. N.”

“Getting into his computer.” Oracle stated, “Give me a few minutes.”
“Were the Kents alright?” Dick asked.

“More angry than hurt.” Kon shrugged, “They’re fine. Worried about Tim. I had to talk them out of telling the police until tomorrow. Eric and his people cut the phone lines, so there’s an excuse there.”

“Are you sure that is wise?” Damian frowned, “As incompetent as the Smallville Police no doubt are, more sets of eyes would be to our advantage in this situation.”

“Then I’d have to explain how I got there in the first place.” Kon reminded, “And why I knew to go in the middle of the week. That’s not going to be easy. Or even believable. They can manage to deceive the police tomorrow. They’re good at telling lies.”

“They have practice.” Bruce agreed, “What vehicle would Eric be using?”

“Don’t know. He doesn’t have a car of his own.” Kon shrugged, “And his ma still has her SUV, so he’s not using that.”

“What about his dad?” Dick pressed.

“Died years ago.” Kon shook his head, “Farming accident. Mrs Seimon sold his truck to pay for the funeral costs. Eric rides a bike most of the time. No way he’s got Tim on that.”

“Could he have been approached by someone else?” Jason suggested, “I mean… This seems a little extreme for a first timer who has no serious police record. Just petty stuff. Vandalism is the worst he’s ever done. And not even much of that.”

“A lot of his stuff didn’t get reported. Or it got swept under the rug.” Kon sighed, “Everyone in Smallville knows that Mrs Seimon has had a hard time. Especially since her husband died. She’s had to run that farm herself. And keeping Eric in line has gotten harder for her as he’s been getting older. He’s been acting out more and more each year. It’s never gone this far before. But I’m not surprised. He’s always got bruises on him from one fight or another. And he’s been getting into more and more fights each year. He’s a bully. Everyone in town knows that. His girlfriend’s been keeping him out of trouble where she can, but it’s not much.”

“Is it common for American teenagers to progress so quickly from common bullying thug to kidnapper?” Damian tilted his head to one side, “I have always been told that things are faster in the West, however this does seem unusually fast even by Western standards.”

“Let’s just say I wouldn’t put it past Eric.” Kon shrugged.

“Everything is matching up on my side.” Oracle announced, “Eric has been using his computer to sound out allies for this. Promising a big pay day and an easy target. Looking at the family’s financials he could just be looking at easy money. Greed blinds a lot of people. The Seimons haven’t got a lot of liquid cash. Eric was never going to manage to go to college even if he got the grades.”

“Sounds about right.” Kon nodded, “Everyone knows he’s not all that smart. Quite honestly I’m surprised that he remembered to wear a balaclava.”

“He’s smarter than you think.” Oracle countered, “Although not that smart. I’ve found the e-mails he sent to recruit people for this. Even got the transactions between himself and a junkyard. Where he brought a Ford Truck. It wasn’t working, but he managed to get it running. So he got a major discount. Looks like he’s been doing odd jobs there for a while. We’re looking for a blue Ford Truck. Unknown licence plate. He never registered it. And the old one was kept by the
“Great.” Dick sighed, “Very common vehicle in a very common colour. I presume it’s a SuperCab?”

“Got it in one, Boy Wonder.” Oracle retorted, “The other two kidnappers are Gabriel Key and Abe Hawkins. Both older than Eric. Early twenties. College dropouts. Abe was on a football scholarship until he broke the behavioural code. What exactly he did hasn’t been recorded, apparently someone was very keen to keep it quiet.”

“Which implies that it was bad and that someone with a lot of money or influence was involved.” Bruce acknowledged.

“Precisely. While Gabriel failed his classes. Spent most of his time spending money that he didn’t have. His parents, while not hurting for money, certainly didn’t have the sort of money that he was throwing around so freely. They cut him off until such time as he learns financial responsibility. That was a few years ago. He seems to have spent quite a bit of time since then finding new ways to make money. Most of them illegal. And have become increasingly violent. Never convicted. Never even arrested. But the trails back to him are clear to see.”

“So basically Tim has to try to protect Christina and himself from three potentially violent thugs with very few brains between them?” Cassie put in, “Because we all know that Tim is going to put Christina’s safety above his own.”

“Wait,” Jason moved forward, “The hostage’s name is Christina? She’s Eric’s girlfriend?”

“Okay, so maybe that was revealing a weakness, but it also was a strength. It gave Christina a sense of superiority. It meant that she would underestimate Tim. And that was always in Tim’s favour given his current situation.
And yes, Tim could get himself out of it in a matter of moments with just one word… One name. But that would run too many risks. It would expose him too much. It would expose others too. That was something that Tim would never do.

Besides, he could handle this. He knew he could handle this.

He tensed slightly as he heard the cocking of a pistol. From the direction and distance it was Christina wielding it.

“You could have.” She almost chided, “I tried to approach you many times.”

“And I chose to keep my distance.” Tim returned, “I know you are armed. And I know it is pointed at me. But that isn’t the first gun I’ve had pointed at me. I’m from Gotham. I’m a Gothamite. Guns aren’t exactly my friends. But I’m not terrified of them. I’m not scared of them.”

“And you think you’re not scared of me?” Christina retorted, “You should be. You have no idea of what I’m capable of.”

“I have a better idea than you think.” Tim countered, “You’re a vicious person. Have been for a long time. I don’t think there’s much softness left in you.”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m the sweetest, kindest, nicest girl in Smallville… In the whole State.”

“Then I despair for the State. You talk a good talk. And you walk a good walk. But it’s all a show. You’re a good actress. You know what you’re doing is wrong. You just don’t care.”

“You talk as if you know me.”

“I know your type. I’ve met people like you before.”

“There are no people like me.”

“There are always people who are distorted reflections of ourselves.”

“That doesn’t mean you know me.”

“I know. But it does mean that I know a little. I know that part of this is about money. But it’s not just about money.”

Okay, so maybe Tim was talking too much. But he had calculated this… He swore! Just enough information to be intriguing. Just enough defiance to challenge her. Just enough fear to keep her confident.

Just enough quick talking to sound scared and trying to cover it.
Tim took a deep breath, appearing to artificially calm himself.

He heard the pistol being uncocked.

“Well, you’ve got that right. We’re going to get rich out of this. Now you sit tight and don’t try anything and you might just get back home to Daddy Big-Bucks faster than you think. And by anything I mean that blindfold. That stays right where it is, until I say so. And keep your mouth shut.”

Ah, so there was definitely a second plan going on there. Something that she didn’t want him figuring out… At least not yet.

It wasn’t as if the blindfold was really an inconvenience anyway. Enough light was getting through for Tim to tell the rough direction he was travelling in and the speed of the truck could be estimated… Give him enough time and Tim could probably figure out roughly how far they had travelled.

(His exact location would be trickier. It wasn’t as if he’d gone around learning the street maps for the entire country at any point. But he could work without it.)

There were only two questions rattling around in Tim’s mind right then:

What was the other plan Christina had?

And was this all her own idea, or was she guided to it?

It wasn’t as if Tim’s enemies would care about using a proxy. And neither would the Demon’s Head.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, now I’m slightly worried. This chapter came too easily for me. I’m not sure if I’m using this as a distraction technique or if everything has just clicked into place.
temporarily. Either way, enjoy!
“O,” The Red Hood addressed her firmly, “Compare and contrast the messages involving this plot with Eric’s usual correspondence.”

“What are you looking for?” B stepped closer.

“Red Robin had me interview a young woman in a lunatic asylum.” Hood replied, his voice tightly controlled, “She was completely sane. However, manipulation by a childhood friend had caused her to be committed. Her family to disown her. Her intentions are to disappear once she is released. So that her so called *fucking friend* can’t find her and manipulate her again… The friend’s name is Christina.”

“You think this is that Christina?” Dick frowned.

“I refuse to believe it is a fucking coincidence.”

“No way.” Kon shook his head, “You guys don’t know Christina. She’s a complete sweetheart. Homecoming Queen. Smartest girl in the school… The smartest *person* in the school, period. She brought in cakes for birthdays. Not just her own friends’ either. Everyone loved her. She had her pick of the boys in the school.”

“Then why isn’t she at college?” O put in, “She’s a couple of years ahead of you, right?”

Everyone knew that wasn’t really a question.

“I don’t really know. There was an incident at Uni. The stories I heard varied wildly. From a bullying incident to an attempted mugging. Something caused her to come home… Or her father asked her to come back. No-one’s really sure what happened. She talks about going back in the next school year, so it was just a rough patch… Although she is going to a different Uni this time.”

“Not surprising.” O put in, “There’s very few details that I can find. But allegations of cheating, bullying and assault don’t disappear easily.”

“Someone hurt her like that?” Cassie leaned forward.

“I never said she was the victim.” O countered, “From what I’m reading… She was the assailant. No charges were ever laid and nothing was ever proven… But there’s a little evidence. She *did* accuse some people of lashing out at her…”

“That makes more sense.” Kon declared, “Look, I *know* Christina. She wouldn’t hurt anyone. That’s not her… *Eric*? Yeah, he’s violent. He’s dangerous. And Tim shouldn’t be with him for a moment longer than necessary. But Christina? She’s harmless. Always has been.”

“There’s a few details there that don’t add up,” O argued, “You were right, Jay. The wording is wrong. Either Eric *completely* changed his writing style when he communicated with Gabriel and Abe… Or it wasn’t him in the first place.”

“But…” Kon stalled, “She…”
“Easy, bro.” Garfield clambered onto Kon’s shoulder as a monkey, “It’s okay. Some people are good at that. They show you one side of themselves and hide the other.”

“This makes things more dangerous.” B frowned, “An inexperienced group of hot-headed boys is one thing. Something that under normal circumstances Tim could handle easily. However, a more calculating adversary could be beyond Tim at the moment. He is still healing and isn’t sufficiently mobile to fight back.”

“He could used that to his advantage.” Dick reminded, “Play it up and get them to underestimate him.”

The hope in Dick’s voice was easy to discern.

“Tt.” Damian sniffed, “Given Drake’s current mobility issues he would have to feign unconsciousness to achieve a realistic deception.”

“How to say it, but I’m with Robin.” Bart sighed, “Tim is not up to defending himself right now. He’s not in a fit state for this. We have to find him… Or we might not get him back.”

“Has anyone checked to see if this was not suggested by outside sources?” Raven added in.

“You think Ra’s might use a patsy?” Cassie turned to look at her, “Well… I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Look, does it really matter?” Bunk shrugged, “We’ve got to find el jefe. And quickly. Because if they didn’t take his crutches, I doubt they took his medication. He’s on a timer now.

Everyone’s heart sank at the truth in those words. With injury to contend with Tim had an uphill battle on his hand anyway. However his compromised immune system and the lack of medications were just as much of a threat as the kidnappers. Perhaps even more of a threat.

And the worst part?

They didn’t know how long Tim had.

123456789

“Get out!” The command was snapped at Tim.

“May I have my crutches?” Tim kept his voice even.

“Beg for them!” The order was filled with delight and a shade of anticipation.
“No.” Tim refused to respond, “Either I have my crutches or I can’t walk. And I’ll need my hands free as well. Or I’m not going to be able to do what you want.”

“Walk or I shoot you.”

“Shoot me and your payday goes away.”

“I didn’t say where I’d shoot you.”

“I rather doubt you have the medical expertise to treat a bullet wound. They do more damage than you’d think. But if you want to risk it, that’s your decision. I am simply telling you what I am not capable of doing. I cannot walk without my crutches. Either you give me them to travel the distance you require me to walk, or I will not make it.”

The sound of the pistol being cocked was loud in the silence that reigned after Tim finished speaking.

“I’ll carry him.” Eric interrupted, “It’s okay, Christina. I’ll handle it. You don’t need to do anything. Just tell me where you want him.”

Tim listened as he heard the doors of the truck open and everyone get out. Not long later, he heard someone approaching him, then felt gentle arms lift him up. He ducked his head so that he didn’t bang it as he was carried out of the truck.

They were clearly parked in a garage attached to a house as Tim heard the footsteps moved from concrete to tile and then to carpet.

Ears pricked for any other audible clues, Tim could hear the creak of floorboards as they travelled up a flight of stairs. Doors opened before Eric and Tim reached them. There was no sounds of anyone else in the building beyond his captors.

The movements around what had to be furniture, and the intact windows letting in light but not wind, indicated that the building wasn’t abandoned. So either all the residents had been killed before they arrived or were otherwise absent.

Tim was betting on absent. For all that he believed Christina had the ruthlessness to execute an entire family so that she could utilise their home for her own purposes; he doubted she would do it herself. And her lackeys weren’t killers yet.

That wasn’t to say they wouldn’t get there. But they weren’t there yet.
Tim could hear doors being opened and closed. So this wasn’t a house that they were completely familiar with. And it was likely that it didn’t have a basement. Otherwise he didn’t doubt that he would have been put there. It seemed like the sort of cliché plan that a smart first timer would use. Easy to keep him segregated and with his leg still in its cast the stairs would prevent him from escaping. Although any set of stairs would significantly hamper him, so taking him upstairs would provide the same advantage.

Finally Tim was taken into a room and put down on a relatively comfortable bed. At least a Queen sized bed, from the feel of it. The curtains were open, but closed quickly after he was placed on the bed. Either they didn’t want him looking out or they didn’t want someone looking in.

He heard the click of a camera. A phone camera. That would have metadata imbedded in the photo. Including his location, as long as they forgot to disable the GPS. If they sent it electronically it would only take Babs seconds to locate him. Although that was assuming that they were stupid enough not to take precautions. He wouldn’t assume that they were. However, there was nothing wrong with hoping. Just to get everything over sooner without exposing any secrets.

He listened as they left the room. He was slightly uncomfortable lying on the bed, but shifted to be as comfortable as he could be. The sheets beneath his fingers were fine cotton. Not up to the standard of the sheets at Wayne Manor, but few things ever were. (Although Damian used silk sheets.)

The pillows were comfortable, but the case had a frill around the edge, which led Tim to the tentative conclusion that he was in a woman’s bedroom. Unlikely a couple’s room though. Christina would want the Master Bedroom to herself. She was that sort of person.

As comfortable as he could manage for the moment, Tim decided to rest. He would need his strength for later.

However, he couldn’t just fall asleep. He was not safe. It wasn’t safe to be so vulnerable. Even if he need to recharge.

Then again, he didn’t need to sleep to rest. It was the work of a moment to slip into a meditative state. He set a mental alert to bring himself out of it, if anyone entered the room.

It wouldn’t be good to be caught unawares.
“What do you mean he’s been kidnapped?” Montoya snapped down the phone, “Who by? When?”

“A local lad.” The Sheriff of Smallville sighed, “Seems that his girlfriend was getting too interested in Drake. And it got him upset.”

“So he decided the sensible thing was to kidnap him?” Montoya exclaimed, “What have you got in the water down there that that makes sense?”

“Eric ain’t never been a very bright kid. Always skipping school. Antisocial. Runaway a few times. Always in fights. No friends. His ma has always had a tough time keeping him in line. We all thought… Well it doesn’t really matter now.”

“Sounds like a real bad kid.” Montoya sighed, “But this is the first big crime he’s committed?”

“Yeah. Everything else has been petty stuff that we’ve dealt with in town, if you know what I mean.”

“I think so.” Montoya agreed, “And now?”

“Well, he’s got two lackeys and two hostages. Martha and Jon tell me that Drake’s not really mobile, so he’s unlikely to manage an escape?”

“Based on the injuries he had when I last saw him… Very unlikely that he’d manage. Have you got any idea what this Eric is after?”

“We’re thinking money… Eric’s not exactly complicated. He can’t have gone far either. He’s never left town before. Wouldn’t know where to go.”

“Never left town? Is that unusual?”

“For most people, yeah. Most people have at least been to a few markets in other towns. Or went with the school to the nearest museum. But ever since his da died, his ma has gotten real nervous about Eric going anywhere outside of town without her. Don’t really blame her, after losing Steve so suddenly and all. And she has to stay at home to look after the farm. So he’s never left town. Besides, she needs his help on the farm. Can’t expect a woman to do all the work. ‘Specially not Jackie. She’s this tiny slip of a thing. Always has been. Half Eric’s size these days.”

“We’ll break the news to the Waynes. Do you have a picture of this Eric?”

“Give me an e-mail address and I’ll send you his file. But I wouldn’t worry too much about telling the Waynes. Martha said she was going to contact Alfred? I’ve no idea who that is, but I presume he’s a Wayne.”

“He’s the butler.”

“Butler? I thought that was a posh British thing.”
“Well, he is very British. And he sounds very posh. Wayne... Well, he’s Wayne. A bit of an airhead... But he loves his sons. That much is very clear. You think this Eric is just after money?”

“As I said, Eric’s not exactly the sharpest tool in the toolbox. He probably saw a chance to make a quick buck. I don’t expect it’ll take us long to find him.”

“Sometimes it’s the amateurs that are harder to predict than the professionals.” Montoya cautioned, “I’ll organise a police presence at the Wayne Mansion.”

“Will they allow it? Rich folks can be entitled.”

“It’s worth a shot. Keep us updated if you get any further information. We’ll do the same for you.”

“Of course. Think we need to tell the FBI?”

“Probably. You do that. As it is still technically your case. And we suspect it’s going to cross state lines.”

“I’ll give them your name as well. So they know who to contact.”

“Alright. Hopefully we can wrap this all up soon. If Eric is as daft as you say, he shouldn’t be too hard to deal with.”

“Bottom of the class in every subject for years. Eric’s not got the brains to be really dangerous.”

Montoya ended the call after that.

“What’s your opinion?” Allen asked as they drove towards Wayne Manor.

“All the reports imply that he’s not all that bright.” Montoya shrugged, “But if he’s not smart…”

“Why hasn’t he been caught yet?” Allen finished for her, “That sounds suspicious. Wouldn’t surprise me if he’s smarter than he lets on. School reports only test for school stuff after all.”

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“Martha already told us.” Brucie’s voice was uncharacteristically calm, “I’ve got Lucius coming so that I know what financial resources I have to hand.”

“You’re willing to pay a ransom?” Montoya wanted confirmation.

“I will do whatever it takes to get my children home safe.” Bruce was firm, “I am not going to lose another child.”
Montoya could vaguely remember the melancholy that had haunted Gotham for a long time after Jason Wayne had been reported dead. While she wasn’t sure the exact situation that had culminated in his return, she knew that Brucie had believed that his son was dead.

“Until I know where all of my children are,” Bruce continued, “Damien is staying home from school. Alfred has organised all of his schoolwork to be e-mailed, so that he doesn’t miss out on anything.”

“We have no suggestion that there is a threat to your other children.” Allen tried to calm him.

“I. Don’t. Care.” Bruce’s eyes had steel in them, that surprised Montoya.

She hadn’t ever thought that Brucie Wayne was capable of such focus or anger.

“The FBI Agents, Master Bruce.” Alfred announced from the doorway, “They are requesting full access.”

“Whatever they need.” Bruce stated firmly, “Wherever they need it. Tell the boys to cooperate.”

“Understood, Master Bruce. Do not worry. Master Tim is a strong soul. He will hold on.”

“I still worry.” Bruce shrugged, “What are you doing to find my boy?”

He had switched to talking to the FBI agents.

“We need to send up a trap and trace on your phones.”

“Do it.” Bruce declared.

“Mister Wayne,” One of the agents stepped forward, “I am…”

“Will knowing your name speed anything up?” Bruce challenged.

“…No.”

“Then I don’t care who you are. Just do your job. Bring my boy home.”

Montoya and Allen were virtually bundled out of the office by the FBI.
“I get the feeling we’re not going to be welcome here.” Allen muttered.

“Probably more welcome than the FBI.” Jason snorted as he walked past them.

“What do you mean?” Montoya looked at him.

“I’m not a fan of the police.” Jason shrugged, “But the Fibbies? They are even worse. They don’t even care. It’s all about getting the bad guys. Getting the credit.”

Montoya looked at Jason. The bags under his eyes were clearly visible.

“How much sleep did you get last night?” She asked gently.

“Not much.” Jason replied, “Look, you’re probably going to find out, so I might as well tell you. Damien and I have been contacting Timmy fairly regularly. Damien couldn’t get through last night. I’ve been trying to call him half the fucking night. Even checked in with his friends. I knew something was fucking wrong.”

“Did you tell Mister Wayne?” Allen pressed.

“I didn’t tell him… Damian did. Was pretty certain something was wrong when Timmy didn’t return his proof-read essay on time.”

Jason turned slightly and Montoya’s eyes narrowed.

“Do you have a permit for that gun?” She asked pointedly.

“This?” Jason tapped the underarm holster she had spotted, “Yeah. Concealed Carry Permit and all. Don’t ask me how, but Timmy managed to swing it for me.”

“Those are very difficult to get.” Allen frowned.

“Don’t I know it. I didn’t even bother trying. Timmy just posted it to me. Took me a week to figure out he was the one who organised it.”

“You were illegally carrying it?” Montoya raised an eyebrow.

“If I was,” Jason replied calmly, “And I’m not saying that I was… How would that make me any different than half of Gotham? Look… Bruce doesn’t like guns. But I don’t feel safe without being armed. Not after… After Ethiopia… I don’t… Bruce can’t understand. He sees guns as the enemy. I see them as a tool. And if I can protect my family, I will do whatever it takes. Even shoot the son of a bitch doing this.”

It was slightly amusing how similar the two Waynes were. Both determined to protect their family. Just from very different angles.
“You know it’s unlikely that they’ll try to attack any of you.” Allen reminded.

“Unlikely. But not impossible.” Jason returned, “From what people are saying, this Eric isn’t that smart. So I don’t think anyone can predict him.”

That was a good point. It was clear that the Waynes weren’t taking this mildly. This wasn’t a threat they were brushing off. And they were co-operating… Well, to a certain extent.

Damien had basically shut himself away in his room. Focusing on his schoolwork, he said. But Montoya suspected that he was worrying in his own way.

Tim rose out of meditation as he heard gentle steps enter the room. A weight rested on the bed.

“You awake?” Eric’s voice was soft.

“Just about.” Tim replied, his nose quickly explaining what was going on.

“I brought you some food.” Eric stated, “I hope you like cheesy chips. It’s the best I can do.”

“Thanks.” Tim breathed, “I was starting to worry… Could I have my hands and eyes back to eat? Unless you want to feed me.”

“Give me a moment.”

Tim felt Eric undoing his bindings, freeing Tim’s hands. Tim pulled off his blindfold.

He took a moment to glance around the room. He had been right. It was a queen sized bed he lay on, with pink frilly covers and muslin hanging from the ceiling to give the impression of a Princess’ bed. With pink walls and pink cushions, Tim initially pegged the age of the usual occupant as being pre-teen. But then he spotted the pictures on the wall and mentally adjusted the age upwards to mid-teen. Just with a serious pink obsession.

Eric appeared slightly uneasy to Tim’s eyes. Holding a cardboard box of cheesy chips in one hand, a spork sticking out of the pile. A bottle of apple juice had been placed on the side table, just within Tim’s reach.
“Thanks.” Tim smiled softly, “Cheesy chips huh?”

“And apple juice.” Eric pointed to the bottle, “You need some fruit and veg.”

“Alfred will appreciate that.” Tim laughed, “He’s always at me to eat better.”

“Christina wants me to take everything off you afterwards.”

“If I can manage to harm you with a spork, then we have got some serious problems.”

That wasn’t exactly true. Tim knew that he could take down all four assailants with what he could see in his room at least six different ways, just based on his initial sweep of the room. And one using the spork.

Of course all of those were assuming that he was at full fitness at the time. And he knew that he wasn’t capable of those actions. Not then. And not likely for some time.

“What are the odds that Mister Wayne will pay your ransom?”

“Depends on how high the ransom is.”

“She’s asking for a lot.”

“And how much do you expect to see?”

“I’m not stupid. I know I’ve been set up to take the fall… I just… I just didn’t realize until it was too late to back out.”

“When did you realize?”

“When I helped you into the truck. I saw my scar.”

A nervous hand was rubbing the scar. Tim hadn’t seen the scar before he was forced into the kitchen at the Kents. Eric had been wearing long sleeves the first time they had met.

“How long has your mother been abusing you?” Tim asked.

“How… Wha… Why do you think that?” Eric blustered, his hand freezing.

“That’s a grease burn. And it’s old. You started rubbing it when you got nervous. That’s a coping mechanism. It reminds you of something. I guessed abuse. And it wouldn’t be from Christina… Too old.”

“Why my mother?”
“The respect you give Christina… And the respect you gave Mrs Kent. You are too scared of women to harm them. Your gun never wavered from Mr Kent. Now most people would think that was because he was the bigger threat, but that wasn’t your reasoning. You were more scared of Mrs Kent, so you didn’t dare threaten her. It is a woman that has abused you most of your life.”

“It could be my father.”

“Doubtful. You don’t hate men. I can see that. She abused him too.”

“Why the past tense?”

“Because I don’t think he’s been in your life for a long time. Now if he’d just run away, there’d be some dislike towards him for leaving you behind. So I suspect he’s dead.”

“Farming accident… At least that’s what everyone says.”

“You doubt.”

“No. It was an accident.”

Eric got to his feet and almost charged to the door.

Tim carried on eating. He wasn’t going to turn food down, he would need the energy.

Besides he would have plenty of time to work on Eric later.

Chapter End Notes

Somehow these chapters are coming easier at the moment. So I hope everyone enjoys this one.

And thank you for all your support both with this story and with RL. *This* is why I love this community!
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The oldest Robins and Alfred were gathered in the hall. They were being ignored by the FBI and the GCPD. Everyone was focused on Bruce. He was going to be the person contacted. Not the butler or the sons. And it was going to be a phone call or an e-mail. Those were the most logical methods and therefore what was going to happen.

Even if it hadn’t happened yet. Even if it had been three days of waiting so far.

“A bit old fashioned, isn’t it?” Dick frowned, “A letter?”

“Harder to trace.” Jason reminded, “It’s taken three days to get here. They could be anywhere by now.”

“May I suggest, gentlemen,” Alfred almost sighed, “That opening the letter might reveal more answers to your questions.”

The two eldest Wayne children and the butler were gathered around the letter that had arrived that morning. The postmark was all the clue they had required to identify it as having been sent by the kidnappers. None of the FBI Agents had realized what had arrived with the mail. Too busy focused on the phone and the e-mail accounts.

“Open it or take it to Bruce?” Dick suggested.

“Why not both?” Jason countered, “Alfred, how long to boil the kettle?”

It didn’t take long to steam the envelope open. And photographing the contents didn’t take much longer either.

Then they resealed the envelope and Alfred placed the envelope on the tray with the other pieces of mail.

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“If you want him back alive prepare to pay a hundred million dollars.” Bruce’s voice was
calm as he spoke, “He is unharmed. But that can change. Details to come later.”

The FBI agents looked at each other. All of them were surprised at how calm Bruce was.

“What do you want to do, Mister Wayne?”

“I don’t access to that kind of money.” Bruce muttered, “I could manage maybe a fifth. But that’ll take time… Lucius? How is Wayne Enterprises placed for this?”

“Bruce…” Lucius sighed, “I didn’t say anything earlier because I thought you knew… We don’t negotiate. There’s a non-payment policy across the board.”

“That’s always been there.” Bruce waved a hand dismissively, “But there’s always been ways around it.”

“There was. Until Tim became CEO.” Lucius countered, “He tightened up the policy. There’s no flexibility there.”

“None?” There was a hint of desperation in Bruce’s voice.

“There’s only one loophole.” Lucius leaned forward on the desk, almost all his weight on his hands as he bowed his head, “It requires myself, Commissioner Gordon and Tim to be in the Commissioner’s office of our own free will to liberate the funds.”

“So the only person who can access the money is the one person we are trying to ransom.”

“That is correct, Agent Broadbent.” Lucius nodded.

“There isn’t a loophole? Someone who could stand in?” Agent Broadbent tried.

“Any member of the Fox family who has been employed by the Waynes for the last month could stand in for myself.” Lucius agreed, “And Commissioner Gordon can be replaced by Barbara Gordon. However there is no replacement allowed for Tim.”

“Are you sure that you can’t access the ransom amount required?” Another agent pressed, “You do have a personal fortune worth several billion after all.”

“Tt,” Damian spoke up from the doorway, where no-one had seen him, “I do not know what sort of bank account you believe my Father has, Agent Shannon. However, one does not simply leave a hundred million dollars lying dormant in a bank account simply accumulating interest. Money of that amount is put to work. It is invested in stocks and shares. It is invested in bonds. It is invested in real estate. No one in this family has anything near what they are asking for simply lying around in a bank account. It is tied up in a manner that would take several weeks or months to liberate successfully.”

“Damian’s right.” Bruce sighed, “What they’re asking for… It’s not that I won’t but that I can’t.”

“There is at least one thing in his favour,” Agent Shannon remarked, “He’s blindfolded. That means it is expected that he cannot identify his kidnappers.”

“So they aren’t planning on killing him.” Agent Broadbent nodded in agreement, “There’s
room for negotiation. Plus they haven’t given details of the money drop. We can still work with
this. I would advise, that if you intend to pay the ransom that you start gathering the money.”

“Once again, we would advise against paying.” Agent Shannon reminded, “We have
experienced hostage negotiation teams ready to act.”

“Master Bruce,” Alfred spoke up, “Give the discrepancy between what is wanted and what
is possible…”

“I know, Alfred.” Bruce hung his head, “Tim always was far too smart to be ordinary. Far
too sacrificing to be ordinary. He’ll understand… But… I didn’t want… I don’t want to reduce his
survival to be dependant upon value. He is invaluable to me. He shouldn’t have a price.”

“This is not your fault, Father.” Damien moved forward to gently touch his father, “This is
their fault. The blame lies with them. Drake is invaluable to us. However many people put
monetary value upon human lives. We will have to negotiate. Not even my Grandfather has
sufficient funds to meet this ransom.”

“And let’s be fair, Damien, he wouldn’t pay it anyway.” Bruce muttered, “We will have to
negotiate.”

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“Anything in the picture?” Jason leaned over Dick’s shoulder.

“Pretty generic unfortunately. I can’t see anything distinctive. Even blown up.”

“Stand back boys,” Babs cut across, “Let a pro deal with this.”

“Aren’t you hacking the FBI to find out what they know?” Jason asked.

“Please,” Babs scoffed, “I’m already in. And have been for days. There’s nothing going on
there that I don’t know about. At least not involving this case. I don’t need to know about anything
else. Not right now, at least.”

“What can you find?” Dick pressed.

“Give me time.” Babs returned, “Even I take time, Boy Wonder. I doubt they’ve done
anything to Tim, yet.”

“It’s the yet, that worries me.” Dick reminded.

“And you think it doesn’t worry me?” She snapped, “I’m currently praying that Christina is
trying for Stockholm’s.”

“Tim wouldn’t fall for that.” Dick argued.

“I know. But I’m hoping Christina doesn’t.” Babs remarked, “Oh! Finally!”

“You got a location?” Jason demanded.

“No. The FBI finally gave up on hacking Tim’s laptop. Bruce should be able to get it back
“Whey did they even bother with it?” Dick frowned, “It’s not like there was going to be anything on it that could help the case.”

“A few agents suggested that Tim could have encouraged Christina’s interest.” Babs shrugged, “Another agent, who will remain nameless, postulated the idea that Tim organised his kidnapping.”


“Cool your jets, Boy Wonder. I’ve dealt with her. She’s getting audited by the IRS. Every year for the next ten years.”

“Remind me never to get on your bad side.” Jason muttered.

“If you didn’t know that by now, Little-Wing,” Dick laughed, “You haven’t been paying attention.”

“True.” Jason agreed, “I just don’t think there’s going to be any information on Tim’s laptop that’ll help.”

“Not about where he is,” Babs acknowledged, “But there’s a good chance he’s got some intel on Christina. Might help narrow my field of search into her past and where she might go.”

“The photo not helping?” Dick mourned.

“I’m having to do an image search… There’s a lot of pictures online. And this photo might be from a different angle. This isn’t going to be fast. This isn’t the movies or tv show, Dickie bird.”

“I’m not certain if my dad’s death was an accident.” Eric confessed suddenly to Tim.

“Why not?” Tim pressed gently.

“My mum hit my dad regularly. She would just scream at me. I could deal with that. I could deal with her grabbing me and shaking me. I could deal with being sent to my room or to the barn or wherever. But that day… That day she was really mad. I can’t remember what I did. But she hit me. It was my fault.”

“No.” Tim shook his head, “What you did was your fault. What she did is her fault. Your actions under no circumstances justify hers. What she did is on her. Never on you.”

“My dad saw it.” Eric avoided Tim’s gaze, “He told her that if she hit me again, he’d take me and run away. She’d never find us again… He died the next day. Mum always tells me it was my fault. That if I hadn’t been bad he wouldn’t have threatened to leave her. That he died because I was a miserable excuse of a son. That I shouldn’t have been born. That I was a ball and chain that she never wanted. That without me she would have been living the high life.”

“Your guilt is understandable. She made you feel that. It was not your fault. I know that doesn’t help. You never stop feeling guilty for things like that. But no-one else would blame you.”
“Christina does. I told her. She said if I was better I wouldn’t have been hurt so much.”

“She’s using it to manipulate you. Guilt is very useful for manipulation. She’s just continuing what your mother did to you.”

“She didn’t hit me at first.”

“She didn’t need to. You think your mother…”

“I don’t know. She always tells me it was a suicide. I have suspected she killed him but…”

“You can’t be sure. And I wouldn’t want to be certain if I was in your position.”

“Exactly. It wasn’t abuse though… She was just trying to make me better.”

“I’m going to ask you a question, Eric. And this is a hard question. So I really want you to think about the answer.”

“Okay.”

“Would you deem what they did to you acceptable to do to a dog?”

“No. Never.”

“Did you know that the first child abuse case in America was prosecuted under animal abuse laws? Because there were no child abuse laws at the time.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes. I have never lied to you, Eric. Not intentionally.”

“Not intentionally?”

“I have always spoken what I believe to be the truth. But what I believe to be the truth, may not be the truth as it truly is.”

“I don’t follow.”

“If I have never seen the backyard here, and someone tells me it has a pool. Then I would tell you that it has a pool. That would be the truth as I know it…”

“But not the actual truth. As you don’t know any different.”

“Exactly.”

Inwardly Tim smiled. He was getting somewhere.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Easter everyone!
Sorry about the delay - I got hold of Pokémon Let's Go... And sort of lost a week.
Sorry again.
“He’s just a kid.” Montoya muttered, “Why such a high ransom?”

“Because he’s a Wayne?” Allen suggested, “Don’t think about him as a kid. He’s a CEO. Not an ordinary kid.”

“But it’s still stupidly high. I’d expect a lower ransom. Given his whole file that we’ve seen he’s not that bright. But even so… He’s managed not to get into serious trouble so far. He’s smart enough to know that that sort of money isn’t easy to move.”

“Are you sure?”

“Look at the computer files the FBI got off his computer. There’s a brain there. He’s managed to recruit two people and obtain a virtually untraceable vehicle.”

“All without directly stating what he’s planning. Only offering a mysterious payday.”

“Most of the negotiations with details must have occurred verbally.”

“And he’s gotten rid of all traceable materials. No phones. No e-mails. They’ve cut all contact.”

“And with three days since they sent that letter, they could have moved since they posted that thing.”

“Anything could have happened.”

“The ransom is far too high.”

“Why are you so focused on that?”

“Because it is too high. I’ve never heard of such a high ransom.”

“Maybe he’s trying to negotiate a high price. Start high and then allow himself to be negotiated down.”

“Or there’s something else going on that we don’t know about.”

“You think he’s capable of that?”

“I don’t know. But there’s a brain somewhere behind all of this. And I’m worried what they’re going to do next.”

“You pointed this out to the FBI?”

“They don’t want to listen to me. I’m just a cop. They’re the experts in kidnap scenarios… But this makes me think too much of some of the more twisted plots the Arkhemites come out with.”

“The ones where nothing makes sense, until everything makes sense. The kind of plots that
Two-Face, Riddler and Penguin come up with."

“And Ivy and Scarface. I’m just waiting for the punchline.”

And with a sinking feeling in her gut, Montoya also knew that she didn’t want to know the punchline.

123456789

The door banged open as Christina stalked into the room. She then slammed it shut behind her.

“Come to gloat?” Tim asked idly. His hands currently trying to make origami figures out of the water bottle label.

“No. I’m implementing the second part of my plan.”

“When do you plan to kill me?”

“What makes you think I will?”

“I know too much. I know you’re the ringleader. You call the shots. You can’t let me live knowing that. And you know it too. But then again, you never planned to let me live anyway.”

“True. That would interfere with my long-term plans. I need you dead. Even if you were stupid enough to believe I was a fellow captive.”

“But you were planning on maintaining the illusion.”

“It would have made this part easier. But I can manage.”

Tim looked her up and down as she approached the bed.

“You’re planning on being the heroic survivor. A bit of publicity. TV shows?”

“Oh, I’m planning on a lot of publicity. Some people manage to make their whole careers out of a well timed kidnapping. With the right media coverage.”

“Which is part of the reason you took me. I bump the media interest up.”

“Of course. It hasn’t broken yet. But it’s only a matter of time. Four days isn’t all that long really.”

“Who do you believe will contact the media first?”

“Either Eric’s mom or my dad. Daddy Big-Bucks will keep his mouth shut. Even though I
didn’t tell him to.”

“Please don’t tell me you sent a ransom note made of cut out letters.”

“But of course. Keeps things thematic. And makes everything look a little clumsy and amateurish.”

“Which is what you want. Along with a longish period of kidnapping. How long have you calculated as being best?”

“At least a month. Using letters will slow everything down. Plenty of time for my other plans.”

“Clever. Take advantage of old-fashioned methods. Smart, but not too smart. Just about the level you want Eric put at.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me about my other plans?”

“Why bother? You aren’t going to tell me, until you’re ready for me to know.”

“And if I told you that time was now?”

Tim shifted slightly. He couldn’t show fear… Or rather he couldn’t allow himself to show obvious fear. Giving the appearance of trying to hide his fear was what was needed. Despite the fact that there was nothing she could do to him that would scare him. She might like to think that she was big leagues, but she was nothing but little league. Tim was barely scared by Two-Face, Christina wasn’t a threat.

“I’m listening.”

“You know, I could never understand why villains in all those tv shows my mother liked would always try to interact with their detectives. But this is much fun! Knowing I have someone of similar, but lesser, intelligence, completely at my mercy. Unable to see what I have planned next. Unable to defeat me. My victim.”

“I am not a victim.”

“Oh yes, you are. Not that anyone will ever know. Because that isn’t the story I’m going to sell everyone.”

“And what story are you going to sell them?”

“Two terrified souls clinging to each other in a storm of human violence and anger.”

“Nice touch with the bruises on your arms. Man handling?”

“I need to have some injuries. Of course, you’re going to have more.”

That was all the warning Tim got before being pistol whipped.
“Smart.” He worked his jaw to try and reduce the pain, one hand cradling his cheek. “No hand. No fist size. You’ve thought about this.”

“Of course. I told you. You’re my victim. I’ve been planning this ever since you turned me down.”

“You mean ever since you realized who I was and I still turned you down. So probably just after the second time you dropped off cookies for me with Mrs Kent. The iced sugar cookies. Butterflies.”

“You remembered.” There was a hint of possessiveness in her voice, “I’ll work that into the story of how you died.”

“Cute. I’m sure the media will eat it up, leave you dry and move on to the next big thing. Enjoy your fifteen minutes of fame. You’ll be a forgotten footnote in history if anything.”

“Oh no. I’m going to be a star. I’m going to be big, big chapter in history.”

“Even Patty Hearst is only a paragraph these days.” Tim lied calmly.

“I’m not going to be Patty Hearst. I’m going to be even bigger. A multi-millionaire before you’ve been dead a year.”

“You’re not talking about my ransom. Even if you killed Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee you wouldn’t be able to spend most of the ransom. Otherwise you’d give yourself away. And you’re too smart for that…”

Tim left it hanging. He was starting to get a bad feeling about Christina’s secret plan.

“Of course, I am. And I don’t want money I can’t spend. I’m going to get all of your money. Every. Last. Cent. And even more from Daddy Big Bucks. And he’ll give it to me without question. I won’t even have to ask.”

123456789

“This is not going to be a quick thing.” Bruce looked at his sons.

“You’re not kidding.” Jason snorted, “If they’re going to post every ransom demand this is going to be a painfully slow process.”

“And what about Tim?” Dick frowned, “They could be doing anything to him.”

“While that is true,” Damian put in, “I doubt that they will. Harming Drake may be too much for the conspirators. They might object to harming someone completely at their mercy.”

“You think that would upset Christina?” Jason dismissed Damian’s comments, “She
wouldn’t mind. You’ve seen some of what she’s capable of.”

“That is true.” Damian nodded, “However Christina has carefully set herself up as a victim. No doubt she believes that she can come out of this without her true role being revealed. That she will be seen as an additional victim. She cannot dispose of her minions easily. If their bodies are discovered it is highly likely that their date of death will be identified. If it is too early, she will be exposed as at the very least a co-conspirator.”

“That’s assuming that her minions do not have the stomach for killing Tim.” Dick reminded, “They may not be so squeamish.”

“I have looked through the files that Gordon located.” Damian stated, “Hawkins and Key, although there is violence in their past, have only ever fought those who were capable of fighting back. They like feeling superior to people. Feeling superior to someone in Drake’s physical condition is not difficult.”

“I don’t want to rely on that.” Bruce returned, “Has Barbara gotten anywhere with the photograph?”

“She’s managed to ID the printer, but it was part of a batch lot brought by a school. A elementary school. No cameras on site. And it’s the next town over from Smallville. The FBI searched the whole place, no sign of anyone suspicious or even the truck.” Dick shrugged, “She’s trying to find any clue in the photograph. Hopefully a new photo might help.”

“Identifying the type of camera isn’t possible given the photo size,” Bruce sighed, “The frustrating thing is that we need more data and the only way to obtain more data…”

“Is to wait.” Jason bowed his head, “Hopefully Timmy isn’t annoying them too much.”

Chapter End Notes

Posting to cheer myself up after watching Avengers: Endgame today. Loved the film, just wish I’d taken an extra hanky.

Also, no spoilers here, but is anyone taking odds on Nathaniel and Morgan dating at some point in the future?
Chapter 45

Tim let his hands be bound to the headboard. There was no point in fighting. It wasn’t as if he could get anywhere once he broke free.

“Just to make sure you can’t stop me.” Christina smiled, “Now, this may take a few goes. But we’ll have plenty of time to sort this out.”

Tim narrowed his gaze.

“It is so useful that you’re wearing these loose shorts.” She smirked, “Makes getting them off so much easier.”

She was already working them down his hips.

“Oh my god!” Tim started laughing, “You’re trying for the Baby Trap. Slightly altered taking into account that we’re not in a relationship and you’re going to kill me. But seriously? You actually think it’ll work.”

“Of course.” Christina matched his gaze, “You’re young. You won’t have a will. The state will give your inheritance to your nearest blood relative. And that’ll be our baby, Timmy.”

“Okay, this is seriously how we ended up with Damian.” Tim muttered, “There’s a few flaws in your logic, Chrissie.”

“Oh, and what are those?”

“One, I have a will. And I don’t leave anything to any hypothetical children.”

“Why would you have a will? You’re not old enough to have one. We’re of an age when we usually believe we’re immortal.”

“My mother died when I was young. My father not many years after her. I live in Gotham. My school had a gang invade it, intending on killing anyone in their way. I have been shot, by a sniper trying to kill me. Two of my best friends have died. So did an ex-girlfriend. I am very aware that I could die at any point. So I made a will. It is signed and filed. And you won’t see a single red cent of the money.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Do you know how we ended up with Damian? His mother roofied Bruce. I not only knew the risks of being tricked into a Baby Trap. But I planned against it. Any child produced to the Waynes carrying my blood will have their mother investigated. I actually put it into Company Policy for children of the CEO. And I have an agreement with a friend of mine, that unless I have
specifically introduced a female to them as a potential love interest, any child that is mine from that female is to be assumed to be a child of rape. And should be investigated as such, with the intention of removing the child from the toxic mother. I have seen some of the worst things that people can come up with. I have taken every possible step to protect myself from the repercussions of those actions.”

“I can still get your money. I can contest the will.”

“It’ll cost you more money than you have to try.” Tim laughed, “God bless Damian. He’s made me a paranoid little creature, but it was worth it! It was worth it just for this moment. Just for the look on your face right now.”

Okay, Tim reflected later, maybe his laughter was verging more on the side of hysterical cackling. But he felt it was a perfectly legitimate response to the situation. He’d managed to mostly out-plot Christina, even before they’d ever met.

Tim was fairly sure his cackling mocked Christina as she stormed down the hall, the door slamming behind her.

Although he was still tied to the headboard (and couldn’t free himself for fear of arousing suspicion) Tim considered the entire interaction a win on his part.

123456789

It was difficult, Jason internally sighed, living surrounded by FBI agents. Going out as Red Hood had become a ridiculously intricate process, whereby he had to sneak past all the agents. Fortunately they were mainly concentrated around Bruce’s study, and all phonelines were directed through them.

But it was the duration of everything that was getting to Jason. The agents had been in place for a week already, and so far there had been only one communication. And that was worryingly one-sided.

Tim could have done anything. And so could have Christina. The whole situation could have changed and they would know nothing.

Jason was slobbed in front of the telly. He wasn’t really watching what was on. It was all background noise to him.
Or at least it was until the Breaking News splashed across the screen.

A few moments in, his brain just… Stopped.

123456789

“You said the guilt never goes away.” Eric frowned as he released Tim’s hands, “What do you mean by that?”

“My dad died and I still blame myself. I should have been there for him.”

“Mister Wayne is still alive.”

“I’m talking about my bio-dad.”

“What happened?”

“Captain Boomerang broke into our home. I was out. With Bruce.”

“Why?”

“I knew Bruce. We’d been neighbours for years. When my dad was in a coma… Bruce looked after me. He was important to me. I just… If I’d been home… I could have done something.”

“You didn’t know that Captain Boomerang was going to break in.”

“I live in Gotham. I knew the risks. I found the bodies.”

“Your mother, too?”

“No. She died years before. My dad had a gun. I didn’t know about it. He managed to kill Boomerang before he died.”

“He was a fighter.”

“Yes. But it was still my fault. I have to carry that guilt for the rest of my life. It’s not something you can walk away from. Not something that you can just forget.”

“Does it get easier?”

“No. But the pain fades. The wounds scar over. Things get better. You never forget. And you never forgive. But it gets easier to live with. You have to accept that you can’t change the past. You never can.”

“I don’t know if I can accept that.”

“You have to. It’s not easy. And forget the whole five stages of grief… They’re just nonsense. There’s no stages to grief and guilt. Just phases.”

“Phases?”
“Times when you feel things. Sometimes Numb. Sometimes Depressed. Sometimes Okay. Sometimes Aching, still missing them. And you can jump between all four feelings at any point. You can hit all of them in an hour or stay in one for days, weeks, months at a time. It’s not about getting better. You can’t fix it. It’s about finding your new normal. About finding steady ground beneath your feet again.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever found the ground steady beneath me.”

“I don’t think you’ve really had a chance. Abusive mother. Abusive girlfriend. You haven’t had it easy.”

“Why would I go with an abusive girlfriend after my mother?”

“Because it’s what you know. People always say that abused people go on to abuse other people. But that’s not always the case. Some do. Others continue to be abused, just by other people. And still others go on to try and catch abusers.”

“You know Christina’s going to kill you?”

“I know. You know she’s going to kill you too?”

“I thought she was going to let me go to jail.”

“No. Too great a chance someone might see what I see. She’ll kill you. Either directly as a desperate attack against her kidnapper or you’ll go out as suicide by cop. Either way you’re not going to live past all of this. The other two might, but…”

“You wouldn’t bet on it.”

“No. Christina’s too smart to leave behind potential witnesses. They’re dead men walking.”

“What can I do? They won’t listen to me. I already know that much.”

“I know it’s cruel but the best thing you can do for them is to focus on yourself. Get out of this situation. Take the truck and drive away. Get to the nearest police station and turn yourself in. Tell them everything. And I mean everything. From your mother to now. Tell them where I am. You’ll probably end up doing some jail time, but it won’t be the end of the world.”

“I’ll still be alive.”

“Exactly.”

“What if I take you with me? I mean all I have to do is get you to the truck and we can get out of here. End this whole thing.”

“You might find it harder than you think.” Tim sighed, “But if you can… It would help.”

“It won’t be that hard. None of them pay attention to me. And Christina’s currently researching stuff online. Whatever you told her pissed her off bad.”

“Good. If she’s off balance, she’ll be trying to replot her way back to being in control. It means she might make mistakes.”

“Like not watching me.”

“Even if you can’t get me out. Your best option is to get yourself out. It’s the only way you
survive this.”

Tim bit down on the inside of his cheek as Eric lifted him up. His bandages were uncomfortable against his skin. His back felt hot. Felt tight.

Infection. He knew the signs. Knew them as well as he knew his own name.

But there was nothing he could realistically do. Cleaning the wounds would only wash out the surface infection. Given his injuries it was highly likely that the infection would get into his bloodstream.

Then it would just be a race against the clock.

But he wouldn’t put that burden on Eric. He didn’t need to know how vital it was that Tim get access to his antibiotics. Otherwise Eric would just end up blaming himself for something that wasn’t really his fault.

And Eric was trying hard enough as it was. He was taking a huge risk. Even if he didn’t seem to care about the risks.

Tim knew it was simply that Eric had been pushed too far. And then had been offered an out… A chance to escape. Eric wasn’t foolish enough to believe that he would suffer no consequences.

But he’d prefer Tim’s consequences than death.

Tim could taste blood on his tongue, drawing him back to the reality of his situation. He knew it would be better for him to enter a meditative state to deal with the pain. But he also knew that would cause Eric to panic. Because it would look like Tim was dead.

He would simply have to endure the pain. He had done so before. He could do so again. He had managed to stand up again and again against Lady Shiva. He could endure the pain here. He would endure the pain.
His eyes were closed as he tried to centre himself. He knew that he shouldn’t need to have the closed. He had done this before without closing his eyes.

But he was not operating at his best. Too little sleep. Too little mediation. Too little nutrition. Too much tension. Too much danger. Too little ability to do anything about it.

To put it bluntly, his mind wasn’t firing on all cylinders. He had to compensate for the deficiency.

“What are you doing?” A voice that was most decidedly not Eric’s cut across his thoughts.
Montoya burst into the Study that the FBI had commandeered.

“The Media has the story.” She announced.


Montoya didn’t know their name; she’d given up on learning their names when she realized that they didn’t care about hers either. They were far more focused on making sure that Mister Wayne saw them as useful.

“We’ve had the story sewn up tight.” Another Agent announced, “Even got that Kent reporter to keep quiet. Who leaked it?”

“Got to be the girl’s father. I knew he would try something. He’s too devout. Believes in all that forgiveness stuff.”

“He’s a priest. I think he’s meant to.”

“No.” Montoya shook her head, “Not him.”

“Then who?”

“Mrs Seimon.”

“Who?” The confusion was real.

“The kidnapper’s mother. Eric’s mother. She’s putting out a personal plea to him to turn himself in.”

“That’s a bit off script.” An Agent frowned, “Most people in her position would either be denying his involvement or trying to distance themselves from him… Not attracting attention.”

Brucie was out of his chair. He had been taking his turn at minding the phone. It hadn’t escaped the notice of Montoya that at least one Wayne was watching the phone at any one time. And had been since the FBI had moved in.

This was the first time it had been unmanned. There had even been a Wayne watching the phone at midnight. It slightly reminded Montoya of a well disciplined military unit, the way they switched over taking turns to mind the phone. Even Damian had been assigned a shift.
But that was just a coincidence. It was simply a sensible way of doing things. No need for everyone to get tired trying to watch the phone all together. And even if the FBI were willing to wake up a Wayne when the phone rang, it was more convenient for a Wayne to be available when needed.

Brucie was headed down the corridor at a fair clip, clearly with a direction in mind.

Montoya tagged along, and watched as he entered one of the TV rooms. It seemed odd to her that in an age where most people tried to have a TV in every room in the house, a literal billionaire only had a TV in a few rooms of his house.

The broadcast was on the TV. Of course it was. It was breaking news. The CEO of one of the richest companies in America? That was prime time television. To say nothing of the fact that he was a teenager.

“Maybe I didn’t cope very well after your father died.” Mrs Seimon’s voice came out of the speakers, “Maybe I could have done more. Set firmer boundaries. Made sure that you knew that there were consequences for breaking rules. But I wasn’t coping well after your father died. Eric, this isn’t the way. You need to stop this. Turn yourself in. You don’t need to hurt anyone. No one’s gotten hurt so far. You can still come back from this. You’re still my little boy. It’s okay. I know you’re scared. But that’s okay. Just turn yourself in. End all this nonsense. I know this is my fault. I should have raised you better. But it’s hard being a single parent. You don’t understand how hard it was for me. I was trying to keep a roof over our heads and food on our plates. There wasn’t time for all the things I wanted to do with you. And I know that that frustrated you. But this isn’t the way.

“I raised you better than this. Turn yourself in. Let them go. I know you’re scared. And you have every right to be. But I know you know the right thing to do. I taught you right from wrong. I may not have been a wonderful mother. I know I could have done better. But I wasn’t the worst person. I put food on your plate and clothes on your back.”

It was a rather emotional appeal, Montoya had to give the woman credit. She was clearly putting a lot into the broadcast.

But most of it was being lost on Brucie. He was focused on Jason.

Jason’s gaze was fixed on the screen. His fists clenching and unclenching. Bruce’s hands wrapped around them loosely.
“Jason…” Bruce was murmuring, “Jay-lad… I’m right here. It’s okay. It’s alright. I’m right here, Jay-lad.”

“She… She…” Jason’s voice stuttered and stalled, but was crystal clear, “She… This isn’t about Eric… This isn’t about him at all. It’s not about Timmy either. It should be about them. But it isn’t… It’s all about her. This is all about her!”

Bruce gathered Jason into a hug.

“Dick,” He addressed his eldest, “You watch the phone. Tell Alfred I need hot chocolate in Jason’s room. We’re getting some space.”

With gentle hands, Bruce pulled Jason to his feet and led him out of the room.

“Detective Montoya, I would appreciate it if the FBI and the GCPD would give us some space while we deal with this. Also, please investigate Mrs Seimon.”

“Why?” Montoya frowned, “She’s just a widow with a criminal son.”

“All of my boys have particular gifts when it comes to people.” Bruce’s tone was even, but with a touch of pride audible, “Dick can charm anyone, not one of his ex-girlfriends has issues with him. Damian can find anyone’s weakness with just words, even when I wish he wouldn’t. Tim can predict how people will react and plan accordingly. Jason can sense when people have bad motives. I think it’s because of all the time he spent living on the streets. He knows how to spot the dangerous people in life. If Jason believes that Mrs Seimon is dangerous… Then I trust him. I don’t like the idea of a woman like that being close to any of my sons. Let alone Tim in his current health state.”

“You believe she’s dangerous? She’s tiny.”

“And you believe her size is an indicator of her threat level?” Bruce raised an eyebrow, “I trust my sons. If Jason says she’s dangerous then I will believe it, until someone produces evidence otherwise.”

With that as a closing remark, Bruce carefully led Jason out of the room.

“He’s right, you know.” Dick remarked stretching into an almost impossible shape as he rose, “I’d trust Jason’s instincts over pretty much anything when it comes to how dangerous someone is.”
Dick jumped over the couch and strode out of the room. Montoya frowned at his retreating back. She didn’t know Officer Grayson all that well, but she knew he was known for dramatic flourishes in his movements. The vault over the couch was lacking anything acrobatic. It was an indicator to her that this situation had disturbed him more than he was letting on.

“Are you okay?” Bruce asked over a mug of hot chocolate.

“Are we really going to do this?” Jason returned.

“Do what?”

“Go into that dangerous territory where we actually talk about our feelings!”

“You basically just had a nervous breakdown. I think it is probably necessary.”

“I’d rather we didn’t.”

“I know. But I’ve never seen you like that before… You scared me.”

“Be glad you didn’t see me after the Pit then… I remember more than one episode like that… And more than a few before then…… Just do what everyone else did… Ignore me and walk away. I can cope. I’ll sort myself out in a bit.”

“No.”

“What? I can sort it out. It just takes me a moment. I’m not… I’m not broken, B!”

“I never said you were. But I’m not walking away. I’m not letting you cope on your own. Because I don’t want you to cope. I want you to heal.”

Bruce carefully wrapped an arm around Jason’s shoulders.

After a long, long pause, the muscles beneath his arm relaxed slightly and a weight lent against him.

“I don’t know if I can… I can’t be that boy from the streets again.”

“I don’t want you to be him… I want you to be you. The best you that you can be… We can’t go backwards. We can only go forward. Make tomorrow better than today.”

“Can’t we do that without all the mushy stuff?”

“Unfortunately I doubt it. There’s a lot of poison between the two of us. Most of it my fault. So we need to get it all out… I missed you. Like a fibre from my heart.”
“You replaced me.”

“It was never meant to be like that… I didn’t go looking. Tim came to us. Not to join. But to try and fix what we had broken… What I had broken.”

“Fix what?”

“My relationships with… Everyone. You’d have like the kid he was back then. So different from you… I should have realized back then… I’m always trying to fight the last war. I treated you, the way I thought I should have treated Dick. And I treated Tim the way I thought I should have treated you. I forgot… I forgot that you weren’t the same. I forgot that you were all different… And you all needed different things from me. Dick needed stability, a safe place to land when he jumped. You needed a Dad, someone to push you to be the best you could be, but also to love you for exactly who you were. Tim needed… Tim needed a Dad, someone to give him boundaries, and to remind him that he didn’t need to do everything himself. Dick wanted space to fly. You wanted independence. Tim wanted reassurance. I thought the reason I had so many arguments with Dick was because I gave him so much space to do what he wanted.”

“From what he always said, he didn’t think you gave him enough!” Jason challenged.

“I know. And I thought that I gave him too much. I thought he thought that because I gave it to him too quickly. He went from being almost always at my side, to being halfway across the country in very little time. And then he didn’t like it, when I didn’t want him to go any further. I hadn’t established many rules with Dick. Not prearranged. They all just got implemented on the fly. I never expected to have a kid. And I didn’t know how to deal with one when I got Dick. I got through most of it by the seat of my pants. And then you came along.”

“And I wasn’t Dick.”

“No. But I reacted the way I wish I had reacted with Dick. I set out firm rules from the start. And pretty much stuck to them. They were tighter and more constricting than they should have been… Than they would have been with Dick. Because I thought that it was a lack of firm boundaries that had caused Dick to hate me so much. He had never known when he was crossing a line, because it was so arbitrary as to basically not exist.”

“But with me they were basically a meter wide, painted in fluorescent paint.”

“Exactly. But you didn’t need those boundaries like that. You needed more space. Space to find yourself. You had never really had a way to express yourself. Emotions are dangerous on the Streets.”

“They show people your weak points. So they know where to attack. Easier to use anger, because that makes you a fighter.”

“Precisely. And by stifling you… Strangling your potential… I made you angry. And that anger festered. You started keeping secrets from me. Because you didn’t want me to interfere with your life…” Bruce held up a hand to stop Jason before he spoke, “And you weren’t wrong to do that. It was a normal reaction to what I was doing. I was the adult. I was in the wrong. It was never your fault. But that led to the whole Ethiopia mess… Which was my fault. Not yours… Never yours.”

“It wasn’t all your fault.” Jason stared down into his rapidly emptying mug, “Shelia also had her part to play.”
“She was being threatened by the Joker.” Bruce argued.

“Blackmailed,” Jason corrected softly. “She was embezzling from the Medical Funds. Any investigation into the Joker’s involvement would reveal her involvement.”

“I… I never knew. I always believed you went to rescue her after the Joker changed his mind and decided to just kill her.”

“No. She handed me over to him after I told her I was Robin. Only things I can thank her for is that she didn’t reveal who I was and that she got him to stop beating me to death.”

“She loved you.”

“No… She didn’t care that I was dying in front of her. She just didn’t want me to deal with it”

“I don’t understand.”

“She knew that if I died, you wouldn’t stop hunting down the person who killed me. And she didn’t want you hunting her. She only stepped in after she thought I was already dead… When the Joker thought I was dead… He decided to do with away my body and her with a bomb. She was surprised that I was still alive… When I was being beaten… She just turned away and lit a cigarette… She was more scared of you than she was scared for me.”

“But you still tried to save her life.”

“Because that’s what we do.” Jason looked up for the first time.

He looked straight into Bruce’s eyes. A tiny hint of the little boy he had once been before he had been hardened by the Streets peeking out.

“That’s what we do.” Jason repeated, “We save lives… Even if I sometimes do it by making sure threats can’t be a threat ever again.”

Bruce took a deep breath in, before letting it out slowly. It wasn’t time to argue about that. Not when they were dealing with their history… While Bruce was trying to explain his behaviour.

“I was in a bad place after you died. Clark had to hold me back from strangling the Joker with my bare hands.”

“You actually tried?” Jason’s voice was small.

“I tried.” Bruce nodded, blinking back the tears that were trying to fall, “Iran made him their Ambassador to the UN for a while… Till he tried to kill the UN.”

“Sounds like the kind of crazy he would try.”

“Yeah… And then I went off the rails. Near killed a few criminals… Not even big
dangerous ones… Muggers and stick-up men.”

“Really?”

“Really… Alfred wasn’t impressed… But we’re getting off topic… What about that broadcast set you off?”

“It was all about her. ‘My fault’… ‘I know’… ‘I could’… All about her. She only mentioned Eric’s name once. And never said his father’s name. It was always ‘your father’. Not his name. She wants the focus to be on her.”

“She did call him ‘your father’… Not ‘my husband’.”

“That’s a sham. It wouldn’t work with the situation. But watch her body language when she says it. She doesn’t like saying it. She has possessiveness in her body when she says ‘my little boy’. She doesn’t even call him her son. Just her boy. Her thing! Sheila may not have cared for me… But that… That woman is even worse. She’s possessive. Controlling……. Everyone else may have heard pleas in that pretty speech… I heard orders… Commands. She spoke of what she had done for Eric… All pretty sounding words… But all reminders of what he owes her… She never once spoke of Tim by name. To say nothing of Tina. A girl she believes to be her son’s girlfriend. It is standard practice to try to humanize the victims of a kidnapping. You know that and I know that. She didn’t bother… Because she doesn’t care about them. This is all one big publicity stunt for her. It wouldn’t surprise me if there wasn’t a fundraising page in her name at the moment.”

“I’ll get Babs to scupper that.” Bruce muttered, “She won’t get to profit from this… What odds do you give her words of having any effect?”

“Oh, they’ll have an effect. And I’m betting negative… If I was Eric and was actually running the show… I’d hurt Tim and Tina just because… As it is… Wouldn’t surprise me if Tina hurts Tim, just to make it look like Eric took this all badly.”

“I agree.” Bruce nodded, “But it all depends on her endgame goals.”

“Yeah… I wish we knew more. She’s smart enough to be dangerous.”

“We’ll find out more.” Bruce promised, “We’ll bring Tim home… And then we’ll show him that he is a vital part of this family.”

“That’ll take time.”

“I know… I know… Worthwhile things always do.”

123456789

Tim kept his head down and his eyes apparently closed… But he could make out a lot more than he would be expected through his lashes.

“What are you doing? He shouldn’t be out of his room!” One of the lackeys demanded of Eric.
“He smells.” Eric shrugged, “You might not smell it, Abe. But I do. And I don’t want to put up with it. I’m getting him washed.”

“You could do that in his room.”

“Then the bed would get wet and smell. I don’t want to deal with that. So I am taking him to get washed.”

“Fine! On your head when Christina finds out.”

“She’s in such a snit at the moment I don’t think she cares what we do.” Eric shrugged, “Any idea what set her off?”

“Don’t know and don’t care. I’m only in this for the money. This is going to be one sweet payout when we collect it. Enjoy the washing. God! I’m glad you got the job of looking after him. I would not have the patience!”

Tim watched carefully as Abe left. Eric immediately turned and entered the bathroom.

Tim ended up perched on the closed toilet seat as Eric buried his face in his hands.

“I can’t do it.” Eric whispered, “I can’t get you out of here.”
“I know.” Tim nodded calmly; his voice soft and gentle.

“They’re… They’re too observant… It’s the middle of the night! And Abe is still up and about.”

“I know.” Tim agreed, “It’s okay.”

His eyes flicked to triple check that the door was locked.

“I thought I could do it.”

“I know. It’s alright.”

“How are you so calm? Do you know what she’ll do to you when she finds out I’ve gone?”

“Probably better than you do.”

“You don’t know what she’s like… You don’t know what she’s capable of.”

“I know I’ll find out, if I don’t get out of here.”

“But I can’t get you out.”

“I know. So you have to get out. You have to tell someone what is happening… Where I am… Everything. About me. About you. About Christina… About your mother.”

“I… I can’t… I can’t do that.”

“You have to.” Tim’s voice got firm, but not threatening, “You stay here… We both die. You get out of here… You live. And there’s a good chance I will too.”

“She’ll make your life hell when she finds out I’ve gone.”

“But only until you get the cops to come… This is the safest thing for me… But you have to tell them everything.”

“But why about… About my mother?” Eric whispered.

“Because it explains a lot about you… Look, without that… You’re looking at twenty to life… With it… You might get off on probation.”

“And then do what? I can’t go home… Not back to that house.”

“One thing at a time. You need to get out of here… For both our sakes.”

“I’m not sure if I can…”
“You can… You can do this. I know you can. They’re not watching you… They’re watching me… If they ask, just say you’re going for supplies or something. Beer.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Then just don’t stop until you get to a police station.”

“Then what do I do?”

“You tell them everything.” Tim repeated, “You tell them everything. And they listen. Then they come and get me.”

“Just that easy?”

“Just that easy.” Tim nodded, “I give you a few phrases to tell them.”

“Phrases?”

“Messages for the Waynes… How good’s your memory?”

“Not bad… I can do this.”

“I know you can.”

“Okay… Take off your top.”

“What?”

“I’m meant to be giving you a wash… Kinda hard to do that while you’re dressed.”

“You don’t need to do that… Just give me a face flannel and I’ll do the bits that are necessary.”

“Look, I’m not going to do your private areas or anything. Just… After I leave, it’s doubtful you’ll get another chance to get clean. So you might as well use it. And I can’t leave the room, so I might as well help. No worse than the locker rooms at school, right?”

Tim bit his lip. To be brutally honest, he’d never been fond of the locker rooms at school either. Usually changing in the toilet. His keenly honed survival instincts rankled at being so exposed amongst people he didn’t trust.

(Which was why he had trouble changing amongst the Bats. It had absolutely nothing with being so small and pathetic compared to the others. It didn’t have anything to do with his physical deficiencies… It didn’t!)

(Even Tim knew that he was lying to himself. He didn’t want to hear the taunts when they realized how little there was of him. How much he didn’t measure up. Always too small. Always too slender. Always too effeminate. Always too fragile. Everything he wore was specifically intended to hide that fact.)
And despite the fact that Tim knew Eric was being honest and wouldn’t hurt him… He didn’t trust him.

But Tim had little choice.

With slow and unsteady hands, Tim removed his top. Averting his eyes from Eric as he did so.

(It wasn’t in shame. It wasn’t. He just didn’t want to see the pity. That was all. He didn’t want to see the pity.)

“Oh okay.” Eric’s spoke after a soft gasp, “You know you’ve got an infection back here?”

“I suspected.”

“I’ll go grab something to treat it. Give you the best treatment I can manage until you get someone better to treat it.”

“It’ll be fine.” Tim dismissed Eric’s worrying, “Just pass me a face flannel so I can get it clean.”

“It needs more than water.” Eric argued, “Give me two minutes.”

Tim heard the door unlock, then open and finally close.

He twisted as best he could, but was unable to see his own back. Even the mirror in the room was no help as it was in the wrong position and would require him to stand to use it properly.

Although looking at the inside of his top was enough to tell him that he had a problem. There were definite signs of infection.

It shouldn’t have gotten so bad so quickly, Tim knew. But then he had to concede that a lack of true sleep or meditation, previous injuries, poor nutrition, a lack of medication and constant stress would have had a negative affect on his immune system.

And with his missing spleen, Tim always was one opportunistic infection away from a septic incident.
When Eric returned, he was carrying a few items.

“Here.” Eric handed over a folded hanky, “Bite down on that. This is going to hurt, but I need to clean out that infection.”

“You actually have a hanky?” Tim cocked an eyebrow.

“I found it in the laundry.” Eric shrugged, “Bite down. I don’t want you screaming… Or biting your tongue.”

Tim took it and bit down firmly. Liquid fire poured down his back with no warning. Tim initially flinched, but then held still. Then gentle patting as the liquid was removed.

“What’d you use?” Tim hissed.

“Vodka.” Eric replied calmly, “Alcohol usually works… Although I normally raid Old Mister Rowe’s moonshine still… That stuff is stronger than neat alcohol.”

“And he doesn’t notice?”

“Oh, he notices he just doesn’t care. I never take more than a jar at a time. And never more than once a month. He doesn’t mind. He doesn’t really care… I’ve helped him with it before now. He once jokingly called it my tithe… I’m good with my hands. Good with tools. And his kids don’t like the still… Thinks it’s dirty. Not for nice folks like them. Never mind that it probably paid their college tuition.”

“All done?” Tim asked.

“Once you’ve washed down your front, I’ll bandage it up. Try and keep infection from getting in again.”

Tim was handed a damp, warm face flannel and quickly wiped himself down. If nothing else, he could feel at least partially clean for a while… It certainly wasn’t something he was going to turn down. He wasn’t particularly keen on feeling dirty… Not after his previous session of captivity. It made his skin crawl…

And was probably something he was going to have to resolve at some point… Odds were pretty good that he’d end up in Gotham’s sewers in the near future if he didn’t get over it.

Gotham was kind like that… A magnificent Queen with a nasty attitude and a habit of preying on weaknesses. And while she might be in the Bat-Clan’s blood… She was in Tim’s bones.
Tim twisted slightly (and suppressed the accompanying wince) when he heard tearing. Eric was ripping white fabric.

“Bandages.” Eric explained at Tim’s raised eyebrow, “I’m not leaving it open. Something else could get in there. You’ve torn a few of the scars back here… Or should I call them wounds? They don’t look fully healed.”

Tim didn’t reply to that. He simply dried himself off.

“I found some bedlinen.” Eric carried on, “Makes good bandages in a pinch. And this is better than the stuff I usually use. Normally old t-shirts for me. Nice and soft, but nothing anyone will notice missing. This is much better. I even found a hand towel. I can make up a decent dressing with this. Hold still.”

Tim watched as Eric encased the fluffy towel in a cotton cocoon, before pressing it against Tim’s back; easily covering the whole area. Torn strips were used to fix it in place.

“Good thing you’re wearing darks.” Eric remarked, “Hides it really well. I’d worry more if you were wearing white. Don’t know why, but white always shows through white.”

“I know.” Tim smiled softly, “Ready for the messages I need you to carry?”

“Lay them on me.”

“Oxfords not brogues.” Tim started, pulling his top on.

“What?” Eric stared, “I thought these were going to be real messages.”

“These are real messages.” Tim shrugged, “Just coded. The Waynes won’t believe you if you come with straight messages from me. They have to be coded to be believable.”

“Okay, but your family’s weird.”

“Tell me about it,” Tim decided it wasn’t worth fighting the idea that the Waynes weren’t his family, “Anyway, Jason will understand ‘Oxfords not brogues’.”

“Oxfords not brogues.”

“Lima.”

“Lima? Really?”

“Lima.” Tim nodded.
“Okay… Lima.”

“‘Cissie’s Mother’.”

“Sissy’s mother.”

“‘Billie Jean and Fanny Blair’.”

“Billie Jean and Fanny Blair… You’re naming ex-girlfriends?”

“No… But they should understand.”

“If you say so.”

“‘Heliotrope Dancer’.”

“That sounds like a stripper.”

Tim managed to hold back a snort.

“Summoning Dark.”

“Summoning Dark? You sure I can’t just take a straight forward message?”

“Positive. It’s just complicated, because I don’t have one person who will be able to get the entire message. They don’t all know the same in-jokes.”

“Oh, it’s that sort of thing. That makes more sense.”

“You got all of those?”


“That’s it.” Tim smiled, “Remember, go to the first police station you can find and tell them everything.”

“I got it… Will you be alright?”

“I’ll survive. That’s the key thing. Wait for your moment. Then go. And don’t look back.”

“Okay.”

Tim took the opportunity to refill a water bottle, before Eric carried him back into his prison.
“Another letter.” An Agent declared.

Dick rushed forward to try and read it. Ever since the first letter, the FBI had been watching the mail. It had rather frustrated him. He should have been able to intercept the letters and find out what was going on first.

“Oh good!” One of the agents sighed, “They’re speeding things up. This is a warning about a phone call… Standard threats… Don’t let the phone ring more than three times…”

“What about Tim?” Dick cut across, “Is there another photo? Is he okay? Have they hurt him?”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why not?” Dick challenged, “This is my brother we’re talking about. My Timmy. I have the right to know if he’s in danger.”

“We need to see if the photo has any evidence on it, before you touch it.”

“I don’t need to touch it to look at it.” Dick countered.

They conceded and allowed him close enough to read the letter and see the photo included.

The letter wasn’t much. Cut and pasted words announcing a phone call in two days’ time (nice of them, Dick thought, to place the date to allow for mail delivery times).

The photo wasn’t much either. Dick was actually of the opinion that it had been taken at the same time as the previous one. Tim was in a much too similar position and state of dress.

His heart sank. It wasn’t anything new.

He had to hold out hope though. With a phone call, they could ask for proof of life.

123456789

Tim jerked out of a half-meditative, half-sleep state when the door crashed open. He blinked his eyes open blearily (he knew he needed more rest of some sort).
“Oh, you think you’re so smart, don’t you? Pretty boy!” Christina snarled as she stormed towards him.

Tim didn’t respond. There wasn’t much he could say that wouldn’t set her off. He knew that Dick, Jason and Damian would be mouthing off at her almost instantaneously with that as an opening line… He had a few responses immediately jump to mind.

But judging by the look on Christina’s face, it was likely she would seriously injure him if he spoke right then.

The risks did not outweigh the benefits.

“Well, you failed.” Christina continued sneering at him, “We caught Eric before he got away. We shot him. He’s dead.”

“You’re lying.” Tim met her glare with a steady gaze.

“Why would I bother to lie to you?”

“Many reasons.”

“You think you’re so smart!” She snarled at him, “Getting him to turn. All you did was get him dead!”

“So you say.”

“He’s dead and rotting in a ditch. And you’re not going to turn the others. I won’t give you that chance.”

Tim saw what was coming before she reached him.

All he could do was brace himself.

Chapter End Notes

I had to build up my courage to post this… And prepare myself to go into the Author Protection Program.

Just remember, if you kill me I can’t post the next chapter, which is currently at 3 pages and growing. Please put down the flaming torches and pitchforks.
“Detective Montoya.” Montoya sighed as she answered her phone.

It wasn’t that she wasn’t interested in whatever the other person on the other end of the phone had to say. It was just her frustration peeking out.

Ever since the media had gotten hold of the story it seemed like her phone was permanently ringing; as one media outlet or another tried to get more details from her.

“It’s Mac.” The familiar voice of her fellow detective reached her ears, “You asked about Mrs Seimon… I did some poking around.”

“And?”

“Your instincts are good. It took a bit of digging, but with Stacey’s help… She’s an abuser.”

“Drugs? Alcohol?”

“No. And actual abuser. There’s medical records for Eric going back years. Unexplained injuries. Different hospitals. And looking at the distances between them, there is no way that wasn’t done as a cover up. The explanations don’t match the injuries. Bruises far too large. Arms broken multiple times.”

“Shouldn’t the teachers have noticed?”

“Small town. They all knew his mother. Either taught her or went to school with her.”

“And they couldn’t believe that she was capable.”

“Exactly. All too close. They all bought her story of Eric going off the rails after his dad’s death.”

“How’d he die?”

“Officially? Farming accident. Reading between the lines? The coroner suspected a suicide.”

“And you?”

“Some of the evidence I’m seeing? I’m suspecting a murder.”

“Likelihood that Eric knows his mother killed his father?”

“Knows it? Or acknowledges it? I reckon he probably knows… Whether he’s willing to believe it… God knows.”
“Not much God in this… How long has it been going on?”

“Since his father died. I’d say he took the brunt of the abuse until his death. Eric’s hospital visits don’t start until about two weeks after that.”

“What odds do you give for a physically and mentally, because don’t even try to suggest that he wasn’t, abused kid suddenly kidnapping someone?”

“Low. Particularly given that apparently he grabbed his girlfriend as well… I don’t see him doing that. Not unless he was abusing her.”

“Some abused do become abusers, but… There’d be signs. And given his reputation, people would have said something.”

“And I checked her medical records… There’s nothing there. There’s something I can’t find details about when she went to Uni. Which caused her to go back to Smallville. But it’s all very hush-hush. No-one’s talking.”

“So he hasn’t abused her before. What odds do you give for him starting now?”

“Low. Unless he’s using her as a surrogate for his mother and projecting onto her. Which I doubt. Physically there’s not much similarity.”

“You thinking what I’m thinking Mac?”

“That there’s more going on here than we’ve been led to believe? Yeah. This story isn’t ringing true. There’s too many odd things going on.”

“Makes me think of some of the low level Arkhemites.”

“What do you classify as low level?”

“Cluemaster.”

“Okay yeah, I’ll give you that… I agree though. This has a plot. Not spur of the moment.”

“And that broadcast by the mother… That won’t help anything.”

“No. More about getting her face out there. Getting her fifteen minutes of fame… She’s not about the crime.”

“She’s after the fame. Good Morning America.”

“That’s how I read it.”

“Thanks Mac. Even if it doesn’t help the case, it’s good intel. Might be able to use it in the negotiations.”

“Good luck. You’re gonna need it.”

Montoya simply hung up and wandered her way back to where Allen was basically acting as a not-so-tasteful decoration in the Wayne study.
“What’d you get?” Allen murmured.

“The mother isn’t as innocent as she’s making herself out to be. Possibly a murderer. Definitely a child abuser.”

“Great. As if this situation wasn’t screwed up enough. Now we have another player making their own play… I’m still waiting for Wayne to go completely off the rails and start making stupid demands.”

“I think he’s played this game before.” Montoya murmured back, “He’s frantic, but it’s controlled. Wouldn’t surprise me. The rich sometimes like to keep things quiet.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

“How long till we’re off shift?”

“Another two hours. You tired?”

“Just frustrated. We’re basically spare parts. Not as if the Fibbies will listen to anything we have to say.”

“They’re too busy showing off to Wayne to care about what we have to say.”

“Why do we have to be here?”

“The Mayor. Wants at least two of GCPD here at all times. Seeing as how important Wayne is to everything.”

“Great.”

123456789

They were literally counting down the few minutes left when the lead Agent’s phone rang.

“Agent Lukić… Where?…… When?…… How soon until the unit gets there?……… Keep me informed.”

The phone was put away with quick precise movements, but also slightly joyous.

“Seems that the broadcasts, unconventional as it was, worked. Eric Seimon has turned himself into the police.”

“What about Tim?” Dick immediately demanded, taking his turn at phone watching, “Is he alright? Where is he?”

“He’s still with the other kidnappers and the other hostage. But we know where they are.
There’s an FBI HRT enroute at the moment. Once they have extracted Timothy they will contact me. We’ll have him home in hours.”

Dick darted out the room, clearly intent on spreading the good news.

“Has Eric Seimon been interviewed yet?” Allen pressed.

“No. He’s currently waiting on that. We gave the locals strict instructions not to mess anything up. We’ve got this one in the bag.”

Allen and Montoya exchanged a long glance. It was clear that Agent Lukić was not a Gothamite. They knew better than to jinx anything like that.

It was just asking for a Gotham twist to the tale.

They hoped that they would be spared that.

Three hours later, Montoya and Allen were still acting as decoration. Overtime had kicked in. Due to the sensitive stage of the kidnapping the FBI didn’t want any information to leak.

All the members of the Wayne family had joined them in the study. It was clear that they were desperate to know what was happening. They wanted to hear the instant that there was news.

It was quite bizarre, Montoya thought, to watch the prickly, antagonistic, dismissive, youngest Wayne child curled up into the side of his dog; hope clearly fixed upon his face. Jason was flicking through a well worn book, but clearly not actually reading anything on the pages. Dick was unable to settle, moving from fidgeting to pacing and almost everything in-between; quite honestly it was a surprise that none of the Agents had thrown anything at him yet. Bruce was almost eerily still, watching everyone with a careful eye, every so often moving just enough to reassure Montoya that he was still alive and hadn’t managed to die in-situ. The butler was just as bad, or maybe even worse, a veritable statue in a corner, only moving occasionally to pour more coffee and calm Dick’s actions before they crossed over the line into becoming truly annoying. Sometimes Montoya forgot that he was even there, until suddenly he moved. She wasn’t completely convinced that she was spotting all the times he moved to refill coffee either. She was fairly certain he’d refilled hers twice without her spotting. And given the fact that his coffee pot was still warm, she was almost certain that he was using some sort of Black Magic to keep the coffee hot and flowing.
But in that manner, three hours had passed slowly. Allen would later swear that he was aware of every single second. That each one felt like minutes. That a minute felt like hours. That an hour felt like days, if not weeks.

When Agent Lukić’s phone rang, every head snapped to attention.

“Agent Lukić…… What do you mean they weren’t there? …… Well, go back and interrogate him! Get him to tell the truth!…… I don’t care what the locals think. This is our case, and we’re calling the shots here.”

“Actually Agent Lukić,” Bruce stood up, “That is not the case. This is about my family. Tim is my son. His kidnapping is my responsibility. As is the decision as to what happens about it. I feel I have been patient long enough. I believed that over the past three hours your team had rescued Tim and were waiting until he had been treated at a hospital until you told us that he was safe. I didn’t like it, but I wasn’t going to object… Because I believed that every moment brought me closer to seeing my Tim again… But now that I find out that it took you three hours to get there?…… What have you been doing?…… Where is my son?!”

There was a definite tone in his voice. It caused all the hackles on Montoya’s neck to rise. Bruce was verging very close to being as dangerous as some of the criminals she faced every single day.

“Ah…” Agent Lukić stalled.

“Dick,” Bruce didn’t even look over his shoulder to where his children were, “Take Damian out of here. He doesn’t need to get involved with this.”

“Father!”

“No Damian.” Bruce was firm, “You go with Dick, now. I will tell you what happened here later. Take Ace for a walk.”

“And if he don’t, I will.” Jason moved eerily gracefully to his feet, “I ain’t going fucking anywhere, B.”

“I didn’t expect anything else.” Bruce’s lips twitched into a momentary half-smile.

There was silence as Dick shepherded Damian and his dog out of the room.

The tension grew as Jason fell into position at Bruce’s left shoulder.
“Now,” Bruce leaned forward over the desk, “What exactly happened? I want to know everything.”

“More coffee Agent?” The butler stepped up behind Agent Lukić.

Montoya wouldn’t have drunk that coffee if you’d paid her to right then. There was nothing in his tone or the words that held any threat. Or even in the man’s body language.

But the eyes were ice cold.

Agent Lukić placed the phone down very carefully.

“Eric Seimon handed himself in to the local Police Station in Newkirk. He reported that Timothy was being held at a local farmhouse outside of town.” Agent Lukić replied, “He took the truck, so they had no transport. A HRT from Oklahoma City was dispatched. By the time they arrived the residence was empty.”

“Why didn’t the local police go investigate?”

“We told them not to. They aren’t equipped for something like this.”

“They could have at least watched the house,” Bruce argued, “Figured out if they were still there… If Tim was still there.”

“There isn’t any evidence that he was ever there. It’s probably just a lie that Seimon came up with. We’ll find out when we interrogate him.”

“He hasn’t even been interrogated?” Jason glowered.

“There’s no reason to let the locals muck this up.” Agent Lukić retorted, “Better to wait until properly trained agents arrive on the scene.”

“Seems to me, Agent Lukić,” Bruce’s tone was clipped, “That the only people who mucked this up was you. You could have used the local police or sheriff force to check if the residence was in use. They could have been instructed to be covert. Or just kept a watch on the house from a discrete distance.”

“It would have been too risky. We could not put your son in danger.”

“And instead you lost him.”

“If he was ever there.”

“Right now,” Jason snapped, “I fucking trust Eric more than I trust you.”

“You are going to let us be involved in the interrogation.” Bruce stated.

“That is not advisable. You are emotionally involved.”
“Of course we’re fucking emotionally involved! He’s our fucking family!”

“We won’t be in the room. But we will be listening in real time. And we will have the ability to communicate with the interrogator so that we can ask questions.”

Bruce wasn’t asking. He was stating.

“And you set it up in the next fifteen fucking minutes.” Jason added.

“This could just be all a lie. He could be an imposter. Someone after their fifteen minutes of fame.”

“You didn’t even check that out first?” Bruce snarled.

“Easy B. Tearing people to pieces is my job not yours… Listen, Agent, you’re going to set this up. And you’re going to set it up now.”

It was clear that Agent Lukić was intimidated by the pairing. Possibly even by the butler still standing unobtrusively behind the desk.

“They stay here too.” Bruce pointed at the two detectives, “Right now I trust them more than I trust you. What is your weigh in on this?”

“They figured out that he went to the police.” Montoya put in, “And they managed to find another vehicle and legged it. Taking their leverage with them.”

“Which is possibly only Tim.” Allen added, “We’ve got some evidence that casts doubt on Eric’s ability to come up with this sort of plan.”

“So who do you put down as the ringleader then?” Agent Lukić retorted.

“I don’t know.” Montoya shrugged, “But I doubt that a chronically abused kid would jump to kidnapping someone he barely knew. It seems very unlikely.”

She could tell that Lukić wasn’t impressed by the statement. The FBI Agent was fixed on Eric being the main culprit and wouldn’t allow anyone else to enter the picture.

123456789

It was only a video stream, but it was the first time Jason had seen Eric live. Cuffed to the table, he was biting his lip, eyes were constantly moving, hands twisting, slouched shoulders.
“He’s scared.” Jason commented.

“He’s in over his head.” Lukić countered, “He thought this was just a prank. Just come up and pretend to be Eric Seimon.”

“No.” Montoya shook her head, “That’s him. I recognise him from his picture.”

“Agreed.” Allen nodded, “He could be a doubleganger… But I doubt it.”

“Did you rescue Tim?” Eric asked the Agent when she entered the interrogation room, “Is he at the hospital? He wasn’t well when I left him. He had an infection.”

“I am Agent Claasen,” The Agent introduced herself, “What can you tell me? What is your name?”

“I’m Eric Seimon. Christina talked me into kidnapping Tim. He’s a good person. He told me that if I stayed I would be killed by Christina… He was right. She’s spiralling fast. I don’t know what Tim told her, but she snapped at him. She slammed a door. She never shows her anger like that. She’s going to kill him if you don’t get him out of there fast. You don’t know what she’s capable of.”

“You’re saying that a priest’s daughter orchestrated a kidnapping?”

“You don’t know Christina… She’s vicious. If you don’t do what she wants… She’ll find a way to make you. She’s been doing it for years. Tim called it abuse… And he’s probably right. She abused me. Just like my mother abused me.”

He’d turned his face down, watching his own hands as his fingers kept moving over and over each other despite the restraining cuffs.

“Then why did you turn yourself in on her request?”

“What request?”

“Her television interview. She asked you to turn yourself in.”

“I didn’t… I didn’t even know she had asked… Though that might explain why Christina’s temper took a turn from bad to worse earlier. She must have seen it… I never did. I just tried to get Tim out of there. Abe caught me. So I lied. Tim understood. He told me to get out. To get help.”

“How do can I tell you’re telling the truth?”

“He gave me some messages.” Eric looked up hopefully, “Things to prove that he sent me.”
“And those were?”


“None of that makes sense.”

“It’s what he said.” Eric protested.

“He’s telling the truth.” Jason declared.

“How can you tell?” Allen frowned.


“What does it mean?” Montoya asked.

“Basically that Tim sent him… It’s got other connotations… Tim doesn’t think that Eric is a bad person. He doesn’t deserve to go to prison, I think… There’s a lot of meanings that Tim could be trying to get across. But it’s definitely Tim that sent that message.”

“Could he have been coerced into giving a message?” Agent Lukić suggested.

“Not that one.” Jason shook his head, “That’s a favour to be called upon. He wouldn’t give that if he didn’t mean it.”

“Did he say Llama or Lima?” Bruce questioned of Agent Claasen.

“Was it llama or lima?” Agent Claasen repeated.


“You said llama before.”

“I don’t remember his exact words. But I remember the sounds. I don’t have that good a memory. And I didn’t write anything down. It would be too dangerous. What if Christina caught me? She’d have killed me.”

“She’s a girl. You’re a guy.”

“You think that matters? My mother is half my size, if we’re being generous. But she’s been abusing me since I can remember. Beating me since my dad died. I’m half convinced she killed him.”
“Why didn’t you say something before?”

“Who would believe me? Look I’ve known since I was very small that I was different to all the other kids. I just didn’t know why. By the time I figured out it was because my mother hit me and yelled at me… Well, everyone knew I was a liar. She’d told enough people that… Besides, everyone knows that women don’t abuse men. Everyone knows it. Women are the abused. Not the abusers.”

“He’s right.” Jason agreed, “No one would have believed him.”

“I can understand.” Bruce nodded, “Women have always been perceived as the fairer sex. The weaker sex. The figurative damsels in distress. But that’s not the point… Tim sent us a message.”

“What does Lima mean?” Agent Lukić frowned, “You clearly knew what Tim was trying to say.”

“Lima Syndrome.” Bruce stated, “It is not very well known. But it’s the opposite of Stockholm Syndrome.”

“You mean it’s when a hostage starts to hate their captors?” Montoya asked.

“No.” Jason shook his head, “It’s when a captor starts to empathise with their victim.”

“How do you know this?” Agent Lukić challenged, “That’s not normal.”

“Master Bruce is known to be a wealthy man.” Alfred reminded, “As such both he and his children are quite likely to targets for kidnapping. It is only sensible for them to educate themselves about how to protect themselves. Including techniques on how to induce Lima Syndrome.”

“Timothy manipulated him?” Agent Lukić blurted out.

“I think he was justified.” Allen retorted, “Given that if he hadn’t we wouldn’t have any clues right now. Mister Wayne, can you translate the rest of the message?”

“Not immediately.” Bruce sighed, “Tim has always thought on a higher level than most people. I wouldn’t be surprised if his message has multiple layers.”

“We’ll need to talk to his friends.” Jason muttered, “They might know what he meant… Plus it’s clear that Eric doesn’t have a great memory. What he’s said isn’t necessarily what Tim said.”

“We’re going to need help. Jason…”

“I’ll get on it.” Jason walked over to the door, “Alfred, we’re probably going to need some tea.”

“I understand, Master Jason.”
“You have a starting point.” Bruce turned to face Agent Lukić, “Find my son. Find Tim… Find the car that they used to get away! Surely *that* is not beyond your capabilities! At least identifying the *blasted* thing!”
"Okay Babs." Dick looked up at the screen, "Bring it up."

He and Damian watched the interrogation from the Batcave.

"Summoning dark." Damian frowned, "I have heard that before I believe."

"If it’s the last in the sequence, then it’s the least important." Dick reminded, "Tim knows how to prioritise."

"I do not feel that any of the other statements are things that I am capable of translating." Damian stated, "I will communicate with the Titans. Perhaps one of these phrases will mean something to them."

"Good thinking."

Damian’s fingers flickered over the keyboard.

"Titans Tower. Sorry, but we are currently busy either fighting to protect our planet or having a pizza party. Leave a message after the beep and we’ll think about getting back to you." Garfield announced calmly.

"Drake has successfully communicated with us." Damian was blunt, "However his message is convoluted. I am of the belief that you and the other Titans might be of assistance in translating his message quickly."

"Guys!" Garfield called out, "Tim sent a message!"

Bart was next to Gar in less than a blink of an eye, almost quivering in place. Kon and Cassie were only a heartbeat later. Miguel and Raven wandered into frame not much longer after that.

"What did el Jefe say?" Miguel asked.

"So far we have concluded that Drake managed to turn Eric Seimon by inducing Lima Syndrome and then sent him to get the message out." Damian stated, "However the rest of his message is convoluted and translation is being impeded by the fact that Eric Seimon is unable to accurately remember Drake’s precise message."

"He’s never been the brightest." Kon sighed, "What have we got?"

"A collection of random phrases." Dick took over, "Sissy’s mum. Billie’s jeans and Fanny
“Sissy’s mum?” Cassie frowned, before snapping her fingers, “Cissie’s mother.”

“I do not understand.” Damian frowned, “That means something to you?”

“Cissie was before your time.” Cassie shrugged, “Cissie King-Jones. She was a member of Young Justice under the name of Arrowette.”

“What happened to her?” Damian pressed, “If she is still operating, I would have heard of her.”

“She retired.” Kon replied, “She nearly killed someone, so she retired. She’s an Olympic archer now.”

“Why would Drake be focused on her mother?”

“Because Bonnie raised Cissie to be a hero.” Bart answered, “She trained Cissie to be what she failed to be… Kind of like the High School Cheerleader trying to ensure that her daughter becomes a professional Cheerleader.”

“Cissie was all kinds of mixed up.” Cassie agreed, “She’s a lot better now. Therapy and getting her mother locked up for child endangerment helped.”

“So Tim is probably trying to flag up that Eric’s been abused.” Miguel suggested, “Sounds like his big corazón is involved here.”

“Could be something else as well.” Gar pointed out, “Tim likes things that have multiple meanings. He’s complicated like that.”

“We can put that on the back burner.” Raven decided, “If we know part of what Tim meant, it is better than nothing. Wasting time focusing on one aspect is not beneficial.”

“Kent,” Damian frowned at the half-Kryptonian, “Why have you not gone to rescue Drake already? Do you care that little about him?”

“I don’t know where he is.” Kon met Damian’s challenging gaze.

“Your father, for lack of a better word, has the ability to find someone by their heartbeat.”

“Kent,” Damian frowned at the half-Kryptonian, “Why have you not gone to rescue Drake already? Do you care that little about him?”

“I don’t know where he is.” Kon met Damian’s challenging gaze.

“Your father, for lack of a better word, has the ability to find someone by their heartbeat.” Damian reminded.

“And I’m not him. Yeah, I know Tim’s heartbeat. And given enough time, I could possibly find it. But it would take a long time. And he would need to not be suffering from an infection. That always throws his heartbeat off. The rate, the pulse. I don’t have the skill to anticipate those sort of changes. I can’t find him, if the thing I am listening for changes that dramatically. And yes, I could listen for his voice. But last time I did that… It took me all night and I only had Gotham city to search through… Not even the whole of Gotham either. I knew that he lived in the better part of Gotham. So I could limit my search to that. I don’t have such limitations now. He could be anywhere within driving distance of his last known location. I don’t have the skills to find him. Particularly if he’s not talking. If calls me… I can find him. But if he doesn’t call me? I don’t stand a chance.”

“What about Clark?” Dick caught onto the idea, “Does he have the ability?”

“Technically yes.” Kon nodded, “Practically no.”
“What do you mean, Azul?” Miguel frowned.

“He can find someone by their heartbeat, by the merest sound of their voice, no matter how far away they are… As long as he’s listening and he knows them well enough.” Kon explained, “He doesn’t know Tim well enough.”

“I’m sure he must.” Dick countered, “I’ll contact him.”

Dick wandered away, pulling out his phone as he did so.

“Is there anything else you can deduce from the clues?” Damian queried, “I know I have heard the phrase Summoning dark before. However I cannot recall precisely when or where.”

“Not something I know, el petirrojo.” Miguel cocked his head, “And I don’t think anyone else knows.”

“We cannot stay down here too long.” Damian declared, “The Agents will get suspicious if we do not reappear soon. I trust you can continue your investigation while we continue ours. If you come to any beneficial conclusions please contact us.”

Damian closed the communication link quickly.

“Grayson,” Damian announced, “If we do not reappear shortly it is possible the Agents will get suspicious of our absence. Leave your phone call until later.”

“Well Clark?” Bruce addressed the slightly sheepish man, “I am now at the point where I fully acknowledge how much danger Tim is in. Can you find him or not?”

“I can’t.” Clark kept his eyes adverted, “I can’t find Tim for you.”

“Why?” Dick chimed in, from where he was perched on a sideboard, “You can always find me.”

“I know you. Know your heart. Your breathing. Your voice… You’re Bruce’s first kid. My nephew. You looked up to me and adored me. And I love you. You’re family.”

“But my other sons aren’t?” Bruce challenged.

“I know yours. And Damian’s… And Jason’s. I just… I’ve never worked with Tim all that closely.”

“But you have with the rest of us?” Dick frowned.
“Jason was such a fanboy back then.” Clark shrugged, “And he was Bruce’s kid. Bruce’s Robin. And Damian’s your blood kid, Bruce.”

“But you didn’t think Tim was important enough?” Bruce glared.

“I… I… I didn’t… I’ve never worked all that closely with him.”

“That’s not the reason.” Dick stalked towards Clark.

Clark took a step back. Eyes flicking over his shoulder to where Bruce was sitting.

Or rather, where Bruce *had* been sitting. He had silently risen to his feet and was now completing a pincer movement alongside his eldest child.

“Okay, Bruce, you want the honest truth?” Clark tried to put his back against a wall, so that he could see both Batmen at the same time, “You didn’t let me close for a long time after the UN incident. By the time I really got to meet him… Well, he didn’t feel like your kid. There was always a distance between the two of you. Then Tim became Conner’s best friend… I kind of… Well… People were comparing the two of them to the two of us. So I just decided…”

“That he was Conner’s problem.” Bruce’s gaze narrowed, “Bit arrogant of you to assume that a kid could match your proficiency with your abilities simply because he was your clone.”

“Well… He always seemed so confident.”

“A lot of it was bluster.” Dick reminded, “I actually *went* to those Parent-Mentor conferences. I learned a lot of stuff from those. And trust me, Conner was hiding a lot back then… Sometimes I think Tim knows exactly how much and other times I think he was as deceived as the rest of us.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Bruce countered, “It simply means that we have to continue as we have been doing. Investigating.”

“And waiting.” Dick added, “We’ve still got about fourteen hours before the phone call… We play our cards right, we might get some more clues then.”

Jason slid into the kitchen, knowing that none of the Agents or detectives would be in there. They were all too afraid of Alfred refusing to make them coffee to upset him. And he had made it quite clear early on that interfering in his domain would upset him.

Alfred was clearly upset, chopping up an onion was distinct thunks of the knife against the wooden board. Given that Jason knew Alfred could cut up literally dozens of onions completely silently,
the sound was quite telling. It was completely off beat from the folk music Alfred would occasionally play when his emotions were running high.

“Alfred?” Jason looked at him, “Can I help?”

“Master Jason,” Alfred paused in his chopping, drawing in a deep breath, “I apologise for my state of affairs. I am…”

“You’re upset.” Jason shrugged, “We all are. S’alright.”

“No Master Jason, it is not alright.” Alfred returned, “I apologise. My anger is not directed at you. It is directed at that… That creature disguised as a human being who is holding one of my grandsons prisoner. The female, who does not deserve the title of lady or even a human being, who is possibly raping my grandson right now.”

“Rape?” Jason breathed half in shock, half in horror.

“Fanny Blair is a reference to a folk song by the same name.” Alfred stated, his face in a poker face that Batman would envy, “I did not recall it at first. However coincidently it played recently.”

“I thought folk songs were all happy things.” Jason frowned, “About love and winning.”

“Not all of them. Master Jason, if you would care to do so, the song is question is sung by Maddy Prior.”

It didn’t take Jason long to find the song. He listened to the song carefully, taking in the words rather than the music.

“Accusation of rape?” Jason puzzled his way through the lyrics.

“Make sense.” Dick chimed in from the doorway, “Particularly if you take Billy’s jeans and turn it into Billie Jean. A Michael Jackson song. My parents loved his songs. It features a man talking about a woman claiming to be having his child… Tim knows I know that song. I always play those songs on my parents’ anniversary.”

“So he’s saying that he’s either been fucking raped… Or he’s going to be fucking raped.” Jason muttered.

“The question is why.” Dick murmured.

“It’s not about sex.” Jason pointed out, “It’s about fucking power.”

“No.” Dick shook his head, “It’s a woman in both songs…”

“Could just be his way of telling us that she’s fucking raping him.”

“Master Jason,” Alfred breathed, “It is equally possible that she is planning something far more insidious. It is generally believed that the only method that could be utilised to prove Fanny Blair’s claims would be a pregnancy.”
“Why would she want a fucking baby? Not like she can pull a Talia! Timbo would never side with her with everything he knows.”

“No.” Dick sighed, “But a baby… B’s first grandchild? And if Tim was killed? Reasonable to assume that they’d be well taken care of financially. Plus without a Will, they’d inherit all of Tim’s money.”

“That’s… That’s… That’s fucking cold!” Jason breathed, “I’ve seen people using fucking babies to lock people into a marriage, but that… That’s…”

“Unconscionable, Master Jason.”

“It’s a smart tactic.” Dick shrugged, “If you think about it. She gets all the money she wants, without having to risk anyone arresting her… If it wasn’t for the fact that Eric got away and Tim sent a message. It also makes sense with the Cissie’s mum comment. She was arrested for child endangerment and child exploitation. Which is probably the other message in that comment that Tim was trying to send.”

“So we’re looking at double layers here,” Jason muttered, “Of fucking course! Timmy can’t just send a freaking normal message. You know, I’m here and I need help!”

“That’s not Tim’s way.” Dick snorted, “Never has been. Besides, he probably doesn’t know where he is. One bit of countryside looks the same as any other bit of countryside out there. We can’t expect Tim to be able to identify his location from peering out a window in the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s just…”

“I know. We all seem to hold Tim to a higher standard than the rest of us… Believe him capable of things that we wouldn’t even consider being able to do ourselves. Why do we do that?”

“If I may suggest, Master Richard, it is simply a case of Master Tim being very different in nature to the rest of this family. He has always taken failure more personally than the rest of you. While equally being more willing to deceive and go behind Master Bruce’s back. I also believe that part of it may be due to Master Bruce’s expectations that Master Tim will exceed him in the areas of deduction, given enough time.”

“Sure,” Jason nodded, “Probably right. He’s on another level… But he’s still human… Still a kid… And he’s out there on his own…… And he’s too stubborn to call for help.”

“A trait I have noticed is common amongst all members of this family, Master Jason.”

With half an hour to go before the anticipated phone call both Bruce and Dick were on hand in the study waiting for the phone to ring.

They weren’t alone either. It felt like the entire contingent of the local FBI office had forced themselves into the study as well. Alongside the requisite two members of the GCPD. Lucius Fox
had also turned up at some point.

Dick was fairly sure that Bruce had invited the long time friend and CFO, both for emotional support and for his business acumen.

Ostensibly Jason and Damian were upstairs in Damian’s room watching a film before bed, to keep the kid occupied and out of the way. In reality they were both in the Batcave ready to trace the phone call.

Alfred was keeping everyone supplied with coffee and had declined to be in the Batcave, stating that someone needed to run interference should any of the FBI try to gain access to either Jason or Damian.

“How would Timothy know about Cissie King-Jones?” Agent Lukić asked suddenly, “She is not frequently in the news. And her past is rarely discussed.”

“Miss Cissie King-Jones,” Lucius spoke up, “Is what Tim commonly refers to as our Korean Investment. WE has been sponsoring her ever since Tim took up his position as CEO.”

“She’s not Korean.” Agent Lukić frowned.

“No,” Lucius agreed, “We have been working on developing a presence in Korea for a number of years. She is part of that program.”

“How?” Agent Lukić blurted out, “It makes no sense.”

“No, it makes perfect sense.” Dick sighed, “Typical Tim. Six steps ahead of the rest of us. Archery is big in Korea... Like Football for us. Or cricket for Pakistan. Or soccer for the UK. Most companies have an archer on staff. And there are competitions between the companies. Tim was buying into the culture. It would probably open quite a few doors having an archer of his own to challenge them with.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m friends with Roy Harper. He’s always been fond of archery.”

“How would you know Roy Harper? I wouldn’t have thought you had anything to do with vigilantes.” Agent Lukić challenged.

“He was fostered by Uncle Ollie.” Dick shrugged, “We used to hang out at parties.”

“Oliver Queen.” Bruce explained further, “I may not like the man, however I do not dislike the man.”

Montoya thought it was strange, she was getting to see a whole new side of Bruce Wayne. Intelligent. Thoughtful. Intense. Strong.
Nothing like the man she had met previously. Whom she heard about through the media.

Was this who he was when his family was in danger? And what caused him not to be like this normally?

“Did you manage to figure out why they chose that particular house?” Dick asked Agent Lukić.

“According to Mister Seimon, Christina is Facebook friends with the teenage girl who lives there. She announced that her family was going on holiday on Facebook.”

“Please tell me that they had met in real life.” Dick sighed, burying his face in his hands.

“Not according to anything we could uncover so far.”

“That’s like Internet security one-oh-one.” Dick muttered, “Babs would kick my butt from here to San Fran if I did anything like that.”

They fell into an uneasy silence watching the phone.

The time for the phone call came and went.

And still the phone did not ring.
Chapter 50

The phone rang.

“Wayne residence, Jason speaking.”

“I said that Mister Wayne was to answer the phone.” The distorted voice on the other end stated.

“Well, it’s been twenty-four hours since you said you would call.” Jason countered, “We only just got him to go to bed an hour ago. He can’t stay awake forever.”

“I want to speak to him, now.”

“I’m sending someone to wake him up… And I want proof that my brother is still alive.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“No.”

Jason didn’t see the point in dancing around the bush when it came to this. He could see the horror and disgust on the faces of the FBI.

But he was going with his instincts.

Listening carefully he could just about make out the sound of tape being pulled off of something. And underneath that there was a tiny hiss of pain.

“Jason?” Tim’s voice was dry and hoarse, “Galahad?”

“Lepidopterist.” Jason returned immediately.

“Obeah.” Tim stated firmly.

“Goldie.” Jason suggested.

“Circus. Slayride.”

“Arkham?”

“Solo act.”

“Clues?”

“One ring. Ah oww!” Tim’s words finished up with a yelp of pain.
Jason could tell that it wasn’t serious pain. More shock than pain. The smack of flesh on flesh sounding like a backhand to the face.

“That enough proof for you? Money-bags.” Jason can hear the insult and mocking in the name.

“I’d prefer to Facetime him.” Jason returned, “But I doubt you’ll let that happen.”

“No.”

Jason looked up as the door opened Bruce rushing in.

“Dick?” Jason mouthed.

“With Damian.” Bruce returned, equally silently.

Jason nodded in understanding as he held out the phone.

“Bruce Wayne speaking. Who am I talking to?”

“The man who has your son.”

“I wish to speak with him.”

“Too late. Your other son already has. That’s all you’re getting. Until I get my money.”

Bruce looked at Jason, who nodded calmly.

“Alive and aware.” Jason mouthed, “Probably gagged.”

Bruce nodded briskly.

“How do you want to do this?” Bruce asked carefully.

“I want you to get me my hundred million.”

“What you are asking for is beyond my ability to raise quickly.”
“Are you saying he’s not worth it?”

“Tim is worth that and more. However the fastest I can get my hands on a hundred million dollars is four months. I think we both want this all dealt with a lot quicker than that. I can raise ten million by this time tomorrow.”

“Don’t insult me. I can kill him soon as blink.”

“I know. That’s why I’m being honest with you. I am willing to pay. I simply can’t pay what you are after as quickly as you want it.”

“I want my money now.”

“Then you have to compromise. Either all of the money over many months. Or a smaller amount immediately. The choice is yours. However it doesn’t matter how much money I am worth, there are limitations on what I can achieve. People with large personal fortunes invest money to make more money. Removing money from those investments takes time. Time that I fear Tim does not have.”

“You’re right about that, Mister Money-Bags. Your brat has a sharp tongue that will get him into trouble… If he doesn’t learn to curb it, someone will teach him to do so. And they won’t be as nice as me.”

Bruce didn’t respond to that. Using the silence to get them to speak.

“I want more than ten million.”

“How much more?”

“I want fifty million.”

“That’ll take at least two months to get hold of. Are you willing to wait that long?”

“No. Would it be any faster if I started sending him back a piece at a time… I’ll even let you pick which finger I send back first.”

“It won’t make any difference. I can’t get that amount of money quickly. I could manage to get twelve million in a few days.”

“Twenty five.”

“That’d take me two weeks. I could possibly scrape together fifteen by the end of the week.”

“Twenty. By this time next week. Or I start sending you fingers.”

“I’ll find a way.” Bruce sighed heavily, sounding stressed and worried and slightly scared, “You don’t need to hurt Tim. He’s… He’s important to me. Please… Don’t hurt him.”

“If he would learn to behave he wouldn’t get so hurt. Always thinking he’s better than everyone else.”
Jason bit his lip. That was so much the opposite of Tim it wasn’t even funny.

“How do you want me to send the money?”

“You’ll find out with the next phone call. Next time don’t make me wait so long to talk to you.”

The phone line went dead almost immediately.

“How did Tim sound?” Bruce asked, ignoring the FBI agents trying to get his attention.

“Hoarse. I think he’s spending most of his time gagged now.”

“Disarming him.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think too.”

“Disarming?” Agent Lukić frowned, “He wasn’t armed.”

“Actually, he probably was.” Montoya cut in, “Tim has a reputation for being highly persuasive. His voice is a weapon in this situation.”

“Have you managed to trace the call?” Bruce turned on the FBI agents gathered around the computers.

“GPS was disabled.” An agent replied instantly, “And they’re in a region with poor cell tower coverage. We’re looking at a radius of forty-five miles. Over six thousand square miles. Centred in Arkansas.”

“It’ll take us way too long to go door to door. That’s assuming they’re even in a building. Given the area, they could be out in the wilderness. That region is a popular tourist trekking spot.”

“And the Ozark National Forest is within the search area.”

123456789

“Oh, so what are we looking at?” Dick was looking at a map on the screen.

“A large patch of Arkansas.” Babs replied, “They’ve crossed state borders since last time.”

“Smart move.” Dick nodded, “Everyone is looking in Oklahoma. Add in the communication issues between different states…”

“I do not understand why people cannot communicate. It is only a matter of a few miles.” Damian frowned, “It is not logical that there are problems.”
“Dami,” Dick sighed, “There’s jurisdictional issues between Gotham City PD and Gotham County Sheriffs Department. Their communication isn’t great. And that’s in the same State. Even the same City Limits. Add in State Lines and things get complicated. Even with the FBI involved.”

“You do not want to know how often Dad’s moaned about that.” Babs sighed, “Unfortunately I can’t narrow it down any further. There’s not many cell towers in that area. With no GPS we need more intel.”

“Tiny Tim gave us some intel.” Jason stated as he entered, “I just don’t know what it all means.”

“Solo act,” Dick nodded, “Tim doesn’t think that she’s working with anyone else. But that doesn’t narrow anything down.”

“It is reassuring though.” Babs reminded, “Says it’s not linked to Tim’s last kidnapping… That Phobos is not involved.”

“That helps… A little.” Jason sighed, “But she’s trying to pull strings. Bruce has to mind the phone now. Basically he can’t leave the study. Dick, you’re going to have to…”

“Stand in.” Dick breathed, “Yeah, makes sense. Anything else useful?”

“Sleigh ride. Obeah. And one ring.” Jason stated.

“Obeah, that rings a bell.” Dick leant back in the chair, “A case, I’m sure. But not one I was involved with.”

“In total we have five puzzles to solve.” Damian announced, “Those three comments and the previous two unsolved mysteries: Helium trap dancer and Summoning dark.”

“Say that again.” Jason frowned.

“Summoning dark was what I stated.” Damian frowned.

“No, before that.”

“Helium trap dancer.” Dick repeated for Damian slowly.

“Say it quicker.” Jason demanded.

“Helium trap dancer.”

“Heliotrope Dancer.” Jason grinned, “That’s what Timmy was really saying.”

“Tt… Does that mean something to you, Todd? A purple dancer does seem like one of the inane things you would know about.”

“It’s not a purple dancer. It’s Heliotrope and Dancer.” Jason laughed, “They’re two prostitutes that went missing a while back.”

“So what has that got to do with anything?” Dick frowned.

“It’s a case I was working… I think Timbo was trying to tell me he got a lead.”

“Because he also stated that his kidnapping isn’t linked to anyone else.” Dick agreed, “And Obeah is a reference to Obeah Man. The kidnapper who killed his mother… Best interpretation?
He’s telling us that she’s going to kill him no matter what. It’s what Obeah Man was going to do. Only pure luck that Jack survived.”

“Well, that doesn’t tell us anything new. Kinda figured that when we interpreted the whole pregnancy scam.”

“Just Tim covering his bases really. Typical.” Dick sighed.

“Is there any part of your prostitute case that Drake could be referencing in a similar manner to the Obeah Man?” Damian pressed.

“Unlikely. We’d gotten nowhere with it. Just two reports of missing people. Belief on the streets was that there was a new pimp rounding up girls. We’d barely gotten traction. It’s far more likely that he figured something out and wanted me to know. Babs, could you do a hunt?”

“How urgent?” Babs queried.

“Just get your computers to check the GCPD databases for them.” Jason suggested, “Timmy couldn’t have done any real investigation. So…”

“He was limited to computer stuff.” Babs retorted, “And you don’t classify my area of expertise as real investigating, huh Jaybird? I’ll remember that for next time.”

“When it comes to dealing with prostitutes?” Jason raised an eyebrow, “Yeah, I fucking don’t believe you can get much traction on your computers. They don’t talk to computers. They don’t talk to cops. The areas they work don’t have cameras. Those are your usual intel sources cut off instantly. Kinda restricts what you can achieve.”

“Okay, that’s true.” Babs conceded, “I’m not even seeing a Missing Person report on those two. Although I have got their sheets up.”

“No one would tell the police.” Jason scoffed, “Besides the police wouldn’t waste time investigating a missing prostitute.”

“I’ll give you that.” Babs sighed, “I wish it wasn’t the case. But it is. And here we go… Dancer’s fingerprint appeared at a crime scene recently. Single fingerprint. Carefully placed. This was no accident. She knew what she was doing.”

“Send me the details.” Jason asked, “I started this case. I’m going to have some part in finishing it… For Timmy’s sake, if nothing else.”

“Why would Drake be interested in the resolution of a case when his very life is in peril?” Damian frowned.

“Because he’s Tim.” Dick sighed, “Anyone got a clue about Sleigh Ride?”

“Makes me think of Christmas.” Jason shrugged, “You know, those sleighs that do trips around various parks?”

“Christmas.” Dick pondered, “Journey… Slayride… Oh, God no… Fuck no… Wait… Solo act, it’s okay… It’s okay. It’s not Him… It’s not Him.”
“Not who?” Jason placed a firm, grounding hand on Dick’s shoulder.

“Joker.” Dick breathed, “Tim was making a round-about reference to this Joker incident. Years back. Before… Before…”

“Before I crawled my way out of my grave.” Jason shrugged nonchalantly, “So what happened? Why is it important? And do I need to go beat the Joker up a few times? You know, for besides the normal reasons.”

“It was Christmas and Tim was patrolling. Solo. He dived through a car to get out of danger and ended up in even more danger. He got knocked out and came to to find that the Joker was driving, he was tied up in the passenger seat and the owners were dead in the back amongst the presents.”

“Oh God.” Jason trembled slightly, “What did He do to him?”

“It was all psychological. Making Tim watch as he killed people unable to do anything to stop it. Probably going to kill him at the end of it. But he didn’t physically hurt Tim… Not that time. It was all mind games.”

“The crucial point here,” Damian cut in, “Is deciphering what Drake was attempting to communicate. I sincerely doubt it was that the harlot is attempting to play mind games on him. Equally I am certain that she has not yet killed within his view or within his deductive abilities. Thus I am currently at a loss to understand what he wishes us to learn.”

“There’s not a lot that could apply here.” Jason’s voice was audibly shaking.

“Except…” Dick’s fingers started moving across the keyboard, “Babs, are there any surveillance cameras between Newkirk and Ozark?”

“Not on all the routes for traffic. But I could get into CCTV and other such things. Only I don’t know what I’m looking for. Or even where I’m looking for it. There’s a lot of routes they could have taken.”

“You told me about Kaleidoscope?” Dick suggested, “If you had a make and model of a car could that help?”

“Yes. I could narrow it down. But I don’t.”

“Or maybe we do.” Dick grinned, “What if it’s the same type as what the Joker used? Only reason I can think of to remind me of that nightmare.”

“Nightmare?” Jason raised an eyebrow at Dick.

“B and I spent most of the night trying to find Tim. And when we realized that the Joker had him? I swear my heart stopped. I just kept thinking there was going to be another gravestone in my future. Someone else I had failed to protect. Babs, I’ve got the file open…”
“Got it. And searching… Pretty common car though. This’ll take longer. Without the colour or licence plate… I’m going to get a lot of false positives.”

“Narrow it down to cars with at least two passengers.” Jason suggested, “Don’t reckon she’ll be dumb enough to keep Timmy in the main body of the car. He’ll be in the trunk.”

“That narrows it down.” Babs agreed, “Give me time.”

“We’ll just have to hope that Tim has time.” Dick muttered.

Jason was lying on his bed perusing the files that Babs had sent him regarding Dancer’s case. Dick was flopped next to him, trying to sleep; legs tangled with Jason’s. Arms wrapped around Damian’s middle, who had claimed the headboard and the pillows, like he was cuddling a teddy bear.

Damian was firmly asleep. Not that the two older boys really cared whether he was awake or not. They just felt better with him close.

Jason knew that he would be the one suffering as Dick’s teddy bear if Damian hadn’t been there. And he was more than willing to offer up the youngest Robin as a sacrifice to the cause.

“Anything interesting?” Dick asked.

“Aydan Giordano.” Jason offered up, “Married. No kids. Wife’s pregnant though. A girl, judging by the amount of pink things he’s been buying. Fairly high level manager for McCaffery Enterprises. Found dead in the Narrows. Picked clean. Naked. Car still missing. There was no reason for him to be there. Clear signs it was dump job.”

“You just reading that?” Dick remarked.

“Yeah, I’ll look at the pictures in a moment. See what they missed.”

The door opened nearly silently, to reveal Alfred with a tray.

“Hot Chocolate, Young Masters?”

“Thanks Alf.” Jason smiled wanly.

“Would you also be interested in perusing the crime scene photographs collected by the FBI of Master Tim’s former prison?”
“How’d you get those, Alfred?” Dick perked up.

“It is rather amazing what a government agent will leave lying around unattended, Master Richard. I was merely tidying up.”


“I’ll take it, Alfred.” Dick laughed lightly, “Let’s see what other breadcrumbs Timmy left for us.”

It was the work of a moment for Alfred to deposit a hot chocolate on the side-table next to Dick, move a small rolling table to hold Jason’s mug near him and hand over the tablet to Dick.

Dick quickly skipped past the accompanying written reports on the tablet. Alfred had clearly managed to get hold of one with full access to everything. He more than slightly suspected that Agent Lukić was going to have to report losing a tablet later.

Because Dick wasn’t giving this one back.

He looked at the picture of Tim’s prison cell. A fairly non-descript bedroom of a teenage girl.

Was this where Tim had been raped? Amongst the trappings of a normal childhood, something he had never had.

And was it better or worse than a rooftop in the rain?

“What’s better than a rooftop?” Jason kicked Dick lightly.

“Sorry, didn’t realize I was talking aloud… Don’t worry about it.”

“No.” Jason twisted to look at him, “That’s you trying to hide something… What you talking about? Where’s your head at, Big Bird?”

“Just… The room looks so… So *normal*… I was… I was expecting…”

“A prison cell?” Jason quirked an eyebrow, “Think those are slightly hard to find in the middle of nowhere Oklahoma.”

“How is the girl supposed to go back to it?… I mean, Tim was raped in her *bedroom*!… How’s she supposed to sleep on the bed now?… How’s *Tim* meant to cope? I mean at least I knew what it was meant to be like.”
“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” Jason spun around, “You were fucking raped? When? Who? And do I need to fucking kill them for you?”

“Jason!” Dick sighed, rubbing one hand over his eyes, “I didn’t mean that… I’m just tired… I didn’t mean…”

“Yes, you did.” Jason’s eyes narrowed, “And you’re trying to cover it. For fuck’s sake, Dick! This is me! You think I was a fucking virgin when I first came under this roof? You fucking think I was innocent?”

“You weren’t?” Dick’s voice was pained and the merest murmur.

“Not as bad as you’re thinking.” Jason poked him with his foot, “There were some nights when sleeping outside was too fucking dangerous or too cold… A few of the brothels back then would let street kids sleep inside in return for small chores. Changing the sheets. Doing the laundry. Emptying the bins. That sort of thing. A few of the other places… They asked for other things… Watching… Some people like an audience… Others… Well, younger is better.”

“You…”

“Not as bad as you fucking think.” Jason repeated, “I never went further than a blowjob. And only once. I quickly learned which brothels were safer than others… So yeah, Big Wing, I know a lot more than I let on. So who raped you and when?”

“You first.” Dick tried.

“I don’t know his name.” Jason shrugged, “Just another fucking John. Liked them young and liked them mouthy. The brothel got closed the next year I think. Can’t remember if it was Penguin or Two-Face who didn’t like it and destroyed it… Now, talk.”

“The first time was… Mirage. I didn’t even realize until later. She pretended to be Kori… I felt angry. But it didn’t feel… Didn’t feel real. You know?”

“Yeah.” Jason murmured.

“Tarantula… Tarantula was different… She… She was a friend… I wasn’t in a good place… Blockbuster had gotten into my head. Psychological torture really… I was one incident away from a breakdown… Then Tarantula killed him. Shot him… My mind… Everything after that… It went fuzzy… Like I wasn’t there… Like I wasn’t in control… It was my body… But not… I know I told her no. But she didn’t listen. I thought we were friends. I thought I could trust her… She tried to marry me… While I was still like that… I came round slightly in the courthouse, where she was getting a licence.”

“That bitch!” Jason growled, “Where is she?”

“She’s dead.” Dick shrugged, “It doesn’t matter…”

“It matters, Dick… You ever told anyone else?”

“No. What would be the point? She went to jail for Blockbuster’s murder. Why bring the sex into it?”

“It wasn’t sex.” Jason countered, “It was rape.”

“We were friends… She misinterpreted…”
“You said no. And even if you didn’t… You had a mental break. You weren’t capable of consenting… Look, you might need to talk to Tim about this.”

“What? Why?”

“Because if I know anything about Tim, it’s that he has these ridiculously high standards for himself. He tries to live up to us. But not the real us. The fictional, idealised versions of us that he has in his head. If he realizes that you went through something like he did… He might talk about his own… Might be willing to go for therapy, if…”

“If I go as well.” Dick dragged a hand down over his face, “Shit. I was trying to just repress and forget it.”

Dick’s voice was small and uncharacteristically nervous.

“Things like that don’t work.” Jason countered, “I would know… How hard do you think I repressed living with the League… My death? I can still remember it. Pushing it down? Just meant that it was stronger when it came back. It waits for a weak moment… For a bad day… And then it comes flooding back. Repressing doesn’t work.”

“So what do you do?”

“I scream. I shout. I shoot things. Never got round to talking to anyone… Apart from Timmy. He’s a good listener… Not so good at talking… Although maybe that was because I wasn’t listening. Don’t know. Perhaps I should try again. He might talk this time.”

The two of them were silent for a long moment.

Then Dick reached for the tablet he had been using.

“Tim must have left us a sign or something.” Dick sighed, “He’s left us clues all over the place.”

“Like a giant scavenger hunt.” Jason muttered, “You know, I think he dealt with Riddler and Cluemaster one too many times for our sanity.”

He picked up his tablet. Having finally finished with the written reports he moved on to the photographs.

“Fuck!” Jason stared at the picture, “No wonder Timmy wanted to tell me to look at the case.”
“Why?” Dick looked over to him.

Jason spun the tablet to show Dick an image. A single fingerprint in blood on a wrist with a pointed oval drawn around it also in blood.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I'm slightly amazed that no-one managed to figure out the Slayride reference. Seriously, go check it out. The story is brilliant, but creepy. Then again it features the Joker, so I think that goes without saying, right?

Also if anyone could offer up some prayers/good wishes, my younger sibling is having an operation this week and we're hoping it'll allow them to live without the pain they've been suffering from on and off for over a decade now. I'll take any religion. I'm not picky.
“If you talk, I’m to gag you again.” Abe glared at Tim.

Behind the duct tape over his mouth, Tim just raised his eyebrows.

“I mean it.” Abe snapped, “You talk you don’t get to eat or drink.”

Tim leant back in his bonds. Settling back against the wall. No bed for him this time. No comfort.

He’d suspected that had been Eric’s influence last time. And now he had more evidence that that was the case.

But it was still better than the freezer, so Tim wasn’t going to complain. Even the zip-ties holding him weren’t all that uncomfortable. He’d certainly been in worse situations than sitting in the basement of a house.

He knew that he was putting a lot of faith in the Bat Clan’s ability to find him with the few clues he had managed to give them. But there wasn’t much else he could do.

He couldn’t afford to draw links between himself and the Titans. Nor could he even contact them anymore. Not unless Raven was out looking for him. And there was a lot of ground for her to cover even if she was.

Tim didn’t… Couldn’t over state his teammates abilities. That would only ever lead to harm and danger when he created plans for them to execute.

Tim knew he was a realist.

He also knew that he wasn’t going to be able to get himself out of this situation. Not without causing himself further harm. He was weighing up the risks and benefits. He was figuring out the
timings he would need. He was calculating what additional information he would need before he could make a decision. He was working out what would be the last straw that would force him to make a break for it.

Tim waited patiently while the duct-tape was pulled off his mouth. Working his jaw he managed to remove the stiffness, before remaining quiet.

A bottle of water, a dry ham sandwich and a protein bar later and Tim knew he wasn’t getting anything else.

“So who gets to be the patsy now?” Tim cocked his head to one side.

“What?” Abe jerked back.

“Well, if Eric is dead he can’t be the ringleader. Which means that someone else has to be the ringleader. Christina’s not going to take the blame. So someone else has to. Is it you or your friend?”

“Shut up!”

“And the ringleader has to die so that Christina’s story works. So who gets to die for her?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“It’s your fingerprints on the tape. Your DNA. Are you the fall guy?”

Tim rode the kick that lashed out at him as best he could, given his situation.

He really wasn’t surprised at the tape being slapped over his mouth once again. He simply cocked his head to one side, and stared at Abe.

He refused to allow any defeat into his gaze. Only defiance and amusement.

Abe almost ran away from him.

*I think I scared him.* Tim mentally laughed.
“I don’t get it.” Dick frowned at the picture, “What are you seeing that I don’t?”

“What does it look like?” Jason tried again.

“A fingerprint.”

“An eye!” Jason motioned, “It’s an eye on a wrist.”

“So?”

“Don’t you… Oh, right… I never told you…”

“Told me what?”

“Something Tim told me.”

“When?”

“Pretty much when we started teaming up.”

“Okay. So why is an eye important?”

“Because Phobos has a flaming eye on his left wrist.”

“Phobos.” Dick’s tone was flat.

“Yeah.” Jason nodded, a half-grin on his face.

“The man who tortured our brother.”

“Yeah.”

“You had a vital clue as to how to identify him and you said nothing?”

“I figured Tim’s trust was more fucking important. I put him in control.”

“What else haven’t you told us?”

“Left handed. New York or New Jersey accent. And that’s it. The key thing was the fire eye tattoo on the left wrist… And this is an eye on the left wrist. Dancer is with Phobos. And she’s fucking scared of him.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because this is a fucking cry for help! This is a last desperate plea! And Dancer has her fucking head screwed on straight. We already know that Phobos is fucked up. Some kind of sociopath. Or sadist.”

“Possibly both.” Dick countered.

“Possibly both.” Jason agreed, “And Dancer took a chance. She sent a message. The only message she thought would get past them. She recreated the eye. How many people know about Phobos and the eye?”

“Fewer than it should be. We could have used that intel!”
“How? I’ve checked the databases. So has Tim. There’s no record. And no-one on the streets knows anything either. I checked. It was useless until right now.”

“One Ring.” Damian spoke up.

“How long have you been awake?” Dick looked down at Damian.

“Long enough to know that you do not want me to answer that question.” Damian replied calmly, “An Eye on Fire is linked to Drake’s comment of One Ring.”

“What?” Jason frowned.

“Have you not read Tolkien’s works?” Damian was dismissive.

“Sure I read them.” Jason shrugged, “Don’t remember an eye on fire though.”

“Then you have not watched the film trilogy based upon the work of Lord of the Rings.”

“The book was better.” Jason retorted immediately.

“You are correct. However the Eye of Sauron was depicted as an eye of fire.”

“And Timmy referenced the most common phrase in fandom usage.” Jason breathed, “One Ring. Just to make sure we got the link between Dancer and Phobos. He was trying to help us catch Phobos.”

“Great.” Dick sighed, “So Tim’s halfway to solving his last kidnapping. While we’re still working on his current one!”

“Drink your hot chocolate and take a chill pill.” Jason lightly kicked him, “We’re making progress. Okay, so it’s not on what we were hoping for… But it solves one more of Tiny Tim’s puzzles. That just leaves Summoning Dark I think.”

“Damian?” Dick looked down at his youngest brother, “You mentioned that Summoning Dark was something that you thought you recognised.”

“In the course of my research I have discovered that it is a reference to a book; Thud, by Terry Pratchett, a British author. While I have not read that particular author to any great degree, I have found sufficient references to establish it as a superstition in the fantasy of the Discworld.”


“I don’t think so.” Dick shook his head, “He would have made a different reference for that… I think. You said it’s a superstition, Dami? What sort of superstition?”

“Draw a particular symbol and a demon will come to bring vengeance upon your enemies. However, it does not permit another to control it. So, it will also destroy you in the process. It is utilized by a dying dwarf to ensure that his death does not get hidden away.”

“What symbol?” Jason put in.

“An eye in a circle with a tail. Altogether a very crude image.”

“You mean like this?” Dick zoomed in on his tablet.
The mark could quite clearly be seen, drawn on a piece of paper tacked to a notice board.

“The equivalent of Gretel’s breadcrumbs?” Jason suggested.

“More like markers to show he was there.” Dick countered, “But it’s got to mean something else. Tim likes layers to his clues. This seems too simple.”

“I would agree.” Damian sighed, “However, I will not subject myself to the task of reading what some people refer to as literature in order to discern if there are more clues hidden amongst its pages.”

“I’ll do it.” Jason replied, “I’m the fastest reader amongst us anyway… Just let me finish this case file. Then I’ll know if there’s anything else in here that might help.”

“What have you got so far?” Dick asked.

“His credit card was last charged for a hotel room. Only the price is fucking huge.”

“Posh hotel?”

“Not in that part of town. I mean it’s not a dive. But it ain’t the Hilton. It ain’t the Ritz. The price is too high. His car’s missing, which doesn’t help. They say he left, but don’t have any security cameras.”

“No cameras?” Dick frowned, “In Gotham?”

“None that they’ll admit to. If I had the time I’d break in there and look for some.”

“We could ask Steph.” Dick countered, “I mean, she’s not being watched like the rest of us.”

“She’d probably rather be looking for Tim.” Jason reminded.

“Well, until Babs turns something up, we’re all stuck waiting.” Dick argued, “And possibly even after that… We can’t all go and rescue Timmy. It’d look a bit stupid.”

“It would also reveal that Drake is connected to our vigilante identities in a more direct manner than simply being a resident of Gotham.”

“Best be me then.” Jason shrugged, “I mean, if I drag Roy and Kori along, most people won’t bat an eyelid. They’ll write it off. I get away with a lot more than most. I’m the crazy one.”

Dick didn’t really have an argument to counter that one.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in posting everyone.
Also thanks for all the best wishes for my Sib. They're out the hospital, up and around and moving better than they have for *months*, if not years. So I think all the wishes
worked!
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the major delay. RL got in the way. As did writer’s block. But I think I know where this is going now. So I just need to churn it out.

“Do you have my money yet, Mister Richy-Rich?”

“Nearly sorted. May I speak with Tim?”

“No.”

Tim shifted against the wall, trying to find a more comfortable position. Any pressure on his back was causing him severe pain. It was only going to get worse, he knew.

He was currently soaked. His punishment for talking. Abe had told.

Tina hadn’t taken it well. She’d poured freezing cold water over him. Judging by the smell and the bucket she’d used… It was pond water. And not particularly clean pond water either. Tim was fairly certain that the pond had been left to fester for quite some time.

Tim wasn’t even hoping that the bandages were keeping his wounds clean. He knew that was futile already. He was a realist.

All he could hope for was that his immune system still had enough functionality left in it, to give him long enough to get out of the situation he was in.

“Please, I need to know that he’s okay.”

Tina had the phone on speaker, clearly a powerplay she was trying on him. Expecting him to react and try to communicate.

Tim wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. He just kept eye contact with her. Not allowing any anger or annoyance into his gaze. Just silent judging.
He was very good at silent judging. Spend any significant amount of time around Bart and Kon and you would very quickly develop the skill. To say nothing of throwing Cassie and Garfield into the mix. Then there was the period of time he spent with Lil’ Lobo.

And he had seriously gotten off topic.

He kept matching Tina’s gaze. He didn’t care if he blinked. It wasn’t that kind of power struggle. It was simply him showing her that he wasn’t scared of her. And that he wasn’t going to entertain her with a futile struggle.

“You’ll get to talk to him when you have my money ready, Mister Money-Bags.”

She hung up.

“Of course he’s not getting you back.” She sneered at him.

Tim merely twitched his eyebrows up for a moment.

“You think this is hell?” She laughed, “You’re going to discover hell… I may not be able to get your money. But I can still get paid for you twice over. There’s more than a few people who will pay for a pretty boy like you.”

Tim rolled his eyes.

Then he started to shake. His eyes tightly closed. Head bowed.

Tina smirked at him before swanning off.

Tim lifted his head as the door shut behind her, tears running down his face as he struggled to breathe.
Behind the tape his grin was threatening to split his face.

He was barely worth anything to Human Traffickers. Marked, scared, injured, sick. He wouldn’t even be worth anything to the Organ Harvesters.

He wasn’t worth anything to anybody.

And wasn’t that going to be a kick in the teeth for Tina?

“I don’t get this book.” Jason frowned, “Timmy likes this stuff?”

“What’s the problem with it?” Dick looked over.

“There’s a lot of humour in it. And I mean a lot. But there’s also places where jokes should be… But I can’t find them.”

“That would be because they are for a British sense of humour, Master Jason.” Alfred remarked as he laid plates down in front of them, “The British sense of humour is quite alien to the average American. Master Tim quite enjoys them.”

“Why?” Jason replied quickly, “And how? I mean, he’s American.”

“It is a well known, albeit historic, fact amongst the Gotham Upper Class,” Alfred stated calmly, “That Master Tim was raised, for the first seven years of his life, by two Norland Nannies.”

“What?” Dick cocked his head, “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Norland College is the Premier Childcare Educational Centre, Master Richard. Norland Nannies are exclusively trained there. They are also the preferred choice for many Royal Families and celebrities. It was deemed to be a very significant coup on the part of Mr and Mrs Drake that they were able to retain a pair for the entirety of Master Tim’s first seven years. A delightful pair of young ladies, I still exchange Christmas and birthday cards with them.”

“You knew them?” Jason blinked.

“I encountered them at the only shop that sells a small selection of British products for the Ex-Pat community, Master Jason. I also make an excellent Afternoon Tea. I spent more than a few afternoons in their company. Frequently with Master Tim also in attendance.”

“I don’t remember that.” Dick put in.

“You were at school or with your friends when they happened, Master Richard.” Alfred reminded, “Have you made any discoveries in your reading, Master Jason?”
“Apart from the humour thing? There’s a lot about racism in this thing. And how history can be written by the winners to justify anything. The Summoning Dark is a demon of some kind, currently possessing the equivalent of the Commissioner.”

“I presume you’ll require the next book in the series after that one, Master Jason?”

“This series doesn’t really work like that, Alfred.” Jason smiled, “It’s just all set in the same universe. They’re all separate stories.”

“Not quite, Master Jason.” Alfred corrected, “While the Discworld series is all set in the same universe, there are individual series inside of it. The book you are currently reading is part of the Watch series. The next book in that particular mini-series is Snuff.”

“You’ve read them, Alfred?” Dick blinked.

“A few times, although I cannot recall many of the details. I quite identify with Wilkins, Commander Vimes’ butler.”

Dick and Jason exchanged a glance, as Alfred wandered off.

“Your impressions?”

“A highly competent butler.” Jason shrugged, “Was sort of reminding me of Jeeves from that old TV series.”

“Okay boys,” Oracle interrupted any further conversation, “Who’s up for a little roadtrip?”

“You found Tim?” Dick jumped to his feet.

“I’ve got a high probability.” Oracle replied, “Not a hundred percent. But high enough that I want boots on the ground to check it out.”

“We’re both going.” Dick declared.

“We talked about this. We can’t both go.” Jason countered, “It’ll be noticed. I can get Kori and Roy to help. Makes more sense for us to be active outside of Gotham than you. Plus Kori can get Timmy to a hospital quicker than driving.”

“Wally’s faster.”

“And we have to assume that someone is going to report who turns up to rescue him. That would draw too much attention. It’s actually reasonable that the three of us would turn up. We’re known for being all over the shop. Wouldn’t surprise anyone.”

“Tim’s important to Gotham. It’d be believable.”

“Look, Nightwing can’t go. Too suspicious. Bruce can’t go, he’s got to watch the phone. Damian can’t go. Robin out on his own? Raise too many eyebrows. And it’s not exactly hidden that he doesn’t get along with the Titans.” Jason ran a hand through his hair in frustration.
“Batman could go.”

“Not reasonable.” Jason argued, “Look we can talk about this or you can let me do this. I’ve had Roy and Kori on standby since O started looking.”

“Wally’s ready at any point.”

“Why are we arguing? I can’t coral the little demon. So it has to be me.”

“And if I don’t go Tim’ll think I don’t care about him. That I don’t love him!”

“Right now he thinks that anyway. It doesn’t change anything… We don’t have time to argue about this. Timmy needs us now.”

Jason pushed past Dick. His hand flicking out to strike a nerve cluster, disabling his older brother.

“I’ll get him.” Jason stated firmly.
“Okay O.” Red Hood spoke up, “Where are we going?”

“Cabin in the forest. Has a basement. I’ve sent you the co-ordinates.”

“Why is the basement important?” Red Arrow frowned.

“Because if I was holding a prisoner with a broken leg,” O retorted, “I’d stuff them in a basement or an attic. Because the stairs would be difficult.”

“Wouldn’t stop him if he was determined.” Hood shrugged.

“He is a valiant, if misguided warrior.” Starfire declared.

“Still sore about when he lied to you, huh?” Red Arrow snorted.

“I am not bitter about the lie. I am bitter about how he announced the lie.” Starfire responded, “Are we ready to go?”

“When you are, Princess.” Red Arrow smiled.

“Hold on boys.”

They grabbed her arms only moments before she took off. Red Arrow with his other hand firmly holding his hat in place.

“So why this place, O?” Hood pressed, even as the world blurred beneath him.

“Within the radius. And I checked Christina’s Facebook.”

“Do not tell me she’s posting on Facebook.” Hood manfully resisted the urge to facepalm.

“No. Though that would be helpful. I remembered that she got her last lair location from a post on Facebook. And figured she might repeat the tactic. The cabin you’re headed to is currently rented for the next two weeks by a family from Chicago. However the fourteen year old son managed to moan and whine and complain enough about the lack of wifi and anything to do that they’ve booked into an all exclusive hotel resort not too far away. The son was crowing about it online.”

“And Tina found his post?”

“She found his post. This country needs to seriously educate people about Internet Security. Some people make my job way too easy.”
All in all the rescue was a bit of a disappointment for Hood.

Abe was so nervous and jumpy he actually managed to shoot himself in the backside! And how he managed that was a mystery for the ages.

Gabriel was slobbed in front of the television not even armed. Red Arrow had him restrained before he even knew they were there.

“Oh thank god you’re here!” Tina simpered, “I’ve been so scared! They were going to kill me.”

“Seriously?” Red Arrow looked over at Starfire, “Seriously?”

“I don’t know what they’ve done to Tim.” Tina continued, “They kept us separated. He… He might be… He might be dead.”

Her voice shook, just a few degrees shy of sounding almost hysterical.

“I can’t take this.” Red Arrow sighed.

Starfire knocked her out.

“How has she become such a threat with such terrible acting skills?” Starfire asked.

“I think she’s better when she’s not improvising.” Hood snorted, “Tie her up. I’ll go find Timmy.”

The basement wasn’t hard to find and Jason crept down the stairs. He didn’t bother turning the light on. Instead just looking around with his helmet’s night vision activated.

When he saw Tim, he moved quickly to the smaller boy’s side.

He was curled up as much as he could with hands trapped behind his back. Violent shivering
wracking his body. Hood could just about make out sounds, trapped behind the tape.

Hood’s helmet hit the floor with a clatter as he moved closer to his brother. The tape was peeled away from lips and the zip-tie cut away.

“I comma square bracket…” Tim murmured.

“Hey, Timmy.” Jason manhandled him upright, “Hey… Talk to me.”

Even with his gloved hands Jason could feel the heat pouring off Tim.

“Tim.” Jason focused on his brother, “Tim, where are you? Where are you?”

Unfocused and glassy eyes failed to stay on Jason’s face, despite the hand forcing Tim’s head to aim in the right direction.

“I got you. I got you.” Jason lowered his forehead to butt against Tim’s. He felt the stickiness of sweat as he pulled away from the bizarrely cold skin.

A slow pulse beat beneath Jason’s fingers, where he rested them on Tim’s exposed neck.

Most of Tim’s clothes were damp, but not just where he had sweat them through. The dampness was in places it wouldn’t have been from sweat alone.

“Hood.” O’s voice came through the comms, jolting him out of his examination, “Status? Have you found Tim?”

“Starfire!” Jason ignored her, “I need you.”

“Yes?” Kori was at Jason’s side in an instant, “He’s… He’s not looking good.”

“Get him to a hospital.” Jason snapped, “Come back for us.”

“Is it even safe to move him?”

“It’s certainly not safe to wait for EMTs, Kori. Get him out of here. Get him help.”

“I don’t know where any of the hospitals are around here.”
“Do you know where there is a hospital?”
“Yes. But he’s not going to like it.”
“Gives him a better chance to stay alive. I don’t care if he likes it or not. Take him and go.”
“When he gets angry and leaves it’s on you.” Kori scooped Tim up and held him close.
“When he’s fit enough to do that, I’ll be happy.” Jason retorted, “Go.”

She nodded and flew away, leaving Jason watching her disappearing wake.

“How is he?” Roy’s hand sat lightly on Jason’s shoulder.
“Not good. Feverish. Hallucinating, I think… Sepsis, probably.”
“Hey,” Roy’s grip tightened slightly, “He’s a tough one. Had to be to survive you. He’ll be okay.”
“I just… I really want to go up there and belt her one.”
“Go ahead.” Roy shrugged, “I won’t stop you.”
“I know… But Tim wouldn’t like it.”
“Do you really care?”
“No… But I think that Tim has the right to decide how she gets punished. So I won’t do anything until he can tell me what he wants done… ‘Sides it’s not like they can lock her where I can’t get at her.”

“Hood!” O’s voice snapped, “What is going on? Do I need to brace anyone for anything?”
“He’s alive.” Hood tapped his comm-unit, “Sick. On his way to hospital. Everyone else accounted for and restrained.”
“I’ll alert the local police. Make sure you’re gone by the time they arrive.”
“Understood.”

Jason turned the comm off.

“You okay?” Roy asked gently.
“Not really. But I don’t want them to have a chance of getting away.”
“Hey, we’re stuck here till Kori comes back for us. How about we hide nearby and watch?”
“We take photos.” Jason was firm, “Tim’ll want photos of them being arrested.”

“Didn’t know he horded trophies like that.”

“He doesn’t… But he used to be a creepy little stalker and took loads of photos. He’ll appreciate it… I think.”

“Why not? Not like we’ve got anything else to do right now.”

Kori found them hiding up a tree, and after a short discussion joined them as they waited for the police to arrive.

Jason got a number of shots of Tina being led out of the cabin in cuffs, protesting her innocence and that she was a victim of the whole thing.

“What odds do you give that they’ll believe her?” Roy asked.

“Unfortunately, fairly high.” Jason sighed.

“I didn’t find her very believable.” Kori frowned.

“I get the feeling she’s more believable when she’s not improvising on the spot.” Jason pointed out.

“Well, Timmy will be able to convict her.” Roy stated, “We’d best get you back to Gotham, before anyone realizes that you’re missing.”

Montoya was stretching her legs wandering the halls of Wayne Manor, when she came across Jason clambering in through a window.

“Alfred doesn’t like it when I smoke in the house.” Jason answered her raised eyebrow.

“So you go out the window?”

“I can get to the roof from here.”

“And you can’t from elsewhere.”

“Well, I can… It’s just on the other side of the house. This is easier… ‘Sides, no riskier than anything the Golden Boy gets up to if he’s left alone.”

“I’d protest, but from what little I’ve heard of Grayson, that sound about right. Former acrobat, right?”
“Circus kid. Big difference.” Jason shrugged.

He turned and walked away. Seemingly confident in the fact that Montoya wouldn’t call him out on his words.

And she didn’t. She simply watched him go.

She chewed on her lip for a moment. There was something in the way that Jason was moving that didn’t seem quite right… Something not normal for someone his age and background.

Something predatory.

The vibration of her phone forcibly pulled her from her thoughts. She nearly dropped it as she pulled it unceremoniously out of her pocket.

Her thumb went unerringly to dismiss the call. She had had far too many phone calls since the news of the kidnapping had broken. Every reporter she had ever interacted with seemed to be of the belief that she was the perfect source to get inside information. Even those who had only ever printed disparaging things about her or made her life more difficult.

The only thing that prevented her from completely losing it was the fact that she knew Allen and the FBI Agents were being equally inundated. She wasn’t alone in her suffering.

She glanced at the name before dismissing it. And froze.

This wasn’t the media.

“Mac,” She sighed, “What have you got?”

“We’ve got Drake!”

“Where? When? How long till SWAT moves in?”

“No need. Although we’ve got a protection detail in place. He got dropped off at the Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital.”

“Who by? Last I heard Wayne was still trying to get all the money together. He can’t have
managed it in the last few hours. Never mind sorting out a drop off.”

“Starfire. She rescued him. Dropped him off. Said something about how family shouldn’t be separated. No one’s really clear on the details. She didn’t even say who he was. Luckily we had his fingerprints flagged in the system.”

“Who else knows?”

“Just a few of us at the precinct. We’re keeping this on the downlow. Figured you could get the message through quicker than we can.”

“On it. How long till security gets to him?”

“The NYPD has sent officers there already. He’s secure… But the doctors need authorisation to do anything more than just keep him alive.”

Montoya was already halfway down the stairs. If it wasn’t for the fact that she wasn’t sure how safe it was, she would have been sliding down the banisters.

She burst unceremoniously into the study, jerking Wayne out of his half-doze, and causing half the FBI Agents to draw their weapons.

“Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital.” She announced, “Drake’s there.”

“He’s safe?” Wayne fixed his gaze on her.

“He’s alive.” She countered, “But the doctors need authorisation.”

“Which State?”

“New York.”

“Alfred!” Wayne was out of the room and striding down the hall at a ridiculously fast pace, given that he wasn’t actually running, “Get a car ready. We need to get to New York, now! Dick, you have the house. I’m going to get Tim!”

“I’m coming with you!”

“No. You are not. I need you here to look after the others. To man the phone, just in case. Just because Tim is in New York, doesn’t mean that his kidnappers know that. He could have escaped and they could be trying to bluff us.”

“But… Tim…”

“I need you here, Dick. As soon as I can, I’ll bring Tim home. I promise. But I need you here right now. Tim needs you here.”

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so I ended up spending *major* amounts of time researching parts of this chapter and the next...

Scarily one of the things I ended up researching came up at work... As in I had to pass a test on it. So now I know *way* more that I ever anticipated learning when I started researching the subject.

Update: I seem to have missed the fact that the Morgan-Stanley's Children's Hospital doesn't have visiting hours in all my research. Mea Culpa. My only excuse is that every hospital in my family's experience does. I simply assumed it was universal. I made an ASS out of U and Me. It's not really a plot point and I used the hospital, because where possible, I like using real places in my stories. I feel it adds a touch of realism. I picked the hospital, because it's in New York, where Starfire resided at one point, and so it could reasonably be assumed that she knew about it.
Bruce was like a whirlwind as he entered the hospital. Demanding to see Tim. Demanding to talk to the doctors. Demanding security. Demanding things left, right and centre.

“Mister Wayne, your son is an emancipated minor. You do not have any authority over his care.”

“I am his father. And he is not conscious to make any medical decisions. Do you have any record of a HCP?”

“No.”

“Exactly. That makes me his automatic proxy in situations like this. And I want him safe and well. So give me whatever documents need signing. Tell me whatever information I need to have to make the necessary decisions.”

“You don’t share the same name.”

“He’s adopted. The name is his choice. I am not going to impose it on him. It doesn’t matter. He. Is. My. Son. And I will see him now.”

What was the most intimidating thing about it, was that he never raised his voice above speaking volume. There was no shouting. No yelling. No screaming. Just firm, clear words.

It was hardly surprising, even to Montoya (who had somehow managed to tag along on this trip) that the hospital staff just gave in.

Tim was lying surrounded by equipment and hooked up to multiple drips; one of which was most certainly blood. Pale, shallow skinned and looking very small and frail on the bed. The persistent noise of the ventilator seeming loud in the relative silence of the small, private room; it sounded in counterpoint to the heartrate monitor.

Bruce sank down next to Tim’s head. One hand going unhesitantly to Tim’s hair, burying fingers into the still wet mass.

“He’s definitely a fighter.” A doctor remarked, “I’m amazed he survived as long as reported without treatment. However, I am starting to believe that the toll was greater than initially estimated. He is not recovering as quickly as he should be.”

“Have you taken into account his asplenia?”

“He has asplenia? I wasn’t aware. Although that does explain why his immune system isn’t responding as quickly to treatment. I’ll increase the antibiotic dosage. However you need to understand he is recovering from sepsis. This will not be an easy or a short recovery.”

“I don’t care how long it takes.” Bruce breathed, “He’s here. He’s alive. That’s the important thing.”

“He should be taken off the ventilator within the next day, but we’ll be continuing him on oxygen, until his levels are more stable. He was exceptionally close to Septic Shock. Although, he was lucky in that his kidney function doesn’t seem to have been compromised. Nor does it look like he’ll need surgery to remove any infected tissue. We managed to remove most of the worst via debridement of his back. However he will have some pretty horrific scaring on that area. You might wish to consider cosmetic surgery in the future, although I would not advise it at present. His body needs to deal with only one thing at a time.”

“How long until he can move back to the Manor?”

“Mister Wayne, I don’t think you understand. He is a very ill boy. He won’t be leaving the hospital for at least a week. Taking into account his compromised immune system I would be expecting that to be doubled.”

“No doctor, you do not understand. Tim has been kidnapped twice in the last two months. Both times from locations I deemed secure and safe. I refuse to put my son in more danger by leaving him exposed.”

“We have the very best security. He will be safe here.”

“And I fear that opportunistic kidnappers might go through the hospital to get to him. Taking out anyone in their way. Tim would never forgive me for putting other people at risk. He needs to come home as quickly as possible. I can provide whatever medical equipment and staff he needs.”

“He needs to stay here.”

“Doctor, once he is stable I will be taking him back to Gotham. For security reasons. I trust my security system a lot more than I trust yours. I can hire doctors and nurses. Provide equipment. But I cannot increase your security system to the level sufficient to protect my son. Not without seriously impeding the running of this hospital. Tim would never forgive me if other people suffered because of someone targeting him. He has always had a self-sacrificing nature. I won’t let it destroy him, if I can at all help it.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I will sign him out AMA.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Without a stated Medical Proxy, I am the only person who can. As long as he is unconscious, mine are the decisions that matter. And I am doing what is best for him. He would
never relax in a hospital setting. He would be too worried about someone targeting him… Or rather about them causing casualties in targeting him.”

“Even at the cost to his own health, and possibly his life?”

“Yes. So how long are we talking about? Because I have to balance his physical and mental health. You’ll also prefer it being me that signs him out AMA, because I will at least make sure he continues healthcare treatment. I can’t guarantee that Tim would remember to do so.”

“Everyone has self-preservation instincts.”

“Doctor, you obviously don’t know Gotham all that well. Those of us born and raised there, often have skewed self-preservation instincts. Tim is all too fiercely protective of other people. To his own detriment at times. A fact I have sometimes forgotten to Tim’s cost. So no, I wouldn’t say that Tim’s self-preservation instincts are in your favour. How long until Tim is stable enough to move? Or do I need to find a doctor who will actually give me an answer?”

“You can’t do this.”

“I can and I will. How long?”

There was steel in Bruce’s tone. Fire in his eyes. The doctor hadn’t been expecting such strength in the man, commonly dismissed as a fop.

“He needs to be here for at least a week.” He tried.

“Forty-eight hours.” Bruce countered.

“We ca… We can’t do that! It’ll kill him.”

“That’s how long it’ll take me to get a hospital grade area set up at home. To keep Tim safe and healthy.”

“And if he dies because of you?”

“He only needs to be stable for the flight. That’s under an hour all told.”

“You mean over an hour, as you have to account for travel time to and from the airport. So say nothing of checking in time!”

“Private flight.” Bruce countered immediately, “Can you do it? Or do I need to find someone else?”

“There’s no one better in this hospital. I can give him the best shot possible at surviving your crazy plan. But it’ll be useless if he doesn’t have sufficient care at the other end.”

“I will make the necessary arrangements, Master Bruce.” Alfred’s voice was steady and calm, almost as if he had just been asked to chill a bottle of wine for dinner.

“Thank you, Alfred.” Bruce smiled, “Hey Timmy, we’ve got your back. You’re okay. It’s going to be okay. You’re safe. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”
It was whispered, like some kind of prayer. A strange kind of brokenness in the tone, Montoya thought. Was he holding back tears?

And if so what kind? Tears of relief? Tears of joy? Tears of grief? Tears of pity?

Montoya wasn’t sure which one she wanted it to be.

Dick could hardly contain himself as he waited for Bruce and Tim to arrive. He knew their scheduled arrival down to the minute (if not the second), and yet had been waiting around for over four hours.

“Dickie,” Jason sighed, from his position on the stairs, “Sit down. Ya making me tired with all your bounding around.”

“Timmy’s coming home!” Dick crowed.

Jason facepalmed. He’d already been interrogated five times over by Dick about Tim’s injuries and health status. Very few questions of which he had been able to answer, given that he hadn’t seen any blood or undesired holes in the teenager.

“Tt,” Damian sniffed, “At the present moment you are more likely to cause him more harm with all of your idiotic bouncing.”

Jason privately thought it would be Dick’s words that would cause the most harm. Dick could be exceptionally gentle when he needed to be… When he wanted to be.

“Look, it’s simple, Little D. Timmy comes home and we show him that he can trust us. Then everything will be better again.”

“How?” Jason’s tone was flat.

“We’ll all be a family again. Together. As we always should have been.”

“No. I meant how will we show him that he can trust us? ‘Cause way I see it, we ain’t been
“We brought him home.”

“Our home. He doesn’t feel he belongs here.”

“We’ll teach him differently. We’ll teach him right.”

“I don’t know. I only see this going bad for us. He’ll be trapped somewhere he doesn’t want to be. With people he doesn’t want to be with. I don’t think there’s a way where we win here.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Grayson, while you may be accustomed to viewing the world through your rose-coloured glasses, the rest of us do not have your sunny disposition. I concur with Todd. Drake will not be happy with this situation. I do not anticipate him forgiving us for our negligence. Indeed, I am not certain that he will even blame us.”

“That’s a good thing!”

“No. It is not. I am of the belief that he does not blame us, because he believes that we never truly cared about him in the first place. He believes it is his fault for trusting us in the first place. The first time that I met him, he offered me his hand in friendship. He called me brother. I was the one who rejected the offer. I was the one who tried to kill him, before I realized how vital a role he played in keeping Father alive all those years before I arrived and the many times since. Drake deems himself to be nothing more than a useful tool to us. I do not believe that he will be easy to sway from this credence.”

“He don’t trust us. And he ain’t gonna just magically trust us, because he’s trapped here.”

“He won’t be trapped for long. I looked it up. He’ll be sepsis free in about two weeks. Then we can go out and about and learn to trust each other again. It’ll be great!”

Dick went bounding off to another part of the mansion.

“This is going to end badly.”

“You said it, brat.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'll confess that I'm not sure if much of what happens in the hospital could happen in real life. But judging that Tim was emancipated without any accusations levelled at Bruce's conduct, I believe I haven't strayed too far from reality.

If I'm wrong, sorry. But I needed this for the story, so live with it.
“Dick, we need to talk.” Bruce spoke firmly, looking at the way Dick was arranging things around the unconscious Tim.

“How?” Dick didn’t even turn around, “We won. Tim’s home. Everything is going to be okay.”

“Once Tim is awake, you’re going to have to give him space.” Bruce announced, “That means leaving him completely alone, unless he asks for you.”

“What? No! I can’t get him to love us otherwise.”

“Love you.” Bruce corrected, “Dick, you have always had a desire to be loved. To be liked. You like to be liked. You want to be liked. You need to be liked. It is part of the reason that you have remained on such good terms with all your former partners.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Not usually… But Tim… Tim likes to be useful. He needs it. And he’s more than willing to sacrifice himself for it.”

“He can’t sacrifice himself for this.”

“No. But he can deceive you. He can make you think that he’s forgiven you. That everything is okay. That it’s all back to how it used to be. And he doesn’t need that right now. He needs to focus on healing.”

“But Sepsis isn’t all that bad. I mean, once it’s caught… I looked it up. Hospital stays aren’t all that long.”

“True. But the recovery period after that… Dick, Tim will be lucky if he goes out in the field in the next year. He’s looking at potential chronic pain, fatigue, recurrent illnesses, mental issues… This isn’t something to just dismiss as a bump in the road. Tim doesn’t need our concerns interfering with his recovery. We have to put Tim first. That means we give him space. We let his friends visit, whenever they need to. We put absolutely no pressure on him to commit to anything.”

“But…”

“Dick,” Bruce rested both hands on his eldest’s shoulders, “There will be time later to change how Tim views us. This will help.”

“How? Are you just going to keep away as well? Let him believe that he’s no more than a lodger in his own home?”

“Yes and no. I am going to be there when he wakes up. And once he is aware of where he is and what the situation is, I am going to explain to him that I love him. That we love him. But that we need to earn back his trust. So we are giving him space, because he is not yet ready for us to force our way into his space. And that we will not seek him out, until he is either fit and healthy or asks us to.”

“Why? It won’t help.”
“It will. Because it will show Tim that we respect his space. That we aren’t going to force anything… Dick, if you try it your way you will shatter it into a million pieces. If we do it my way… Worst case scenario is that we take a few steps backwards.”

“You going to tell Jay and Dami the same thing?”

“I am going to make it clear to them what we are doing. They have a different situation… We broke Tim’s trust… We broke him. By our actions and our inactions. They never had any trust to break. They started in a different position. They have managed to build a relationship. I won’t say that Tim trusts them. But currently I don’t think he distrusts them. Which means they might be invited in much earlier than we will. We have to let them go. We have to make sure that it is clear that Tim is the priority. Whatever he asks for he gets, within reason… I am not getting him an elephant, Dickie.”

Dick tried to pull out the big puppy-dog eyes he’d used a lot in his early Robin years, but had long since retired for his sultry gaze.

“Dick… You haven’t been able to pull that off since you discovered Batgirl.”

“It was worth a try… You really think this’ll work?”

Dick’s voice was small and tentative, in a way it hadn’t been for years.

“I think this is our only option. We have to do what is best for Tim. No matter how much it hurts us. I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I really screwed up, didn’t I Bruce?… I… I really thought you were gone… I only had the time… The strength to care for one of them… I thought Dami needed me more than Tim.”

“But Tim still deserved your time. Time to explain to him exactly why you were making the decisions you were making.”

“You never explained.”

“And how many times did I hurt you that way? Yes, I rarely explained. But I always hoped you would manage to avoid my mistakes… I am not a good role model, Dick. But you’ve known that for some time. Speak the truth. Don’t hide from it anymore.”

“It was… It was easier. Dami’s anger was easier to deal with than Tim’s grief… Then it was easier than Tim’s denial. I just… Anger I understood. Denial? I didn’t know how to help with that.”

“Damian would probably be insulted that he was deemed the easier issue than Tim.” Bruce badly hid a snort of laughter, “You need to lay aside your guilt for that.”

“But I did wrong by him.”

“And do you want to apologise for him or for you? Because I’m the same. I should have
treated him better. I should have done better by him. But I didn’t. So I need to apologise… The important thing is that he doesn’t feel obligated to forgive me.”

“Forgive us.”

“Forgive us… I think I might need to go to Confession.”

“You’re not Catholic… You’re barely Christian.”

“But it does wonders to purge your sins to someone who will listen.”

“I thought that was what a psychiatrist was for.”

“I trust the Sanctity of a Confessional more than I trust a psychiatrist’s confidentiality… And I can visit a Priest as Batman.”

“You would.”

“Forgive us.”

“How serious is it?” Jason’s voice crept to Bruce’s ears from a dark corner of the corridor.

“Not as bad as it could be.”

“That still leaves a lot of leeway.”

“You got him out in time. It’s serious, but survivable.”

“How’d you manage to get him here so quickly?”

“I’m his father.”

“He’s emancipated.”

“He forgot to get a POA assigned.”

“Forgot my ass! He probably thought that if he got fucked up this badly he’d be dead and it wouldn’t matter!”

“No. I think it was more that he had things to do. More important things in his mind. Tim wouldn’t forget seeing his father in that hospital bed fighting for life, waiting for months for him to regain consciousness.”

“I… No, Tim never expected to survive. He’s kept moving from one situation to another. I’m surprised he’s not burnt out yet.”

“Right now, that doesn’t matter. He’s here. He’s safe. He will get well.”

“And Dick will bounce all over him.”

“No. I’ve made that clear. The only people with unlimited access to that room is Alfred and whatever medical staff he’s managed to magic up. Everyone else… Tim has to invite. He makes the decision. We put the power back into his hands.”

“You could have left him in the hospital. It would have been better. Kept the distance
between him and us. Give him the space needed to fix this.”

“No… That wasn’t an option. It was too…”

“Too what B?”

“Too risky. Oracle found some more information after you left.”

“What sort of information, Father?” Damian’s voice came from the staircase.

“Christina was intending on being paid twice for Tim. She had put his image up on a Dark Web Slave Auction site… Only she was stupid enough not to take anywhere near the necessary precautions. She doesn’t know how to access it and not be tracked.”

“Grandfather found her location.” Damian came to the obvious conclusion, “An enemy weakened and virtually packaged for transport. He would have not allowed her to live.”

“I almost wish he had gotten his hands on her.” Jason snarled, “I know the kind of fucked-up punishment that Ra’s would have subjected her to. She fucking deserves it!”

“Ra’s wouldn’t be put off by Tim being in a hospital… Tim needs to be somewhere safe. This was the best I could come up with, given that the police will want to question him.”

“Grandfather would order the death of every single person in the hospital to gain control of Drake if that was what it took.” Damian announced calmly, “Your decision was sound, Father.”

“I seem to be constantly asking Tim to sacrifice things… Expecting him to. Sacrificing liberty for security.”

“You’re going ta have to talk fast to get Tim to understand your logic.”

“I owe him quite a few explanations… And apologies. I want to make one thing clear to both of you… Tim can choose to invite you into his room, or he can choose not to. If he asks you to leave, you leave. You don’t protest his friends visiting. You don’t argue about whether he has the right to have them here. And I will hear no comments about him being a layabout or a waste of space, Damian. He has quite enough to overcome, without us mixing in our issues.”

“How long do you think he’ll be off the field for?” Jason queried.

“At least a year at this point. Maybe longer. Sepsis isn’t something you just shake off. This is serious and potentially fatal. Jason, you made the right decision in letting Kori take him to hospital. If he hadn’t gotten there as quickly as he did… It could potentially have been fatal.”

“He didn’t have a temperature.”

“Unfortunately, a misconception of sepsis. It doesn’t always present with a fever. You did the right thing. No matter how hard it must have been for you.”

“I… I didn’t know… I didn’t know if I’d see him again.”

Bruce moved to Jason’s side, and pulled him into a gentle hug.
“I know. It was hard to let the medics look after him in the hospital. I kept thinking that they don’t know him as well as I do. That they couldn’t take care of him as well as I could. But I knew they were the best option for him. So I had to let them do their job.”

“Being here isn’t going to help his stress levels.”

“I already have a plan for that. It will also partially help with his pain levels and with the touch-starvation I believe he has long since had.”

“Always have a plan, huh B?”

“Always… Just not always the best one.”

“Trust Tim to get it from you.”

“Oh no, Jay-lad, Tim had it long before he came to us… He had a lot of the issues I developed before he came to us… Before I let him sacrifice himself to my cause… Before I took a kid who just wanted a family, gave him everything he wanted and then took it all away.”

“Hey,” Jason smiled slightly, “I got your back, Boss. He’s letting me and the Demon-brat in. We’ll get there… It’s just going to take time and patience. Dickie-bird, you just gotta think of it like a long undercover gig or stakeout.”

“How’d you know I was listening?” Dick’s voice floated down from the ceiling.

“It’s you.”
Returning to consciousness after a long period out of it, always felt like swimming upwards through treacle (and yes he did know what that felt like, blame the Riddler for that one).

Snatches of words… Of phrases… Of sentences were drifting through his mind.

“Take it easy, Tim…”

“… Boss, you’re…”

“… You mean?”

“…… Messa…” Was that…?

“… Safe…”

“… time, Tim.”

“Sorry about the mess.”

Okay, someone was definitively watching Star Wars.

Tim opened his bleary eyes.

“Hey, welcome back.” Kon’s face grinned at him.

“Kon?” Tim blinked, trying to get sleep out of his eyes. His voice was raw and croaky, causing sparks of pain through his throat.

“Hold-on-I-got-it!”

A face wipe appeared in Bart’s hand, offered out gently.

“Thanks.” Tim croaked again.

His movements were a little uncoordinated, and certainly hampered by the drips in his arms, but his two best friends didn’t offer to help.
They knew Tim wouldn’t appreciate it. He always preferred sorting himself out where at all possible. Even such a little thing would mean a great deal to Tim at the moment.

“Drink?” Kon held up a much with a straw poking out the top of it.

“Yes.” Tim nodded.

Kon switched out the mug for the wipe and let Tim get comfortable.

With the soothing water trickling down his throat, Tim glanced around his location. He hadn’t done so before, because he trusted Kon and Bart. He knew that if he wasn’t operating at his best, they wouldn’t be so relaxed and calm in a dangerous situation.

They trusted him. And he trusted them.

The room he quickly recognised. The layout hadn’t changed a great deal since he had left it behind to find Bruce… When he had removed the last of his belongings from it not long after Bruce had returned.

But there were differences.

Where there should have been the generic curtains he had carefully returned to their rightful place, the Starry Night swirled in its place.

The empty bookcase was partially refilled; and while Tim wasn’t close enough to read the spines, he could catch a glimpse of a cover to identify a few books as ones that he knew well and enjoyed a great deal.

A replica of the Slayer Scythe was displayed prominently on one wall. While on another was an enlargement of one of his photographs; a panoramic sky-view of Gotham. Taken from the top of Wayne Tower, if Tim remembered correctly. Part of a series; a number he’d taken after the Cataclysm during No Man’s Land and beyond.

But he’d never enlarged it. Never framed it. So someone else must have done so.
This is certainly the room he left in the Manor. But clearly designated for him. He had expected it to become a spare room. Left empty for another Robin in some future time.

The fact that it wasn’t… That didn’t feel right. It was out of left field.

The medical equipment was expected, he knew that he wouldn’t be outside of a hospital without some sort of medical care. The oxygen canula up his nose was annoying, but too much fuss to remove. The IV lines were even more annoying, but they were probably still needed at this point; so he’d leave them until he knew that they weren’t.

“Why are you here?” Tim managed to get out after a few moments of drinking.

“You-were-injured-dude-do-you-really-thing-we-wouldn’t-be-worried?” Bart blurted out at rapid pace.

“Slow down,” Kon playfully slapped Bart’s shoulder, “We’re here, because the Bats didn’t try to stop us. Thought you might prefer to see us when you woke up than them.”

Tim smiled, and then had to stifle a yawn.

“Easy,” Bart smiled, “You’re no-where near well.”

“You were rescued four days ago. Transferred here one and a half days ago.” Kon got the important details out, “Christina and her merry band of villains have been arrested. She’s playing the innocent victim card to the hilt. But Abe threw her under the bus. Currently it’s just “He said; She said”, with Eric and Gabriel backing different stories. So the FBI will want to interview you once the docs say you’re up for it.”

“What about Eric?”

“He’s talking. And talking a lot. His mom’s already been arrested. She’s looking at a stint in prison. At the very least she’s off all the boards of the Smallville community groups she’s part of.”

“Good. Tina still in jail?”

“Don’t know.” Bart shrugged, “Been more focused on keeping you alive.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“Dude,” Kon looked at him, “You could have died.”

“But I didn’t.”
“The-Outsiders-had-to-pull-you-out!” Bart blurted.

“I didn’t I didn’t get to watch it.” Tim faux complained.

“Tim.” Kon was firm, “Please… We were worried. I didn’t know that Christina was so dangerous… I didn’t know Eric…”

“Wasn’t?” Tim cocked an eyebrow, “I had a plan.”

“Ye-ah,” Kon wavered, “That really doesn’t comfort me.”

“Or me.” Bart put in.

Tim screwed up his eyes and swiped a hand across his eyes. Breathing out deeply as he did so.

“Go to sleep.” Kon smiled at him.

“I only just woke up.”

“Dude-you’ve-been-badly-injured-you-need-to-sleep-a-lot-to-get-better.”

“I’m fine.”

“Sleep.” Kon pushed Tim’s shoulder back down into the mattress gently.

“I don’t need…”

“Sleep.” Bart nodded, agreeing with Kon; pulling the quilt up to tuck Tim in.

Despite Tim’s protests it only took him a few moments to fall asleep.

123456789

The next time Tim woke up, there was a different figure by his bedside.

Tim barely even needed to open his eyes to know who it was. The weight of the brooding was palpable in the air.

“Bruce.” Tim spoke the name carefully, as he turned to face his former mentor.

Bruce didn’t respond verbally at first, instead there was a pained look on his face. He reached for a
mug of water and handed it to Tim, complete with a straw.

Tim took a few sips to wet his throat and settle his nerves slightly.

“What do you need?” Tim managed.

“For you to listen.” Bruce spoke softly.

Well, that was easy enough to do.

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

Tim blinked. Had he… Had he just heard that right?

“I’m sorry.” Bruce repeated, “I haven’t treated you right. I haven’t treated you the way you needed. I spent so much time analysing my mistakes with Dick and Jason after… After Jason’s… After Ethiopia… I worked out everything I had done wrong… Then I tried to fix those mistakes with you. But I forgot that you weren’t them. That you didn’t have the same issues as them. That you didn’t need the same things as them. They were so similar that I forgot that everyone’s not the same. That I needed to look at what you needed. Not what I thought you needed.

“So I screwed up. I failed you. I gave you space you didn’t need. Focused on those who were making more noise. Instead of those who actually needed me. And you drifted away, believing yourself unwanted.

“That was never the case. I kept a distance between the two of us initially, because I knew you would be so easy for me to love. For me to take as one of my own… And I couldn’t steal you from another man… From parents, that I believed loved you, in their own way… I didn’t realize what the true picture was.

“I never realized what the true picture was. You kept secrets and I didn’t bother to look. Because I believed that you couldn’t keep secrets from me… Even when I found out that you had. I never once considered that you wouldn’t tell me what you needed. Because Dick, Jason and Damian will always do so. Loudly and repeatably.
“That is not your fault. It was never your fault. You told me what you needed, just in quiet ways. That I missed. We all missed. Because we weren’t listening.

“So I let you go off on your own. And you’re just a kid. I never should have let you go so far. I should have known the minute you got kidnapped the first time. I should have checked our equipment, so that when you called for help it got through. I should have kept a better eye on you. I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did when you went after Captain Boomerang. It just…

“It just reminded me so very much of a dark path I nearly followed myself. I very nearly killed the man who killed my parents. It was only because, like yourself, I realized it wouldn’t help that I stopped. I had the gun in my hands and everything. And after that, I went into a very dark place. This was long before I became Batman. It was what caused me to travel the world learning… I… I didn’t want you to end up in a dark place like that as well.

“Instead I caused to you go to another equally dark place. And I didn’t even realize. You were always… You have always been the good kid. The one I didn’t have to worry so much about. And I should have realized what that meant.

“I love you. I’ve loved you from before I put you on that plane to go to Paris. I loved you from the moment you looked me in the eye and asked if Robin would fight for Gotham. When you reminded me that Robin couldn’t die. Just like Batman couldn’t die. Only I didn’t show you that right. I didn’t tell you.

“Dick was easier. He knew how to read my body language, all my clumsy attempts at showing what I wasn’t comfortable saying… Jason had the advantage that I’d learned from Dick.

“With you… I’d locked my heart away. And I didn’t know how to unlock it to show you that I love you. I never have figured it out properly.

“So this is me telling you that.

“I love you.

“I have always loved you. You are my son. No matter what. No matter how far you go… No matter what you do… You will always have a place in this house… In this home… In my heart… As part of this family.
“But you aren’t ready for that. We screwed up so much that you don’t know that you can
trust us. And we deserve that.

“I want to fix it. To fix what I broke… Your trust… Your care… Your love…”

“But we can’t force it. So until you are capable of telling us to go away… To jump off a
building without a grapple… To leave the conversation… You will have your space. Neither Dick
nor I will come into this room, unless you invite us. Jason and Damian will leave when you tell
them, or I will know the reason why.

“Alfred has complete access, seeing as he’s the primary medical staff in this house. He has
control over the medical staff that will be taking care of you. I would have left you in the hospital if
it had been safe, because I know it is what you would have preferred. But it wasn’t. It isn’t. So I
brought you here, where you’re safe… At least from the threats of the outside. And I will keep you
safe from being harassed here.”

Tim blinked slowly. Licked his lips. Took a deep breath in. Opened his mouth. Closed it again. Let
the breath go.

“I…” He tried again.

“You don’t have to say anything.” Bruce had sunk down onto his knees, next to the bed so
that he was eye-level with Tim, “It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong… In fact you did
everything right. You did better than I could have ever expected of you. And I never told you
enough that I was and am so proud of you.

“And I know you aren’t ready to believe me right now. To trust me. And you won’t without
evidence. Because I know you. Words are cheap. Actions are the important thing. So get better.
Heal up. Give yourself the time you need. As soon as you are capable of being without medical
supervision and can move on your own, I won’t mind if you leave. I simply ask that you tell Alfred
when you do. And if you could tell him where you’re going it would make him feel a great deal
better. And me. Because while I won’t ask him where you are, until you’re out in the Field again, I
will sleep better knowing that someone at least knows where you are.

“But I will keep being there. I will be there for you until the day I die. No matter how far
you go. Or how long you go for. I will always love you. I will always be there for you. And I will
prove it to you, no matter how many times you need me to.

“I love you. And I’m proud of you. Don’t forget that.”
Bruce moved forward carefully and cautiously pulled Tim into a hug.

It wasn’t one of Dick’s octopus hugs. It wasn’t one of Jack’s backslapping, more for show than anything hugs. It wasn’t one of Janet’s just for the Press and the Public hugs, that had the minimal amount of touching involved without appearing wrong.

There was a hand buried in his hair, pulling him forward into Bruce’s shoulder. But a gentleness behind the strength.

Another arm was wrapped around his torso, keeping him upright. Yet low enough not to aggravate any wounds.

Tim’s arms twitched upwards, before he exerted his iron-will so that they stayed down. His back muscles tensed and then forcibly relaxed.

Bruce could feel the play of muscles under his arms.

Tim felt dampness land in his hair and roll down his skin.

He managed to pull back a little, just enough to see tears rolling silently down Bruce’s cheeks from tightly closed eyes.

After a long moment, when Tim had just about managed to relax underneath the all encompassing embrace, Bruce released him.

A brief kiss was pressed to his forehead, so quickly that Tim was confused as to whether it was a fantasy or reality.

“I do love you.” Bruce repeated from the doorway, “No matter what.”

Tim was left staring at a closed door, trying to fit everything that had just happened into his world.
And the pieces didn’t fit… Didn’t even come close.
“God, Alfred.” Bruce sank into a chair in the kitchen, “It’s worse than I thought. Worse than I expected. Worse than I feared!”

His arms were folded on the table, head buried in the nest they created for him.

“Chin up, Master Bruce. Nothing is unconquerable. Although, I am curious as to how bad it is that you are despairing so.”

“He’s touch-starved. Desperately so. He wants to be touched. Wants skin on skin contact. But when he gets it, he doesn’t know what to do. He nearly used a nerve strike on me, before he got control of himself. It took him nearly five minutes to relax. I didn’t dare let him go before he relaxed… You never did.”

Bruce’s words were muffled, but Alfred had many, many years of practice in interpreting words muted, due to arms being in the way.

“No, I did not, Master Bruce. It is one of the rules with affection to children. Never end a hug, before they do. Although you have to be careful. Some people are not comfortable with such actions. It is a very fine line.”

“He was shocked that I would touch him. The shock on his face when I apologized… Alfred, I don’t remember the last time I apologized to him… Or even told him that I’m proud of him… Never mind that I love him.”

“Master Bruce, you have always been one to speak through your actions. Displaying your love through physical means. However, Master Tim watches with jaded eyes. Far more accustomed to words being lies and actions being meant to deceive. He is far harder to convince of true affection than many… He has been burned too many times to allow himself to burn again.”

“I won’t let him go. He’ll take a fibre out of my heart if he goes, Alfred. I need to fix this. I have to fix this!”

“I am sure you will, Master Bruce. However it will take time and patience. This is not a robbery for you to foil. It is a stakeout, of sorts.”

Bruce took a deep breath in. Raised his head slowly and deliberately. He met Alfred’s gaze steadily.
“Tim deserves no less than the care and attention I would give the worst of my cases. If anything my sons deserve more. And he is one of my sons... It is just... Staying away from him is going to hurt. But I promised to give him space until he heals.”

But the image kept haunting Bruce’s mind, of his son lying in his bed, small, pale and confused.

It was not one he wanted to see again...

And yet, he didn’t hadn’t wanted to leave him in the first place.

123456789

“Mister Drake,” Tim wasn’t really looking at the FBI Agents as they fussed around the room, “Could you please tell us about your kidnapping? About how you and Christina were treated?”

“Detective Montoya,” Tim sighed, “Are you merely here as a witness or as an active participant in this?”

“Technically I’m an observer. But what do you need?”

“Someone who will speak sense. What do you know? What do you want to know?”

“I know that you’ve been kidnapped and rescued for the second time this year. I know that you’ve been hurt. I know that you’ve nearly died. I know that there have been many claims that Christina Eddings is not an innocent victim, as she is claiming. But instead an active participant and even the coordinator of everything that happened. What I want to know is what happened to you. What I need to know is what you can tell me. What I need to know is whether the FBI should let Christina go, as they are inclined to do so. Or whether she should be detained like the local law enforcement people are insisting on... Apparently they hold a great deal of respect for Superheroes and will not release anyone arrested by one, until there is unequivocal evidence against them. Currently they are holding the whole lot on charges of trespass.”

“How dare you! You could be compromising our whole case!”

“Mister Drake is an intelligent young man. He is more than capable of finding out all of this information. And I would rather that he just cut to the chase. He is more than capable of talking around in circles. Tim, tell us what happened.”

Tim took a deep breath in, and then started talking. Unlike before, Tim refused to focus on anyone. His gaze was fixed on a point on the wall, past everyone.
But once again, he told his story with the same detached air as he had the last time. He talked without waiting for questions, telling the whole tale without letting a trace of emotion touch a single word.

Questions were asked, and were answered. And yet Tim barely reacted, except to answer the question.

“You’re saying that she raped you?” An FBI Agent snapped at Tim, “A beautiful, innocent girl? Why would she do a thing like that?”

“Because she could. Because she saw a benefit to herself… But no, she did not rape me. I made it not worth her while. I made it more dangerous to rape me than it was to simply kill me. I made a decision to ensure that I didn’t suffer anything more.”

“Men can’t get raped.”

“We can and we are. By women and by men. It’s just not deemed manly to talk about it. So no one does. I was not raped. But that does not invalidate those who were and are. Tina wants money and fame and power. I was simply a tool to get what she wanted. When I was no longer useful I would die. She is not innocent. She is not sweet. She might be beautiful on the outside, but she’s rotten inside.”

“I think you’re lying. You’re showing no emotion. This is just a story for you to tell.”

“Will tears convince you? Will it help if I am so overcome with emotion that I can’t talk? I am a product of my upbringing. My mother never approved of displaying emotions openly. I learned from an early age not to show what I was feeling. When I am feeling particularly under pressure I revert to my early teachings. This is not a lack of emotion. This is so much emotion I cannot cope being in public with it.”

“You’re not in public.”

“You are neither my friends nor my family. This is public.”

“Agents,” Montoya put in, “Tim has answered all questions. He has given evidence for every accusation of his. He has given reasons for every piece of information he managed to get to us while captive. Everything lines up. I’m more inclined to believe him than Christina. She plays a very good act. But I’ve seen evil acting as good before. You can’t go very far in Gotham PD without learning that. Evil can wear a very pretty face. The world isn’t made up of Two-Faces. There are more than a few Poison Ivies.

“Besides, Tim is still ill. I rather believe that his doctor would prefer us not to disrupt his healing process.”

“One final question.” Agent Lukić leaned forward, “How did you know that Christina Eddings was behind everything, before she revealed herself?”

“She never tried to hide it. I upset her from the first day we met. I didn’t fawn at her feet. I didn’t play her game. I don’t play other people’s games, unless I have to. That means I play the
games of businessmen and politicians. The games of children and amateurs are not things that I play. She is very good at playing games. However she was and is very much out of her league.”

“She nearly killed you.”

“And she would have gotten herself killed if she’d continued playing in the adult pool the way she was. Even if I died, I had done enough to sabotage her true plan. And therefore I won. Even if I died.”

“I think you might need some therapy.” Montoya sighed.

“You know the risks of that.” Tim reminded.

“Yes.” Montoya breathed softly, “I didn’t realize you knew.”

“I’m not blind to what my name and history mean. The Media would love to see a chink in my armour. Refusing to display my emotions simply denies them a story. Then they leave me alone.”

“Agents, Detective Montoya,” Alfred opened the door, “It is time for Master Tim’s medication. In addition he is still healing, and requires rest. I presume you have successfully gathered all the information that you require and thus will not be disturbing him again?”

Montoya managed to control her snort of amusement as the Englishman chivvied them all out of the room.

She knew that until the time came to prepare for the trial, it was unlikely that they would be able to gain access to Tim again.

123456789

“Well!” Jason announced as he entered the room with a laptop slung under an arm, “You awake?”

“If I wasn’t before, I am now.” Tim sighed, shuffling his body into a more upright position, careful not to dislodge anything.

Jason’s eyes flickered to the IV drips that still remained, noticing the copious amount of tape being used to keep the things in place. Clearly Tim had already dislodged some of them previously.

“What do you need?” Tim continued.
“I thought you might want an update on the whole Dancer and Helio thing.” Jason hopped onto the edge of the bed, positioning the laptop with surprising care on Tim’s legs, “I know I would in your position.”

Tim blinked. Then blinked again, only slower. He was crossed his arms, as he watched Jason open the laptop. His eyes fixed on Jason’s hands, alert to their every movement.

Jason made his actions slow and deliberate. Nothing hidden. Nothing untoward. Just simple actions. The set of glacial blue eyes seemed to freeze the skin they were transfixed by. Jason could almost feel the cold seeping into his bones and flexed his fingers slightly to try to warm them again.

Jason settled back on the bed, leaning against the headboard. He kicked his legs up to lie next to Tim. He didn’t fail to notice the flinch from Tim. Trust was going to be a hard thing to win back, he knew.

“We were focusing on finding you.” Jason carried on, “So we asked Babs to run with it. Of course her birds were all over it.”

“How far did the police get?”

“They managed to get a record of a credit card payment to a hotel. Which is odd given that he was a local. But given what Helio and Dancer do to survive… Well, he wouldn’t be the first to use a hotel room. Not uncommon for upper class people. Too good for back alleys. But neither Helio or Dancer would go to that kind of area. Too far from their street. They’d go for the low-cost motels that rent by the hour. Not a place that charges by the night.”

Tim’s eyes focused on the laptop, seeing all the reports gathered so far. Both those the GCPD had put together and those the Birds of Prey had written.

Jason watched as Tim’s fingers flew over the keyboard, dashing through the reports. Jason could almost see the connections and links being formed in the kid’s mind at a speed that he was envious of.

Okay, so there wasn’t actually much research done so far. The Birds had done what they could, but Oracle had been slightly distracted by making sure that the FBI found all the information about Tina needed for a swift and strong conviction.

But Tim was spending far too long just to look over the files.
“Dinah and Helena are going to break into the hotel tonight?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure why. I haven’t read the files yet. And you went too fast for me.”

“It’s a brothel.” Tim replied absently, “Probably being run or at least enforced by Phobos. The girls are most likely part of the stable. I don’t know where they’re being kept during their down time, because I doubt it’s in the various rooms.”

“How did you…? I didn’t even…”

“They haven’t actually stated it in their reports. But I can see which way it’s heading here. Plus it makes sense given the other factors and the way the evidence is piling up.”

“There isn’t much evidence.”

“There’s enough. Dancer’s fingerprint had to get there somehow. And if she was using it as a call for help… A desperate SOS… Then somehow she had access to him… Add in the other details, and yeah, it makes sense. She’s using the print as her own Summoning Dark.”

“A marker that she was there.”

“Yeah, I scrawled that thing on anything I could find. It’s on the car trunk lid.”

Jason carefully stored that tit-bit of information, even as he started to read the information that Tim had brought up on the screen.

“You sure it’s Phobos owning this place?” Jason asked, “Only I’m seeing a lot of shell corporations for an enforcer.”

“He’s involved.” Tim stated firmly, “I’m firmly of the belief that he wouldn’t allow anyone to copy his tattoo. And he’d be rather useful in this situation. Keeping the girls too scared to try anything. Dancer was very brave just leaving a marker behind…… Phobos… He likes being intimidating… Likes scaring people.”

“How much did you give him?”

“A fair bit more than he deserved… But a lot less than he wanted.”

“Do you think he’ll be there?”

“I think if he is, he’ll manage to slip away. And I doubt he will in the first place. He doesn’t need to be.”

“Doesn’t need to be?”

“You don’t use a rocket-launcher to swat a fly. He’s only needed for the initial intimidation and when the girls step out of line. I also think there’ll be other places.”

“Others?”
“You don’t put all your eggs in one basket… You don’t have all your kinks in the same place. There’ll be at least one other location. Possibly two.”

“Why?”

“Because some of the Johns will be interested in males.” Tim’s voice was calm and steady.

Jason froze for a moment, as Tim brought up some CCTV on one part of the screen, still wading through information on the other half. Jason could see the hotel from multiple angles.

“Nothing inside?”

“They’re not stupid. No cameras linked to the outside. Everything’s on a closed system. With hidden cameras according to Helena. The hotel actually claims not to have cameras at all. Smart move. Keeps the Johns happy. But allows blackmail to be gathered.”

“You’ve actually thought about this.”

“It’s only logical.”

“You getting anywhere with those shell corporations? Babs said she dead ended on them.”

“I can see why. It all comes back to a false identity. Westley Porter.”

“So no lead there.”

“Oh, looks like Dinah’s making her move.” Tim zoomed in on some activity.

Most people would have missed it. But both boys’ eyes were accustomed to spotting shadows moving within shadows.

“So when should I expect Dick to burst in here?” Tim asked idly, as the pair watched.

“Dunno… He’s not even in the Manor at the moment.”

“B… B… Bruce threw him…”

“God no! No! No, not at all Timmy. Dick just said he had something he needed to do. And he left. Not long after you woke up the first time. Really felt like he was waiting to make sure that you’d be alright before he left. Don’t know why or what he’s doing. You know how he gets sometimes… He’s as bad as B some days.”

Tim just shrugged. Jason wasn’t sure if Tim believed him or thought that Dick didn’t care to come visit against B’s instructions.
But the pair settled back to watch what they could of the Birds’ smackdown.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter might be a little lack-luster this week. I've had an issue in RL. Not my fault, but I still feel like I've let people down.
Chapter 59

Dick settled himself into the hard plastic chair. He forcibly kept his arms loose by his side, instead of leaning on the table in front of him. It was an effort of will not to sit sideways, in the manner he was accustomed to. Or even to spin the chair around and straddle it from the back.

He had to be calm. He had to be professional. He had to be.

He was waiting. Feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise with anticipation.

Slowly and methodically he tensed and released every muscle he could. Preparing himself for what was to come.

Nobody knew where he was… Okay, so that wasn’t technically true.

He hadn’t told anyone where he was going.

But that didn’t mean that they didn’t know.

He was fairly certain that Babs and B had figured out where he was by now. Jason and Damian wouldn’t have managed it…

Tim…

Well, it depended upon whether he was alert enough to think about it and whether he knew Dick had left the Manor.

Dick’s attention was drawn to the door opposite the one he had been brought in through. He straightened his back and squared his shoulders, which had slumped while he had been waiting.
The woman came and sat down opposite him. The orange clothing washing out her complexion, certainly not a colour that suited her. Then again, she hadn’t had much choice in the colour.

“Who… Who are you?” Her voice was small and shaking. She couldn’t quite meet his gaze, her eyes flickering around the room, shying away from the other silent figures that stood watching.

“I’m Officer Grayson of Gotham City PD.” Dick replied, knowing his uniform was identification enough.

“You’ve come to get my side of the story?” She lifted her head and looked at him with undisguised hope in her eyes, “I’m innocent. I didn’t do what they say. They’re just trying to blame me. I can’t go to jail. I’m innocent.”

Dick met her gaze steadily. He saw the hope. But he also saw what she was trying to hide. The deceit that ran right through her.

“No, Tina.” Dick was firm, “You’re not.”

“Yes, I am. They got to you too. They kidnapped me. Eric kidnapped me. Then he made me help him take Tim. No-one will even tell me if he survived.”

“He’s alive. Alive and awake. Awake and talking. He’s telling everyone about what you did. About how you were the ringleader. How you planned to kill him.”

“He’s confused. He’s ill. I could tell he was getting worse. But I didn’t think he would become delusional.”

“You don’t quite realize the situation you’re in here.” Dick leant back in the chair slightly, letting some of his confidence shine through, “You failed to do your research.”

“I don’t…”

“You don’t recognise me, do you?”

“Should I? We’ve never met. I’ve never gone to Gotham and you’ve never come to Smallville as long as I’ve lived there.”

“No. But it you’d done your research properly you would. I’m not here as a police officer. Gotham City PD don’t even know I’m here. I’m here of my own accord.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because you missed something very important. Yes, Tim’s the adopted son of Bruce Wayne. But he’s not the only adopted son of Bruce. He’s the third.”

“So?”

“I’m the first. Richard ‘Dick’ Grayson. Not at your service. You took my little brother from me.”
“I didn’t…”

“Every time Timmy talked to us… No matter who he talked to… He was telling us that you were behind it. That you weren’t a good person. That you had raped him.”

“I didn’t rape him.”

“He was accusing you.”

“I didn’t.”

“But you were planning on it.”

“No.”

“Don’t bother lying. It’s amazing what you can find out, if you know the right people. If you weren’t planning on raping my little brother… Why did you buy a Fertility Monitor?”

“I didn’t.”

“You were caught on camera at the pharmacy.”

“It was for my best friend.”

“Yeah, none of them are coming forward on that front. Add in your handy-dandy period tracker app that also includes a fertility window… The signs are pointing to a lot of things not in your favour.”

“I didn’t touch him.”

“I rather doubt that. Timmy doesn’t cry wolf and he doesn’t make stuff up. I know him better than most. I know him better than you.”

“I didn’t do anything. He was sick. He must have gotten delusional. I wasn’t sure if he was going to survive. He probably got confused. I was trying to help him. Treat his wounds.”

“Give up.” Dick sighed, “You’ve lost. Even if you convince the jury that you weren’t going to rape him, you’re going to labelled a sex offender anyway.”

“What?” That was panic in her voice, surprise and fear.

“You’re technically an adult. Over the age of majority, even if you can’t drink. Timmy isn’t. My little brother is still a minor. Still a child, legally. Even if he is emancipated. So you kidnapped a child that you are not related to. That’s a sex crime. Even if there was no sex involved. You crossed state borders, and tried to ransom him to family in another state. That’s a federal crime. Add in the fact that you were planning on selling him on the Dark Web.”

“They were going to…?” She tried to protest.

“Don’t even try. Next time you go diving into the Deep Web… Remember to use an anonymizer and don’t access your Facebook from the same computer first. It was really obvious. Didn’t even take the FBI techs ten minutes to find all the evidence they needed.”

Okay, so that had been ten minutes and Oracle putting some pretty obvious signs on things. She
had refused to let anyone miss anything vital; especially in her domain.

“So that’s federal kidnapping, sex offences, slavery.” Dick ticked them off on his fingers, “You’re screwed! And I came here, to be the one who got to tell you just how badly you fucked up. This isn’t something your saccharin smile and false words can get you out of. People know.

“The abuse? The way you treated Eric? He’s told everything. And his mother? She was stupid enough to keep a diary of her offences… And included what she saw of yours. She has documented evidence of what you did. Dates. Times. Pictures. You weren’t as unseen as you thought.

“Do you know who the best profilers are? The criminals. They can spot the person who will go with them. The person who will follow them. The person who is strong enough to stand up to them. Their allies. Their enemies. Their fellow criminals. They can spot them.

“And she spotted you. Spotted you a mile off. And welcomed you in. Because she knew that you’d never interfere with what she did. And you didn’t. You saw what she was and you said nothing. Because it worked in your favour. It made Eric susceptible to you. All you had to do was show him a little kindness at first, and before long he would do whatever you asked of him.

“Tim figured it out. And he found a leverage point. I don’t know what. But he found it and used it. You went into that situation believing that you were the smartest person in the room. Only you weren’t. Tim was. And he was smart enough not to let on to you that he was. He was smart enough to play dumb just enough to make you overconfident.

“Yes, he nearly died. But he still beat you. Because even if he had died, we had enough information to go poking into all the dark corners of your life, that you never wanted us to go into.

“So this is me giving you a fair warning… One that you don’t deserve, but I’m giving it to you anyway… Try to fight this… Try to claim innocence… Try to pass the blame… And your sentence is going to be long and hard. Own up… Plead guilty… And maybe, just maybe you’ll get out before you hit the menopause. Otherwise… You might be able to claim your pension… If you get out at all.”

“I’m innocent.”

“That’s your choice. I know the truth. And the jury will find it hard to believe you. With two out of three of your lackies turning on you… And Timmy’s testimony? You’re screwed. You don’t stand a chance. Plead guilty.”

“You’re biased.”
“I don’t want my little brother to go through what you put him through again. I don’t want him to have to unpack all of this in such a public space, scrutinised by everyone. I’m trying to protect him. I don’t want him to have to testify…”

“He doesn’t have to. All he has to do is admit that he was ill, sick and can’t be sure of what happened… As he was not in his right mind at the time.”

“And make your life easier? Make your lies easier? No, I’ll stand by Tim as he tells the truth about what you did. I’d just rather he didn’t have to. He tells the truth and your sentence will be a lot worse than it would be if you’d just pled guilty.”

“But I’m not.”

“I’m not someone you can just lie your way past. I’d trust Timmy half out of his mind with infection before I’d trust you to tell me that the sky is blue. You’re a liar and a criminal. You just haven’t gotten caught and punished before now… Did you know that others are coming forward? Those you destroyed in your march forward. They remember you. And some of them are more than happy to tell their stories. You’re going to be destroyed. No one can stop that. All you can do is mitigate the fallout. Plead guilty. It’s your only chance.”

“But I’m innocent.”

“We’re getting nowhere. I’ll see you in court… Know this, this was me being kind. Me being generous. If I’d had my way I would have had five minutes alone with you and no consequences. But I knew that was never going to be possible…… But you come near my brother… Any of my brothers… Again? I’ll destroy you. And I won’t even loose one minute of sleep over it.”

Dick got to his feet and walked out of the room. He didn’t look back. Didn’t even faulter in his steps.

“Thanks.” He smiled at the prison officers, “I feel a bit better now.”

“I’m amazed you didn’t punch her.”

“Then she would have won. I’d best go home. Timmy’s going to need his family around him.”

“We’ll make sure she stays locked up. Don’t worry. Your brother is safe from her now. You focus on helping him heal.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hoping everyone is okay. I'm suffering from a cold and I've stupidly gone and done an Obstacle Course today. So I'm now curled up on the sofa watching Oceans 11.
Handily Jason had left Tim the laptop after they had finished watching the Birds kick butt; although Tim could have done with having the charger as well.

Although he’d gone to sleep the night before, Tim was now quickly scanning through his e-mail, catching up on any information he needed to know. He was on a time limit and he knew it. It wasn’t as if Alfred was going to let him have a charger. Everyone knew that it would only cause Tim to stay awake sorting things out.

“You must not forget to eat, Master Tim.” Alfred chided lightly as he came through the door carrying a tray.

“Thank you, Alfred.” Tim kept his words light, but there was an underlying formal tone about them.

Alfred carefully arranged a lap table for Tim, so that he could eat the hot tomato soup and toasted cheese sandwich.

It only took Tim a single bite to taste the onion and sweetcorn hidden inside the sandwich. His favourite from childhood. Something he still wasn’t sure how Alfred knew.

“Master Tim…” Alfred’s voice was uncharacteristically uncertain.

Tim looked up from his food. He had been studiously focusing on it. Keeping his gaze away from the Englishman.

“Yes, Alfred?” Tim frowned.

“Master Tim, I thought that you out of all of my grandsons would have known the truth in the matter. What happens Upstairs is not always a reflection of what happens Downstairs. While one may be rejected by Upstairs, in this household you will never be rejected by Downstairs, so long as I remain Butler to the Waynes. While you were not rejected or unwanted or unloved by Master Bruce… You remain precious to me. You will always have a home where I reside.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can and I will, Master Tim… Please, tell me why you didn’t come to me.”

“I…” Tim looked away again.
His hands wrapped around him, as he turned slightly away from Alfred.

Alfred perched himself on the side of the bed and eased Tim’s arms out of the self-hug into a combined one.

He laid his head over Tim’s. Underneath his hands he could feel Tim starting to shake, but no moisture touched him.

Tim wasn’t so far gone to let himself cry yet. Although Alfred highly suspected that Tim needed to.

“I…” Tim tried again, “I didn’t want… You shouldn’t…… Didn’t know…”

“You didn’t know who I would pick.” Alfred filled in the blanks, “And you didn’t want to know. You feared what my answer would be. So if I never made a choice you could pretend that it was the answer you wanted. You could push me away, because if you were the one pushing it was your decision. Oh, my child. You are my grandson. No matter what happens, I love you.”

“You’d have picked Bruce.” The words were mumbled into Alfred’s jacket.

“I would have picked both of you. All of you.”

“You can’t do that. Has to be one or the other.”

“Are you trying to tell me what I can and cannot do, Master Tim.”

“No, Alfred.” The voice of a chastened little boy crept unwillingly out.

“Good. I would have picked all of you. Had I realized what was going on, I would have made it abundantly clear to you that you were welcome and that no-one had a right to turn you out of your own home.”

“I left.”

“You felt you had no choice. That was our fault. Not yours. Never yours. I love you and I won’t ever stop. Nothing you can do will ever make me stop loving you.”

“Everyone leaves me.”

“So you left before we could tell you to leave. Tim… I know it is hard for you to believe or understand, but that is the fault of others. Not yours.”

“Then why does everyone leave me? I’m the only common factor. So logic dictates that the fault must lie with me.”

“No, dear child. The fault is not with you. It has never been with you. You have simply had
people fail you over and over again. You have always been kind. The veritable Cinderella. You have been kind. You have had faith. That we have failed to treat you as you deserve is on us, not on you."

“One is chance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is a pattern.”

“We took advantage of you. That was not your fault. It has never been your fault. We saw a smile and failed to see the pain behind it. We saw pain and failed to realise that you hid pain so well that the fact that we could actually see it meant that it was far greater than it seemed. None of that was your fault. It was ours.”

“No.” Tim shook his head.

“Yes, dear one. You are my grandchild. Loved and adored. I failed you. I should have made things clearer. I hope that I can make it up to you. Even if I cannot, know this, I will always love you.”

Tim took a deep breath.

“I forgive you.”

“No, Master Tim.” Alfred sat back slightly, “You do not. You are simply saying what you believe I want to hear. However, that is okay. There is time. Eat your lunch. Get some rest.”

Tim watched as Alfred left the room. One hand holding the sandwich, Tim returned to catching himself up. Around a mouthful of sandwich, he started to organise essential things. He had things he had already put off too long.

Some things he could organise remotely… Others…

Well, he would have to go himself. Despite everything.

123456789

“Would you mind telling me,” Jason took a deep breath, “Just how you managed to fail to capture Phobos?”

“It’s not our fault, Jason.” Babs returned, “He wasn’t there. I had eyes on every exit and he simply wasn’t there. And don’t even try to say we should have waited until he was… Those girls couldn’t wait. You saw the condition they were in. Don’t even pretend that you didn’t.”

“No… I saw. You’re right. I wasn’t going to argue it. I just…”
“We all wanted to grab him.” Bruce squeezed Jason’s shoulder gently, “We all wanted this to be over for Tim. But we can use the information the Birds gathered to find more about him. We can use that information to find him.”

“It doesn’t seem fair. He had those girls so scared that some of them didn’t even try to run. And he wasn’t even there to scare them.”

“No, but he did have cameras watching them.” Babs stated, “Simply on an internal system. Never connected to the internet. They didn’t know he wasn’t watching all the time. But they believed he was.”

“Have any of them provided a better description of him?” Bruce asked.

“Most of them are too scared to talk right now.” Babs sighed, “I mean, they still believe that he’s going to come and kill them or take them back. So I’m not expecting anything useful for a while. Give them a few days to realize that they’re safe… Then we might get something useful.”

“What about those who are willing to talk?” Jason latched onto the hope.

“Those are your two girls. Dancer and Helio. Helio… She just seems reckless. Completely determined to ‘stick it’ to him. Actual quote by the way. Although she’s not got the greatest memory for faces.”

“Typical Helio.” Jason muttered, “She can tell you every detail about someone’s clothes… Spot a knock-off from a hundred metres. But can’t remember an eye-colour for love nor money… What about Dancer? She’s always had a level head.”

“Didn’t want to talk at first. Really worried about her little boy and her sister. She’s the main breadwinner?”

“Yeah. Sister can’t really find any work.”

“Well, seems they’ve had a bit of luck despite everything. Eliza’s gotten a job, with full medical insurance, child-care and a decent wage. Enough to keep the roof over their heads and
“food on their plates.”

“Doing what?” Jason blurted out, “Everyone was turning her down. Didn’t want a woman with a scared face and two prosthetics.”

“Well, she’s been recruited for her insight as to what soldiers actually need in the field, and what veterans need when they come home. She’s working product development and testing. Good worker. Hard worker. Kid’s doing great at the nursery… I rather suspect Tim being behind this, given that she’s working for WE. And was actively recruited by the HR department.”

“Typical Timmy.” Jason sighed, “Well, at least they’re okay. Dancer gave you something though?”

“A fairly basic description. Over six foot. Dark skin, but not African-American, just dark Caucasian. Dark eyes. Short brown hair. Broad shoulders. Bulky, but with muscle not fat. She’s working with a sketch artist. But I’m not expecting much. First blush is that she didn’t see him that often. She spotted the tattoo and latched onto that as an identifying mark rather than his appearance.”

“Anything else useful?” Bruce asked, “What about the clients?”

“Bored businessmen, B. I’ve got all the credit card details. They know nothing beyond the fact that it was a brothel. They paid with credit cards. A few even paid with their corporate cards! I’ve got a range of companies. Most from McCaffery Enterprises, but there’s a WE manager, a few STAR Labs managers, Griffin Records, Lionsearch, Vertex Productions. All the big names. Going by the prices, no small time managers or small time companies got a look in.”

“What about the second one?”

“The second one?” Babs frowned.

“It was a theory Tim had.” Jason replied, “He asked where the second brothel was. The one catering to those preferring male company.”

“Unlikely.” Bruce shook his head, “Despite everything most of the people at that level of management are male, white and straight. It’s simply the way things are right now. None of them would dare to be seen as going against that. Too dangerous. They’re not high enough placed to be confident in their ability to hold onto their position. They would have wanted power over someone they saw as weaker. This isn’t the world of high-end escorts. Where they give executives the illusion of surrender. The illusion of being controlled. The illusion of not making the decisions. This wouldn’t have had that. It would have been for those who were a level or two away from having that power. Those who hunger for that level of power. They wouldn’t risk their reputations. Even if they had inclinations that way.”

“Wonder why Tim would think there was a second one then?” Jason frowned.

“Because Tim is too much of an equal opportunist. He doesn’t always spot other people’s prejudice.” Bruce smiled, “It’s why he gets on so well in business. He always judges people and thing by their true worth. Not what others perceive it as.”

“Master Bruce,” Alfred interrupted, “You have a phone call.”

The telephone was presented on a silver tray. Jason didn’t bother to smoother a snort of laughter at
the sheer ridiculousness of it. Alfred had even managed to keep the phone balanced upright down all the stairs.

“Who is it, Alfred?”

“Mister Fox, Master Bruce.”

Bruce reached out and took the call.

“Hi Lucius! What’s up?”

“Bruce, is Tim actually up for working? Only I’m getting conflicting reports. The Media has him at death’s door. And Tim’s announcing that he’ll be in the office tomorrow for a meeting.”

“No.” Bruce snapped, “Tim is not fit enough for that. He’s still on IV antibiotics right now. Much to his displeasure. He’s signed off for at least a month. Six if the medics get their way, but I doubt that’ll happen.”

“Okay, so he’s simply overestimating his health again. I can deal with that. Don’t worry, I’ll talk to Tam. She’ll intercept his messages so that he doesn’t book himself into the office. And keep the number of things he actually needs to deal with to the minimum. A lot of what he gets is the stuff I used to send you.”

“The busy work so that I looked like I was completely ditzy.”

“Pretty much, only I never got out of the habit of sending it. And you didn’t look ditzy, you looked like a caring employer who remembered all the birthdays, anniversaries and everything else to do with the people. But wasn’t quite sure what was going on with the business… It worked! Tim’s completely different. You know you’re not getting the CEO position back anytime soon, right?”

“I figured that. Just make sure that Tim gets to make the decisions he needs to make. I don’t want him feeling like I’m trying to muscle in and squeeze him out… Kid gloves, Lucius. Kid gloves.”

“Bruce, I know how to play this game. I’ve been playing it for a very long time. I can control this. You look after him. Get him fit and healthy. He’s far too valuable to lose to anything.”

“No, Lucius. He is far too precious to lose. I can handle him turning away from anything he wants. But he will not be left on the outside of this family again.”
“No.” Jason shook his head, “Sorry, Timbo. But you’re not yet healthy enough to go back to your Nest.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.” Tim ran a hand through his hair in frustration, “Weren’t you listening?”

“Honestly?” Jason shrugged, “I kinda blanked after you told me that you needed to go to the city. Sorry, I started to panic. You came off the IVs yesterday!”

“I have to go see a lawyer.” Tim explained.

“Why?”

“Jake’s Will. It’s being read tomorrow. They kindly put it off, while I was healing and then while I was missing. But I can’t ask them to put it off anymore. And Jake wanted me to be there. I couldn’t be at his funeral. I have to be there. He deserved that at least!”

“But you’re barely walking wounded, never mind fit and healthy.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m going. The only question is whether you’re taking me, or if I have to talk Conner into it.”

“You’re not going to ask Alfred?”

Tim just raised an eyebrow at Jason.

“Good point.” Jason conceded, “He’ll give you a lecture and a look. You know he’ll find out and give you those anyway?”

“But then he’ll give me them after the event. Not before. I’ll get through it better if I don’t have that playing on my mind.”

“Okay.” Jason sighed, “But you can barely use crutches. Will you at least use a wheelchair?”

“No. I don’t need a wheelchair. I can cope with the crutches.”

Inwardly Jason smiled. He was expecting Timmy to nix the wheelchair, but equally knew that he would compromise with the crutches. Timmy wasn’t the only person who knew manipulation.

“Where is the reading?”
“Johnson and Associates.” Tim named one of the middle range legal companies.

“And when’s the reading?”

“Ten o’clock. There shouldn’t be too many of us there. Just Jake’s cousin and me.”

“Not his parents?”

“Jake’s mum died years ago. And his dad… Well, his dad didn’t approve of Jake’s life choices. And Jake didn’t approve of his dad’s life choices either.”

“What?” Jason stared at Tim, “That’s…”

“Not unlike you and Bruce some days.” Tim reminded, “Only Jake walked away from it all to do what he wanted… Well… Nearly.”

“Nearly?”

“Running a garage wasn’t Jake’s dream. But it was closer to it and allowed him to do what he wanted as well, rather than his dad’s ideas.”

“The oil company.” Jason recalled.

“And construction.” Tim nodded, “Yeah. I just… I’m gonna miss him. He was good people.”

“I can tell.”

Tim levelled a look at Jason.

“You’re different when you talk about him. Anyone who gets you to talk like that… They have to be good people. You talk about him the way Roy talks about Connor and Kori talks about Dick. Like he’s more than a friend.”

“Yeah. Jake was good people… Really good people. I just… I wish I could have made his funeral.”

“Put it behind you. Wasn’t your choice. Wasn’t your fault.”

“I know.” Tim flopped back in the bed, one arm over his eyes, “Doesn’t change how I feel.”

Jason spotted the yawn before Tim managed to stifle it.

“Look, I’ll get you there. Okay?” Jason stated, “But you need to get some sleep. You don’t need to be falling asleep in the middle of the reading or something.”

“I won’t.” Tim muttered, clearly holding back a yawn.
Jason turned off the light as he left; fairly confident that Tim wouldn’t turn on the bedside light… Mostly because he would have to move to reach it.

“Master Jason, I am not certain that it is wise for Master Tim to leave yet.”

“Alfred,” Jason sighed, “He’ll do it with or without my help. At least if I go with him I can keep him safe and bring him back quickly. If he gets one of the Titans to help him? I don’t think he’ll come back here. I just need to know which car will be easiest for Tim to get in and out of.”

“I will prepare Chrysler 300, Master Jason. However I will expect you back promptly after the reading. Master Tim will not be in a fit state for extended socialising.”

“Understood.” Jason nodded, “I’ll do what I can. But I’m not being his prison guard.”

“I would not expect you to, Master Jason. A moderating influence perhaps.”

“Remember who you’re talking to. I’ve never been a moderating influence in my life!”

“I have faith in you, Master Jason.”

“I’m fairly certain it’s misplaced.” Jason muttered.

Jason was thanking every deity he had ever heard of, when he realized that despite the lawyer not having their own office block, they were in one which had its own parking garage.

That meant that Tim didn’t have to hobble too far on his crutches. It was only a short distance to the lift. Jason knew that he was probably being overcautious in how he was watching Tim’s movements. However, he didn’t want Tim to come to harm on his watch. The rest of the family would lynch him. To say nothing of what his own conscious would do to him.

Tim, however, was extremely steady on his crutches. He was moving slowly, but steadily.

They were the first to arrive in the lawyer’s meeting room; it was clearly not an office, but was where they had been sent. Jason got Tim settled in a chair, before picking a suitable wall to lean against.
He wasn’t going to trust anything about this meeting. Despite the faith that Tim had it being a simple legal meeting. Given that Phobos was still on the loose, Jason was going to assume that if Tim went *anywhere* unusual that Phobos could appear and target his brother. Tim was still a target. Phobos didn’t seem like the kind of person who would just give up. To say nothing of the person behind him.

Jason wasn’t sure if Tim realized that Phobos was still unidentified and still on the loose. Certainly, he didn’t seem perturbed by anything outside of the family at the moment.

The door opened, and Jason’s focused snapped there; absently noting that Tim looked over his shoulder.

Three figures entered, two males and a female. Jason almost flinched as he took in the leading male. It was Jacob Stone. The face, the build, all matched the images that Jason had seen before.

Had it all been a set up? Had it all been a trick?

“You must be Elliot Spencer.” Tim struggled to his feet, “Jake mentioned the family resemblance. It is quite striking.”

“And you would be Tim.” The man spoke carefully, “My cousin was very fond of you. Although he often mixed up your name.”

“Tim and Cheng?”

“Rong actually. But yes. Had to explain it to me.”

“He did mention you weren’t as big a fan of art as he was.”

“I don’t think *anyone* was as big a fan of art as Jake was… Sit down. You ain’t looking too good. And your bodyguard is worrying.”

“Jason isn’t my bodyguard. He’s my… My transport for today.”

“Still I think he’d prefer it if you sat down. And so would I. Jake would come back from the dead and hit me with a barstool if I let you stand on that leg any longer. So sit down. Parker, don’t poke the man.”

Jason had spotted the female closing in on Tim, but there was only curiosity in her movements. Nothing malicious.
“He’s adorable, Elliot.” She fired back.

“Babe, he’s injured.” The other man put in, “Remember? We talked about this.”

“But he’s adorable.” She almost sulked as she moved back to the others.

“It’s nice to meet you too.” Tim smiled at them, “Parker and Hardison, right? Jake told me a little about you…”

Jason noticed tension creep into their postures, even as they sat down.

“You run a brewpub in Portland, right?” Tim carried on, seemingly oblivious to the tension, “The old Bridgeport Brewery?”

“That’s us.” Hardison managed after a moment, “You ever visited?”

“No. Jake tended to keep clear of Portland. Apparently had one too many occasions of mistaken identity to risk going there.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.” Elliot had seemingly relaxed in his chair, but Jason could tell that it was simply a position that could allow him to jump into action at a moment’s notice, “We were often mistaken as twins, when we were kids. The perils of being double first cousins.”

“We didn’t even know he had a cousin for years.” Hardison put in, “Never expected this though…”

“I’m sorry.” Tim locked eyes with Elliot, “It was to get at me. It was my fault. I should of…”

“No.” Elliot interrupted firmly, “It was not your fault. Never your fault. Jake wouldn’t blame you. He’s not… He wasn’t that kind of guy. It’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. Those who gave the order… Those who wielded the blade… They’re the ones to blame. Not you… God! Jake loved you. You were his little brother in everything but blood… You were good for him. You listened to those art talks of his. I always used to tune him out after about five sentences. But… You listened for hours and asked questions! He was so pleased to find someone who could listen.”

“I didn’t always understand him.”

“But you tried. That was the important thing.”

The entering lawyer interrupted the conversation.

“Thank you for your time.” The man sat down at the desk, “My name is Paul Buhle. Now, this is quite unusual to have a will reading in the manner of movies. However, Mister Stone was quite adamant that he wanted, should anything happen to him, for the important people in his life to meet. He wasn’t sure that everyone would be able to make his funeral… Although he was more concerned that Mister Spencer would be unable to attend, than Mister Drake.”
“I sometimes have work commitments with time restrictions on them.” Elliot shrugged.

“So the splitting of his possessions. Mister Stone was quite clear with regards to his liquid assets. Everything was to be split equally between Mister Spencer and Mister Drake. With regards to his business he stated that it was to be inherited by Mister Drake, with the understanding that it was not to be sold for at least five years after his demise.”

“He honours me.” Tim bowed his head, “I will do my best by him.”

“You best will be more than enough.” Elliot reached out a gentle hand to place it on Tim’s shoulder, “Jake used to say that you had enough business acumen to run a country, not just a company. He also said that you knew his business as well as he did, if not better. And he sometimes felt that he was using you, given how much you used to help out.”

“His home and the contents therein are also to be inherited by Master Drake; with the exception of the contents of the kitchen, which are for Mister Spencer. Mister Stone noted that he had managed to obtain all of the recipes from their mutual grandmothers, along with the kitchen utensils.”

“I thought he had managed it somehow.” Elliot smiled, “God only knows how. I know he left that house with only what he stood up in and a small backpack. Always was one for travelling light when he had to… Same as me really.”

“Finally, we come to the main inheritance.” The lawyer continued, “Mister Stone’s art collection. Knowing that Mister Spencer has very little interest in such things, he instructed that all art was to be inherited by Mister Drake, with the exception of one piece. That piece is to be selected by Mister Spencer, and may be any piece in the collection, except for one particular piece…”

“I know which one I’m not to touch.” Elliot interrupted, “I’ve seen it before… I also know which one I want. I’ll have to look up the name though. Because my description isn’t going to help.”

“Mister Drake, Mister Stone left one instruction for you with regards to his collection. All of the artwork may be sold at your discretion, apart from one piece. That piece he requested that you keep for at least ten years.”

“I know he had most of his collection on display at various museums.” Tim put in, “Would it be possible to continue that arrangement for the time being? I don’t have the space or the insurance for the collection at this time.”

“Of course. However, the one piece he spoke of, is not in any museum. To be blunt, I don’t know where it is. Mister Stone never told me of its location.”

“I know where it is.” Elliot countered, “Jake got me to help him with it a while back.”

“Thank you.” Tim smiled.

“That is the end of the reading. You have this meeting room for the rest of the hour. I’ll leave you to discuss anything you need to talk about.”

The lawyer simply got nods of acknowledgement as he left the room.
“How’s the leg?” Elliot asked.

“Healing. Slowly.”

“Legs are a pain.” Parker muttered, “You should have seen me after mine. I nearly went stir crazy.”

“Babe,” Hardison sighed, “You went a little loco during that time. I kept expecting to come back to find the Brewpub burnt down or something.”

“Only a little bit.” She looked slightly embarrassed, but mostly dismissive.

“Thank you.” Elliot looked firmly at Tim, “Jake needed someone like you. I never could give him the time he needed. You did.”

“No.” Tim shook his head, “He gave me his time. What I got to see, because of him? More than anyone else would have been able to show me. Worth more than wealth.”

“Filled a part of you that you didn’t know was empty.” Elliot nodded, “I get that.”

“Jake used to tell me,” Tim spoke slowly, “That you were a bad man.”

Jason frowned slightly, as he saw tension ripple through the trio.

“But he also told me,” Tim carried on, “That you were good guys… If it is possible, I would like to ask a favour.”

“What do you want?” Elliot asked, having exchanged heavy glances with his friends.

“One of my kidnappers is called Eric Seimon.” Tim explained, “He’s a good person who has been abused for most of his life. He’s got a really good deal on his sentencing. However, once he’s done his time, little there is of it, he’s got nowhere to go.”

“What are you asking?” Hardison leaned forward.

“If he goes back to where he was… Smallville. He’ll never get a chance. Never make anything of himself. And there’s good odds that someone else will take advantage of him… I don’t want that. A fresh start? And people who will make sure that he doesn’t go down that path again?”

“You want us?” Parker blinked, “To be his Parole Officers?”

There was something else going on, Jason was sure. Something that made this situation amusing to the trio and to Tim. But Jason was firmly on the outside of the joke. Once again he evaluated the trio. They certainly were mismatched, crossing gender and racial divides. Elliot had clearly been military at some point, but left a long time ago. Parker was lithe and flexible, in a way that Dick would consider to be close to his normal. And Haridson was clearly attached to his technology.
How they had come together wasn’t clear. But what was clear was that Tim knew more about them, than he had revealed to Jason.

“Of a sort.” Tim shrugged, “I just want him to have a fresh start. A new city. A new life. I think that would stop him from falling in with the wrong sort of people. Particularly abusive people.”

“We can do that.” Elliot stated, “Why not bring him here though? It’s your city.”

“And it eats people alive. It takes a certain kind of person to survive here… To thrive here. Eric doesn’t have it. And I would know.”

“Yes. I suppose you would.” Elliot considered, “And what are you offering in return?”

“A favour. One you can call upon when you need to. I know a lot of people. And I know a lot of secrets.”

“You realize what you’re offering?” Parker frowned, “You know what we are?”

“Dishonest people in a dishonest world.” Tim smiled, “And I would also dare to ask that if you ever hear rumours about my company? That you tell me first. I don’t like abuse. Of any kind. But I prefer to clean my own house when it is needed.”

“I can understand that.” Elliot smirked, “You know you’re nothing like I expected… But everything Jake used to say about you… You’re an honest man in a dishonest world… I’ve worked with one of those before. Even when he was dishonest… He was honest about it. And he gave me the one thing I’ve needed all my life.”

“A good man.” Tim nodded, “Started a crusade… And it became your war.”

“You know the sort of man.”

“Met one in my time.”

“Don’t forget, they’re still human. Can get blinded sometimes. Lose focus, because they’re too focused.”

Tim half-smiled at that. Jason was completely lost, but he noticed that there was real kindness in the voices being used. Elliot cared for this friend of his cousin. In a way that Tim would accept.

“Look after yourself.” Elliot got up and shook Tim’s hand, “If you need us… You know where to find us.”

“If you need me.” Tim returned, “You know where to find me.”

“You’re adorable!” Parker briefly hugged Tim and then stroked his hair.

“And the geeks shall inherit the Earth?” Tim held up a fist for Hardison.

“I knew you were one of us!” Hardison fist-bumped back, then pulled Tim into a hug as
well, “Age of the geek, brother. Age of the geek.”

His voice dropped down into a range that meant that Jason couldn’t hear anymore. He could see lips moving, but lipreading had never been his skill, particularly not from the angle he was at.

It was frustrating, particularly with Tim’s face changing from joy and happiness and delight, suddenly locking down into cordial placidness. Whatever he had been told, he hadn’t liked. But didn’t want anyone to know.

Unfortunately, Jason had made a study of Tim’s expressions. He knew when Tim was hiding something… Even if he didn’t know what.

Once the trio had left, Tim rose to his feet, swaying slightly on his crutches. His head hanging slightly. A tension in his shoulders.

Jason blinked. The tension had been there for some time. Only he had never really noticed it before. It was only now that he was hyper-focused on Tim’s body language, that he really registered it consciously.

How long had there been tension in those shoulders? How long had they been carrying the burden of stress and pain?

And was there anything he could do to help?

Chapter End Notes

I’ve known this scene was coming for a while… But it was still fun to write.
“What did Hardison tell you?” Jason asked bluntly when they were back in the car.

“Nothing really important.”

“Tim,” Jason leant hard on the name, “I want to help. And I know that you’re hiding something. Is it a threat? Do I need to go after him?”

“God! No!… Look, it wasn’t like that… You would as well… Look, it’s nothing like that… I need your word that you won’t tell anyone.”

“If it’s a threat to you or us, I can’t promise that.”

“It’s not… Well, sort of. But not from them. You can talk about the threat. But not where I got the intel from. Okay?”

“Sounds fair.”

“Okay, what you need to know is that… Parker and Hardison and Elliot… They weren’t always on the right side of the law.”

“So? They’re reformed criminals? I’m cool with that.”

“Parker… Was Parker.”

“I don’t get it.”

“The Parker.”

“The fucking international thief?!” Jason spun around in his seat, oblivious to the traffic he was driving through for a moment, “Robbed the French National Bank? Stole the Fortune Teller, the Polar Star Diamond, the Gem of Gibraltar, the Damiani Raid, the Roslin Diamond and the Lion of Gilgamesh? Stole the Hope Diamond and gave it back? That Parker?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck, Timmy. She’s wanted in nine countries, including Yemen! She went off the radar about seven years ago. No one’s seen her since.”

“Not quite true. She found something different. She’s a good person, Jason. They all are. And even though they don’t do what they used to… They keep their ear to the ground.”

“If Parker was a thief, what were the other two?”

“Hardison was a hacker… Still is really. More White Hat than Black these days. But he’s done his time wearing a Black Hat. His first true hacking job? He got the Bank of Iceland to pay for his nana’s hospital bill.”

“Okay, that’s impressive and has style. I take it that his handle would be known to Babs?”

“Probably, but I don’t ask about things like that. Anyway he keeps an eye on the Dark Web. He spotted chatter on a site that I don’t think Babs watches… Someone was asking for thieves. Thieves and hitters and hackers to steal from m… From WE. Going after m… Project Padua. Using
“Old con?”

“Claiming that the data was stolen from them in the first place. No names. But it got updated after I got rescued.”

“Someone didn’t think you were coming back.”

“Someone hoped I wasn’t coming back.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know. Nor does Hardison. But he thought it only fair that I got a heads up.”

“If Parker was a thief and Hardison’s a hacker… What was Elliot?”

“A Hitter.”

“He’s dangerous! I saw how he moved. I knew he was dangerous.”

“So are you. And Elliot knows it. He’s not stupid.”

“I don’t want you near him.”

“You don’t get to decide that.” Tim cut the line of conversation off.

Jason drove on in silence for a while, before he spoke again.

“I’m sorry.” Jason breathed, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Tim didn’t respond, but Jason could feel the gaze on the back of his neck.

“It’s just… We just got you back… For the second time. I don’t want to lose you again. And losing you to something that I could prevent? That would hurt even worse. You’re my brother.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. It doesn’t matter what you think. You’ll always be my brother to me.”

“I’m just the Replacement. The stand in. I’m not family.”

“Yes, you are.”

“If I was family, then Dick would have believed me. If I was family, then Bruce wouldn’t have shunned me. If I was family, then Damian wouldn’t have tried to kill me multiple times. If I was family, you wouldn’t have tried to kill me multiple times. If I was family, Steph wouldn’t have faked her death and lied to me. If I was family, Babs wouldn’t have turned away when I needed
her. I’m not family. I am nothing more than a useful tool. Life is easier when you accept what you are.”

It wasn’t just the words that turned Jason’s stomach… That caused his rebuttal to stick in his throat.

It was the tone. Completely flat.

Jason pulled the car over and spun around to look Tim straight in the eye.

“I can’t speak for the others. They’ve got their own apologies to make. But this is mine… I was screwed up when I came out the Pit. Screwed six ways to Sunday. And Talia didn’t help. She hates you.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“And I’ll say it as many times as I need to, to get it into your head. She hates you. And she wants you dead. She tried to use me to kill you. She tried to use Damian to kill you. She had me so twisted round I didn’t know which way was up. And I screwed up. Some of the stuff I’ve learnt since then… Well, I did more harm to you than I realized. I might have had my issues with Dick, back when I wore the pixie boots… But I still respected him… You went further than that. And I wrecked what could have been… Because all I saw was Pit Green. I hated you because you were an easy target. Even half out of my mind with the Pit, I knew that I couldn’t beat B. And it was doubtful I could beat Dickie Bird… You were just an easier target… And I knew that hurting you would hurt B… Even more than if I hurt him.”

Tim’s disbelief was easy to read.

“B’s never been good at showing emotions. He was, and still is, even worse with you. But I knew how to read him. Always have, really. I knew that he cared for you. That he loved you. Even back then. I knew that targeting you… Hurting you would hurt him.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not. I also knew that you doubted your place… Because Talia told me that. I knew that you didn’t think anyone cared about you… I’m not proud of what I did. But I cold-heartedly and deliberately targeted your weaknesses. I used words as a weapon. In a way that I’m not proud of…”

“And I came to realize that you were so much more than just a warm body taking up my old position. You were smarter than I could ever be… And just as I was more of a fighter than Dick,
you were more of a detective. You weren’t the same as me. Just as I wasn’t the same as Dick. If B had really just wanted a replacement, he would have gone for another lost street kid… Not someone like you.”

“I forced my way in. I wasn’t chosen.”

“And that made you even more incredible… You knew what I had to be told. What Dick had to be told. What Damian was told from the cradle. What Babs took years to be let in on. What Steph was hidden from. What Cass had to have explained to her. And you figured it all out. If B hadn’t been impressed… He would have found some way to keep you quiet.”

“He did. He made it my secret to carry as well.”

“He didn’t have to go that far. There are other methods. As you well know. B respected your abilities. He never had to pick me. He never had to pick you. He could have found another way to keep you silent… If you don’t believe anything, believe this… There were a thousand ways I could have hurt B. But I chose to target you. Because I knew it would hurt him more than anything else… I could have targeted Dick… Remember that.”

Saying anything more would just lead the conversation round in circles; so Jason turned back to the wheel and pulled back into the flow of traffic.

He could almost hear the cogs turning in Tim’s head, as he tried to turn the information dump around so that it fitted into his world view. The problem was that it didn’t fit. And couldn’t fit.

“Can’t believe you’re friends with thieves.” Jason muttered.

“They’re no worse than Selina.” Tim fired back, “If anything they’re better.”

“In what way?”

“They’re not themed. And they don’t care about making statements… I might even hire them at some point.”

“For what?”

“Security testing. They’ve beaten a Steranko in their time.”

“The Overkill? How?”

“I don’t know. That’s the first time I’ve ever met them. I just keep an eye on their exploits. You never know when it might come in handy.”

“You need anything to eat? We can find a diner. Or swing past a take-away if you’re too worn out.”

“Alfred won’t approve.”

“You’ve been dealing with his healthy food for way too long. Everyone needs to enjoy eating junk every so often. You wouldn’t believe the number of times I used to talk B into a burger
“Out on patrol.”

“I might.”

“Yeah…” Jason conceded after a pause, “You might… Look, do you want something to eat? I think you could use some fresh air.”

“This is Gotham.”

“Fair point… Look, you need to eat. Don’t tell me you don’t. You need something that isn’t Alfred’s healthy, healing crap. You know he’s been making us eat the same thing? Apart from B… He got cucumber sandwiches a few times.”

“Pancakes.”

“What?”

“I want pancakes.”

“Sure. I know a few diners.”

“No. I want the best. There’s this diner…”

“Tell me where.” Jason smiled, “I’ll take you.”

Tim leaned back in the seat. He rattled off the address.

Jason didn’t recall being to the diner before. But if it was where Tim wanted to go, he wasn’t going to argue.

“I take it that Jake had a good collection of art?” Jason tried to change the topic slightly.

“It’s not the largest. B has more. But it’s better quality. Better condition. More valuable, I think… I’ll have to go through the records.”

“Later.” Jason reminded, “Will they be safe at the museums?”

“Yeah. Saves on the insurance too. The insurance companies charge lower rates for pieces that are publicly displayed.”

“Why?”

“Because it is believed that the security is better than what a private collector could afford.”

“Makes sense I suppose… You seen all of them?”

“No. I don’t even know the one he wanted me to have in particular. I guess I’ll find out
when Elliot contacts me with it.”

“You trust him? I mean, it’s probably quite valuable… And well, no insult meant, but he is a thief.”

“No. Parker’s a thief. Hardison’s a hacker. Elliot’s a hitter.”

“And that makes it better?”

“Look, they operate on a different revenue stream these days… It’s not the way things were back when they worked solo… They’re good people. Even if they aren’t honest.”

“Jake told you a fair bit about them, didn’t he?”

“A good amount. There’s not many people he can talk about them to. They have their reasons for staying off the radar as much as they can. I don’t know what Jake told them about me, but I wouldn’t be surprised about much.”

“Okay.” Jason decided to put that on the back-burner for the moment, “Tell me, are the pancakes any good here?”

“The best.”

“How’d you find it?”

“Steph loves waffles.”

“I don’t follow.”

“She loves waffles. I’ve been to every place that does waffles in Gotham. Steph doesn’t really rate the waffles here… But their pancakes are the best.”

That actually made sense.

“So when can we watch the second Kingsman?” Jason asked.

“What?”

“When can we watch it?”

“I thought you had.”

“It won’t be the same unless I watch it with you.”

The shock and surprise on Tim’s face was almost heart-breaking.

“You didn’t have to wait.”

God help him, he was going to beat it into Tim’s head if it was the last thing he did.

Dick was slightly shocked when he saw Tim walk through the Manor’s front door.

He was half-draped over Jason’s shoulder, with one crutch only being used cosmetically really.

The suit and tie was askew and rumpled. There was a chocolate smudge in the corner of Tim’s mouth; and something that looked like blood, but was probably strawberry sauce on the cuff of the shirt.

“Timmy!” Dick bounded up to the pair.

Bruce had banned Dick from going into Tim’s room. But this wasn’t Tim’s room. This was Tim out and about. This was allowed… Or at least it hasn’t been specifically banned.

“You joining us for dinner? We can watch movies first! It’s only a couple of hours till supper!”

“Dick,” Tim raised his hanging head, “I don’t have the batarangs to deal with you right now!”

There was a snap in his tone and a glare in his eyes, even as he seemed to squint at Dick.

“What?” Dick jerked back.

“Ask Babs. She’ll get it!”

Jason seemed to realize that the conversation was over, as he started to help Tim up the stairs back to his room.

Leaving Dick watching them go, his head tilted to one side as he frowned.
“And I think Tim threatened me.”

“Wait, what?” Babs interrupted, “Tim wouldn’t do that. Even when he’s been furious with you, he’s never tried to harm you. He loves you too much.”

“I don’t think he does anymore.”

“He may be denying it. But he does. He does too much for you, to hate you.”

“He told me that he didn’t have a weapon to deal with me.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Would I lie?”

“Not about that. But that doesn’t mean that you aren’t mistaken.”

“He thought you would get it.”

“What did he say?”

“I told you.”

“No… What did he say exactly?”

“He said he didn’t have the batarangs to deal with me.”

“Oh… Oh! God, yeah… You misunderstood. He wasn’t threatening you.”

“Really? Because it sounded like a threat to me.”

“No… It’s a bit warped. But I get it. He wasn’t threatening you. He was telling you that he didn’t have the energy to deal with you.”

“What? I don’t get it.”

“You ever heard of the Spoon Theory?”

“No.”

“It’s a method used to describe living with disability or chronic pain. I’m not surprised that Tim knows about it, really. He probably heard about it when his dad was in recovery.”

“What is it?”

“Imagine waking up in the morning and having ten spoons. Now it costs you one spoon to get up and get dressed. One spoon to have cereal for breakfast. Three for a cooked breakfast, excluding the washing up. One for a microwave meal. Three for a cooked meal. One for having a shower. Two for a bath. Two for every household chore needed doing. Given all of that, can you get up, have three meals, do the washing up and a bath before going back to bed?”
“No. I don’t have enough spoons.”

“Exactly. Tim is currently recovering from a very serious illness and has multiple other conditions. What had he been doing before you came across him?”

“I don’t know. He was in a suit and had left with Jason. Jason was smartly dressed, but in Jason’s way, you know? Jeans with no holes in them, leather jacket, his good boots… You know, smart stuff… For Jason… Umm… They weren’t at WE, because Lucius promised not to let Tim do any work if he tried to go there. Remind him that he’s still on the sick list. So it had to be something else… And they went for food afterwards. Tim had chocolate and strawberries… Hold on… Tim was wearing a black suit.”

“So?”

“Tim never wears a black suit. He prefers dark blue. He only wears a black suit for… Babs, did he go near a cemetery?”

“Checking CCTV cameras… No. No sign of him going near any graveyards either. What are you thinking?”

“Jacob Stone, or whatever his name actually was. Tim hasn’t gotten to visit his grave yet. And he only wears black for funerals.”

“I get where you’re going. Jacob Stone was cremated before we even knew Tim was missing the first time. However, Tim did go to a lawyer’s office… Something to do with Stone’s estate?”

“Probably. So Tim was emotionally worn out. You can’t convince me that it wouldn’t be otherwise… But I don’t see why he wouldn’t be able to spend some time with me. I wasn’t asking for him to be energetic. Just watching a movie.”

“Dick,” Babs sighed, “I don’t know how to break it to you… But sometimes, your sheer enthusiasm and optimism is mentally exhausting. Personally I don’t blame Tim for not wanting to spend time with you if he was emotionally and physically exhausted. Because don’t even try to say that Tim used a wheelchair for the day. He’s got too much pride for that.”

“But it’s good to be enthusiastic and optimistic… Isn’t it?”

“Sometimes it can be a bit much. Especially if you don’t have the energy to match it. That’s the thing about you Dick, everyone wants to live up to your expectations for them. It’s not like Clark, where he is the unattainable goal we’re all aiming for. People don’t want to let you down, so they try to match what you think of them. And while we don’t always succeed, just trying makes us feel like we’re improving.”

“But if you’re already exhausted, you just feel like you’re failing. Okay, I get it. I don’t like it. And I’m not sure I agree with you. But I get what you’re saying. Give him his space… But he’s my little brother. He needs me.”

“Not right now. Right now he needs to know that you respect him enough to trust him to know what he needs. And that is space.”

“Barbie’s right.” Jason put in as he entered, “It got… Pretty intense… I think. Timmy’s wiped out.”

“How bad was it?”
“Not bad, but… I don’t want to break his confidence, but… He’s carrying a lot of guilt, a lot of pain, a lot of stress.”

“Stress? What’s stressing him out?” Dick frowned, “He only has to focus on getting better.”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s Tim, Dick.” Babs sighed, “He’s always multitasking. You don’t even want to know how much work I managed to dig through on his computers. He was taking on way too much before all of this started… He also had a good enough GPA that his teachers aren’t chasing him for his papers or threatening to throw him out of their courses… Apart from one jerkward, who I’m dealing with. Don’t worry.”

“Babs,” Jason looked at the screen, “Could you do me a favour?”

“Anything.”

“Could you see if someone’s staying in Gotham for a while? I think we need to know if they’re going to hang around.”

“Give me a name.”

“Parker.”

“Jaybird, I’m good, but I need a little more than that. Is that a first name? A last name? Are they male? Female?”

“Female. And it’s Parker. Just Parker. Like Madonna.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Dick interrupted, “Parker? The Parker? International thief, Parker? The only thief in the whole world who might be able to rival Selina in ability?”

“She went off the grid years ago.” Babs frowned, “There were rumours that she’d died! You know she’s in Gotham? How?”

“I saw her.”

“Where?”

“In the lawyer’s office.”

“What was she doing there, Little-Wing? Casing the place? That doesn’t jive. She’s strictly high end. There’s nothing in that place that should attract her.”

Jason went quiet.

“She was there for something to do with Tim?” Dick pressed slightly.

“I don’t want to break his confidence.”

“Is she any danger to Tim?”
“No.”

“Good…”

“Unless you count her calling him adorable.”

“Well, she isn’t wrong there.” Babs snickered.

“Why are you glaring at your laptop, Drake?” Damian inquired as he entered the room.

“The battery died.”

“Tt. Then just plug it in.”

“Alfred hasn’t let me have a charger.”

“I do not follow the logic in that denial.”

“I can only use my laptop until the battery dies. It limits how long I can work. While still allowing me to work. Very effective. If somewhat stress inducing. Constantly looking at the battery gauge. Can I help at all?”

“I thought you would be interested in the fact that my teacher gave me an A for my Shakespeare essay; although she informed me that she disagreed with the content.”

“Then why did you achieve an A? I’ve known teachers who managed to mark down essays that they disagreed with.”

“It was a well-researched, critical document. She did not approve of the view-point I took. However, as we were allowed to choose our own specific topics her dislike was irrelevant. In addition, it is well known that if I do not achieve a mark I agree with I will challenge the mark. I have challenged my mark successfully in History before. It resulted in a teacher being disciplined for potentially racist behaviours.”

“What was their problem?”

“We were tasked with writing an essay about the discovery of America. I wrote an essay about the Indigenous American people and how they were affected by the Colonial Invaders. My teacher, at the time, stated that they did not discover the country they were simply born here and were not negatively affected by the Colonisation of America. Instead he stated that they benefited from the Colonisation.”

“Completed bumpus. Good for you. Do you need anything?”

“What is that?” Damian pointed at the laptop.

“The keyring?” Tim lifted the small metal symbol up slightly, “The symbol is of the Horde in World of Warcraft. Not something I’m particularly into, but the keyring makes it easy to differentiate between my various snapdrives. What do you need?”
“One of the group, I have manage to ally myself with, today said something that I do not understand.”

“What was it?”

“It may have been the losing side…”

“Still not convinced it was the wrong one.” Tim finished, “It’s from a rather niche, but cult, TV series called Firefly… You’d probably enjoy it.”

“What is it about?”

“It’s hard to describe. Cowboys in space is probably the closest I could come. But there’s a lot else going on. The main character is Captain Malcolm Reynolds. Known as Mal.”

“What is his character like?”

“He’s a lost and broken soul. He fought in an intergalactic war. And was on the losing side. He was part of the Independents during the Battle of Serenity Valley. A sergeant assigned to command thirty men and women. It didn’t take long before he was the senior officer of two thousand. He managed to keep four hundred of them alive until the fighting stopped.”

“He did very well. I presume the battle went on for some time.”

“Yes. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Both sides decided to work out a Peace Treaty. While they were doing that, they left the soldiers in the Valley. Wounded and dying. Only a hundred and fifty survived to when the soldiers left. Of his original thirty men and women only himself and one other lived.”

“That is despicable treatment of soldiers. It should not be tolerated.”

“That was why Mal’s faith died there.”

“Would you show me this series? I presume it will take some time. I am willing to devote two hours a day to this task. How long will it take?”

“Not much more than a week. It’s a very short series. The film will add a bit of time on the end.”

“We will start tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Well done to everyone who figured out that Batarangs were Tim's version of Spoons!
Chapter 64

“Right,” Jason strode into Tim’s room, “The brat’s at school. We’re watching Kingsman. Although I don’t know why he can’t watch the sequel… Would it give him ideas as well?”

“Partly. But also it would cause him to be interested in the original.”

“Good point.”

“That and there’s a scene that I think would probably trigger him.”

“Oh… That bad?”

“Not really. But Damian wouldn’t take it well.”

“Okay… Now I’m not watching it on your small ass screen, when there’s a Media Centre downstairs. So get up. We’re going to slob on couches and eat popcorn. I might even have managed to talk Alfred into letting us have burgers and fries.”

“Give me a moment. I haven’t bothered to get fully dressed.”

Jason looked at Tim’s top half, which looked smart and professionally dressed.

“Then why get only half-dressed?”

“Because it looks slightly better on vidcalls. Particularly when presenting evidence in arraignments.”

“Ah…”

Jason had honestly forgotten that was today. He had forgotten that Tim would likely need to give evidence for it.

“Are you up for watching a film?”

“I’ll cope.”

“Not what I was asking.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not that bad really. Slobbing on a sofa and watching something pretty mindless. Not like it’s a documentary or anything I actually have to pay attention to.”

“I’ll find you some clothes. Any preferences?”

“Not really.”

“Any preferences? What do you want? What do you need?”
“Trousers, t-shirt, hoodie. Soft.”

Well, that wasn’t too hard.

Jason dug through a few of the drawers, until he found something suitable. They were all well-worn and battered.

They were also things he vaguely remembered seeing Tim wear before. Along with a pair of boxers, on the basis that they were probably fairly easy to get over the cast.

“Here.” Jason piled them on the bed, “Don’t bother about shoes. Not worth it, if you’re going to curl up under a blanket on a couch.”

“I need grip on the floors.”

“Your feet will do. And if they won’t, I’ll carry you. It’s not far. And to be fair you don’t weigh half as much as Dickie-bird does. And you should have seen the distance I had to carry him one time.”

“You don’t need to carry me. Just give me shoes.”

“No. Because it’s too much fuss when you’re not going outside. Come on… It’s not like the floor is dirty or anything. Alfred would never stand for it.”

“Okay.” Tim sighed, his shoulders rising and falling with the sigh, “Do I get privacy to change?”

“You get ten minutes.” Jason announced, “Just about enough time for me to go put the popcorn on and grab some drinks. Any preferences?”

“Not really.”

“Timmy… If you could have anything to drink at all what would you like?”

“There’s this Italian drink I like. San Pellegrino Aranciata Rossa. But we won’t have it.”

“I’ll check with Alfred. If nothing else he can get it in for you for later.”

“Don’t put yourself out.”

“Nah! It’s just a drink. Not anything difficult.”

Jason sauntered down to Alfred.

“Alfred,” Jason called out, “Tim and I are going to watch a film. I’m just going to sort some
popcorn and drinks… Do we have something called san pellegrino aranciata rossa? I think it’s something orange flavoured? It translates to red orange.”

“No. I am afraid I don’t, Master Jason. Is this a personal request?”

“Tim says he likes it. I hoped we had some for him.”

“I have not heard of it before, Master Jason. However, I will ensure that it is put on our next shopping list. In the meantime, perhaps you might tempt Master Tim with an Orangina? It used to be his favourite drink.”

“We have that? I’ve never seen anyone drinking it.”

“I make sure that we are always fully supplied, Master Jason. I will bring your refreshments to the Media Room, momentarily.”

“You’re the best, Alfred. The fucking best.”

“So what was the verdict for the Arraignment? I presume they’re going forward.” Jason asked as he looked for the right film on the TV screen.

“Yeah. They’ve got enough evidence. Although she did try for bail… At the same time… Which I thought was quite bold… Albeit smart.”

“I do hope, Master Tim, that she was unsuccessful in her plea.”

“The Judge declared that she would have a curfew, ankle monitor, Restraining Order and bail set at a million dollars. To be paid in cash. She’s not getting out.”

“No way.” Dick remarked from the doorway, “I checked. Her dad can’t raise that kind of money… Now, what are we watching?”

Jason watched Tim watch Dick. The eldest of the Robins sauntered into the room and carefully took a chair a decent distance away from where Tim was perched on the sofa. The twitch towards the sofa, while crossing in front of it, did not go unnoticed, simply unremarked.


“Okay.” Dick nodded, “Is there anything I should know before watching it?”

Jason kept his eyes on Dick as Tim quickly, but briefly, summarized Kingsman; without giving away most of the plot. In fact, Jason was fairly certain that when Dick watched the film, the twists in it, would still remain a surprise.
The film started, but before long Tim’s eyes were mostly closed.

“Work?” Jason signed quickly at Dick, using Robin code.

“Stakeout. Media.”

Jason considered it. It made sense really. Bruce would turn down any official police guard at this point. But Dick was a good compromise.

“Time?”

“Week.”

Jason settled back into his seat. At least he knew what was going on.

And he had a film to watch.

“Tell me what’s going on, Big-Bird.” Jason directly confronted Dick after Tim had hobbled back to his room.

“The police are nervous that the original kidnappers will try again.” Dick sighed, “There’s been some mutterings on the Dark Web. And they found it.”

“You mean, Babs found it and made sure they did.”

“Same thing… Anyway Babs didn’t have to lose her temper and lead them to it this time… So she says they’re getting better. So they decided to let me have a week off, while they try and negotiate a security detail.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to work.”

“True. But I wasn’t going to tell them that… Is the first film where you got that bar thing from?”

“Yeah. Thought it’d cheer him up.”

“Okay, now I’m going to have to watch the first one… Is… Is that how you managed to reach out to him? How you got him to trust you?”
“No. I don’t think he really trusts me yet. He just doesn’t dis-trust me. I listened. I opened up. I told him things I didn’t want to tell anyone. I asked questions about what he told me. I proved I was listening when he talked. Not just when it was about something I was interested in or was relevant to me. I listened and I learned.”

“You don’t think he trusts you? He talks to you.”

“Because I talk to him. And when he tells me to walk away. I walk away. I give him the same amount of respect you have given every single one of your significant others. I don’t force him to give me space or time… Basically I don’t act like a creep.”

“And you think I do.”

“I think you don’t know where his boundaries are. Because he’s never enforced them with you. He’s always let you trample all over them… But you didn’t do badly today.”

“What?”

“You gave him space. You didn’t join him on the sofa. Even though I could tell you wanted to. You didn’t touch the blanket when he pulled it over himself. You gave him space.”

“And that will help?”

“Keep doing it. Let him know that you know he has boundaries. And maybe… Just maybe… He’ll let you get closer. I can’t promise anything. I don’t control him. And I wouldn’t want to.”

“No. I wouldn’t want to either. He deserves to make his own decisions… I just… I just want to help him.”

“Then let him make the decisions about when you can help and with what.”

“You still keeping all his secrets?”

“No. I don’t know all his secrets. But I know some. And those I know, I’m keeping close.”

“Look after them. He needs someone he can trust. Even if only a little.”

“It just hurts that it took so long for us to get to this point.”
Chapter 65

Damian frowned a little at Dick, when he asked if he could join in watching Serenity a few days later. But didn’t argue against it.

Tim merely shrugged; already stretched out on the sofa. A blanket tucked around him and Damian’s cat perched upon his chest. One of Tim’s hands was absent-mindedly stroking the creature.

Damian was leaning against the base of the sofa; Titus’ head in his lap as he held the remote ready to start the film.

“What’s it about?” Dick asked.

Damian glanced up at Tim.

“You explain.” Tim suggested, “It will be a good test of your recollection and explanation skills.”

Damian nodded sharply, before turning to Dick and laying out a brief explanation of the characters and their situation.

It was a very succinct explanation and somewhat reminiscent of Tim’s from the previous occasion. However Dick bit his tongue, before he mentioned that.

He simply settled down to watch.

After many years Dick had developed the ability to see very well out of the corners of his eyes. So he was able to keep an eye on Tim throughout the movie.

Able to watch as shoulders loosened. As the cat seemed to fall asleep. As breathing deepened. As
the moving hand stilled.

… As the cat nudged the hand to get it to move again, before giving up and letting it rest on his back.

Okay, so Tim had probably fallen asleep again.

But the film was good. And there were quite a few messages in it that Damian could do with learning…

And some that Dick was finding very relevant to himself as well.

123456789

“Bruce, you available for a meeting today?” Lucius wandered into Bruce’s commandeered office.

“Nothing urgent. Who’s it with?”

“McCaffery Enterprises.”

“The people Tim had a lunch meeting with, before…”

“Before his first kidnapping… And I’m still not happy about how that’s how I’m currently marking time.”

“Join the club. What do they want? Tim said he shut them down.”

“Well, considering that he got taken right after, they’re trying again. Thinking that he didn’t’ tell us what he thought of them.”

“Right. Anything I need to know?”

“McCaffery’s a closet-misogynist according to Tim. Probably racist as well. Certainly classist. He’s not really a nice person. He appreciates results though. Very results orientated. I’ve heard rumours that his own son might be in trouble.”

“How old?”

“Oh, McCaffery Junior? He’s older than Dick.”

“I don’t remember meeting him. He’s called Josiah, right? Josiah Junior.”

“Yes. Josiah Westley McCaffery Senior and Junior. I always have felt rather sorry for the younger. JJ is such a predictable nickname.”
“Yeah. He’s in trouble? Part of the company I presume.”

“I can’t remember his department, but it’s not been very successful recently. Suspicion is that it won’t take long before he’s moved to a new, more successful department, or simply demoted… Bets are on demotion. Although I’m betting on disguised demotion. It wouldn’t be good for his son to be visibly demoted.”

“Ruin the image. Got it.” Bruce sighed, “I am not looking forward to this.”

“Nor am I. We’re doing it together. If I’d known they had organised a meeting with Tim I’d have been there with him myself the first time. I don’t trust anyone from that company.”

“Dirty?”


“Oh, he’s one of those. Believes in the power of a handshake.”

“Exactly. And then he’ll interpret the words used to suit his own agender.”

“Got it. How long till the meeting?”

“Half an hour.”

“What?”

“They sprung it on me too… At least I’m fairly certain they did. Only my PA went on paternity leave last week. So I’m not entirely certain that the temp didn’t lose something in the hand-over.”

“Did we send something in congratulations?”

“Tim organised a card and a suitable gift… Rather nice choice of a nursery clock and a gift card for nappies.”

“Sensible. I’m told you can never have too many.”

“Brucie, my dear boy, when are you planning on getting married?” McCaffery asked over a glass of wine and a rather excellent tiramisu.

“What do you mean? I don’t really think I need to right now. I’m focused on looking after my children.”

“Ah, but they’re not really your children, are they?”

“They are my children. What else would they be?”

“Parasites, Brucie. Parasites. I mean it was honourable and kind of you to take them all in.
But lets be fair, none of them are really worthy of being your heir. The closest who comes to it is Timothy. And the Drake’s always were Nouveau Riche. It was bound to pass onto their son. He’s trying hard, but he’ll never be one of Us. Good job on organising that kidnapping to keep him in his place.”

Bruce tasted iron in his mouth as he tightened his grip on his cutlery and pondered just how much damage he could manage with just the utensils he held.

“And the others? Well, it was so charitable of you to take in a Circus brat and a Street Rat. But they’ll never be worthy enough to inherit your wealth. What would they do with it? Waste it. That’s what. They don’t know how to take care of that sort of money. They don’t understand the responsibility and burden that such wealth and status affords. No, what you need to do is marry. And marry well. My daughter would be a suitable woman. Educated enough to have intellectual conversation, but not too well. No one likes a woman smarter than them.”

Bruce manfully restrained himself from mentioning Dick’s love for the highly intellectual Barbara Gordon.

“Then how would you class my Damian?”

“Oh, Brucie, Brucie, Brucie… A bastard is never an heir. Never mind a mixed race bastard. It was honourable and charitable and generous… But you don’t have to make him your heir. Bastards don’t belong at the same table as us. You should know that, Brucie.”

“They’re my children.”

“But they don’t have to be your heirs. And they don’t have to be your only children. My daughter would be a good choice for you. I’ll introduce the two of you at the next Gala.”

Bruce managed to get through the short period of time before it was polite to leave. Lucius in almost perfect step beside him. The two moved in silence until they were settled in the car.

“Probably racist?” Bruce raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, so Tim understated it. I’ve never met the man before… Although I can probably guess why now.”

“None of my children are ever to go near him again. Do you understand me? I don’t care what line Tim feeds us.”

“Understood.”

“I think we have seriously underestimated the sheer amount of crap that Tim has had to put up with. He needs a bonus… Or maybe a raise… Maybe both.”
“I can probably swing the bonus, but not the raise. I’d have to get it past the Board. And considering that they’ve got a smattering of racism and misogyny amongst them, I’d never manage it.”

“Okay. Go for the bonus… And we’ll work on replacing the Board with more tolerant people.”

“Already on Tim’s agenda.”

“Good. Then I can support and aid him… I’d best find out what his plan is. So I don’t mess it all up for him… Please tell me that McCaffery’s daughter is older than Tim.”

“She’s about Dick’s age. So approximately there’s the same age gap between the two of you as there was between McCaffery and his second wife.”

“How many wives has he had?”

“He lost his third in a mugging about two years ago… I’ve heard rumours that he’s looking for a fourth… Aiming in the same age as his daughter though.”

“And is she anything like him?”

“Not from what I’ve heard. I’m told she’s a kindergarten teacher in New York. Only turns up for the obligatory Gala’s and family holidays with her father.”

“Good. Probably best to warn her about her father’s plans… Lucius, how much money would it take to buy out McCaffery?”

“Depends? Now? More than I’d be willing to invest. In six months? You could manage it easily. I may have just identified Tim’s long-term strategy against them. I was rather confused at the number of new hires that had come over from McCaffery. I think he’s stealing their best to weaken them. He doesn’t want to merge with them. He wants to them to be an acquisition. So they have to be weaker.”

“Typical Tim. We need to talk… Or rather you do. I promised him space.”

“I’ll deal with it. You go home and hug your kids… We’ll crush him into the ground, Bruce. I promise you that.”

“No one insults my children to my face… Or behind my back… Or at all really.”

“Understood.”

Have we got any further on the original Drake kidnapping?” Montoya sighed, as she sank down into her chair.

“Nothing,” Allen returned, “But that’s the way things go sometimes.”

“I know. It just feels like we’re missing something. Like it’s right there and we can’t see it.”
“It sucks when that happens. Shelve it and move on. We’ll go back to it before long. But we have other cases.”

“We always do… We always will.”

“Hey, Montoya!” Romy called out, “Thought you said that that kidnapper chick wasn’t getting out until the trial?”

“She’s not. Family can’t post that kind of bail.”

“Well, someone did.”

Chapter End Notes

This story is probably going on a temporary hold. I'm taking part in Nanowrimo this year and need to focus on that. However, it will *not* be abandoned. I will have a new chapter by Christmas at the *latest*

Thanks for your understanding.
Three heads snapped to look at Jason as he burst into Tim’s room, Dick only a heartbeat behind him.

“Whoa!” Conner blinked, “What’s the rush?”

“Timmy,” Jason focused on the only person that mattered right then, “It’s Tina… She…”

“She got bail.” Tim nodded, turning back to his computer, “I know.”


“He doesn’t.” Dick agreed, well accustomed to interpreting Speeder-speech, “Babs checked. And she crashed any attempt he made at running online donation schemes.”


“Do you know who?” Conner frowned.

“I don’t know everything.”

“Despite all evidence to the contrary, bro.” Bart snorted, “You think she’ll leave you alone?”

“I don’t think she’s stupid enough to risk anything right now. She needs to present a picture-perfect image to the world if she wants a chance to walk away from this. And she knows it.”

“Dude, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Tim looked confused, “Con… She’s an expert. I only spotted her, because I’m used to seeing snakes for what they are. I’m Gotham through and through. And Upper Gotham at that.”

“Meaning what?” Jason frowned.

“That there’s more political manoeuvring at the average Upper Class Gala than there is in a full month of street level activity. How else do you think things got so bad before Batman? I learned to navigate its waters before I lost my first tooth. You don’t want to mess with the sharks.”

“How’d you get charging cables for that thing?” Jason blinked, suddenly spotting the cable draped over bedspread, “I thought Alfred was keeping them away from you?”

“He was.”

“You think we’d let our bro go cable-less?” Bart blinked, “Because no way, dude.”
“Just no. No way.” Conner shook his head, “Not after last time.”

“Oh _god_ no!” Bart shuddered, “We are _not_ doing that again.”

“Last time?” Dick blinked, “Kori would have told me about something like that.”

“One, that explains a _lot_.” Tim returned calmly, “And two, it was in the Young Justice days.”

“Young Justice?” Jason frowned, “And what happened?”

“Young Justice was our team before the Titans.” Conner returned, “And no. We’re not talking about that incident. I still have nightmares about that.”

“Think the Titans only with less adult supervision… Less restraint… More hormones… And worse parents.” Dick put in, “No-one knows exactly what they got up to. And most of us didn’t ask.”

“Who was _on_ this team?”

“These three, Wondergirl, Arrowette… The smoke girl… What was her name again?”

“Secret.” Bart returned.

“Come on,” Jason whined, “I’m a Bat. You know I want to know.”

“No.” Conner shook his head, “That was her name Secret. It’s what we called her. We also had a few others.”

“I remember one… Duchess?” Dick suggested, “There weren’t that many of you.”

“Empress.” Tim corrected, “Also Lil’ Lobo… Or Slobo as he preferred. There were more of us than you realized. I mean there was only ever the one Parent’s Evening that I remember.”

“Suddenly I am so glad that half your team retired.” Dick shuddered, “I mean I remember what you were like at the _start_. Is it true that Arrowette yelled at the League?”

“According to Cassie, yeah.” Conner nodded, “They wouldn’t tell us what about. And if there is any footage… Tim won’t let us watch it. I don’t know what happened… But the girls went from fighting each other to being best friends… I don’t even know why they were fighting.”

“Dude,” Bart blinked, “You didn’t get it? Seriously?”

“He was oblivious.” Tim shrugged, “Took a while for you to spot it though.”

“True.” Bart nodded, “Kon… Cassie was crushing on you back then. Crushing on you _big_ time! And you were only interested in Cissie… It was a car crash and we couldn’t look away.”

“Really? I don’t remember that.”

“You wouldn’t.” The two smaller teens chorused.

“Okay… So, you’re okay with it Tim?… With Christina being out?” Conner focused back on the main topic, “Because… I know I wouldn’t be.”

“She can’t get to me. I won’t let her hurt me. She has no power over me.”
“Tim… Timmy,” Dick spoke softly, “Did she… Did she… Did she rape you?”

“Why do you want to know?” Conner challenged, “Doesn’t Tim have enough to deal with? Doesn’t Tim have a right to his own secrets?”

“Yes… But it’s not easy recovering from something like that.” Dick breathed.

“How many women have you helped through something like that?”

“How many have you saved and just handed over to services?” Conner took over, “You planning on just handing Tim over to one of those? To just walking away? Again?”

“No.” Dick shook his head, “I was hoping we could recover together.”

The room stopped. Stillness even affecting the motions of a Speedster.

“You?” Tim slid his laptop sideways off his lap, as he straightened up, “I never… When? … Who?”

There was a quiet menace in Tim’s voice. He never raised his voice above a hushed whisper, but there was a threat in it.

“Tarantula.” Dick confessed, “She’s dead. She can’t hurt me.”

“It never stops the hurt.”

“Did she hurt you?”

“No… No, I managed to talk her out of it.”

“How?” Jason gasped.

“She wanted money. My money. She was going for the baby chain.”

“You remember when you set that up.”

“Your Will.” Conner started sniggering, “I remember when you set that up.”

“Oh God!” Bart snorted, “The lawyer thought you were nuts!”

“I still can’t believe you wrote that clause in.”

“I can’t believe the lawyer let you.”

“So… She didn’t… She didn’t…” Dick whispered.

“No.” There was something along the lines of compassion in Tim’s eyes, “No, she didn’t. She hit me. She threatened me. She verbally abused me… But she didn’t rape me. Is that what you wanted to know?”
“I wanted you safe. I wanted you happy… Are you happy?”

“I am… Content. I have things I need to do. I have people I need to talk to. I can currently only do half of what I want to do. But I will recover. I will endure. I will rise. And I will be stronger than before.”

“I’m… I’m sorry, Tim. I failed you. I failed you a million times over and in a million different ways. Looking back, I failed to understand you the way I should have. I failed to read you properly. I was always focused on something else, believing that you would tell me when you needed me… I forgot that you never do. Because you’ve been trained not to. Because you only ask for help from those you are certain you will receive it. And I have failed to be one of those people. I failed you when I didn’t listen to your concerns about Damian. I failed you when I didn’t believe you about Bruce. I failed you when I got your friends to try and convince you to get mental help… Mental help that you didn’t need as badly as I thought you did. And I’m not saying that you don’t have mental issues… We can’t be a part of the cape and cowl community without having mental issues. I just believed that you had had a larger break from reality than was survivable without assistance. I should have trusted you. I should have had your back the way you have always, always had mine. I screwed up. And I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I don’t deserve your trust.

“But this is my promise to you… I will not do this again. I will not let you down again. If it looks like I am not taking your concerns seriously enough… If it looks like I am not listening to you… If it looks like I’m not paying attention… If it looks like I am failing you in any way shape or form… Tell me Norbury. And I will listen. That’s my promise to you, Cindy.”

Silence echoed around the room.

“You understand what you are saying?” Tim challenged.

“Yes. And I am willing to abide by whatever rules or restrictions you impose. This relationship that we have moving forward… It is by your rules. You set the limits. You tell me to stop… You changed… Because of what I did… Because of what I didn’t do.”

“Why now?”

“Because I was blind. And I have multiple people bash it into my head, multiple times that I have been ignoring your needs and wants in favour of my own. I wasn’t coping after Bruce… After Bruce… I wasn’t coping. And I needed to cope. I had to. I didn’t like feeling helpless.

“And Damian needed me in a way that I needed to be needed. It’s not your fault. He was just easier to help. And I latched onto that. Ignoring your needs, because it was easier for me. I’m sorry. That was my fault. I shouldn’t have done that. Everyone grieves differently. I should have helped you as well as Damian. I screwed up. And I hurt you, because I screwed up. I left you with nowhere and no-one to turn to. I took everyone away from you. And that was wrong.

“I left you without a support network. And that was actually worse than pulling away from
Jason, Conner and Bart were flicking their gazes between the two. Dick on his knees, just outside the doorway; still officially obeying Bruce’s orders. Tim was sat upright in the bed, looking not too dissimilar to historical images of invalid royals sitting in their beds.

“I’m not sure if I can forgive you.”

“That’s okay. You don’t have to.”

“I don’t know if I can forget either.”

“That’s okay. You don’t have to… Thank you for listening to me… I enjoyed watching the movies with you… You have good taste.”

Dick rose and walked away slowly away. He didn’t look back, but it was clear that he wanted to. That he wanted to be called back.

But he wasn’t.

“That…” Jason broke the long silence, “That wasn’t what I expected to happen.”

“What did you expect?” Conner put in.


“Yeah.” Jason nodded, “That’s what we were both expecting, I think… But… He’s serious about this, Timmy.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Look around you, Timster. I didn’t decorate this room. B didn’t. It’s not Alfred’s style. He would put your books on the shelves and your clothes in the drawers. But he wouldn’t put weapons on the walls in a bedroom. You know that. How many times has he told you off for Sneaking anything like a weapon upstairs? And Damian wouldn’t think about stuff like that. I didn’t… This was all Dick.”

Tim looked around the room.

“How did he know what I like? I’ve changed a lot since we were brothers.”

“Well someone had to help me search your place for clues… By the way, you really need to
leave us more obvious clues. We’re not all as smart as you. I completely missed your crucial clue for your password… It was Alfred who pieced it all together… After the fact. And I hate mystery stories, which is why I didn’t look any further.”

“I’ll remember that for next time.”

“Dude!” Bart protested, “There is not going to be a next time! Nope! Nada! Zilch! No way!”

“I’m with Bart.” Conner nodded, “Never again, Tim. Please? I swear I aged twenty years with just the first. To say nothing of the second… I mean I know Christina. And I never even suspected that she could be capable of anything. Never mind what she actually did! I should have spotted what she was capable. I should have known. I should have protected you. I took you to a safe place! And basically handed you over to a sociopathic monster!”

“No.” Tim’s voice was firm, even though it was quiet, “You aren’t responsible for what other people do. You took me somewhere that, in your experience, had always been safe for you. It was your sanctuary. Your safe place. The fact that there was a danger there for me, is not on you. She chose to do that. Not you. I still trust you. I still trust your judgement.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“You were wrong once. About one person. Who has been proven to be a Master Manipulator. I think I’m allowed to forgive you.”

“Okay… But don’t you dare let Ma Kent off that easily.”

“Wait!” Jason interrupted, “Where does she fit into all of this?”

“She was trying to push me and Christina together.” Tim shrugged, “Thought we’d be a good couple. She’s a Yenta at heart.”

“Yenta?” Bart blinked.

“Jewish match-maker.” Tim replied easily, “She thought that we matched. She just didn’t realize how broken I am and how warped Christina is.”

“You’re not broken.” Conner protested.

“Yeah, he is.” Jason leaned back against the door frame, “We all are. Every Bat is broken. We’re just all broken in different ways.”

“I’m not a Bat.”

“Yes, you are. If I can be welcomed back… After everything I’ve done. Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Because I was never wanted.”

“Maybe not. But you were needed. And that’s the important thing. We needed you. Even if we didn’t know it. And I like to think… You needed us… I don’t like to think about you all alone in that empty house of yours.”

“I was used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have had to be.”
“But I was. I’m tougher than you think.”

“I already think you’re made of titanium. So I don’t see how.” Jason shrugged, “Look, we screwed up. I was screwed up when I started screwing up. But you forgave me. You set me free… And that probably wasn’t the best decision at that point… But you were looking out for me. And I appreciated and appreciate it.”

Tim looked away.

“Okay, this is getting way too serious.” Bart interrupted the silence, “Anyone want some more pie?”

“Pie?” Jason blinked, “Where did you get pie from?”

“Ma Kent’s idea of an apology.” Conner shrugged, “It’s good pie though. I reckon I can milk it for at least another dozen, if I play it right.”

“Superman would be appalled at you… Pass the pie.” Jason stated.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for the support in my NaNoWriMo this year.

Unfortunately for you all, although I've won, it's a piece of Original Fiction that I hope to publish one day. So it's not going to appear here.
Damian was perched on the window seat in Tim’s room; apparently doing his art homework, using Tim as a model.

He could tell that Tim didn’t quite believe the excuse, but the CEO wasn’t going to call him on it.

And to be fair, it was a pretty lame excuse. However, Damian couldn’t be bothered to come up with a better one. It wasn’t worth the effort. Tim would see through it anyway. Why bother?

“Do you have any suggestions for which fandom I should explore next?”

“I have one…” Tim was strangely tentative, “I wouldn’t have suggested it before… I don’t think you were in the right place for it before. And I think you wouldn’t have understood a lot of the deeper messages.”

“However, you have changed your mind?”

“You have matured. You have grown. I think you might be better placed for it now.”

“Is there anything I need to be aware of before I start watching it? Presuming that it does have a watchable format.”

“It’s a TV series.”

“I would have appreciated a warning about the true nature of River Tam. Should I be prepared for other such surprises in this series?”

“Don’t judge it. It’s a cartoon, but there’s a lot of stuff going on. There is no film… No matter what anyone says or even what the internet says. It does not exist.”

Damian quickly managed to draw the conclusion that the film was a sore topic, and not something to bring up around Tim. However, he would probably go off and find it later.

“You took River very well. I’m sorry, I didn’t consider the parallels as much as I should have. I thought of it more along the lines of someone being experimented on after being raised normally for a long period of time… You always make me think more of X-23.”

“I have not heard of this X-23.” Damian stated.

“Yeah, that’s not a good place to start. It’s a very convoluted world and I wouldn’t advise diving in at the deep end there… Let’s just go through Avatar first.”

“I was of the belief that Avatar was a film. I am certain that Grayson has mentioned it
before and that Gordon was impressed by the CGI.”

“No. Sorry for the confusion. There is Avatar the film. But there is also, and more importantly, Avatar: the Legend of Aang. Sometimes called Avatar or AtLA for short.”

“Is there anything else I should be aware of?”

“You will probably find a character early on that you think I associate with you. You’re right, but for the wrong reasons. They are just as much a product of their history as everyone is. However, it takes quite some time for that history to become known. So don’t get angry with me and don’t judge them until you know more of their past.”

“Do you believe I will enjoy the series?”

“I think it’s got a lot of lessons you will appreciate. A lot of messages you will agree with. And a lot of things you will like. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“Very well, we will begin tomorrow upon my return from school. I presume there are more episodes than your last suggestion?”

“This one made three seasons. There’s enough content there. Plus, if you like it, there’s the bonus sequel.”

It was unusually formal around the Kent dining room table. Conner was being unusually quiet. Clark wasn’t quite sure how to broach the subject.

“I’m sorry, Conner.” Martha spoke up, “I didn’t realize.”

“I know.”

“I wouldn’t have let her in if I’d known.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you mad at me?”

“Because Tim wasn’t comfortable, but you kept exposing him to her.”

“They never interacted here. He wouldn’t agree to.”

“That doesn’t matter. He was uncomfortable. And you let her come here.”

“It would have been impolite to turn her away. And besides, I didn’t know she was dangerous.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point?”
“The point Martha,” Jon sighed, “Is that you ignored Tim’s wishes. He was a guest in our house and you didn’t grant him the dignity of keeping his privacy.”

“He wasn’t asking for much.” Conner put in, “Privacy and a safe place.”

“She didn’t mean any harm.” Clark countered.

“But she didn’t have any respect either.” Conner got up from the table, “I can’t do this. I can’t sit here and pretend that it doesn’t mean anything. You know what I think the absolute worst thing is?……”

No one spoke.

“Tim doesn’t blame her. Doesn’t even think it’s worth getting angry about. Doesn’t care. But I know that Christina couldn’t have found out how much Tim is worth without knowing his name! You didn’t have to give her that. Just call him Tim.”

“She asked.”

“But you didn’t have to answer. You were trying to set the two of them up.”

“I thought she could help fix him.”

“Tim doesn’t need fixing!” Conner went to smash his hand on the table, only stopping, because Clark caught the blow.

“He is broken.” Clark chided.

“But he doesn’t need fixing. He needs to heal! And that’s totally different.”

“Then she could have helped him to……”


“He’s not just hurt physically.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I’m blind to his mental issues? But I think it’s arrogant and foolish to believe that a romantic relationship can just heal it. That a relationship built on one person being broken and the other healing them can ever be equal? That the relationship would become anything other than abusive.”

“I didn’t know that Christina was abusive. I couldn’t believe that she could be abusive.”

“That doesn’t matter! Emotional abuse is still abuse. A relationship built on one person fixing another leads people to becoming dependent on each other. So that they aren’t independent anymore. And Tim’s independence? That’s one of the greatest things about him. The fact that he can do so much, all on his own… But that he knows when to ask for help. If he’d needed help… I have to have faith that he would ask for it.”

“People don’t always know what they need.”

“But it isn’t our job to force it on them… I read a book once that had the line: we’re the
kind that gives people what they know they really need, not what we think they ought to want… He’s smart enough to know what he needs. So we shouldn’t force what we think they want on them. Otherwise we’re just being… Just being…”

“Arrogant.” Clark breathed.

“Yes! Arrogant! It’s not our job to give people what we think they want. It’s not our job to decide what people need. It’s our job to ask them and listen to what they say.”

“I do!”

“No, you don’t. Because if you did, you would have let him be. You wouldn’t have let Christina come in here… I can’t do this. I’m going back to the Tower. I’ll try again next week.”

Conner turned and walked away. A quick glance at the floor, from Clark showed that his feet weren’t touching the floor.

Bruce wandered down into the Cave. Damian was cutting his way through various targets, without remorse and with the emotionless expression on his face that meant he was hiding anger.

“Damian,” Bruce called out, “Are you alright?”

“I am fine, Father.”

“Then why are you angry?”

“I am not angry.”

“Damian, I can tell that you’re angry. What is the matter?”

“I am not angry. I am… Disappointed.”

“Disappointed?”

“Zuko made a choice I am not pleased about. I understand why he made the choice he did. I can see the logic behind the choice. However, it was the wrong decision. My frustration is that I cannot change his decision.”

Blinking in surprise at the level of maturity Damian was showing, Bruce backed off from the discussion. Returning to the computer, where Dick and Jason were working.

“Did I miss hearing about a kid in his class called Zuko?”
“No.” Dick shook his head, “Zuko’s a cartoon character that Tim got Dami watching. Really great series. Surprised I hadn’t found it before actually. Anyway Zuko’s a brilliantly complicated character, that Dami’s really started emphasizing with.”

“Timmy done good.” Jason snorted, “Never thought the Demon-Brat would understand that people can be more than they appear. That he would be able to see why a person had made the decisions they had. That even if they were wrong that there was a logic behind it… And Timmy got him do it with a cartoon character!”

“Damian,” Bruce called out, “If Tim agrees, you can skip practice and watch some more episodes tonight. Maybe the situation with Zuko changes for the better in the next few episodes.”

Damian was gone in a moment.

“It’s nice to see him acting like a kid.” Bruce smiled after his disappearing son.
A fair warning to you all.

This was meant to be a short transition chapter...

The characters had other ideas.

“Damian,” Tim spoke up as an episode was running the credits, “You planning to work at WE on Friday? I know your school is closed then for teacher training.”

“That is my plan.”

“I intend to come in with you for a few hours.”

“Why?”

“There are some tasks I need to do. And I can only do them in my office.”

“Tim,” Dick spoke up, “I’m not trying to stop you or anything, but are you fit enough for that? I mean… You’ve been through a lot.”

“I am not planning on going down to R&D or leaving my office, unless it’s to go into Tam’s. I have no meetings scheduled. I just need access to certain things that I don’t have access to here. I am fit enough for this.”

“Okay.” Dick backed down.

“You swear that you have nothing else planned, Drake?” Damian frowned.

“Nothing scheduled. I literally have no intention of going anywhere other than my office and maybe Tam’s office.”

“Then I agree.” Damian nodded, “Provided you stick to that promise.”

Tim simply nodded in agreement, before playing the next episode.

“Tim’s planning on coming in on Friday.” Bruce confessed to Lucius, “Is there anything he can’t do at home?”

“Not really.” Lucius shrugged, “But I don’t think that’s the point.”
“Then what is?”

“He’s been basically trapped in the Manor since he got rescued… You thought he might have cabin fever?”

Bruce opened his mouth, paused, closed it. Paused once again.

“Okay, that’s actually fair.”

“He probably just wants to get out for a bit. I mean I don’t blame him.”

“Nor do I. He’s either in his room or Damian’s semi-bullied him into the media room to watch something… Or Jason actually. The pair of them seem to have been covering the social interaction portion as much as possible.”

“That’s good. I do worry about him, you know.”

“I know. We all do. Any idea what paperwork he’ll be able to do when he comes in? If we can get the worst of it done for him…”

“He can relax a bit… There’s not much really. I’ve been fielding most of his work for a while now. Most of it’s sorted.”

“Most?”

“There’s one piece that’s confusing me. It’s a HR issue though. So Tim shouldn’t have to worry about it.”

“HR issue? What’s going on?” Bruce leaned forward.

“There’s a pattern of sexual harassment reports against one employee.”

“So? What’s the issue? Discipline. Warn. Fire.”

“It’s not so simple. All the reports are anonymous. And HR has interviewed every female in the department. None of them have admitted ever feeling threatened or harassed by Benjamin Key.”

“Key? I know him. Mid-to-high level manager. Specialist in computers and security. Married with two kids… Both adopted, right?”

“That’s right. Stacey and Adam. Lovely pair of kids.”

“But the reports keep coming?”

“Yes. Every other week there’s a new report. But no-one’s stepping up to say anything.”

“You can’t be certain they’re not false accusations.”

“Exactly. Every report is basically the same. He gets them alone and then harasses them. Only he has a legitimate reason to get people on their own. It’s literally part of his job!”
“Great. He’s had the Harassment Seminars?”

“Twice since these reports came in. He knows that there’s been anonymous reports. But the reports keep coming. An none of the females that interact with him have any issues when interviewed. According to the HR department, they actually seemed to think it was funny that he was under suspicion.”

“Anything else I ought to know?”

“He’s the WE employee who got went to the Brothel.” Lucius sighed.

“Ah. So, we know he’s not happy at home… I wonder if his wife knows… Gabriella, if I remember correctly.”

“There’s always been tension in that family. I don’t know if Gabriella knows about his infidelity. But it wouldn’t surprise me either way.”

“He’s someone we need to keep an eye on. If he’s willing to pay… I don’t know how far he will go.”

“Might be worthwhile opening an investigation in the future.” Lucius smiled.

A knock on the door interrupted them.

“Mister Fox?” A blonde peered round the door, “Sorry, sir, I didn’t realize you were in a meeting. I’ll come back later.”

“No. Come on in.” Bruce smiled, “Don’t mind me. Just two old friends catching up. And you are?”

“Clara Smith, sir. From the Secretarial Pool. I was asked to bring up this file?”

She held it up.

“Thank you, Clara.” Lucius motioned at her, “Just put it on my desk.”

She put it down and then turned to do.

“Clara,” Bruce frowned, “May I ask for your opinion on something?”

“Of course, sir. But first, who are you?”

“I’m Bruce Wayne. And I was wondering if you have met Benjamin Key? And if so, what is your opinion of him?”
“Benjamin Key? I wouldn’t want to get anyone into trouble.”

“You wouldn’t be.” Lucius lent forward, “We’re just trying to get a read on him. And well… Secretaries know everything.”

“Well… I’ll be honest… He’s always come across to me as a little… Well, I get a little bit of a gay vibe off of him.”

“His wife and two kids would speak against that.” Lucius snorted, “But thank you for your candid honesty… Are you sure that you have to leave at the end of the week?”

“I’m sorry, Mister Fox. I don’t have a choice in the matter. My family situation isn’t something I can change.”

“Well, we’ll miss you.”

“Thank you, Mister Fox.”

She shut the door behind her as she left.

“That wasn’t much help.” Bruce sighed.

“She’s not been here long. Shame we’re losing her so soon. She’s got great interpersonal skills according to the reports I’ve been getting… Anyway, you all set up for that factory inspection on Friday?”

“Yes. I just… Can it be put off? So I can be here when Tim is?”

“Not really. It’s been on the books for about four months. Tim was originally scheduled to do it. And besides, Bruce, you don’t want to crowd Tim. Give him some space. He’ll be safe here. Don’t worry.”

“Can’t help it… But I’ll try to tone it down a little.”

“Damian,” Tim leaned back in the car, “Could you do me a favour today?”

“What do you require, Drake?”

“You’re scheduled to work in the main canteen again today. Could you work in the Secretarial Pool instead?”

“Why should I?”

“It’s Hannah Gemmell’s seventieth birthday today. She’s been part of WE for years. Started basically straight out of secretarial school, as it was then. She was working when Bruce was a kid. When your grandfather, Thomas Wayne, was a child… It would mean a lot to her, to
meet you. Especially today.”

“It would be sensible to honour a woman who has served our family for so long.”

“And it’s Clara Smith’s last day. I think she would also appreciate meeting part of the family, before she moves on.”

“That is something I can agree with. I will work in the Secretarial Pool today. However, I do not know what use I will be. I do not know how to be a secretary.”

“They don’t need another secretary. And I wouldn’t throw you in at the deep end like that. However, they could use an office boy. To make tea and coffee. Fetch the biscuits. Run paper around. Basically, be a goffer. Go for this. Go for that.”

“That is acceptable. In addition, I will be able to observe the duties of a secretary, so that I know what is to be expected of them. Therefore, in the future I will be able to assist them better.”

“Exactly.”

“I will be instructing Miss Fox in how to care for you in your current state.” Damian pronounced.

“That will be a little difficult.” Tim snorted, “Tam’s currently assisting Bruce with his factory inspection. I asked her to keep him on track.”

“Then who will be assisting you today?”

“I have organised a temporary replacement. Although they will simply be on call for me. A goffer of my own, if you will.”

“I presume you have chosen a person of a suitable calibre?”

“He is perfectly suited to my needs today.”

Damian nodded in acceptance as they arrived at WE.

123456789

Damian found the work in the Secretarial Pool strangely soothing. It wasn’t taxing and the gentle conversation of the secretaries was very calming. Albeit a lot of gossip.

“You sure you’ve got to leave us, Clara?”

“I don’t have much choice in the matter. Family situation.”

“What’s happened?”

“My sister’s pregnant.”
“Congratulations! What is she having?”

“She hasn’t said. But that’s not the problem. The problem is that she’s got complications.”

“Complications? Like what?”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“Preeclampsia and gestational diabetes. At least that’s what I was told.”

“Oh no!”

“And you’re going to take care of her. Of course. You’re a good sister.”

“Hell no! I’m not going to take care of her. That’s what the hospital is for. I’m going to stop my brother-in-law from falling to pieces.”

“He’s worried about her. That makes sense.”

“Surely he’s listening to the doctor? If they say it’s okay then…”

“That’s just the thing. This is his second marriage. His first ended after his son died in hospital of a rare medical condition. He can’t cope with hospitals. And this is pushing all his buttons.”

“Oh poor man.”

“The poor thing.”

“Sweetie, and you’re going to look after him?”

“More like, prevent him from crawling into a bottle and not coming out until after the birth.”

“What about his ex-wife? Is she in the picture at all?”

“I knew a divorcee who tried to use new marital issues to rekindle an old relationship.”

“Oh, no. She’d never do that. According to my sister, she once said that she didn’t love him anymore. But she liked him more than she liked him when they divorced. And possibly more than she liked him when they were married.”

“That’s nice. And she gets on with your sister?”

“They’re best friends.”

“And how did your sister meet him?”

“Work. They were with two different companies originally. But he quit and then joined her side for a while. They just really clicked. Always had some chemistry there. Though he would never have acted on it. He’s not that kind of guy.”

Damian smiled as he made another round of coffee. He was learning all kinds of things. Things that he didn’t think Bruce would expect. And things that he was fairly certain Tim was.
He decided to check in on Drake. But there was no need to let his brother *know* that he was being checked up on.

That was what bugs and tracking devices were *for*!

According to the tracker, Drake was still in his office. And the general silence from the bugs supported the idea he was alone.

Damian was about to disconnect, when he heard a door open.

“What are you doing here?” Drake asked, “I don’t have any meetings today.”

“You do now.”

“And just who are you?”

“Josiah McCaffery and I’m sure you recognise my associate… Phobos.”
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Damian froze. But it seemed that Drake rallied faster than him.

“I would be hard pressed to forget Phobos, Westley.”

The smack of flesh on flesh could easily be discerned.

“Really, Westley? Was that necessary? And besides, I’d say you hit like a girl, but I think that would be insulting Barbara Gordon. You didn’t knock me to the floor or even draw blood. Your slapping ability is weak.”

“Shut up!”

“No. You’re in my office. We play by my rules. How did you get in here?”

That was something that Damian wanted to know as well. This shouldn’t have happened!

“I have my ways. Your security isn’t as secure as you think.”

“How much money did you spend bribing Key?”

“How did you know?”

“I’m not stupid. He was obviously in your pocket. I figured that out ages ago. I just couldn’t prove it.”

“How?”

“He’s gay. One hundred percent. Why would he be in your brothel? Unless it was being used as a meeting place. You really should diversify your workers there. Or just open a second all-male one. You know, increase your income.”

“He’s married.”

“His father and grandfather are majorly bigoted. They cut his sisters off for “unwise marriages”. Even if they were perfectly suited to their partners. So he knew that he couldn’t just follow his heart. And his family expected him to marry. His wife is probably asexual. Certainly sex-repulsed. But wanted kids. So, she chose to adopt. Only it’s hard to adopt as a single mother. So, she needed to marry. They’re old friends. It works for them. And the kids are happy.”
Damian’s listening was interrupted, by Clara tapping him on the shoulder.

“What?” He glared at her for a fraction of a moment.

“We have to evacuate. There’s a criminal in the building. The silent alarm’s going off.”

She pointed at the slowly flashing red light.

“I need to go to my brother.” Damian argued.

“You can’t.” She shook her head, “We have to evacuate.”

“He’s injured. I’ll help him evacuate.”

“No. I mean you literally can’t. During a criminal evacuation the lifts won’t go up if anyone’s in them. And the stair doors only let you into the stairs. You can’t go up. Besides, I’m sure Mister Drake will evacuate with the rest of us.”

Damian’s heart sank for a moment. It was clear that the ladies wouldn’t let him go to find his brother.

However, outside he could slip away and find his own way back into the building and to Tim’s office.

Tim refused to let them see that they were getting to him. He knew exactly how dangerous the situation he was in. But he wasn’t going to cower before them.

“How did you know it was my brothel?”

“Easy enough to trace the name the whole organisation was under, past all your shell corporations. You’re not as smart as you think you are.”

“It was under Westley Porter!”

“Yes. Westley, the name you actually prefer. Josiah ties you to your father. As does Junior. You’ve gone by Westley most your life. Just most of that time you’ve been out of Gotham. New York, mostly. Where your mother went after the divorce.”
“Anyone can be called Westley!”

“So you’d think. But Porter? Your aunt’s married name.”

“She was never married!” He slammed his gun down on the desk.

“As good as. Certainly, the name she chose to take. It was quite a scandal!”

“You weren’t even born then!”

“No. But I heard about it. When your father divorced your mother. Officially due to her affairs. Unofficially because of his desire for a younger woman. Your aunt was originally engaged to your father. But when she ran off with her lover, the family disowned her and bullied your mother into marrying him instead. It was what was good for the family. Certainly, better than acknowledging the lesbian daughter, who just ran off to San Francisco.”

“And she died like the scum she was!”

“I would call her a hero. A woman who cared to tend to the AIDs victims in their dying days.”

“And then contracting it like the filthy whore she was!”

“That was an accident. Not due to any misconduct on her part. You used her name because it allowed you the anonymity you needed. And partly, I think, out of hatred to her.”

“If she hadn’t run off, she would have married my father. And then my mother wouldn’t have been abandoned by him! She had to get a job after he divorced her!”

Tim leaned back in his chair.

“Once I knew it was your brothel, everything made sense.”

“You know, I preferred you when you were silent.” Westley snarled, “Less mouthy.”

“Or when he was screaming.” Phobos sneered.

“True. It was almost funny when he was half out of his mind with pain.” Westley laughed, “Trying to sing.”

“I can’t sing at all.” Tim snorted, “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It was an interesting rendition of “The Daring Young Man”.’” Phobos mock laughed, rounding the table to tower over Tim.

As he moved, he kicked the crutches out of Tim’s reach.
Damian was quickly starting to hate Clara Smith. She wasn’t letting him out of her sight. Clearly intent on keeping him safe, until someone else in the family turned up to take custody of him.

He could still hear Drake talking in his ear. So, while he knew that Drake was in danger, he knew that the older boy wasn’t yet hurt. But that didn’t make the situation any easier to handle.

He couldn’t even manage to speak to his Father. Father wasn’t picking up his phone, no matter how many times he called.

The police had already arrived. Cordonning off the building. It appeared that there was a complete plan in place for such a situation. Something that Damian had not been aware of or briefed about.

Damian spotted something that raised his hopes slightly. He made a bee-line for the police cordon.

“Grayson!” He barked.

“Dami?” Grayson spun around, “You’re okay? Where’s Timmy?”

“I am fine. I have not found Tim.”

“He’ll be okay. Don’t worry.” Grayson pulled him into a hug.

Damian slipped an earwig into Dick’s hand. With a discrete, natural motion Dick slipped it into his ear to listen in on what Damian was still aware of.

“How?” Dick’s lips formed the words that were never spoken.

“Phobos.” Damian responded, his voice barely a murmur.

“Have you called dad?”

“He is doing a factory inspection. I do not think he has his phone on him. He has not answered so far.”

“Call Jason.” Dick instructed, “Ask him to bring the car. Take you home.”

Damian knew that the instructions were just a cover. He pulled out his phone, nodding as he did so.
“The lift isn’t going up.” Dick stated, “We’re clearing each floor in turn. I’m on security down here.”

Damian nodded in understanding, even as his phone rang.

“Demon? What’s up? You bored already?”

“Todd.” Damian took a deep breath, “There is a situation at the Tower.”

“What do you mean? What sort of situation?”

“The Tower has been evacuated. A criminal of some sort is in the Tower.”

“Who?”

“It has not yet been announced.”

“But you suspect.”

“Indeed.”

“You’re not alone.”

“Correct.”

“Is Timbo with you?”

“He is not.”

“He’s still inside?”

“Exactly.”

“Can you get away from your watchers?”

“No.”

“And Dick’s working… B’s at the factory visit… You need me to come.”

“Precisely.”

“Who am I dealing with?”

“A man you have been looking for.”

“Phobos? He’s there? He has Tim? I’m on my way! Keep trying to call B.”

Damian nodded, even as Todd hung up. He started the cycle of trying to call his Father, once again.
Chapter End Notes

Yes, I am aware that I am evil. 😈
Tim refused to turn to look at Phobos. He would not show fear.

“So, you know why I’m here?”

“I’d like to hear you say it.” Tim kept meeting Westley’s gaze.

“I’m here to take Project Padua from you. And you are going to hand it over to me.”

“Why would I do that? I withstood whatever your bullyboy there could throw at me when I was at my weakest. Why would I do it now?”

“Because a girl nearly destroyed you.”

“Oh, nice one.” Tim laughed, “No. Tina didn’t destroy me. Didn’t even make a dent. I was just suffering from an uncontrolled infection. It was time that was killing me. Not her. No, I have no motivation to give it to you. Key doesn’t have access.”

“You really think I can’t kill you?”

“I don’t think you’ve got the stones… Oh, sure you could tell your muscle there to do it. But you? Nah. You might chip a nail.”

“I killed my step-mother!”

“Thanks for confirming it. I wasn’t sure you had actually done the deed. But I can spot a poorly disguised murder as a mugging a mile off… Childhood trait… I’ve been reading the crime section of the newspaper pretty much since Bruce took Dick in.”

“You were just a Baby then.”

“Four… But I was precocious according to my nannies.”

“You are a waste of space. You were then and you are now. And you always will be. Nothing but a jumped-up piece of gutter trash!”

“No. I was New Money. Just my father overreached and was distracted due to his illness, so the business went under. Much like your own father’s business is going to do so.”

“Only while he’s in charge.”

“And part two of the reason behind the brothel. Not just financial incentive. But leverage against the Board members. Smart. If a little clumsily done.”

“Who cares? They’re going to hand the whole company over to me at the next meeting.”

“Only if you bring the goods. That’s why you want Project Padua. You need something with potential.”
“They will hand it over to me. Then I can kick my father out. And he can go cry in his mansion all alone.”

“The way you cried as a child after the divorce? Father issues, anyone?”

“I never cried. I was angry! He divorced my mother and she never got over him. She never had another relationship.”

“Actually, she’s had several. She’s not celibate. She’s just not stupid. While publicly the divorce was due to her infidelity, privately everyone knew that he was the philander. She got an extremely good alimony agreement. Which stops as soon as she marries. Plus the ten percent of his income that she got for both you and your sister for your entire childhoods. She came out very well in that. She definitely choose the better lawyer.”

“She’s a bottom feeder! She could have been so much more! She could have married up!”

“Wow! You need a therapist. Sounds like you blame both of them. Your father is a misogynist. Your mother is smart enough to know that most men with money, don’t want to marry a divorced mother. She’s exceptionally practical and intelligent.”

“She’s a waste of space. Women don’t have enough brain power to do anything useful.”

“And that would explain why it’s been really easy to headhunt a good portion of your staff. I got some real experts that way. All they want is decent pay and respect. Benefits were just the icing on the cake for them. You made my job really easy… And that’s why your company is going to die soon.”

“It’s not going to die, because I have a plan.”

“Robbery and corporate espionage is not a plan. It’s a crime.”

“You are going to give me Project Padua.”

“No.”

Westley nodded at Phobos.

In response Phobos latched one hand around Tim’s neck, forcing his head back into the chair. The grip was tight, partially interfering with his ability to breathe.

“You are going to give it to me.”

“No.”

Tim’s voice was barely audible. But it was still steady.
“I could snap your neck right now.” Phobos hissed, “I can take the breath from you.”

“Give me Padua.”

“No.”

The grip tightened.

Tim exercised every restraint he had not to raise his arms and attempt to break the grip. He knew from previous experience that Phobos was far stronger than he. The only way to break the grip was to use methods that Tim Drake could not know.

And scrabbling ineffectively was not something he was willing to let Westley watch. He was not going to provide the entertainment in such a fashion.

123456789

“Sir,” A security guard, Meghan, interrupted the factory manager’s speech, “We have a situation.”

“What sort of situation?” The manager, Mohammed, frowned.

“A WE Site has had to be evacuated. As per security protocol all WE sites are placed in lockdown, in case of a coordinated attack. In addition, all high-level personnel must be accounted for and placed under additional security. Mister Wayne, you would be best placed in the security room.”

“Which site?” Bruce frowned.

“Sorry, sir?” Meghan blinked.

“Which site has been evacuated?” Bruce walked over to her, “Where is the initial threat?”

“Wayne Tower, sir.”

“Two of my sons are there!” Bruce exclaimed, “I have to go check on them!”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Meghan shook her head, “Until it has been cleared by the police or confirmed as an isolated attack, protocol dictates that I cannot let you leave. I cannot let anyone leave.”

“Then I want to be able to call my sons.”

“That is fine, sir. This way, please.”
Bruce pulled his phone out as he was led to the security room. It was clear from all the missed calls that Damian was safe. But there was a startling lack of calls from Tim. Something that caused Bruce’s heart to sink, even as he turned his phone off silent.

“Father.” There was so much emotion in that one word from Damian; it was hard to connect it with the sullen, almost emotionless boy that had once stood in front of him.

“Damian, you are safe?”

“Yes. Tim is not.”

And that was telling. Damian was actually using a first name and a diminutive form of it.

“Where is he?”

“I do not know.” There was a lie in that, but Bruce could hear people around Damian. So the lie made sense, “Todd is coming. When should I expect you?”

“I have been put on lockdown. It will not be lifted until the Tower is cleared or confirmed as an isolated event.”

There were so many questions that he wanted to ask. But not questions he could ask, surrounded by security personnel as he was. Nor could Damian answer. It almost physically pained Bruce. He knew his son was in trouble… In danger. But he could do nothing.

It was another type of torture. And Tim’s kidnapping all over again.

123456789

Black dots were dancing in front of Tim’s eyes when the grip around his throat was released. He gasped loudly as he refilled his lungs.

“Give me Padua.”

“No.”

“You are going to give it to me. Or Phobos is going to go and find the bastard brat.”

“What?” Tim’s voice quavered.

“You thought I didn’t know that he was here today? Working in the main staff cafeteria.
You give it to me. Or I’ll give him to Phobos.”

“What?” Tim hissed.

“I wanted you alive. That’s the only reason you’re still alive right now. I don’t have any inclination to keep the brat alive. Everything Phobos put you through last time… The branding? The scaring? The cold? The heat? The starvation? Everything. Give me Padua. Or Phobos will go and what he did to you? He’ll do to him. Only I won’t hold him back from killing him this time.”

“Never done it on a kid before. Could be entertaining. Certainly more fun than just killing your driver. He wasn’t any fun at all. Far too quick.”

“You touch one hair on his head and I’ll destroy you.” Tim’s voice was still hoarse, but it was filled with venom.

“What can you do? We have guns. You have nothing. Give me Padua.”

“You really think it’ll save your business?”

“That doesn’t matter to you. Just give it to me.”

“I’ll need to contact my assistant.”

“Call her. But no funny business.”

“Tam’s not here today. I have a replacement assistant today…” Tim pressed the button to connect to his assistant’s desk, “Jonas, I require your presence.”

Phobos closed in on Tim. Pushing a gun into Tim’s gut.

“Say one word that tips him off and I’ll put a bullet in your gut and we’ll get to see how long it takes you to die.” Phobos whispered, “Who knows? I might just do it anyway. Be fun.”

Tim watched as the door opened.

“Can I help you, Mister Drake?”

“Yes, Jonas. These gentlemen are after Project Padua.”

Jonas didn’t look very threatening. A smart suit, but not that expensive. A little sloppily cut. Certainly a person of lower income than the perfectly smart suits that both Westley and Phobos wore. His light hair pulled back into a small bun at the base of his skull. There was no tension in his body. No threat in his stance.
“Is that so, Mister Drake?”

“Yes, Mister Quinn.”

Chapter End Notes

A present to you all from Father Christmas.

Merry Christmas to those of you who observe it...

Enjoy the present, those of you who don't.
The Red Hood was making his way across Gotham, cursing the sun as he did so.

Bats weren’t meant to be out during the day.

They weren’t supposed to be spotted.

He was moving from shadow to shadow. Using the tunnels as best he could.

“O?” He called out, “Tell me you’ve got some good news.”

“Tim’s still alive.”

“If that’s the only good news you’ve got, then I ain’t fucking happy!”

“The police are still clearing the Tower floor by floor. Following protocol. So far no-one extra. Looks just to be Tim’s office. I’ve gotten into the cameras and can’t find anyone else wandering around…”

“You left that hanging.”

“According to R, Tim had a goffer for today. No name given. I’ve looked at the records and can’t find anyone specifically assigned. So I’m thinking it was a personal request to someone he knows, but…”

“He’s a good boss and knows a lot of people. Yeah, I figured that. What about rollocall? Is anyone missing?”

“That’s just it… Everyone who swiped in today is accounted for… But there are multiple people who didn’t swipe in, who are also accounted for. Looks like some people aren’t adhering to security protocols properly.”

“Shit!”

“Exactly. So far we have at least two dozen people who are present, but not recorded. I don’t know how many people have just wandered off without checking in. I’d like to believe no-one, but…”

“But it ain’t fucking likely. A crowd of people with a potential villain sighting? Even if they don’t fucking know who it is, some people would turn tail and run. Get away from the crowd before it gets attacked.”
Hood slid into a subway access tunnel, narrowly dodging a train.

“Just tell me you’ve got fucking eyes on Timmy?”

“He’s covered every single camera in that office of his. Even Tam’s office as well. I haven’t needed to access them for ages. He marked up the lenses months back. I can even see him do it on old footage. It was about a week after he took up position there.”

“Fuck! Why didn’t anyone notice before?”

“We never needed to spy on him. And besides all the main areas of the Tower are covered.”

“Have you got an image of the gofer, even if you don’t know the name?”

“Not much of one. Pretty much a gym-rat by my reckoning. Certainly not a bodybuilder though. Just well defined. I’d say most of those muscles are aesthetic. Not a bad looker, from what I can see. He just… He keeps his head down. I can’t really get a clean grab of his face. But he’s not particularly threatening in appearance. He’s not going to be much help really.”

“Fuck. So Timmy’s all alone in there.”

“Not for long. I’ve got Huntress, Black Canary and Batgirl on their way to you.”

“I don’t fucking need them!”

“We’re not staying out of this. And you might not need them. But we don’t know enough about what’s going on. I’d rather cover all our bases.”

“Fine! But I ain’t waiting for them!”

“Wouldn’t expect you to.”

Quinn moved with lightning speed, his open body language clearly a lie. But one he was accustomed to.

Tim knew that it was unlikely that Westley could make out what happened next. But he watched with amusement as Quinn disarmed the businessman and had him down on the floor within seconds.

For his own part, he sucked in his stomach, and lashed out in a calculated move at Phobos’ wrist. It was just enough force to knock the pistol away from his torso, before it was fired.
The bullet tore into the solid wooden desk, but not before marking a line of fire across Tim’s trunk. He hissed in pain even as he raised an arm to block the next blow.

However, it wasn’t necessary. Quinn had vaulted the desk, catching Phobos’ raised arm, and kicking Tim’s chair out of reach of the fight.

Tim watched as brute force and backstreet brawling met trained and elegant lethality.

Phobos never stood a chance, ending up with his head bouncing off the desk.

“Flexi-cuffs?” Tim pulled a pair out of a drawer; once he had slid back to his desk.

“Nice. You’re well equipped.” Quinn flashed a toothy grin, catching the cuffs.

“This is Gotham, you have to be.” Tim slid over to his crutches, even as Quinn restrained the pair.

“What? You never… You planned that?” Westley stared, just coming round from his stunned stupor.

“Of course,” Tim hopped out from behind his desk, “I’m not stupid. I knew it was probably you. And I knew there was a very good chance that you’d target Damian today. So, I gave you a better target.”

“You still left him exposed.”

“No. He’s not working in the canteen today. I made sure of that. Couldn’t be sure that you’d go after me first… But I had a pretty good odds on it. Hiring Quinn here… Well, that was one of my better ideas. You picked a street thug to be a street thug. I picked a retrieval and security specialist. One of the best in the business… I’m a Gothamite. I know how to stack the odds in my favour. You’re not.”

“I’m Gotham born!”

“Yes. But New York raised. When you weren’t off at a posh boarding school, expensive European skiing holidays or basically anything that wasn’t a court mandated family appearance. And that makes a world of difference.”

“You’ll never be able to prove anything. I’ll sue you for illegal detainment!”

“The police are already on their way. And my whole office is bugged. I told you… I figured you were coming… Now, Quinn, are there any other threats that need dealing with?”

“Nope. He was overconfident. I could go help arrest Key if you want.”

“No thanks. I had the security team alerted to him the moment everyone else started
evacuating. Gotta love those under-desk security alarms. I have a whole range of buttons and options.” Tim picked up his phone, “And that’s the balance wired to you. Along with a bonus for prompt and efficient work.”

“Nice to work with a man who knows what he’s doing. I haven’t had such a good Mastermind since I worked with the Leverage crew.”

“Thanks. Let’s continue this in the outer office. I don’t want to be around the stench of failures any longer than I have to.”

“They were a little ham-fisted. I mean the kidnapping? Totally overplaying their hand. He should have tried stealing first.”

“Tip to the wise, Westley.” Tim tapped Westley’s face with a crutch, “Don’t try the “stealing back my stolen property” gag. Last person who did that also tried to stiff the team he hired along with trying to kill them. Their retaliation was brutal. And the word got around the community. They always check these days.”

Tim limped out of the office, with Quinn on his heels. The door closed on Westley’s shouting, cutting it off completely.

“You are a generous employer,” Quinn remarked after checking his phone, “The bonus is very much appreciated.”

“You are efficient and effective. I’ll pass on your name to people who might be interested in your services in the future. All honest types. All good people. But people who sometimes need a bad guy to get good stuff done.”

“You’ve been hanging around Spencer’s crew too long.”

“Just his cousin. You might also want this.” He handed over a file.

“What is it?”

“Your pension plan and health insurance.”

“What?”

“I like to invest in people. In good people. Some day you might want to come in from the cold. In from the constant moving and fighting. As long as I have any position of power in this company, you have an open job available here. In the meantime, I am sure a man of your career often finds that medical care is necessary. Call it, protecting my investment. The insurance card will get you care at any licenced medical provider. And is sufficiently anonymous that you don’t have to worry about it being traced.”

“I would say that I’d pass your name around as a good employer. But I think I’d rather keep you to myself.”

Tim laughed at that. Open and free.
“You’re bleeding. Sit down. I’ll tend to it.”

“Just a graze.”

“I’ll deal with it.” He was firm, “Phobos catch you?”

“Just a graze. Doesn’t even hurt.”

“You took a risk. I could see that gun buried in your gut.” Quinn helped Tim down onto the couch.

“Wasn’t buried. Barely touching. Just enough so that I knew it was there. And he didn’t have his finger on the trigger. Too dangerous. I knew they wanted me alive. I knew I had time to react.”

“Where’s the nearest medical kit?”

“Bottom drawer of the filing cabinet… But it’s fine. You don’t need to fuss.”

“I like to keep my good clients alive. Better for business that way.”

“Okay.” Tim sighed.

“This is basically a field medical kit.” Quinn half-asked, half-accused.

“Gotham.” Tim countered.

It didn’t take long for Quinn to clean and dress the bullet graze.

“All done. You make sure you don’t get an infection. Spenser would try to kill me if you died from that.”

“I think you might want to avoid the police.” Tim changed the topic, “They’re on their way up.”

“Which is the best route to take down?”

Tim pulled a book out of the bookcase, causing it to swing open.

“Emergency evacuation route.” He stated, “Bit of a long walk down. But no-one will spot you until you come out in the carpark. They never cover the pedestrian exit down there. Just the stairs and the lift up.”

“Thanks… I might see you around. You know how to contact me. And if you can’t… Spenser can… Look after yourself, kid.”

“Will do. And you.”
With a ruffle of Tim’s hair, Quinn was gone.

Tim watched the bookcase close behind him. Then reset the mechanism, making sure that simply removing the book would not open it, until all the other switches had been activated.

Then he settled back down on the couch, carefully raising his casted leg to settle on the cushions.

And waited.

Chapter End Notes

After the last chapter I think I can split my reviewers into 2 categories... Those who spotted the Leverage reference, and those who didn't.

I've had that scene planned for *ages* Hope you enjoyed it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!