A (SMART) Bird's Guide to Manners

by PrettyMissKitty

Summary

Alfred is Magic.
His sheer epic-ness shows itself clearly as he raises an unruly flock of baby birds.
A new drug is sweeping through the streets, killing almost everyone it touches. GCPD's given up on finding the culprit, of even figuring out what the new drug IS, and Batman is on the case. He, Nightwing, and Robin are actively investigating with support from Batgirl and a very special stalker who's becoming part of the family faster than anyone realizes.

Except Jim Gordon... Jim Gordon is not surprised. He would be amused if not for the ridiculous caseload on his desk and the hopelessness of the new drug to which most of his cases are linked. But perhaps the new kid can help.
Rule #1 - Don't Take Without Asking

Chapter Summary

Jason feels like he's screwed up once too badly and makes to run-away before he gets kicked out.

Alfred catches him in the act and makes him rethink everything he knows.

Chapter Notes

Finally post-worthy!
The whole story isn't drafted yet, but I have a buffer, and I'm really pleased with this chapter. XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter One: Rule #1 – Don't Take Without Asking

It’s been two years now that Jason’s been living at Wayne Manor, but he still has a go-bag. Well, technically, he has two, but he’s reasonably sure that only one is hidden well enough to have evaded notice. The other is left mostly-alone as a sort of compromise, a secession to Jason’s clearly ingrained street-kid habits – an indulgence.

It’s a durable backpack made of water-proof nylon – with a drab grey coloring that disguises how expensive the material is – stuffed with nonperishable food items, two weeks of clean clothes in thick, durable materials, 500 bucks in small-bills, and plastic bags – sanitary food storage on the streets is downright impossible, which makes a box of fresh, clean plastic bags worth a helluva lot more than anyone growing up with running water and antibacterial soap could possibly realize.

The first bag is tucked away behind a loose panel in the servants’ hall behind the old, disused south pantry.

Jason knows it gets checked on by someone in the house – though everyone is capable of being so meticulous the act is hardly noticeable, so he’s not sure who that someone is… Regardless of who’s doing it, the bag gets rifled through once a week now – down from the once a day it used to be when he had five caches just like it littered across the Manor’s hidey-holes – and checked to ensure that he’s not still adding to the haul, or making any final-looking preparations to get the pack ready to set out with immediately.

He knows whoever’s checking is trying to be as careful as humanly possible to put everything back exactly how they found it. But you don’t survive the streets long without developing a sixth-sense level of observant intuition about someone touching your stuff.
So that bag is tended loosely. Adjusted every now and then to make it seem like it’s still his primary go-bag, but not actually maintained with genuine street-wise attentiveness.

The other bag is some sort of duffle – like a really nice one, like mountaineering gear or some shit. It looks like a piece of shit, hashed together out of a tarp and some broken tent poles, but Jason ripped the labels off himself – and painstakingly scored out the embroidered logos with a razor – and he knows Cabela’s is damn good shit. It’s the most expensive thing he’s ever seen that could pass for the kind of cobbled-together pack he’d need on the streets.

It’s big too.

He can fit everything from the fake go-bag in it twice over.

Along with a roll of outdoor grade heavy duty trash bags, 100 yards of burlap-insulator garden-winterizing fabric, two gallon-sized unbreakable water bottles, and enough quasi-perishable food items in plastic containers to last over a month. The bento-box food storage assembly, a water-purifying kit, and a startlingly well-stocked first-aid kit were already included at the bottom of the backpack/duffle/tent-thing. Which is what made Jason think it’s some sort of mountaineering starter set. There was a walking stick too – aluminum, light weight and very high quality jointed foot-stabilizer thingy – but it’s bright paint job would’ve stuck out immediately. Way too much to hide it on the streets, and too much even to use it as a weapon with any efficacy – it was easy to block a blow you could see coming.

Jason had considered keeping it – selling it off as soon as he could to a pawn shop or recycler plant or something – but it was bulky and noticeable enough to make moving it a challenge and it wasn’t worth the risk.

Speaking of risk: he’s checked over every single millimeter of thread he’s stashed in the duffle, as well as the duffle itself, for any kind of data-chip or tracking device. He’s even used the scanners from his Robin gear (and borrowed one of Batman’s to ensure that B didn’t have any parental locks or shit on the Robin gear) to make sure there weren’t any Bat-trackers.

The bag in the south pantry lights up like a Christmas tree under the scanners – and there are fucking parental locks on his Robin gear that block some of Batman’s personal trackers, because more lights show up with B’s scanner than with his – but the duffle is clean.

Jason keeps the duffle in the tiny room between the garage and the Manor’s actual basement (not the Cave-level basement, but the real basement, with the pool and the mini-movie theater and the single-lane bowling alley he’s fairly sure was put there on a dare and has never actually been used). It’s in the server-room, inside the rubber- and lead-lined box that holds the Manor’s second back-up emergency generator and the physically partitioned cloud-storage back-up for the Cave’s archives.

Even with all of B’s high-tech scanners and shit, the duffle is entirely invisible unless you physically go into the server-room, open the back-up storage containment unit, and bring your own flashlight. And even then, Jason’s tucked the duffle away so carefully that it’s tricky to spot even if you already know exactly where to look.

The first time Jason himself had gone back to check on it, he’d almost had a panic attack because he’d thought the Bat had found and removed it.

He hadn’t, and all signs indicated that he still hadn’t found it.

Which was good, because if the fucking Bat was that kind of psychic Jason needed to hightail it. Fast. Because he would not be able to survive that oppressive kind of constant,
unavoidable supervision. He’d practically raised himself, after all, he didn’t need a nanny-goat and god damn did he need room to breathe.

Especially on bad days.

On days when he screwed up and knew he was two-seconds away from being kicked out of the Manor if he messed up again before he managed to make things right … Especially on days – or nights, rather – when he screwed up as Robin.

Like last night, when he’d jumped down from a roof – despite Batman’s direct order to stay put – to comfort a victim who’d stumbled out of the warehouse they were casing… But the ‘victim’ had turned out to be a junkie, wired-up sky-high on a sample of a new drug hitting Gotham’s streets because he was part of the deal going down inside… Jason had thought the man looked half-dead and in need of saving, but apparently he was just in the throes of an ecstasy Jason didn’t recognize – and forget half-dead, the random junkie had been amped up enough to throw Jason through the warehouse wall.

Both sides of the drug deal had scattered – taking all trace of the drug with them – while Jason got the snot beat out of him by a balding, middle-aged dock-worker who only weighed a buck fifty soaking wet. It was a shamefully one-sided fight.

Batman had needed to step in, and even though he’d abandoned his own post as soon as the scuffle started, his aid hadn’t quite managed to prevent Jason from being knocked out and tossed into the North Point curve of Gotham Harbor.

In full Robin gear and completely unconscious, Jason would’ve drowned had Batman not jumped into the icy water after him – though doing so meant that the junkie who’d pummeled Jason had managed to get away. They’d left the warehouse with absolutely nothing to show for their efforts – with zero progress in the investigation already going on two months.

Three more people had died of overdose from the new drug in the four hours they’d been back at the Manor since the stakeout debacle.

That raised the total casualty count in the last month alone to 29.

With the first definitively confirmed case of overdose from this new substance being almost four months ago, there were already over a hundred deaths attributed to it. And that was just the confirmed deaths – and those were only counting the overdoses, the direct-by-drug deaths. It completely ignored the tangentially related deaths – murders by gun or knife that happened over the drug but committed by villains against victims where neither party was actually high on the drug.

Jason’s estimate was around the 500 mark for casualties.

And they’d had almost zero leads. The drug metabolized quickly, and so completely that it was almost untraceable. It was such a strange substance that GCPD hadn’t realized it was a drug for six weeks – they’d thought it was a strange new disease. But it didn’t spread like a sickness, and it didn’t kill like a sickness.

It didn’t kill like anything Jason had seen before – and to judge by the Bat’s frustration and constipated scowl when he’d first gone over the GCPD’s case details, Bruce hadn’t seen anything like it before either.

The warehouse last night was the first truly tangible lead anyone had on the case – a rumor on a deal between the local smugglers and Gotham’s low-level runners. It wasn’t a high-profile deal
of any sort. The smugglers had gotten a case of the product as a bonus on top of their standard payment and they were just trading it to other gutter scum. But it was still a lead.

And Jason had blown it.

The three deaths from the night are on his head.

All the deaths that soon would occur before the Bat could find a new lead are also Jason’s fault. The Bat blames him for it, Jason’s certain. He’s been curt and brooding since they’d gotten back – B’s only direct comment to him since he’d fished Jason out of the harbor had been that Robin needed to spend extra time training for situational awareness, and that Jason needed to learn how to follow orders.

That had stung.

But Jason deserved it.

He’s a distraction at best, a liability at worst.

And people are still dying.

Jason can’t do anything about it except make things worse, so he knows it’s only a matter of time – days most likely, weeks if he manages to stay out of the way for a while – but he’s probably on his way out of the Manor.

So, here he is, at 7am on Saturday morning pilfering Alfred’s perfectly stocked pantry like a common burglar.

It’s embarrassing, shameful, but Jason can deal with that – grit his teeth and carry on with doing what’s necessary to survive. He’s fine.

Or… he’s fine until a quiet sigh behind him alerts him to the fact that Alfred’s caught him literally climbing on the pantry shelves to reach a jar of that high-calorie, high-protein chia mix that could keep him going for a month or more.

Jason freezes in place – hand still short of the jar by a good six inches.

He’s mortified, utterly ashamed.

Stealing from Bruce is one thing. But stealing from Alfred… that’s low.

Jason knows it and he hates himself for what he’s doing – but he can’t stop himself from lunging for the chia jar as Alfred says, “The Manor’s stores are at your disposal, Master Jason, all you have to do is ask.”

There aren’t any obvious tells, but Jason knows how to read people – even people as impossibly stoic as the old butler – and he can hear that Alfred sounds the certain kind of tired that says he’s disappointed. Unsurprised, but saddened nonetheless.

Self-loathing swirls in Jason’s gut.

“Didn’t wanna wake you,” he mumbles. A lie – and a terrible one at that.

But Alfred doesn’t bat an eye.

“It’s no trouble,” he says brightly, “In fact, I’m feeling a bit peckish myself. How about I
whip us up some breakfast?”

Jason nods dumbly.

He’s still clutching the chia jar as Alfred rolls up his sleeves and moves towards the sink with the easy, natural grace that permeates his being – that keeps the stuffy stiffness implied by his British-ness and butler-y-ness at bay.

The water is still running as Jason edges out of the pantry.

“Would waffles suit the young sir’s taste this morning?”

Jason nods dumbly again – realizes belatedly that Alfred can’t see it. He wonders how he knew Jason had come close enough to hear the question, but he answers verbally – or tries to.

He has to clear his throat before he can squeak out, “Waffles sound great.”

Alfred nods. Shuts the water off. Opens the fridge.

He pulls out eggs and milk and a few different sugared berry purees – and yoghurt.

Sets the berries and the yoghurt on the island, takes the eggs and milk to the counter where he’s somehow already produced a mixing bowl and flour and the other dry ingredients.

“Feel free to start on the chia parfaits,” Alfred says casually as Jason stares at the stuff on the dark marble of the island – bright and glittering like bizarre jewels or hyperreal movie props.

Jason blinks, attempts to focus.

Alfred is still speaking.

“As I recall, you did mention young Mister Drake has a particular affinity for them,” the butler mentioned, “So am I to suppose your chia designs mean you are indeed planning to visit him this morning?”

“That’s the plan,” Jason replies. Another lie – still absolutely terrible.

He’s still holding tightly to the chia like letting go of it might make the jar explode.

“Mister Drake’s parents are out of town again, so I had hoped you might plan to visit the dear child,” Alfred is saying as Jason somehow manages to pry his fingers off the chia jar. He sets it on the island and moves to wash his hands as Alfred adds, “Besides, it will do you good to get out of the house during daylight hours. School is one thing, but the forging of friendships is quite another – and just as necessary.”

The rest of the hour is quiet.

Only the sounds of cooking – and a few distractedly hummed bars of God Save the Queen – break the soft hush. The food itself is consumed in silence, but it’s not oppressive – it’s warm and comfortable and understanding.

It makes Jason’s throat tighten as he helps Alfred clean up – two travel-jars of fruit and yoghurt and chia set aside on the island, already packed neatly in a cushioned lunch bag.

Eventually, Alfred helps Jason into a thick coat – warm, high-quality, perfect for the late March weather, but way too nice to go with him back on the streets.
“Would you like a lift, or would you prefer to feel the sunshine on your face?”

“I’ll walk, Alf,” Jason replies. “It’s fine.”

Alfred’s lips are pressed together – not quite thinned with obvious displeasure, but definitely suppressing a sigh – but he curves them into a smile as he presents Jason with the lunch bag and its weighty treats. “As you wish.”

Alfred walks Jason to the Manor door, fussing over the lay of his thick scarf – warm, hand-knit soft wool, burgundy and grey, and subtle enough to take with him when he leaves.

“Do try to get back before dark,” Alfred says as Jason steps across the threshold. “You may be barred from participating in your usual nightly activities this evening, but Master Bruce still worries for your wellbeing, day to day. As do I.”

“Sure thing, Alf,” Jason replies blithely.

“Is there anything specific you’d like me to prepare for dinner?”

Jason shakes his head. “Nah, I’m good, Alf. Don’t worry about it. I won’t need anything.”

“I’m not asking what you need, Master Jason,” Alfred chastises – his tone light, but firm and very clearly admonishing. “I’m asking what you want.”

Jason doesn’t answer.

He looks at his sneakers – lightweight tennis shoes already ratty with constant use, too thin to be warm enough, but flexible and quiet and familiar in a way the dress shoes and nice boots B’s bought him just aren’t – and waits.


Nothing comes.

He looks up, cautious – searching.

Alfred’s face is serene, as always.

“The Wayne Family’s resources belong to you just as surely as they belong to me, or to Master Bruce,” the butler says – and Jason’s relieved in how he manages not to flinch. “If you want anything, anything at all, please ask for it.”

“Sure thing, Alf,” Jason says again, kicking around to make his way down the front steps – literally running away from the conversation and the strange feeling it breeds in his gut.

“Enjoy your visit, Master Jason,” Alfred says to his back before he closes the door softly.

Jason presses on down the driveway, pretending not to have heard.

He’s still on his way out of the Manor – that much Jason knows – but maybe he doesn’t have to leave today. Maybe he could wait ‘till tomorrow. Or Monday, using school to get a six-hour head start on disappearing. Yeah. Monday would work best.

Settled with that much, Jason watches his feet kick though the wet gravel of the Wayne’s auxiliary driveway. He doesn’t know where he wants to go exactly – he has cash for the bus in his pocket, enough to get him to Coventry, at least, with enough left over to spend a few hours in an
Jason doesn’t realize he’s turned away from the main road until he’s standing at Drake’s door, leaning on the bell – barely realizes even that much until the door is opened.

The baby seal is suddenly right there, looking up at him with these bewildered goddamn bambi eyes – Timothy Jackson Drake, in the pasty-ass flesh, looking every inch a cave-dweller.

Jason proffers the lunch bag.

“I brought food.”

Tim blinks.

Jason nudges him gently out of the way with the bag and steps inside the Drake foyer.

Tim closes the door. Locks it. Edges around into Jason’s eyeline. Waits.

“You got any video games?”

A nod.

Jason cracks a smile.

“Lead the way, baby bird.”

Chapter End Notes

Like I said, this is gonna be a slower posting pace.
Work is kicking me in the teeth right now, but I'm still getting enough done to be confident in bringing you regular, if a bit distended, updates.
Chapter Summary

Tim is working the drug case - giving it all he's got. Possibly too much.

Jason shows up on his doorstep, with food... and makes concerning observations.

Science occurs. (Though it's admittedly not exactly SENSICAL Science...)

Chapter Notes

I've got a very big day at work today, the kind that could legit change my career, so I'm pushing this chapter out early in hopes of making myself feel kinda awesome before the Thing happens.

I'm needy and ridiculous, but wish me luck! <3

TW: this chapter has mentions of self harm. Not to mention basic self abuse... sleep is important people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Two: Rule #2 – But Don’t Be Afraid to Ask

It’s the end of a long, frustrating week, dragging at the end of a long, frustrating month, and Tim is starting to contemplate the pros and cons of upping his coffee consumption rate. The list of benefits is quite substantial, but the one glaring con is enough to make him hesitate: if he suddenly needs to put more coffee on his grocery orders, Mrs Simz will notice and will tells his parents who will suddenly discover that their twelve year old son is drinking coffee at all and will more than likely put a stop to it.

Which is something Tim is fairly certain he could not actually survive.

So, no more coffee. For now. Probably.

Still debatable.

Tim massages his temples – forcing his eyes closed for a moment, getting them off the dim glow of the screen they’ve been fixed on for the last… five hours.

Maybe he should take a break.

But not a coffee break. Because reasons. That he just went over.
Frack.

Okay. Break time.

Tim pushes back from the computer with a painful, physical reluctance.

The problem he’s working on is important – it’s part of Batman’s latest case, an investigation into the new destructive force slinking into the city. It’s a strange new drug and Tim understands why GCPD thought it might be a disease, at first… There’s something about it that’s – not quite alive, exactly, but organic.

Not like any kind of bacteria, but almost like a virus.

It is simply… mindboggling.

Tim can’t tell how it was produced, or even what compounds it contains are exactly – granted, his only samples are from a few day-old smears of blood collected after the capes and cops had abandoned the scenes where the bodies had dropped.

But people are dying from this mysterious substance and Tim can’t even tell why.

The chemistry doesn’t make any sense. At all.

The blood samples he’s collected are both slightly radio-active and entirely inert, simultaneously. Highly combustible when exposed to energy and oxygen and the unique plasma proteins and platelets found in blood. And speaking of blood, it attaches itself so securely to the aspects of human blood that it, like a virus, it actually changes the genetic make-up of the cells and plasma proteins to which it clings.

Tim doesn’t understand how it works.

Or why people are dying.

It absorbs so fully into the human biochemistry that it seems like it shouldn’t affect the host at all… perhaps it could act like a steroid, briefly – the street kind, anabolic-androgenic steroids, rather than like corticosteroids – providing a boost to muscle performance and production, but over a prolonged development rather than an immediate stress response. But other than that… it doesn’t seem like it should be doing much of anything.

It does change the chemistry of the body, which would probably affect the physiology of it as well, and perhaps that alone is enough to explain the organ failure.

Blood exposed to the chemical glows faintly green, like phosphorus and it contains enough quinine to fluoresce brilliantly at exposure to ultraviolet light. And fresh blood exposed to contaminated blood bubbles and hisses with a reaction as the virus-like substance … eats through part of the fresh blood’s natural elements. Whatever happens in that reaction contaminates the fresh blood to the point that it too fluoresces, and with repeated exposure to the contaminated blood, even fresh blood can be coaxed to glow under its own power.

It’s eerie and kind of terrifying, if Tim is honest.

He doesn’t understand it. Knows that he needs to if he’s going to be any help with solving this case – with providing Batman with the information he needs to get the drug off the street, get the dealers behind bars, get the victims some sort of antidote… or at least an emollient, some form of treatment, be it palliative or a genuine cure.
Tim knows he needs to understand, knows just as well that staring stupidly at the same screen with no new data after five hours and a night entirely without sleep isn’t going to help him understand. He knows that throwing energy at something that’s not helpful is useless.

But it still hurts to push away from his desk.

Time wobbles slightly as he stands. His head feels light and spin-y.

His ears are ringing.

No.

Wait.

That’s his doorbell.

It works, and people use it sometimes.

Well, two people use it.

Well, one person who occasionally brings his adoptive older brother.

So, Tim isn’t exactly surprised to see Jason when he opens the door, but it’s more that he’s not surprised to see it’s Jason behind the door… he’s still surprised that there’s anyone at the door to begin with – Jason is the only candidate, statistically speaking, but that still does nothing to explain why Jason is there.

A black bag of some sort – insulated by the look of it – is shoved into his face, taking up his entire range of vision.

“I brought food.”

Tim blinks.

Food.

He’s pretty sure he’s eaten recently.

But he can’t remember what he ate… so maybe not.

The lunch bag nudges at his shoulder, pushing him slightly to one side so Jason can slip inside and out of the frigid damp of late March.

Tim closes the door behind him to keep the heat in. He locks the door too, knowing that to do otherwise, in a rich, secluded part of Gotham is just a stupid way to tempt fate.

Jason’s just standing in his foyer – Jason Peter Todd, ward of Bruce Wayne, current Robin, natural bad-ass – Tim still hasn’t quite managed to make his brain accept that it’s possible he’s kinda
sorta friends-ish with the teenage vigilante. Or that they’re neighbors – well, as close as one can be to neighbors when estates large enough to house nature reserves separate the two mansions – or that they could have any reason to interact at all.

“You got any video games?”

Jason’s question is sudden – totally unexpected.

Supposing Tim had managed to formulate any kind of guess as to why Jason was at his door, the question easily blows away any possibility he could’ve even been kinda close to right.

Tim nods.

To answer Jason’s question: he has all the video games.

Jack and Janet Drake might be rather absent parents, but they’re conscientious in their own way. They understand how important it is for children to have social interaction and how much that interaction relies on shared media interests and affiliations. So any piece of fandom or media platform or anything that’s made a top ten pop culture list in the last five years – since Tim reached an age where he was capable of forging genuinely formative and in-depth relationships – is in the media room they’ve created for him.

He’s never played any of the games, or watched any of the movies, or read any of the books... but he’s appreciated the gesture, skimmed the summaries.

“Lead the way, baby bird,” Jason prompts, jarring Tim from his thoughts.

A beat passes before Tim processes the words – connects them to the expectation of action. Eventually, he manages to get his feet to move and leads Jason downstairs to the media room stocked with whatever Jason could possibly want.

Jason is aptly awed.

Tim is pleased – and his appreciation is renewed for his parents’ decision to provide him with the tools to interact with his peers.

“Dude. You have everything,” Jason manages, having been still and silent with wide eyes since Tim first opened the media room’s cabinet door.

“Yeah, kinda,” Tim replies, feeling irrationally smug.

That giddy smugness goes away when Jason frowns. “It’s all still in cellophane.”

“Yeah... kinda...” Tim repeats.

Tim’s eyes fall to the carpet – focus on Jason’s feet, notice that he’s standing... funny.

Jason kneels to investigate the repertoire of games Tim has available – he holds back the groan, but Tim reads it in the tension of his jaw, and he sees the jolting movement as he falls the last few inches instead of a controlled descent.

Tim’s been doing a lot of reading on the topic of body language. He’s not a natural, but he’s a quick study and he can identify traits – link them to the statistically common causes as noted in his books. He can’t read Jason, but he can create a list of observations. And while he doesn’t know Jason well enough to interpret those observations, he can connect the more obvious dots in the data
“You’re hurt.”

Jason pauses – not freezes like Tim offended him or anything – but he stops skimming over the title selection in Tim’s cabinet as he asks, “What’s that you’re mumbling back there?”

“You’re hurt,” Tim repeats, louder.

This time, Jason freezes. Looks back at Tim with a slow motion that gives nothing away about his pain, or the lack thereof he clearly wanted to make convincing.

“I’m sore, Timmers,” Jason counters. “There’s a difference. Even your average parkour enthusiast gets a bit run down trying to train new tricks.”


Tim knows the Bat is worried about what he knows – about how much he knows. His name had been attached to rumors about someone knowing Batman and Robin’s secret identities and he’s found half a dozen bugs littered around his house since the rumors settled – the Bat’s way of checking up to ensure that the rumor was, and still is, nothing but hearsay.

“I don’t care if he’s listening,” Jason growls. His tone is… wrong. Not quite bitter, or directly wounded, exactly, but jaded? Hurt. Like it’s not just his body that’s sore. “I’m fine.”

Looking over Jason, even with his new understanding of body language, tells Tim nothing. He simply isn’t able to read the vigilante. He’s looking so carefully for signs that Jason’s hurt, Tim doesn’t realize Jason’s looking at him just as carefully – but with much keener eyes.

“Tim,” Jason says, suddenly serious and careful and Robin. “What is that?”

Baffled Tim blinks.

“What is what?”

“That,” Jason repeats. This time he taps two fingers to his wrist.

Tim’s running his fingers through his hair – he realizes belatedly that it’s his stress-response to the frustration of being unable to read Jason – and it’s let his sleeve fall a few inches down his forearm. Exposing the bandage wrapped around his wrist.

The bandage he’s apparently starting to bleed through. Again.

Frack.

Frack. Frack. Frack.

Tim pulls his hand down and clamps his off-hand around his wrist.

Which does absolutely nothing except expose the edge of the bandage around that wrist.

At least he’s not bleeding though that one. Yet.

He’s jittery and anxious and bouncing on the balls of his feet as Jason stares him down and okay maybe more coffee would’ve been a bad idea after all because Tim is buzzed up to his eyeballs and suddenly he feels all the caffeine he’s ingested over the last 48 hours.
And Jason is still staring. Still frowning.

But he’s closer now, close enough to put his hands on Tim’s shoulders and physically hold him steady – at arm’s length, but still close enough to make Tim feel like he has to look his hero in the eye. He tries to. Fails. Chews his lip and fixes his eyes on the zipper of Jason’s dull red hoodie – sets his mind to wondering why a Wayne ward would be wearing something without some sign of money dripping from its label.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Jason’s talking to him.

Tim focuses on the words – parses them together into sentences.

“It’s okay, Timmers, you’re safe, you’re solid, you’re here,” Jason’s saying – the sort of calm, soothing nothings he’s used time and again to comfort victims. “I’m real, you’re safe, everything is fine.” Bizarre nothings. Odd, disjointed. Helpful to derail his panic, but not quite what Tim expected from Robin.

No.

Not true.

It’s exactly what he would expect from Robin.

If the victim in question isn’t a victim of plain old violence, but a victim of drug violence.

Tim’s hero thinks he’s high.

Great.

Fabulous.

That’s just perfect.

Tim considers swearing off coffee forever.

Flinches and rescinds the thought.

Somehow Tim’s able to get his breathing under control – unsure exactly when it went so haywire – and he lets Jason lead him over to the couch, takes a seat.

Jason’s hands migrate down his arms, from his shoulders to his elbows. They stay there, angled towards the wrists folded up between Tim’s knees, but not going any closer than the tops of his forearms. Jason’s crouched in front of him now, in front and off slightly to the side so he’s not crowding Tim’s space or forcing him to make eye contact.

“Now, Tim, can you help me with something, please?”

Tim frowns, nods, confused.

Jason nods too. “Good, Tim. Good job,” he says, “Now, I’m not mad, and you’re not in
trouble, but I need you to tell me about those bandages. Okay?”

Tim is chewing on his lip again.

Words are hard when he needs to find a way not to sound crazy. He knows that he probably should’ve been working in a hermetically sealed environment, and that having open wounds around an unknown quasi-biological agent was probably a bad plan, but it’s not like you can order an airlock and an IV kit when you put in the request for milk and eggs and coffee with the groceries. People ask questions when that stuff gets purchased. Babysitters do terrible things like make phone calls to parents.

And he’s not even supposed to be working on the case anyway.

The police were very insistent on that point.

They gave him like four lollipops to keep him entertained until Detective Harvey Bullock could drive him home. Bullock gave condolences for the friend Tim had gone to GCPD to claim had been part of the OD epidemic, and another lollipop, and another warning not to investigate on his own. So Tim really isn’t supposed to be doing this.

But his parents are in Peru until the end of next month and Tim knows he can help.

Jason’s hand is suddenly covering his mouth and oh sweet science he’s been saying all of that out loud, hasn’t he?

Frack.

So much for not sounding crazy.

He sighs heavily, resigned to melting into the carpet at the earliest possible moment.

“Okay,” Jason says, carefully removing his hand. “Let’s try this again. No story, no reasons, you’re still not in trouble. Just tell me direct cause and effect. Why are both of your wrists bleeding?”

Oh.

Oh.

So Jason doesn’t just think he’s high. He thinks he’s suicidal.

Frack.

Mortified, Tim thinks with a morbidly wry cast of humor that if he wasn’t before he is now and sincerely wishes that he was physically capable of vaporizing into atoms. Tesla built a death ray. Tim decides he should look into it. Assuming he doesn’t die of embarrassment first.

“Tim? Why are you bleeding?”

“I- uh.. I needed a sample of uncontaminated blood,” Tim admits.

Jason takes a careful breath – steeling himself. “Why?”

“To test its interaction with the blood samples of people who’ve overdosed on whatever new drug is starting to gain ground on Gotham’s streets,” Tim explains.

Jason takes another careful breath. “You’re working that case?”
“Kinda?”

Jason’s eyes close briefly. He mutters something in Spanish.

Then he sighs. Pushes to his feet.

“Where’s your fucking med kit?”

“Uh-” Tim starts to get up to show his guest around the house, but Jason shoves at his shoulder at just the right force and angle to send Tim falling back down to the cushions.

“Sit. Stay,” he orders. He picks up the bag he’d brought, had set beside him when he’d started to investigate Tim’s stash of games. Jason pushes it into Tim’s hands, saying, “Just tell me where the med kit is and eat your fucking fruit thing.”

“Bathroom on the ground floor. Up the stairs, down the hall to the right, third-uh fourth door on the left-hand side,” Tim says, beginning to poke through the contents of the bag. “Med kit is in the cabinet under the sink.”

Jason nods, replaying the directions in his head.

He moves to the door, pauses, points at Tim. “Stay.”

“Fruit thing,” Tim repeats, amiably – pulling out a mason jar filled with the yoghurt concoction Jason’s brought over a few times before and a spoon to eat it with.

Jason's eyes narrow, suspicious, but he slinks out the door in pursuit of the first aid kit.

Tim’s only gotten a few bites into his parfait when Jason returns with the spoils.

It only takes ten minutes for Jason to tend to the clean, careful cuts Tim made on the side of each wrist, edging on his forearms – right where the nerves are thinnest and most sparsely spread, which is why he was able to cut so deeply and why he’s kept accidently knocking the wounds into things without noticing that he’s jarred the injuries.

Jason’s made him keep eating as his wrists were being worked on – chia parfait held between his knees, spoon in whichever hand wasn’t being tended to. Mutters of how if he was ambidextrous to cut both wrists, he’s ambidextrous enough to eat with both hands.

It’s a true statement and Tim complies.

He’s finished the parfait before Jason’s finished with his wrists.

“That good?” Jason asks as he sets the med kit aside, nodding at the empty jar in Tim’s lap. The corners of his smirk twitch when Tim nods. Proud. Jason made the parfait himself.

The empty jar is pulled from his hands – swapped out for the full one.

“Eat.”

Tim frowns.

“But this one’s yours.”

“Says who? Eat.”
“Eating does not magically heal lacerations,” Tim protests.

Jason shrugs, “Doesn’t hurt ‘em either.”

Tim pouts. He knows he does. He should be embarrassed. But he’s been mortified already one too many times today to care.

“What?”

Tim doesn’t want another parfait.

He wants – but no, he’s already been too much trouble for Jason to bother.

“What?”

Great. Now Jason sounds irritated.

He must flinch, or do something equally pathetic, because Jason huffs and tones his growl down to say, “If you want something, Timmers, speak the fuck up about it.”

“Uh-”

“Yes?”

“Could you… uh, could you make that cheesy pasta thing with the garlic-y bread again? ‘Cause that was… that was really good,” Tim admits.

“Tortellini and parmesan bruschetta? You liked that one?”

Tim nods.

“You’ve got the stuff to make it?”

Tim nods again, more vigorously. He made sure to include everytthing he’d had in the kitchen before Jason made the thing on this recent grocery list. If he had what Jason needed then, he definitely has it now.

Jason sighs.

“Tell you what,” he says, planting his hands on his hips. “I’ll cook that for you if you give me a copy of the fucking data your shithead little stunt with the scalpel got you. Deal?”

Tim grins.

“Deal.”

Chapter End Notes
Also just saying again: Sleep is Important.

And self-harm for science is not a good idea.
Rule #3 – Share with Your Sibling(s)

Chapter Summary

Jason discovers that Tim is an idiot. He attempts to intervene.

The other siblings in the Bat-brood get in on the sharing and join the baby-seal protection squad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Three: Rule #3 – Share with Your Sibling(s)

If Jason drowned when that thug shoved him in the harbor – if he’s died and this is Heaven – Jason is entirely, one-hundred-fucking-percent certain that he’s not gonna complain.

Because this is awesome.

Tim keeps calling it a cabinet.

But it’s a fucking closet full of every video game Jason’s even heard of and all the platforms needed to play them and holy shit he’s dead and this is heaven and he is totally okay with all that shit. Because seriously.

“Dude,” Jason manages eventually, “You have everything.”


On the planet.

“Yeah, kinda,” Tim says, shy but smug in a way that makes a grin claw at Jason’s face.

Except… all of them are still in their original packaging.

All of them. Like the stupid kid hasn’t even pretended to play them. Ever. At all.

“It’s all still in cellophane,” Jason blurts, confused – concerned.

“Yeah… kinda…” Tim repeats.

That smugness is gone, replaced by something dark and twisty. The shyness is still there, though, buried under the something sad.

Jason pretends he doesn’t notice, leaves the little robot be – pretending to be a Real BoyTM is obviously hard enough for him. Jason’s hands skim over the incredible array of titles Tim has to choose from, still a bit in awe. Dick had collected quite a few games during his tenure as the Manor’s
primary child-resident, but Tim’s collection feels like a game shop – especially with all the cases still in plastic wrap.

Jason’s heard of all of these, stolen a few hours on some of them inside arcades or on neighbors’ consoles from way back when… but most are still unfamiliar by anything more than their reputations. Jason is gonna have so much fucking fun with this shit.

Tim squeaks something that’s probably supposed to be a string of words and Jason pauses. “What’s that you’re mumbling back there?”

“You’re hurt.”

Jason freezes. Does a quick self-evaluation that skims through all ten points of the injury check Batman taught him – aware that the scuffle from the warehouse at North Point didn’t leave him with any overwhelming injuries, nothing out of the average for Robin. But that could still be alarming for the average civilian. Tim’s not the average civilian, but Jason still makes an effort to calm his worries. He turns slowly, carefully – moving to encourage Tim to speak, to keep from startlling him, and to conceal any sign of injury Tim might’ve managed to catch.

“I’m sore, Timmers,” Jason promises, adding. “There’s a difference. Even your average parkour enthusiast gets a bit run down trying to train new tricks.”

If Tim didn’t already know about his utter failure at the warehouse, Jason felt no need to inform him of it. He was ashamed of that enough without having the fuckin’ baby seal go all gooey and guilty for something he had exactly zero ability to influence.

“There aren’t any bugs in here,” Tim says.

Jason frowns, he knows that already. It takes a second for him to realize that Tim thinks he’s trying to avoid talking about a Robin injury because Tim’s not supposed to know about the fact that Jason is Robin. The Bat’s still monitoring him about it, after all.

Tim’s worried that Jason’s not telling him about an injury because it’ll get Tim in trouble, and he’s worried enough about whatever injury he thinks Jason’s hiding to press the issue.

“I don’t care if he’s listening,” Jason growls. It’s not like the Bat even cares if he’s hurt or not. If he’s listening at all, he just cares about making sure Jason doesn’t give the secret away. Besides, Jason’s not hurt – not at all really, and certainly not enough for the medibot Tiny Timmy 2.0 to be concerned by. “I’m fine.”

Jason stares at Tim to send his point home.

Tim stares back – missing Jason’s attempt at eye contact by a mile and skimming over every inch of him looking for some tell of injury. The kid is clearly frustrated by what he sees, or what he doesn’t see. Jason knows how to read a face and now that he’s gotten to know Tim a bit, he’s able to read most of Timbo’s thoughts on that giant billboard of a forehead.

It’s clear that Tim’s been trying to get better at the people-reading thing.

It’s just as clear that he’s a grade-schooler in the study and he’s frustrated by Jason’s apparently effortless PhD.

That brings a smirk to Jason’s face.

At least, until Tim’s frustration causes him to run his fingers through his hair. The force with
which he rips at his scalp is concerning enough to make Jason’s smugness slide away, but there’s something else. Something that sends an icy bolt down Jason’s spine.

There’s a bandage peeking out from under the sleeve of Tim’s stupid Robin sweater – that oversized, hand-knit monstrosity he’s always drowning in, but clearly counts as his favorite article of clothing. The sweater is ridiculous – but acceptable, even it if makes the little robot a huge dork that Jason refuses to be seen with in public. The bandage, though… the bandage is not acceptable.

Especially, since Jason can see bits of a red stain beginning to bleed through the starched whiteness of the sterile wrap.

“Tim,” he says, careful with the confidence and calm of Robin. “What is that?”

The little robot blinks – processors stuttering as one train of thought is derailed without another managing to find its groove.

“What is what.”

Fucking baby seal idiocy.

Kid could lose an arm to a lion and not notice until he needed the fucking hand to type.

With a slow, broadcasted motion, Jason taps two fingers to his own wrist and nods at Tim as he repeats, “That.”

Tim blinks again. Baffled.

He looks at the forearm of the hand still tangled in his hair – frowns like he didn’t realize it was there at all. Frowns at the text-book stress response he didn’t realize he displayed.

Freezes.

The bandage having finally caught his eye, registered in his awareness.

His eyes jump between his wrist and Jason, bouncing back and forth like a frickin bunny.

“Frack,” the kid wheezes.

He yanks his arm down – hard and fast in a way that’s definitely not good for the injury he pitifully attempts to conceal by clamping his other hand around the offending wrist.

Except that motion exposes that the other wrist also has a bandage.

The kid wheezes again – the pitiful little bleat sounding wet and heavy like a baby goat with its throat caught between a mountain lion’s pearly whites. He’s jittery and clearly panicking, bouncing on the balls of his feet and straight-up vibrating like he’s attempting to throw himself through the floor one atom at a time.

Jason’s moving before he’s even consciously aware of it.

His hands are on Tim’s shoulders – not restraining but… steadying. A bizarre little curl of him wants to pull Tim close and keep him from vaporizing. But Jason’s seen this kind of thing before, this irrationality and leap to panic.

He’s not sure if Tim’s actually on anything – is pretty sure he’s not – but Jason knows how to handle someone on a bad trip, isn’t sure how to help someone who’s tripping out on nothing but their
own thoughts. So, he sticks with what he knows will help and confinement is not one of those things.

Tim attempts to meet his eyes. Fails. Chews his lip.

He stares at Jason’s zipper. Fixates on it. Frowns – that’s good, grounding.

“It’s okay, Timmers,” Jason murmurs, “You’re safe, you’re solid, you’re here.”

He’s not sure the words actually make it into the little robot’s brain, but something does and the Blue Screen of Death going on inside his stupid fucking circuits cuts off to black. Reboots. Start-up protocols engage.

“I’m real, you’re safe,” Jason promises, “Everything is fine.”

Timmy 2.0’s programming hits a hiccup.

He blinks. Looks at Jason like seeing him for the time.

Red creeps up his neck, crawls up his ears, claws at his cheeks.

He closes his eyes – clearly regretting every decision he’s ever made.

A string of curses in what might be Chinese tumbles from his mouth. The idea of the fucking baby seal cursing would’ve brought a grin to Jason’s face in any other circumstances, but at the moment it makes him more concerned than ever – baby seals don’t curse, even in the kind of Chinese riffed from a sci-fi space-western.

Tim flinches at some thought or other, but somehow, he manages to stop hyperventilating. Breathes shallowly, but almost normally.

He lets Jason guide him over to the couch – a squishy, comfy-looking monstrosity that Jason could easily imagine spending hours camped on, but now is not the time. Tim takes a cautious seat and Jason crouches beside him.

“Now, Tim,” Jason says – soft and steady. “Can you help me with something, please?”

Tim frowns, obviously confused – but thinking clearly enough to be confused.

He nods.

It’s not a shaky gesture.

Jason nods too, relieved – if only slightly.

“Good, Tim,” he says, reassuringly. “Good job.”

Tim softens slightly, the tension in his face eases. The mortified flush recedes; the sickly paleness stays, but doesn’t seem any worse than the cave dweller’s usual pallor.

“Now, I’m not mad, and you’re not in trouble,” Jason promises, knowing a little something of the worries Tim’s expressed about other things he’s grappled with over the last few weeks to be certain that the kid needs the specific reassurance. “But I need you to tell me about those bandages. Okay?”

Tim chews on his lip again.
Eyes doing the little flicker thing that means he’s trying really hard to puzzle something out – in this case it quickly becomes clear that his current puzzle is how to use his words.

The lips between his teeth slips free and with them slide out words.

Lots of words.

Not all of them entirely sensical. Very few strung together into something like an understandable sentence.

There’s something about not sounding crazy.

The notion of a hermetically sealed environment comes up, as does an unknown quasi-biological agent – in a way that makes Jason’s stomach drop with dread as the back of his mind links it to the current case sitting open on his own desk back at Wayne Manor.

Mentions of an airlock and an IV kit get muttered alongside groceries, and the apparently terrible possibility of someone calling Tim’s parents.

And then there’s an admission that he’s not supposed to be working on the case.

Which solidifies the dread in Jason’s gut.

There’s a confusing story about Tim going to the police and getting frickin’ lollipops and being told to sit back and let the grown-ups handle the investigation.

So Tim knows he shouldn’t be doing this.

But his parents are in Peru until the end of next month and Tim knows he can help.

Jason puts his hand over Tim’s mouth – at a loss of how else to stop the flood of words and disconnected thoughts from streaming out.

Tim blinks.

Then his eyes widen like he only just now realized any of those words made it out into the air beyond the fried circuits of his crazy little brain.

His eyes close and he sighs – making Jason relax. Tim’s back to being mostly conscious – aware of the current situation as it unfolds around him.

The resignation and mortification are clear on his face.

“Okay,” Jason says cautiously, removing his hand as Tim’s eyes open again.

“Let’s try this again. No story, no reasons, you’re still not in trouble,” Jason says, certain that the fear of being in trouble is what prompted Tim’s long-winded attempt to explain himself.

“Just direct cause and effect,” Jason goes on. He gives it a beat, waits to make sure some of his calm finds a way to sink into Tim’s stupid blubber-filled baby seal skull. “Why are both of your wrists bleeding?”

There are a lot of possible answers. Technically.

Unfortunately, none of them are accidental.
All of them involve intentional self-injury.

All of them.

And Jason didn’t realize that was a possibility with Tim. Didn’t realize how terrifying that fucking possibility was.

Tim laughs – sort of. It’s more a bark of embarrassment that’s so absurd and painful and ridiculous that the only option is to laugh.

Jason presses the question again. “Tim? Why are you bleeding?”

“I- uh.. I needed a sample of uncontaminated blood,” Tim admits.

Jason takes a careful breath – steeling himself. “Why?”

“To test its interaction with the blood samples of people who’ve overdosed on whatever new drug is starting to gain ground on Gotham’s streets,” Tim explains.

Of course.

Of fucking course.

Jason knew – had known since the first spout of rambles – but this is confirmation.

Baby seal, diving into another fucking shark tank.

Survival of the fittest his ass.

Tim’s a fucking idiot.

Fucking idiot robot alien moron.

But Jason is gonna keep his fucking ass alive if it kills him.

Jason takes another careful breath. “You’re working that case?”

“Kinda?”

Jason’s eyes close briefly. Mutters a prayer.

“Dios mío, salva a este maldito idiota.”

Then he sighs, pushes to his feet.

“Where’s your fucking med kit?”

“Uh-”

Tim starts to get up – But Jason’s having none of that shit.

It’s too easy to push Tim back down to the couch, and Jason tries not to think about that –
focuses on the fact it’s currently helpful.

“Sit. Stay.” Jason orders. He spins around, searching for the lunch bag he’d brought over to begin with, the chia yoghurt parfaits still tucked securely inside. He shoves the bag into Tim’s hands as the idiot tries again to get up – halts the action before Tim’s even aware he’s attempting it. “Just tell me where the med kit is and eat your fucking fruit thing.”

“Bathroom on the ground floor. Up the stairs, down the hall to the right, third-uh fourth door on the left-hand side,” Tim says, beginning to poke through the contents of the bag. “Med kit is in the cabinet under the sink.”

Jason nods, replaying the directions in his head.

He moves to the door, pauses, points at Tim. “Stay.”

“Fruit thing,” Tim repeats, shy but amiable – pulling out a mason jar filled with the yoghurt concoction Jason’s brought over a few times before and a spoon to eat it with.

Jason’s eyes narrow, suspicious. But Tim’s an open book and he’s resigned himself to eating, so Jason slinks out into the hall – follows the kid’s directions. He finds the med kit right where Tim said it should be and races back to the basement where he left the kid.

Tim’s still seated on the couch.

The relief Jason feels tells him that he wasn’t half as certain Tim would still be there as he thought he’d been. Tim blinks up at him – all baby seal innocence and a spoonful of yoghurt stuck in his stupid face.

He needs like ten thousand more calories shoved down his throat, ASAP, but the parfait thing is adequate for the moment.

Jason makes him keep eating as he tends to Tim’s wrists. Mutters of how if he was ambidextrous to cut both wrists, he’s ambidextrous enough to eat with both hands.

He’s not sure Tim actually hears him, but regardless, Tim finishes the parfait just before Jason finishes his first aid. The cuts were clean, careful. Intentionally carved into Tim’s flesh in a way meant to produce the most blood and the least pain – they looked worse than they were.

Jason sets the med kit aside and nods at the empty mason jar between Tim’s knees.

“That good?”

Tim’s face lights up with a soft smile. He nods.

A bubble of warmth helps untwist the dread in Jason’s gut. He knew Tim liked the frickin parfait things. He’d worried that he’d told Alfred without being certain, but nope. He’d been right. Tim did like the damn things.

Jason pulls the empty jar out of Tim’s hands – he doesn’t notice the absence quick enough to move his fingers before Jason’s filled the void by swapping in the remaining parfait.

“Eat.”

Tim frowns.

“But this one’s yours.”
“Says who? *Eat.*”

“Eating does not magically heal lacerations,” Tim protests.

Jason shrugs, “Doesn’t hurt ‘em either.”

Tim needs the protein, and the calories. The nutrition and such can’t go wrong either.

But Tim… *pouts.*

Straight up.

Like a fucking puppy dog.

“What?”

Tim stares at the parfait like there might be a razor blade hidden in it.

He peeks up at Jason – quickly looks away. He curls into himself, sad and small and shy and staying quiet just because he doesn’t wanna push his luck.

“What?”

Tim flinches. Jason realizes his second question might’ve been growled.

Alfred is so much better at this part than he is – better than anyone is…

But thinking of Alfred, Jason realizes the old butler has a point – as he usually does – in that it’s frustrating to have the means to help someone with ease while they refuse to ask for whatever the fuck it is they want.

Alfred has always seemed like a magical being of patience and serenity, but now, Jason’s starting to wonder how exactly god-like the old Brit really is. And maybe he really does want Jason to ask him for things – wants to *provide* for the teen beyond the base necessities.

Jason sighs, consciously reels back on his temper.

“If you want something, Timmers, speak the fuck up about it.”


“Uh.”

“Yes?”

“Could you… uh, could you make that cheesy pasta thing with the garlic-y bread again? ‘Cause that was… that was really good,” Tim admits.

The admission is stilted, but open – honest and earnest.

It takes Jason a moment to figure out what food stuff Tim’s talking about.

“Tortelini and parmesan bruschetta? You liked that one?”

Tim nods.

That small smile again.
Jason almost feels like he might be able to crack a smile of his own.

“You’ve got the stuff to make it?”

Tim nods again, more vigorously.

The smile threatens Jason’s face again, but he catches Tim playing with his sleeve – very carefully not fiddling with the fresh bandages beneath it.

Jason sighs.

“Tell you what,” he says, planting his hands on his hips. “I’ll cook that for you if you give me a copy of the fucking data your shithead little stunt with the scalpel got you. Deal?”

Tim grins. Bright, warm, the kind of thing that makes kittens purr.

“Deal.”

Tim makes good on his end right away. He scrambles up the stairs, slides sock-footed down the hall, dashes up another staircase, thunders around above Jason’s head and then skids back into view as Jason reorients himself to the Drake kitchen.

Triumphant, Tim slaps a flash drive down on the counter.

He grins at Jason like he expects fully-cooked pasta to fall out of the sky instantaneously or some shit. The grin doesn’t fall away when nothing happens, though. Tim’s still got that ridiculous happy exuberance as he sits himself down on a stool on the far side of the island – settling in to watch Jason work.

Jason looks between Tim, the drive, and the stuff he’s pulled out to cook with wondering if there’s any way he can tell Tim he’s being an awkward little robot without making that smile go away. He decides there’s nothing to be done, resigns himself to bearing with the awkward itch of eyes on him as he cooks.

It’s not as bad as it could be.

And Tim eats everything Jason puts on his plate. Which is extremely gratifying, to both Jason’s sensibilities as a cook and to his Robin-need to make Tim fucking eat something.

That satisfaction lasts until Tim’s head begins to droop – and it becomes clear that he’s about to pass out face first into his fucking food. Jason wakes him up with a flick to the forehead, sends him up to bed – smacks him with a wooden spoon when he tries to help clean up from the meal.

Guity-ass bambi eyes glance back at him, but Jason watches Tim slink down the hall and waits until he disappears up the stairs. He cleans the kitchen up quickly after that, leaves everything spotless and just like he found it – save for a pyrex of leftovers stuck inside the fridge.

Jason pockets the drive and slips back into his coat before pushing out into the afternoon sun. He reverse-picks the lock on the door – using the set of picks he’s got sewn into every sock and shoe he owns – and leaves Tim’s mansion just as secure as it was when he arrived.

Anything but an industrial grade set of picks would break on that deadbolt.

Jason’s almost broke and he’s got a Bat-grade tension rod.

He makes it back to the Manor around the same time he would’ve gotten ho– gotten back
from school, had it been a weekday.

He heads straight up to his room. Plugs Tim’s drive into his computer.

There’s a shit ton of new data to plow through – which makes Jason both impressed and furious with the fucking baby seal who has absolutely no business being anywhere near a substance this dangerous, let alone around the people bringing it into Gotham to start with.

Jason folds his fingers together, stretches out his muscles, cracks all his joints.

Then he gets to work.

He spends hours poring over the data and calculations and notes Tim’s made.

It gives him tremendous insight into the chemicals involved, proves beyond a doubt that it’s not like any drug he’s ever seen before. Tim’s done more to explain why this stuff kills, and to explain how the stupid stick-arm junkie managed to throw Jason through a wall last night, than the entire GCPD’s been able to do over the last month.

And his hypothesis on its quasi-biological nature… his stupid, but insightful experiment to test its viral reactivity… Jason uses Tim’s data and analysis to connect dots he hadn’t seen before, connecting it to the chemical structure of the Venom that has appeared with Joker and the Vertigo and toxins used by the Mad Hatter. It’s not quite the same, but it’s linked.

This new serum is more potent, slower acting, and… it seems to create a compounding reaction: a change that builds on itself, evolving rather than just reaching a point of saturation and completion… If you add too much of this serum to human blood, it more or less ignites and burns through the host – consumes them from the inside out. But if you add a little, wait for the reaction to play out, and then add more, you can add twice as much as would make the untreated blood combust without exciting a reaction.

It’s… bizarre.

Unnerving.

It does not bode well.

Jason’s still staring at his screen when he senses someone stepping into his room – sees the movement in his peripheral vision, realizes that he should’ve noticed sooner but was being sucked face-first into the sink hole of data Tim provided.

A bowl slinks down onto his desk and Jason has just enough time to blackout his screen before Golden Boy Dick Grayson drapes himself over the back of his chair – chin perched on his shoulder and a shit-eating smile on his face.

“Hey, Little Wing,” Dick fucking coos, “What’cha workin’ on?”

“Fuck off, Dick,” Jason growls.

Dick pouts into his shoulder. “Alfred says we’re ‘sposed to share.”

Like he’s a fucking four year old and Tim’s crime scene chemistry research is a fucking toy fire truck. If it were a fire truck Jason would chuck it out the window on principle.

As it stands, Jason just pushes back from his desk, tries to wheel his chair over Dick’s foot.
He misses, and Dick gracefully sidesteps to stand by the bowl he bought – proffers it to Jason like a peace offering.

In the bowl is a snack. Pita cut into triangles, doused with olive oil, and sprinkled generously with parmesan. It’s an Alfred after school special.

“See? Sharing is good,” Dick says as Jason grabs a handful and shoves them in his mouth – suddenly realizing that it’s been hours since he’s eaten anything.

Jason grumbles and grabs another handful of pita.

He speaks around the mouthful. “What’re you even doing here? Don’t you and the Titans have a case in California?”

A smile – relieved, satisfied, refreshed – flits over Dick’s face, beneath the stupid Sparkles grin he’s wearing. Jason knows what Dicks gonna say before he even opens his mouth.

Part of it, at least.

“We solved it yesterday,” Dick explains. “Bad guy’s behind bars and everything. Just in time for me to get back here for the annual Wayne Foundation for the Arts Senior Exhibition Charity Gala.”

Jason blinks. Not following at all.

Dick laughs. “Bruce forgot, too. I thought he was gonna break his jaw with how hard he bit down after Alfred reminded him about it.”

The gymnast sobers slightly as he adds, “Guess that means you’ve got a pretty big case to distract you, huh?”

Jason grunts, unwilling to go into it.

Especially because he’s pretty sure that Bruce is gonna replace him on the case with Nightwing – with a Robin that hasn’t already screwed this case over sideways. Maybe Nightwing weighs enough to keep his feet on the ground when a roid-raging junkie tries to throw him through a wall. Jason’s not bitter. Not at all.

But he’s also not stupid.

And Nightwing being free for an assist is actually really good news.

Even if Jason’s not particularly inclined to be happy about it.

“Sooollllll,” Dick leads, his grin still bright and sparkly but stiffer – anxious, almost pleading. He knows just as well as Jason does that Bruce is gonna put him on this case. He’s giving Jason the chance to let him in before Bruce Voice-of-God’s him into it. “What’cha workin’ on, Little Wing? And is it something I can help with?”

Jason stares at the sparkly seventeen year old gymnast / vigilante / adopted older brother. He’s been trying to be a good brother, especially lately, Jason’s noticed – trying really hard not to let Bruce’s special brand of idiocy ruin everything else.

Dick wants them to be a family – so badly it’s kinda pathetic.

But Jason’s not averse exactly to having a brother. He was honestly pretty stoked about it the
first time Bruce laid it out for him. Bruce just screwed it up in pitting them against each other over the stupid Robin issue.

Robin belongs to Jason now and Dick’s evolved into Nightwing.

Even with the Titans, he’s starting to go out more and more as the blue bird instead of the one in green and yellow. Dick is trying.

So Jason supposes he can meet the guy halfway.

He turns his screen back on with a disgruntled huff and says, “There’s a new drug on the streets, killing people. We don’t know where it’s coming from, or even what it is.”

Dick leans closer – but this time he only invades Jason’s mental space and hardly toes the boundary of his physical bubble. He skims over Tim’s data, expression darkening with each new bit of info he gathers. And then he reaches the part about Tim’s experiments with introducing fresh blood into the equation and he stops.

Dick tries really hard not to stiffen.

Jason sees it in him – reads it in every twitch, or lack thereof, in Dick’s body. As a gymnast, Dick has amazing control of his every muscle. But as a bleeding heart / worry wart / frickin golden retriever, he broadcasts his emotions before he even recognizes having them.

“Did you get all this data yourself?”

The question is kind of insulting, it makes Jason bristle.

But the question is less insulting than the surreptitious check for injuries and bloodletting that Dick forces himself not to run on Jason – fixes his eyes on the screen and holds them there so tightly that Jason could’ve landed a couple solid kicks on him.

“Anonymous tip,” Jason bites out.

The tension fades from Dick’s stiff frame and the six foot seventeen year old’s fucking 180 pounds of muscle actually ripples like he’s melting as it fades away. Creepy ass circus freak.

A dialogue window connected to the Cave’s coms pops up – revealing Barbara Gordon in full Batgirl gear. She snorts and says, “Anonymous tip, my ass. Jay. You gotta talk some sense into this kid. He’s messing with some really dangerous stuff here.”

“Babs!”

Dick’s whole being lights up and he flops heavily over Jason’s chair with excitement as he greets his ex-girlfriend / current-sister / Jason’s-not-gonna-touch-that-complicated-shit-with-a-hundred-foot-pole. He respects Babs, having forcibly elbowed her way in to become the only female element of the Bat’s crusader crew. And she’s damn good with computers.

Which is awesome like 92% of the time.

And really annoying the rest of it.

“Babs,” he says flatly, “Get the fuck off my system.”

“Sorry, Jaybird,” she replies with a shameless shrug and a bright-eyed smile. “No can do. I’m bored as hell and you’ve got a lot of data to wade through here. So big sis Babs is helping whether
“Where are you?” Dick and Jason ask together – it’s the only sane question to ask.

“Air vent,” she sighs, “Chinatown.”

Dick nods. “Still working the counterfeiting case? Any headway at all?”

“I’m in an air vent, on a Saturday, while the sun’s up,” Barbara sasses. “So, no. No headway, no clues, no closure, nothing. So, let me help with this drug thing before I go insane.”

“Sun went down two hours ago,” Dick supplies, unhelpfully.

“Seriously? No wonder I’m so bored,” Babs sighs.

“Fine, whatever,” Jason huffs, kicking back from his desk and throwing his hands up in defeat. “Take the fucking case, take my desk, I’m going to the library.”

“Take your pita!” Dick calls, throwing out his arm to knock the bowl in Jason’s direction.

Jason catches it as it skids off the edge of his desk – scoops it up, nestles it in his arms, and shoves another handful of the snack down his throat.

As soon as he knows Jason’s got the snack, Dick turns his attention back to the screen, asking Babs, “So, you gonna go to the gala tomorrow?”

Barbara’s voice responds, but Jason’s tuned them out already.

Yeah. Not touching that shit.

Jason grabs a book, settles down on a couch.

He manages to finish his snack, but he doesn’t even crack the book.

He’s out before he even realizes.

A blanket is draped over him at some point – he’s only vaguely aware of the new cocoon of warmth – and the book is removed from his hand, the snack bowl removed from the side table. A shadow looms over him for a long moment, but by then he’s gone to the world.

Chapter End Notes

The work Thing went well!
Not quite the way I wanted it to, but still good.

And I have a nice buffer of material for this story to edit, so updates are still on track for being pretty regular!
Rule #4 - Always Be Friendly and Welcoming

Chapter Summary

The Wayne Foundation for the Arts hosts a senior showcase gala at Gotham's Grand Gallery and the Waynes are in attendance, some more willing than others.

Dick is not particularly happy, but Jason is downright miserable - until Tim shows up out of the blue.

Jim Gordon is amused. Or would be if he weren't so tired.
Bruce, as usual, misses the point.

Chapter Notes

It's a Dick chapter!

Thank you to everyone who’s reading and commenting and kudo-ing!
This has gotten SO MUCH MORE attention than I anticipated and I love you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Four: Rule #4 - Always be Friendly

Dick’s been doing this a while, now.

It’s been about seven years now that he's been living with Bruce Wayne – acting the part of the sweet, but slightly spoiled child of a billionaire at the countless galas, showings, and vapid public appearances constantly expected of Gotham's rich and richer.

Dick knows how to behave with Brucie in public, knows how to play the media darling. Bruce and Alfred both have taken pains to ensure his education in that regard. But he hasn’t really needed much help from them. He’s been doing the performing thing for most of his life.

Performing is more than second nature to him.

Honestly, he lives for it – for putting on a good show.

While Dick would prefer to wow an audience with a demonstration of skill, even putting on such a shallow display as this – as playing the air-headed billionaire’s equally air-headed adoptive son – sends a thrill of excitement through his veins.

It’s all an act, a misdirect – like he’s standing in for the magician’s assistant back at Haly’s. The months when she had been too pregnant to fit into the tight spandex of her costume had been
some of the best of Dick’s childhood. The promise of new life, the keen pleasure in being needed and helpful, and the delight of nudging an audience to and fro…

There’s no baby on the way here, but this act does contribute to the safety of Gotham’s children who’ve already been born – it protects Dick Grayson’s role in Batman’s crusade and Dick takes that very seriously.

He knows how to work a crowd.

He knows how to smile and wave, how to maintain an active string of chitchat.

He can be gracious as he takes a compliment, can be polite as he sidesteps an insult.

Dick is perfectly at ease in meandering through the crowd at the opening event of a new gallery in the Gotham Metropolitan Museum of Art – part of the annual showcase of graduating seniors on scholarship from the Wayne Foundation for the Arts. He’s even enjoying himself as he makes the rounds through the sea of party-goers.

It’s not until he reaches the edge of the area opened after-hours for the event that he’s given any pause – not until he reaches a point where he can see the shadowy corner where Jason is downright *hiding* from the goings on in the gallery’s brighter regions.

Seeing Jason is like a direct punch to Dick’s gut.

Dick has always prided himself on his friendliness, on his ability to sweet-talk a smile out of absolutely anyone – to be as likeable as any human who was not actively holding a golden retriever puppy could possibly be.

He had dropped the ball on that with Jason.

Actually, he had drop-*kicked* the ball. All the way to California.

Most of Jason’s first year in the Manor had seen Dick storming off from fights with Bruce, if he’d even been in the city at all. Half the time, Dick had been with the Titans in San Francisco – stoutly refusing to answer any calls, not that Bruce had actually made any.

But recently, he’d been better. Six months back, Dick had started actively attempting to repair his relationship with the little brother he’d never asked for – but who was Family all the same and who *needed* his love and care more than anyone else Dick had ever met.

Things are better now.

But Dick is still anxious whenever he considers going over to be friendly.

Jason is unpredictable.

And trying to be nice to him is like walking through a minefield.

He’s getting better at it, but he’s still only *okay* – and only *that* when they’re back at the Manor without outside pressures to create additional irritants.

Dick can’t tell if Jason would be glad for company, or embarrassed that Dick thinks he needs to be rescued. If he would respond well to a friendly overture, or if he’s on the edge of the party to avoid mingling by choice. Or some combination of both.

Jason is slouching, curled in on himself. His hands are in his pockets like he’s relaxed and
nonchalant, but there’s tension in his jaw that Dick knows is far more telling.

Jason is tense, anxious. The odds of him responding well to Dick are low.

But the odds of him responding so badly it draws unwanted attention are also low.

And Alfred has always been insistent on being polite, on making pointed, definitive efforts towards repairing the relationship Dick almost destroyed and is now responsible for finding some means to salvage.

So, Dick sucks in a calming breath, plasters a smile on his face, and makes his way across the gallery to stand with Jason.

Dick makes sure to approach from an easily visible angle, to move slowly enough not to make Jason feel like a direct target or like Dick’s trying to corner him, and to snag a pair of small plates with canapes off a passing tray to use as a peace offering.

Food is usually a safe bet to get Jason’s attention without making him leap immediately to taking up the defensive.

It’s probably a part of his days on the street – days Dick doesn’t like to think about but knows are important to remember. He knows that he should never deliberately ignore the time Jason spent on the streets, or the effects that time has had on Jason’s development – both emotional and physical – but it still makes something in Dick’s chest ache to think of it.

And worse, the only thing Dick can compare it to in his direct experience is working with the abused dogs that old man Haly rescued. Dick knows Jason would be highly offended by any likeness Dick might render between them, but Jason’s skittishness, his tendency to lash out – to strike preemptively in hopes of avoiding getting hit himself – and most of all, his baffled and mistrustful response to the love and affection Dick wants to shower him with… Dick can’t help but see the similarities between Jason and Haly’s rescue pack.

Especially since it was his experience with those unfortunate puppy dogs that gave Dick the idea of how to win Jason’s trust by bribing his stomach.

Well, those pups and Alfred’s insistence that while it was certainly important to be overtly friendly, sometimes being truly welcoming meant opening doors and waiting for the other person to walk through in their own time.

So, food. Patience. Smiles.

Dick can do this.

The canapes in Dick’s hand get Jason’s attention immediately as Dick nears the little corner his adoptive brother has staked out.

“Have you tried these things yet? They’re delicious,” Dick comments, offering one plate to Jason as he balances the other on his elbow and takes a bite of the savory hors d’œuvre.

Jason accepts the offer and pops one of the cracker-cheese-fruit bites into his mouth with a satisfying crunch and no pause of suspicion that Dick might’ve altered the food somehow.

The first few times Dick had tried to feed his way into Jason’s affections, Dick had needed to spend long minutes coaxing Jason to trust that the food hadn’t been made with rat poison. There had been a terrible incident about four years before Jason came to the Manor where a fake charity had set
up almsgiving food trucks with the intent of ‘cleaning up Gotham’s streets by clearing out the vermin’... Batman’s response had not been pretty.

But on the bright side, that brutality and Bruce’s continued vigilance in monitoring charitable activities means that every single registered charity in Gotham is doing legitimately good work for the city and its people.

And Jason is finally taking food from Dick without distrusting his intent.

Progress all around.

Dick’s smiling at Jason – who’s frowning back with a look in his eye that Dick should probably find insulting, but he doesn’t at all because the fact that Jason isn’t glaring at him is still new and shiny enough to make him genuinely happy.

“Holding your own over here?” Dick asks, adding, “I know these things can get kind of dull and irritating.”

Jason gives a stiff, one-shoulder shrug.

Dick waits – lets him speak in his own time.

“It’s just weird,” Jason admits eventually. “He’s weird.”

He means Bruce, Dick realizes.

Following his adoptive brother’s eyeline, Dick spies spoiled, shallow Brucie Wayne – the Playboy Prince of Gotham, himself – chatting away amid a small crowd of wealthy cling-ons.

Dick has always found the Brucie act unnerving, too.

It’s seamless, easy – fluid in a way that doesn’t sit right in Dick’s gut.

But he knows Jason sees right through the mask – or rather, sees the mask for the falsehood it is like it’s underlined in red. Dick’s not sure what Jason sees under the mask, if anything – he’s not even certain if that part really matters – but he knows it rankles Jason to see the mask so clearly and watch as the rest of Gotham eats it up as gospel truth.

Jason huffs as Brucie laughs obnoxiously at something.

“And we just have better things to do,” he mutters, morose.

With a heavy, empathetic sigh, Dick soothingly promises, “We’ll get to them. Soon. We should be out of here in another two hours at most.”

Jason doesn’t audibly groan, but it’s very clear he wants to.

But then – with a suddenness that startles the sympathetic grin right off Dick’s face – Jason perks up with interest as something catches his eye across the room.

Jason has a lot of different kinds of being ‘interested’ and Dick is still learning to interpret them. Some, he’s realized are not necessarily good interested. There’s the obvious kind of pick-a-fight interested that’s plainly destructive, and the sixth-sense that-guy-is-totally-a-criminal-worth-investigating, that’s helpful on patrol but worrisome at a party... but then there’s the kind of interested that means something just exploded or a train just crashed or some idiot fell in the punch and Dick is still learning to tell those ones apart, and tell them all from the sort of eager interested...
when something like Star Wars or Assassin’s Creed comes up.

But right now, Dick thinks it’s a good kind of interested that has registered in Jason’s attention – in fact, he’s almost sure of it. Maybe not quite sure enough to stand on it if it were an actual landmine, but definitely sure enough to poke at it as one of Jason’s mental landmines.

“What's up? Someone show up late or something,” Dick asks, scanning the crowd near where Jason seems to be looking.

It takes a moment for Dick to spot him, because he’s moving like a shadow through the crowd, but he pauses long enough to grab a cheese cube from the buffet table. Dick almost doesn't recognize Timothy Drake. He looks unreasonably different when wearing a tailored suit instead of an oversized sweater, and he's moving with a suave confidence that is utterly fearless.

Dick has only actually met Tim a few times now, and only for a few hours at a stretch, but still… it had taken Dick and Jason substantial coaxing to get Tim to join a conversation inside his own kitchen. Dick had never imagined the timid twelve year old could hold his own so easily in some place that was actually intimidating.

But Tim is clearly flouting that expectation, and by Jason's instant recognition of him earlier, Dick assumes his brother has seen this side of Tim before… there’s a sudden bubble in his gut that makes Dick think he might not have the difference between ‘yay friend’ and ‘oooh fire’ quite pegged.

Dick is optimistic, however, and he flashes Jason a smile.

“Let’s go over and say hi,” he suggests, throwing an arm around Jason’s shoulders and starting to drag him forward before he can protest.

Jason stiffens sharply as Dick's arm closes around his shoulders, consciously relaxes as he allows Dick the liberty in a as sweet a brotherly gesture as Dick has ever seen from him, and then stiffens all over again when he fully processes Dick's intentions.

“What? No, we don-,” Jason splutters, debating with himself over how much resistance he can show without making a scene.

Dick is so happy Jason cares about propriety – that he’s not just reacting on instinct or emotion over a pinched nerve – that Dick almost relents. But at the same time, it makes Dick feel all gooey warm and giddy to see his brother flustered – not pissed and jumpy, or any kind of scared-anxious, but doggone honest, almost happy, flustered.

So, Dick does not relent.

He drags Jason all the way around the perimeter – cutting as many corners as Jason’s wallflower sensibilities seem capable of tolerating – until they're right in front of Tim Drake.

Dick’s greeting is exuberant, and Jason visibly considers punching him as Dick half-shouts, “Hey, Timmy! I didn’t know you were gonna be here.”
Tim, Dick comes to realize almost immediately, has very poor situational awareness.

At least, he has very poor coordination and extremely limited personal spatial awareness – lousy sanshin – when his brain is focused elsewhere.

When his attention is fixated on something well beyond his body, Timothy Drake can probably be snuck up on by a herd of rhinos.

He *does* recognize the vulnerability this leaves him with, on some level, because the instant he recognizes that Dick and Jason have appeared in his personal space Tim reacts with a stifled yelp and dramatic flailing that threatens to send him toppling over.

Dick is not generally known to have the fastest reflexes – he’s got great reaction times, but Jason and Bruce always seem able to move *as* something happens instead of after – but between his circus training and his Robin conditioning he’s learned to react to appropriately on nothing but instinct to the wild flail of arms a person made before a fall.

It’s a perfunctory move, carried out before it’s truly needed, as Dick grabs Tim’s forearm and yanks him just so – rights his balance with ease. He doesn’t even move his other arm from where’s it’s curled around Jason’s shoulders.

Tim seems a bit shell-shocked. He blinks at his arm as Dick’s hand falls away from it, and then blinks at both Dick and Jason in turn.

“What are you two doing here?” Tim asks, all that confidence and focus evaporating.

“It’s a gala for the Wayne Foundation of the Arts,” Dick points out with a wide grin. He gives Jason a supportive, emphatic squeeze as he adds, “Officially speaking, we’re Waynes.”

“But I thought you’d be gone already,” Tim reports, face blank.

That strikes something in Dick’s awareness, though he can’t quite peg what. Tim is usually a guilty ball of sheepishness when he makes any statements referencing his knowledge of Dick and Jason’s roles as Nightwing and Robin – being that it’s not exactly knowledge he’s supposed to have – and it seems like that’s what he’s referencing now.

Jason notices it too and asks, “You trying to avoid us for some reason, Timbo?”

“No,” Tim responds with a little frown and a shake of his head.

“Really? Then why’d you come so late,” Jason pushes. “Isn’t it passed your bedtime?”

Dick feels the last question might’ve been over the line, but Tim doesn’t get defensive like the insult stung – instead he gets sheepish.

“I, uh, I had to wait,” Tim admits, speech stilted as he stares at his shoes. “For, um, for Mrs. Simz to leave for the night.”

Dick half wants to smile; he’s deeply amused at the hilarity of the Cinderella story playing out in front of him with little Timmy Drake – dressed in full tuxedo – hiding underneath his bedcovers until he can sneak away to the gala he’s always dreamed of…
But.

At the same time.

Tim was able to get out of his house unnoticed – entirely unnoticed, to such an extent that he feels confident his nonchalant attendance at an event like this won’t oust his absence.

He’s able to be here because there’s no one at home to miss him…

And that makes Dick want to bundle him up in one of those ridiculous sweaters and bury him in blankets at Wayne Manor with a big warm bowl of mac and cheese – to smother him with the care and attention his childhood has clearly lacked.

The urge to pull Tim into a hug and never let him go is a direct kick to the heartstrings for Dick. It throws his brain a little sideways.

Jason clearly feels the blow as well, Dick can feel the renewed stiffness in his shoulders, but he recovers faster – or perhaps he’s simply better able to stay focused on the important things than Dick is... or better able to recognize that it makes Tim anxious and uncomfortable to glimpse how his tragic home-life makes his heroes sad.

With only the slimmest pause of awkward silence, Jason huffs and asks, “What’s so frickin important about this stuffy shindig to have you slummin it?”

Tim verbalizes an answer, but no recognizable words make it out of the mumble he produces with enough strength to get all the way into Dick's ears.

Jason blinks – having heard the mumble more clearly than Dick, but understood it just as little. “You need a fucking laser?”

Tim nods.

“For what?” Jason demands.

Tim’s eyes slip away from Dick and Jason, anxiously scanning the gallery crowded with party-goers. He clearly doesn’t want to explain here – where people might overhear.

It’s case-related, then. Dick knows Tim’s been working the investigation into the new drug
on Gotham’s streets. He only found out yesterday, but already he knows that Tim is willing to go to absurd lengths and take downright terrifying risks to forward the investigation.

Dick’s gaze flicks downward involuntarily – flitting briefly to where the sleeves of Tim’s black silk suit jacket cover the wrap of bandages around his wrists from the last stunt he pulled to test a theory for this investigation. Tim doesn’t seem to notice Dick’s agitation.

“I wanna try separating the drug serum from the victims’ blood without destroying or destabilizing its chemical structure,” Tim explains.

The words mean almost nothing to Dick. And he’s still not sure how a laser and an art museum and a chemical test on doped blood could possibly all connect.

Jason might understand it more than Dick does, but not enough to satisfy Tim – who sighs heavily when he glances up at their faces and then elaborates, “The Restoration labs here have a special laser that helps them remove the accumulated organic matter from the surface of paintings. I’m hoping it might do something similar to the blood samples. The serum gets so enmeshed in the blood chemistry that everything else I’ve tried to isolate it results in the samples completely falling apart.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to be working this case,” Jason chides, a gruff resignation under the admonishment.

It reminds Dick of Alfred, or even Bruce, almost – on his good days at least – When they’d given up on trying to tell Dick not to do something that was very dangerous for most people, but only moderately dangerous for him, like using the ballroom’s chandeliers as trapeze swings, and yet still felt compelled to admonish him despite understanding that his genetics simply could not accommodate the behavior they wanted from him.

Tim takes the chastisement more seriously. He frowns and shoots Jason a glare with impressive force behind it. “But I can help,” he protests.

Jason chuckles. “Relax, baby bird,” he huffs, “We’re not gonna get you in trouble.”

“Speakin’ of trouble,” Dick says, catching the movement out of the corner of his eye, “Incoming, 4 o’clock.”

All of them know better than to turn and look or clam up like they’re guilty. Dick falls effortlessly into his usual media darling act, and Jason manages to maintain an amiable bland.

Tim though… Tim transforms. Shoulders back, spine straight – he suddenly seems a good few inches taller – and his eyes go as open and as friendly as his smile, but there’s a hard, calculating glint behind them.

It’s more convincing even than Brucie’s little act. Convincing because it’s not entirely an act. Convincing because it’s life – Tim’s life. He grew up with this, with money and the Society that revolves around it.

Tim is the one who carries the fake conversation forward as if it’s the one they’ve really been having. He embarks on a point maybe 2/3 of the way through an argument he’s pretending to have with Jason about the merits of Impressionist interpretations of industrial environments – which, Dick is quick to note, is a topic that keys off of the painting they’re gathered by.

“You know, it worries me when you Wayne boys go quiet and secretive and band together,” GCPD Commissioner Jim Gordon growls as he arrives in their little corner, gruff with affectionate
bluster and genuine concern. Sternly, he adds, “Nothing's on fire, yet, and I would like to keep it that way.”

“I'll keep them in line, Commissioner,” Dick promises, flashing him a brilliant grin. “Good to see you tonight.”

“Sure, it is,” Gordon growled. “Not like you’d prefer to have Barbara here or anything.”

Dick could hear the warmth in his voice, the affection in his sarcasm. It was an acquired skill with a man with as much right to be grim as Jim Gordon, but it was one Dick had learned years ago. Having dated his daughter and not broken her heart helped tremendously.

With a bright, honest smile, Dick says, “Well, you got me there, but I understand the homework crunch. If this had been last week even I wouldn't have been able to get here.”

Gordon gives a terse chuckle, and replies, “It seems that she’s not as invincibly brilliant at everything equally. This organic chemistry project she’s working on has her frazzled.”

“She hasn’t told me much about it, but yeah, it seems like that well-rounded education she’s after isn’t pulling any punches,” Dick sighed.

Gordon simply grumbles in response. It’s an anxious sound; too knowing and too oblivious, both at once. If he’s utterly convinced Babs is genuinely working on homework for an organic chem class, Dick will eat his shoe. And yet, if Gordon knows what his daughter is really doing… Dick’ll eat Jason’s shoe.

Not for the first time, Dick wonders how much of Gordon’s ignorance is willful. He tries not to worry about the fact that Barbara isn’t here because she’s out on patrol – because someone on the right side of the crusade has got to show their cape while the Waynes are otherwise occupied. Tries not to worry that Batgirl is going to cut her patrol short, as soon as the Waynes are not otherwise occupied, and that she’s going to spend the rest of the night in the Cave, doing more analysis of the blood samples Batman has collected from every confirmed victim of the new drug…

He tries not to worry about her safety, her health, her sanity…

They parted amiably, but he still loves her. More than a friend, no less than a lover – but differently: sister is the only word he has for it, and yet it doesn’t seem like quite enough.

Dick is worried about Barbara’s safety and he knows she can kick ass – knows that she’s smarter than to run headlong into a situation she can’t handle. Her father has so much more reason to worry, because he can’t possibly see her skills as clearly as an outsider and the love he has for her must be a thousand-fold what Dick feels. Babs is Gordon’s baby girl, after all.

Gordon sighs. “Well, just stay out of trouble, okay? You boys always have that hell-raiser look about you and the it’s making some of the grand old dames nervous, as usual.”

Gordon's brow begins to knit before he finishes his sentence.

His frown is firmly in place as he opens his mouth again, speaking as he processes what he’s seeing: “Wait. Since when are there three of you?”

“Are my boys bothering you, Commissioner?”

Dick manages not to jump at the sudden appearance of Bruce at his shoulder. Gordon does too, far more used to his tendency to sneak up on people – even as Brucie, the shallow socialite –
than any of the younger generation could hope to be.

“No more than usual,” Gordon replies warmly. With an amused exasperation ringing clear, he adds, “But honestly, Bruce, when did you get a third kid?”

Dick thinks it’s telling that Bruce doesn’t pause a beat – doesn’t need even 0.002 seconds to figure out what Gordon’s talking about – before he answers with an achingly paternal warmth, “Tim is just an important family friend.”

“Uh-huh, right,” Gordon says with the kind of knowing exasperation only acquired by watching a child grow up – the kind of knowing that means Gordon understands Bruce better than Bruce himself, nearly as well as Alfred. “Let me know how that works out for you.”

Bruce does not respond, he just maintains his smile.

Gordon sighs and shakes his head.

He needs to get back to the rest of the party, everyone knows it – just as they know he doesn’t want to. “Just stay out of trouble, boys,” he says eventually, “I know it’s difficult for you, but at least try, alright? Make an effort.”

“Sure thing, Commissioner,” Bruce replies jovially.

He receives an eye-roll and an affectionate pat on the shoulder for his trouble.

As soon as the Commissioner is far enough away not to notice the change, Bruce sobers slightly – he keeps up a minimal façade, exclusively because Tim’s there to see it – and says, “I got a text from Alfred: something’s come up with work the requires my immediate attention. I’m sure it’s nothing too serious, so I’d like you boys say here and maintain the Wayne presence. If I’m not going to get back before midnight, I’ll send Alfred with the car.”

Dick and Jason give immediate nods – this is not the time for insubordination, Batgirl needs back-up. Dick doesn’t plan on staying until anywhere near midnight, and he doubts Jason has any inclination to stay another minute, but neither of them give the slightest tell. Still, Bruce pauses – like he’s picked up on their thoughts through a secret psychic power.

“And how about we give Timothy a ride back, as well?” Bruce trains a careful gaze on Tim and adds nonchalantly, “And I’m certain Alfred wouldn’t mind cooking for an extra mouth if you’d like a midnight snack, Tim, if you’d like something more substantial than hors d’œuvre.”

Tim flashes that smile of his – the one that’s both real and fake – perfectly natural, and says, “Thank you, Mr. Wayne, but I’ve already had dinner and it’s a school night, so I shouldn’t stay out too late.”

“Of course, you’re absolutely right, Tim, I’m sorry,” Bruce replies – and Dick is fairly certain that he’s the only one who hears the thread frustration and worry in Bruce’s tone. “I still insist on having Alfred give you a ride, though. Would leaving around ten be early enough?”

“That would be wonderful,” Tim accepts, “You’re a very generous man, Mr. Wayne.”

Jason snorts at that, but Bruce ignores him to say, “I do what I can, and it’s no trouble at all to help a family friend. You’ve been spending a lot of time with my boys lately and I want you to feel welcome asking us for anything.”

“Of course, sir,” Tim replies.
It’s subtle, but Dick catches what about Tim’s response makes Jason shift. The pre-teen’s words are soft acceptance, but the statement is also a dismissal. Twelve year old Timothy Drake just dismissed Bruce Wayne – while fully aware that Bruce Wayne is the frickin Batman – and he didn’t break a sweat, didn’t even blink.

Dick is impressed.

A bit worried about what Tim’s thinking, but mostly impressed.

Bruce doesn’t seem to notice, but Dick makes a mental note to watch him carefully when they get back to the Manor – to check up on what measures Batman is using to monitor Tim, because no matter how concerned Bruce is about Tim’s wellbeing, the Bat’s first concern is whether or not Tim knows.

But for now, Bruce smiles at Tim and fare-wells them all. He gives Dick a warning look – to reinforce the understanding that as the oldest Dick is responsible – and then disappears out the side door – the Batmobile is surely on its way already, autopilot ferrying the Bat’s cape and cowl along for him. Within minutes, Batman will be with Barbara – answering whatever distress call Batgirl sent out that made Alfred text Bruce with four hours left in the gala.

Dick intends to follow.

It’ll take him half an hour to get back to the Cave, ten minutes to get changed and briefed, and five to get his bike just about anywhere in the city that Babs could possibly need him. The way Bruce had spoken, Dick doesn’t think the situation is too dire, but he has no intention to leave her hanging.

If she needs an assist from Batman, she can probably use his help as well.

Dick is about to tell Jason he’s leaving when he realizes that Jason is no longer standing with him – in fact, neither Tim nor Jason is still in the corner with him. Jason skillfully extracted himself from Dick’s slackened hold and Dick just barely catches sight of him slipping under the velvet rope that cordons off the party venue from the closed areas of the art gallery.

Presumably chasing after Tim.

Panic flares in Dick's chest.

So much for being the responsible one – for being the one looking out for the others.

Dick takes off after them, moving as slowly as he can force himself to go while still in view of the party goers and then dropping into a dead sprint as Jason disappears around a corner. By the time Dick makes it around the same bend, the slow-close of a door leading to the basement is Dick’s only clue as to their course.

A dark stairwell, another door, and then…

An empty hall.

Dick runs his fingers through his hair and picks the turn to the right at random.

He can guess that they’re heading to the Restoration room that Tim mentioned earlier, but Dick hasn’t studied the blueprints of the art gallery – he doesn’t know where that room is, or how to get there and the signage in this place is abysmal.
“God damn it,” he huffs.

And then the sounds of heavy footsteps echo through the halls.

The guards. They must have gotten curious – caught one of the abrupt and rather less than elegant exits made from the gala in the last two minutes.

Dick pushes his feet faster.

Chapter End Notes

I've got a good buffer set up and I like these next few chapters an awful lot, so I might be able to get the next one up a little earlier than next week!
Chapter Summary

The Gala for the Wayne Foundation for the Arts from Timmy's PoV!

Science Occurs!

And Alfred leads a field trip to the Bat Cave that kinda blows Timmy's little mind!

Chapter Notes

I would like to apologize to any humans that work real science, interact with lasers, or have a passing understand of how art restoration actually functions...

I write this stuff in like 2-min bursts of downtime while at work, utterly cut off from all my notes and even from Google. So I KNOW that this is not how this shit works... like in this case I actually got my kinds of lasers confused mid-way though and kinda just merged them into a pseudo-magic artifact... If it doesn't seem like legit science, just assume magic is at play. And again, I'm sorry. I have notes. I do research. I promise I'm not completely ridiculous...

Also: HUGE thank you to everyone reading and commenting and kudo-ing. Those notifications always make my day so much brighter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five: Rule #5 – Never Leave a Party Early

Donning a suit and tie is not an unusual affair for Tim.

Even changing into the formal wear after a hasty bike ride across town once a nanny had left for the night wasn’t a new stumbling block for him to conquer.

The thing that tripped him up, that actually caused his plan to shift and stutter, was something he’s never had any reason to expect: unsolicited attention.

He’d come up with the plan that morning.

After Jason had made him dinner and then forced him up to bed, Tim had actually gone to sleep. He hadn’t really meant to. He’d intended to sit down on his bed and review his casefiles until Mrs. Simz arrived with the weekly groceries – she always came late on Saturdays and didn’t stay long, leaving the poor boy to his weekend unmolested.
He’d fallen asleep.

It had been a deep, recuperative sleep – the kind he almost never managed.

He’d managed to wake up – and hide the files – when Mrs. Simz had arrived. After an hour of helping her put away the groceries and chatting about his weekend plans – and getting gently chided for focusing too much on homework he could easily finish before class on Monday – Tim went back to bed.

Properly.

He’d taken a shower and brushed his teeth and changed into real pajamas.

And intentionally gone to sleep.

Most miraculously, it had worked.

He’d woken up refreshed, and his first cup of coffee had done more than merely make him human again – it had revitalized him, energized him.

Tim had gone straight back to his casefiles that morning. He’d spent several fruitless hours trying to discern some pattern in the victim profiles. But then he’d gone to brew another pot of coffee and the invitation his parents hadn’t even been in the country to receive had jarred his memory about the gala at the art museum – which had, in turn, reminded him about the gallery’s very particular laser.

The invitation gave him an in at the gala, security would be focused on the VIPs milling about, and the laser would be just downstairs. An hour, in and out with a sample… it might not work to shave off the added organic matter of the transfigured blood, but it was something he hadn’t tried yet. Any possibility of gaining new, telling information was worth investigating.

From the moment the idea had occurred to him, Tim had shifted his focus to infiltrating the gallery and getting an hour with the laser. It looked more than doable as he’d studied the blueprints for the layout and the electrical grid for the camera angles.

The only issue he anticipated was at the door – getting in without his parents along.

But Tim had snuck into more than enough Society events – enough Wayne events, for that matter – to be fairly confident. And he’d been right.

Tim had slipped inside with no trouble at all.

He’d made his way through the party, keeping to the edges and clocking the movements of the security guards as he made his way to the unattended corridor that would lead to the shortest route to the Restoration Room. It had all been easy, one of his more straightforward infiltrations, if he was being honest.

The guards didn’t bother him, the socialites glazed over him, he was even more invisible than the wait staff – because he belonged there, he wasn’t hired help, he didn’t have food. He was important enough to get in, not enough to be clung to, and with no designs to do the clinging. It has always been Tim’s sneaking strategy and it has always worked.
This time proved the rule.

Tim is making his way through the last leg of his public sneakery when things go wrong. He pauses at the buffet table, grabbing a cube of cheese as cover to give every single security guard one more look, and to delay the instant when he slips out to ensure the camera is looking away from his hall.

He’s focused on getting away clean, on walking through his route to the Restoration Room – mentally re-timing the plan he’s worked out for his steps to suit the mechanical twirls of the cameras, because they move a bit slower than he thought they would – and then suddenly there’s a person right in front of him. A person – two persons – one of which is saying his name, his name, brightly and intentionally, and Tim is NOT prepared for that.

Tim is caught so completely off guard that he doesn’t even realize his body’s reflexes are reacting – and by ‘reacting’ Tim can admit that he means flailing like an absolute idiot – until a hand wraps around his forearm and yanks. Hard.

It’s a simple, sharp motion that perfectly corrects for Tim’s flailing and leaves him perfectly square – balanced effortlessly over his feet.

He blinks at the hand that saved him from a fall as it releases him, blinks up at the person it belongs to, and the one beside him – familiar faces, both.

Dick Grayson and Jason Todd.

Nightwing and Robin.

“What are you two doing here?” he blurts, every ounce of confidence and competence he’d felt literally seconds ago just evaporating. Sublimating.

“It’s a gala for the Wayne Foundation of the Arts,” Dick points out with a wide grin. Some part of Tim notices, and takes heart in the observation, that Dick gives Jason a supportive, emphatic squeeze as he adds, “Officially speaking, we're Waynes.”

Tim knew that.

He did.

But they’re Waynes. They have people to schmooze, or rather, they have people to be schmoozed by. They have no business being here in this corner, no reason to notice him.

He’d known there was a possibility that they’d be here, but he’d never imagined they’d have the time or inclination to notice him – to purposefully come over to talk to him.

Honestly, he’d thought it was a 50/50 shot that they’d even be here.

Batgirl must be on patrol right now instead.

But they’re probably going to head out soon themselves. With this current case being so difficult and deadly, and all the usual low-key crime still in swing, all the capes are needed on deck right now.

“But I thought you’d be gone already,” Tim admits.

There’s a pause.
It’s brief. Tim wouldn’t have even noticed it before, but he’s been studying social dynamics lately – trying to figure Jason out, to be perfectly frank – so now he notices, but he still doesn’t understand.

But Jason plows onward; arms crossed, eyes narrowed, a hundred data points gathered from Tim’s posture zipping through his mind – data points that Tim can still hardly hope to identify, let alone consciously counteract or shape.

“You trying to avoid us for some reason, Timbo?”

“No,” Tim promises. He’s not avoiding them, he would never avoid them. He just… doesn’t understand why they would seek him out – or expect him to seek them out.

“Really? Then why'd you come so late,” Jason pushes. “Isn’t it passed your bedtime?”

It’s an insult, Tim knows, but Jason’s natural language does not accommodate a widely recognized version of cultural-typical affection. But Tim’s been researching. Over the last four months, Tim’s learned a lot about the linguistic peculiarities of Crime Alley and the other rough corners of Gotham’s urban landscape.

Jason’s teasing is not mean-spirited. It’s concerned and warm – and covering for it.

“I, uh, I had to wait,” Tim admits, speech stilted as he stares at his shoes – embarrassed that the teasing hit its mark even if the insult behind it wasn’t supposed to sting. “For, um, for Mrs. Simz to leave for the night.”

There’s another pause.

This one, more obvious.

Jason stiffens beneath Dick’s arm – his whole being freezing over.

And Dick… Dick is looking at Tim with these big blue eyes that are so expressive and open, and Tim just cannot wrap his head around the outpouring of emotion in them well enough to interpret what exactly that expressiveness is screaming.

Jason huffs – forcing himself to relax in a way Tim is starting to recognize as artificial – and asks, “What’s so frickin important about this stuffy shindig to have you slummin it?”

Frack.

Tim’s not supposed to be working this case anymore.

There has been no shortage of people telling him that.

He even got an email from BATGIRL about it.

He’s certainly not supposed to be breaking into a museum for unauthorized use of a very
expensive laser on the off chance it might provide some insight on the case. That he’s not supposed to be working at all anymore. That case.

Tim mutters an explanation about the laser – hoping Jason doesn’t catch it.

Jason’s got better hearing than he’d anticipated.

“You need a fucking laser?”

Tim nods.

“For what?” Jason demands.

Tim’s eyes slip away from Dick and Jason, anxiously scanning the gallery crowded with party-goers. Not all of his unwillingness to speak is his own doing. Part of it is the venue. There are plenty of people here who could be troublesome if they overhear the wrong thing.

But nobody’s close enough to hear.

And Nightwing and Robin deserve to know.

He’d been planning on telling them anyway if this panned out positively.

“I wanna try separating the drug serum from the victims’ blood without destroying or destabilizing its chemical structure,” Tim explains with a sigh.

His explanation meets with blank looks. Which prompts another sigh.

“The Restoration labs here have a special laser that helps them remove the accumulated organic matter from the surface of paintings,” he elaborates, “I’m hoping it might do something similar to the blood samples. The serum gets so enmeshed in the blood chemistry that everything else I’ve tried to isolate it results in the samples completely falling apart.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to be working this case,” Jason chides.

Tim winces – despite having expected that reaction.

He forces himself not to sound like a whining kid as he insists, “But I can help.”

The assertion, Tim knows, is difficult to swallow – it would be for anyone. What could a kid like him possibly do to help an investigation of this scale, of this degree of danger? But if anyone could understand it should be Robin.

And. He does.

Startlingly, it seems Jason does.
Jason chuckles. “Relax, baby bird,” he huffs, “We're not gonna get you in trouble.”

“Speakin’ of trouble,” Dick says, seemingly inclined to agree with Jason on the first point – at least enough to put it on the back burner while another issue rises to the front. Dick keeps his smile steady, but Tim is learning to read the stiffness behind the sparkle of a brilliant grin, and he recognizes the edge of anxiety now as Dick says, “Incoming, 4 o’clock.”

There’s a gap between Dick’s arm and his side, and through it Tim glimpses the approach of Jim Gordon. *This* Tim can handle.

He’s talked himself out of more potentially awkward situations where grown-up oversight threatens to interfere with whatever other thing he’s attempting to do. While Jim Gordon is a more astute and intimidating grown-up than most, he’s still just a grown-up and he’s still just a minor inconvenience in Tim’s path.

And Tim knows how to side step it.

He’s sure that Nightwing and Robin could manage on their own, but of the three of them, Tim is doubtless that he has the most practice with this particular technical difficulty.

While all three of them clearly know better than to clam up or turn and look, it’s Tim that jumps to carry on with a conversation that they could have plausibly been holding all along.

“You know, it worries me when you Wayne boys go quiet and secretive and band together,” GCPD Commissioner Jim Gordon growls as he arrives in their little corner. Sternly, he adds, “Nothing’s on fire, yet, and I would like to keep it that way.”

“I’ll keep them in line, Commissioner,” Dick promises, flashing him a brilliant grin. “Good to see you tonight.”

“Sure, it is,” Gordon growled. “Not like you’d prefer to have Barbara here or anything.”

Tim knows that the first Robin and Batgirl have had a sort of special connection, but he doesn’t particularly care. They still work well together, so Tim doesn’t see why he would have any reason to care. His attention drifts away from Dick’s conversation with Gordon – looking back towards the hallway that starts the route to his laser.

The timing has been thrown off, but it’s a short loop and Tim knows that it’ll only be a minute or two before things line up properly again. He just needs to find a way to sneak out from under Gordon’s nose while his presence distracts Dick and Jason.

Well, while he distracts Dick.

A glance at Jason shows Tim that getting away won’t be as easy as he hopes – Robin is watching him and the look in his eye shows that he knows exactly what Tim is thinking. But Jason’s still caught under Dick’s arm and Dick is involved in the conversation with Gordon, so Tim can likely arrange for a thirty second head start – he doubts Jason will oust him immediately if he gets away from Dick and Gordon.

But then the conversation shifts, and Gordon’s puzzled gaze falls on Tim directly.

“Wait. Since when are there three of you?”

And then things get so much worse because *Bruce Wayne* appears – his gaze falling right on Tim as well – and asks, “Are my boys bothering you, Commissioner?”
“No more than usual,” Gordon replies warmly. With an amused exasperation ringing clear, he adds, “But honestly, Bruce, when did you get a third kid?”

Tim is standing stock still. He’s pretty sure he’s forgotten how to breathe, mortified at the casual tone of the implication. Bruce Wayne must be shocked – Tim knows he’s been spending a lot of time with Dick and Jason, but he didn’t mean to make it seem like he’s trying to assimilate into the Wayne family. He kind of wants to be part of the crusade, but he knows that Batman has no reason to let him join – to even tolerate the involvement he already forces on the Bats.

But Bruce Wayne is a practiced actor in the socialite arena and he effortlessly responds to Gordon with a convincing warmth, “Tim is just an important family friend.”

“Uh-huh, right,” Gordon replies immediately. “Let me know how that works out for you.”

Tim wants to melt into the floor.

He doesn’t hear if Bruce responds or if Gordon says anything further.

The next thing Tim is aware of is Gordon raising a hand in farewell.

“Just stay out of trouble, boys,” he says eventually, “I know it’s difficult for you, but at least try, alright? Make an effort.”

“Sure thing, Commissioner,” Bruce replies jovially.

He receives an eye-roll and an affectionate pat on the shoulder for his trouble.

As soon as the Commissioner is far enough away not to notice the change, Bruce sobers slightly – he keeps up a minimal façade, but says, “I got a text from Alfred: something’s come up with work that requires my immediate attention. I’m sure it’s nothing too serious, so I’d like you boys stay here and maintain the Wayne presence. If it seems like I’m not going to get back before midnight, I’ll send Alfred with the car.”

Dick and Jason give immediate nods – this is not the time for insubordination, and Tim knows as well as they do that a text from Alfred means Batgirl needs back-up.

Bruce lingers – eyes on Tim evaluatively. He can’t possibly know why Tim’s here – the laser is such an abstract, such a long shot, that Batman would have no reason to consider it a plausible option for the investigation.

“And how about we give Timothy a ride back, as well?” Bruce says carefully. He adds to Tim directly, “I’m certain Alfred wouldn’t mind cooking for an extra mouth if you’d like a midnight snack, Tim, if you’d like something more substantial than hors d’œuvre.”

Tim flashes a smile – trying to be as unaffected and nonchalant as possible – and says, “Thank you, Mr. Wayne, but I’ve already had dinner and it’s a school night, so I shouldn’t stay out too late.”

He hopes that’s the response Batman is looking for – the response that says Tim is just your average kid, and is definitely not still planning on sneaking down to the basement.

“Of course, you’re absolutely right, Tim, I’m sorry,” Bruce replies – and Tim hears something in his voice that might be frustration, might be suspicion. Is probably suspicion if Bruce’s next words are anything to go by: “I still insist on having Alfred give you a ride, though. Would leaving around ten be early enough?”
Frack.

Batman knows.

Batman totally knows.

And he’s going to sic Nightwing and Robin on him to make sure that Tim does not follow through with his plan. If Alfred is going to show up at ten, that only leaves Tim with half an hour to mess with the laser – and that’s assuming he can either get away from the younger vigilantes, or convince them to help. Escaping seems more viable, but still painfully difficult to manage.

But Tim smiles.

“That would be wonderful,” Tim accepts, “You’re a very generous man, Mr. Wayne.”

Jason snorts, but Tim doesn’t have time to attempt to analyze why as Bruce responds, “I do what I can, and it’s no trouble at all to help a family friend. You’ve been spending a lot of time with my boys lately and I want you to feel welcome asking us for anything.”

“Of course, sir,” Tim replies.

He realizes vaguely that it might be a bit abrupt of him, but he knows that Bruce is only offering these things because Tim is a problem – a person to be managed carefully.

Besides Tim’s distracted. He needs to get downstairs, fast, and get messing with that laser. An hour in an out, he’d anticipated. That still left him with over 45 minutes to accomplish his work, while at the laser itself. It’s going to take him five minutes to get down there, at least three to get set up properly, and even if he only takes two minutes to get back upstairs, that’s only twenty left for the actual experiments.

Frack.

Tim’s attention is entirely fixated on retiming the approach. He’s decided not to care about the cameras, but there are still human guards around – not to mention the Police Commissioner, himself. And Nightwing and Robin.

But they seem distracted too – by Batman’s exit.

Batman is gone.

Nightwing and Robin are watching the spot where his back must have disappeared.

Tim takes advantage.
He’s under the velvet rope and halfway down the hall before his brain can process any possible cons to his decision to go – the act of processing it would’ve taken long enough to let the window of opportunity close.

He’s going at a jog by the time he reaches the stairs.

He’s at a sprint by the time he reaches the right hallway – dives into the Restoration Room and begins the start-up procedures for the laser without even turning on the overhead lights. He’s flipping switches, checking monitors, picking the lock on the cabinet with the various organic mediums he wants to try – mentally eliminates the one he was only vaguely interested in… the mediums through which the laser is focused changes its properties, mostly the color-spectra through which the analysis is generated. Laser light is just light, and should not genuinely affect the blood samples, but it is possible that a certain wavelength could strike just the right ratio of elements to excite the atoms – produce some observable change.

Even if the change is brief or only microscopic, the various cameras on the rig should allow Tim to catch the tiniest of effects when he goes over the results back in his bedroom.

He’s glad that he’s put in a sprawling HD set up in his room, because he’d originally hoped to do some preliminary analysis here, but with Alfred coming at ten… With Alfred being the direct line to Batman that will likely be the main force behind convincing Bruce that Tim is harmless, he can’t afford to misstep with him.

Tim needs to be back upstairs to accept the ride home.

He can probably handle apologizing to Nightwing and Robin later, and they probably won’t do anything to blow his chances with Alfred.

But he needs to finish this first.

He’s just slotted the first focus medium into place and is pulling the tiny box of carefully packed vials from his pocket when a hand wraps around his elbow. He yelps, but this time he doesn’t flail – keeps a steady grip on his box of blood samples.

It’s Jason.

He’s glaring.

“Dude, you have fucking listen,” Jason growls. “What the fuck are you thinking?’

“Laser,” Tim tells him, realizing only then that he’s still breathing hard from his sprint to get here at all. “Need to run these samples… Before Alfred –”

“Yo. Alfie’s cool, Timmers,” Jason promises, “You’ve got nothing to worry about from him. So, take your fucking time, a’ight? Don’t give yourself a heart-attack or a frickin concussion. Breathe, you stupid little shit.”

Tim ignores the cursing.

He knows it’s just Jason’s own anxiety. Tim supposes that he was right about Robin being tasked with managing him – and likely with protecting him, too, if only from himself. It makes sense for Jason to be worried about losing his charge.

“But he’s gonna be here in twenty minutes,” Tim protests, trying to get his mind refocused on the task at hand.
Jason huffs and allows Tim to have his arm back – which he immediately begins to use to set up his first sample – as he says, “I told you. Alfie’s cool. He’s not gonna make you leave before you’re finished. No matter what B’s fucking told him to do.”

That makes Tim pause.

Frown.

Connect dots.

“Does Alfred know?” Tim asks, a pit growing in his stomach. “Know that I…”


Tim blinks. Ponders that. Realizes he is not equipped to puzzle through it and decides to push it away – to simply trust in Jason’s assessment that Alfred won’t tell Batman if he’s a little late, won’t force him to rush through these tests in a way that could possibly compromise them.

Settled, Tim slows down.

Focuses on getting this done *right*.

Jason steps in to help. Tim’s not sure how Jason learned to work with lasers, but he doesn’t get in Tim’s way at all – he even proves legitimately helpful with applying the appropriate labels to everything.

They're just finishing up the very last sample when Dick bursts into the room. “We should probably get out of here,” he says, as nonchalant as if he’s caught them playing video games instead of doing homework. At worst it’s like they’re tagging alleyways with Bat symbols and not at all like they’re messing with a multimillion dollar laser. “The guards are coming.”

Well.

Tim supposes that’s not really surprising, considering the sloppy haste with which he made his way down here to start with.

“Where the fuck have you been,” Jason asks, pausing to stare at Dick like his sudden appearance is as much of a surprise as his failure to follow them from the beginning.

Dick flashes a grin. His signature getting into trouble grin, as Tim well knows from having spent years watching him from behind the lens of his camera.

“Well, since I couldn’t find you guys right away, I’ve been leading them on a merry little chase,” Dick explains, adding hurriedly with a gesture to the walkie in his hand, “but the chase is over now because they figured out I was avoiding this room, and they’re coming straight here, so we gotta go. Batgirl can scrub the footage later, but our ride’s already here so shut that thing down and let’s go.”

“Well, since I couldn’t find you guys right away, I’ve been leading *them* on a merry little chase,” Dick explains, adding hurriedly with a gesture to the walkie in his hand, “but the chase is over now because they figured out I was avoiding this room, and they’re coming straight here, so we gotta go. Batgirl can scrub the footage later, but our ride’s already here so shut that thing down and let's go.”

“On it,” Jason says before Tim’s fully processed what Dick means.

Switches get flipped the other way, the hum winds down, and the box of newly labeled samples and a ream of printouts make their way into Tim's hands.

Tim feels a bit like he’s underwater – like reality is drifting out from under his feet and his body is just floating away. He’s never been this close to getting caught before, And he’s sure it's
Dick and Jason's fault, and *that* feels terrible.

But he’s also never had anyone trying to help him *not* get caught before.

He’s never had back-up.

And *that*… well that feels kinda… that feels kinda good.

Kinda *really* good.

Tim likes the idea of back up.

A lot.

A lot more than he thought he would.

He thinks that probably means something… But it’s about to not mean anything, because back up or not they’re all about to get caught…

Except Jason's pulling on his arm and his feet are already moving and they're halfway back upstairs before Tim even realizes what’s happening.

And then they’re all getting into a car and Dick is grinning madly and Jason’s smiling too and someone's yelling step on it like this is a good old fashion bank robbery.

“To the Cave, then,” states an elderly British voice, with a warm lilt to his tone like he’s getting in on the action-movie fun of a botched heist. It's Alfred, Tim knows immediately. Tim has met him a few times at Wayne Manor during the periodic galas held there and he will never forget those brief encounters.

Encounters where Tim was at the center of a warm bubble of genuine attention – not being pressured into being perfect; or being expected to give the right answer or the appropriate response for a child his age. Alfred had spoken to him like he mattered as his own self – and like he was genuinely interested in Tim’s unique take on one thing or another.

Jason had called Alfred magical; Tim is inclined to agree.

But he also knows that it is not his place to join the Bats in the Cave… and the resigned, responsible part of him speaks up to say, “You don’t have to worry about me. Just drop me off when we get to the mainland.”

“Whatever for, Master Timothy?” Alfred asks, adding brightly, “I’m sure you have a mammoth load of data to go over after tonight’s exploits and I’m sure the Cave's computer will be a tremendous asset in wading through the mire.”

Tim is not sure he heard right.

Actually, he’s very sure he heard wrong.

Because.
No.

He can’t possibly be getting an invitation to the Bat Cave. He can't.

Because that doesn’t happen to anyone. Let alone someone like him.

Well, it happened to Dick and Jason, Tim supposes.

But they were orphans when Bruce found them, orphans with clearly established and demonstrated skills that could be used to contribute to Batman's crusade.

Tim isn’t an orphan.

And he doesn’t exactly have any cape-worthy skills…

But Barbara Gordon isn’t an orphan, Tim's brain supplies – utterly unhelpful. She doesn’t count because she didn’t get an invitation, she had invited herself.

Barbara is the Commissioner's daughter.

If anyone had the skills and know-how to prove their worthiness and join Batman's crusade without getting an invitation, it was Barbara Gordon.

Tim doesn’t compare to her. Not at all.

He has decent detective skills. But he doesn’t have a genetic legacy of criminal justice. He has tech skills that are better than average, but Barbara… she is amazing. The one email Batgirl had sent him had been so strongly encrypted that Tim could barely figure out how to read it, let alone attempt to trace it.

And she could fight.

Had been in kickboxing classes since age eight, branching out into half a dozen martial arts by the time she’d turned eleven.
Her skills are unreal, and with her rightful proximity to the cases Batman was working, it’s no wonder she’d wound up as part of the crusade.

Tim is not Barbara.

And he’s not Dick. And he’s not Jason.

But.

But that was the turn for his driveway.

They passed it.

How they got here so quickly, Tim doesn’t know.

It’s physics defying.

But now Alfred’s pulling into a culvert, a hidden driveway, a seriously cool man-made cut-out in the landscape that recognizes the car and unfolds until it gapes open for the vehicle to speed by and then melts back into the landscape seamlessly. The underground driveway is long – long enough to keep its entrance well away from the Cave itself, from the heart located deep underneath Wayne Manor and from its natural outlet to the east where the icy waters of Gotham Bay splash at the stalagmites.

And then … Tim is …

Tim is in the Cave.

The Bat Cave.

And Tim is standing inside it.

Marveling.

Awestruck.

Terrified.

This place is unreal. It can’t be happening. He clearly did something with the laser that went wrong, and it blew up and he’s dead and that is totally okay with him right now. Totally.

Yep.

He’s dead and that’s fine.

A hand appears on his shoulder, a light touch, but grounding – real.
“Are you quite alright, Master Timothy?”

Tim nods.

He’s dead and that’s fine. So yeah, he’s alright.

“I think we broke him,” Dick worries, hovering nearby.

Jason snorts. “Nah. This happens a lot with the little fucker. Sit him in front of the Bat Computer and he’ll snap out of it. Shit’s a sucker for cool tech.”

Jason’s voice sounds further away than Dick’s.

Tim attempts to look around and locate him, but his attention is fleeting and getting sucked away by everything his gaze glances over. There’s regular workout equipment and specialized gymnastic gear and a frickin American Ninja course, and there’s a dozen unbelievable tech stations, and lit-up glow-y closets full of weapons and gear and stuff for the Bats on the streets, and a full-scale hospital wing, and Tim is dead and everything is fine.

The hand on his shoulder leads him through the massive complex of the Cave.

And it is massive.

Tim’s chest is tight and wheezing as he tries and fails and tries again to take it all in.

Tim knew the Cave had to be huge to accommodate even half the training equipment he knows the Bats must use, not to mention to house the various cars, boats, motorcycles, and aircraft they’ve employed on the streets.

But this.

This is …
This is massive. It’s all open, too.

Tim had thought it would be big, but he’d thought the Cave complex would be more complex than cave… he’d clearly been wrong.

The hand on his shoulder has guided him over to a computer.

A quantum computer.

A quantum computer that’s decades ahead of the one showcased at the Gotham SciTech Museum. Decades. At least.

It’s … it’s gorgeous.

And logged in.

And the data from the printouts that… that had been in Tim’s hands until just a second ago… the data on them is being scanned into the computer and displayed on an array of screens that puts the NSA set up to shame. That puts NASA’s set up to shame.

And it begins logging patterns in the refraction effects on the samples tested with the laser at the art gallery. Logging all sorts of patterns. Some of which are reaching, but some of which… some of which are intriguing. Definite possibilities.

Things that need to be looked into.

Things that can be looked into… right now.

Tim takes a few seconds to figure out the controls on the computer, all the extra keys and clear shortcuts and the more elaborate patterns of movement needed to manipulate the chemical structures and data points and everything in 3-D.

He gets the hang of it quickly enough.

Begins plowing through the data.

“So, Babs is incoming with a fresh sample,” Dick mentions at some point. “We’ll probably be passing her around Robbinsville.”

“Very well, Master Dick,” Alfred replies, “I’ll be running coms until she arrives.”
It registers in Tim’s brain suddenly that Dick and Alfred are referring to Nightwing going out on patrol. He turns around in his seat – not really sure why he’s compelled to look or what he’s expecting to see.

Nightwing and Robin are standing there in full costume, performing their final equipment checks before they head out to chase down crime on Gotham’s streets. It’s an inspiring sight – awe inspiring, and motivating.

Tim feels his mouth curve into a smile.

“Be careful,” he breathes.

Neither Nightwing or Robin hear him, but that hand appears again on his shoulder as the vigilantes swing astride Nightwing’s motorcycle.

“My sentiments, exactly, Master Timothy,” Alfred commiserates.

They wave the young vigilantes off to the thunderous roar of Nightwing’s bike and then the Cave is quiet. The Bat computer is humming away and the sporadic beeps allow the silence to break without feeling strained.

“Would you like anything to eat before you get to work, Master Timothy?”

Sheepishly, Tim replies, “Coffee would be nice?”

“Unfortunately, I cannot condone caffeine so late in the evening,” Alfred tells him. “I would offer decafe, but…”

Tim feels the face he pulls - doesn't want to think about how it looks or how rude it is to turn down Alfred's kindness.

Alfred give a slight pause, tipping his head in acknowledgement of the face and its inherent meaning, before going on unphased, “But I somehow suspect you might prefer something else. Strawberry milk, perhaps?”

Tim doesn’t feel his jaw drop, but he’s pretty sure it does.

*How?*

Alfred simply smiles softly, pleased with having guessed correctly. “I shall fetch some presently, then,” he mentions casually, turning to head deeper into the Cave.

How could he know that was Tim's favorite? Not chocolate, like most kids, or plain old white milk like the average ‘odd child’, but strawberry.

*That* didn't come up often.

How could Alfred possibly know Tim liked strawberry milk?

Why would he know that?
Why would he have it have in stock?

“A butler always knows what those in our care require, and we always ensure we have the means to provide when it is something so simple as strawberry milk,” Alfred says as he suddenly returns, impossibly quick, tray in hand with a tall glass of perfectly frothy, ice cold strawberry milk balanced atop it.

Okay.

Fine. Alfred is magic.

That's fair.

He has special awesome butler magic.

That’s almost reasonable.

But.

But Tim is not one of his charges, not someone even tangentially considered to be in his care. Tim has his own parents and nannies and staff for that.

So why..?

Tim recognizes that the question is too big, too convoluted and ridiculous, for him to answer right now, especially with a more pressing question right in front of him.

So, Tim pushes the big question aside and accepts his perfect glass of strawberry milk.

And he focuses on the data filling up the screens spread out before his eyes.

Chapter End Notes
No epic-finicky lasers were harmed in the making of this fanfic. The museum staff were able to work the next morning as if no BatFam fiddling had occurred.

Again... sorry about the Science. Yay, Magic?

I have another Chpt on the Museum Heist (from Jason's PoV!) almost ready, so I should have that up by Monday!
Rule #6 - Be Patient

Chapter Summary

Museum Heist Mock 3 - Jason's PoV

With a couple new case details from Babs that do not bode well for anyone.

Chapter Notes

Alrighty, last chapter of the super-tight overlap!

After this, we go back to actual plot development!
Originally, I wasn't intending on three whole chapters of this one bit at the museum, but the way the boys approach the scenario is just so radically different that I felt it worth exploring!

Once again, I apologize on behalf of real Science.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Six: Rule #6 – Be Patient

Jason is not a fan of the fucking penguin suit.

He is not a fan of galas, or the fucking idiots that attend them.

He is not a fan of fucking around here when there are killers on the streets and a new drug sweeping slowly, but unstoppably, through the Gotham population.

And he is not a fan of wasting his time here, trying pointlessly to fit in with these fucking shallow, stupid morons, just to have it pointed out over and over again that he doesn’t belong.

He knows he doesn’t fucking belong.

He doesn’t fucking want to belong.

Jason hates this shit.
He’s already made it through hours of bearing with this stupidity.

It’s been long enough, more than long enough.

If Bruce doesn’t decide to take them home in the next half hour, Jason’s cutting out early – Alfred’s repeated careful warnings about the impropriety of leaving early be damned. Jason likes the butler, respects him, but not enough to let this idiocy torture him to death.

Jason’s contemplating the pros and cons of leaving early, of pulling an immediate cut and run – without even giving B the benefit of the doubt in hoping that he’ll be getting them out of here soon – when Dick catches his eye from across the room.

Dickiebird had been making the rounds, smiling at the socialites and playing nice with the vain, ridiculous assholes that might not be super-villains, but definitely contribute to Gotham’s crime rate in their own, negligent and callous way.

Making eye contact with Dick is a mistake. As always.

Goddamn idiot takes it as an invitation over and begins to move immediately.

Dick treats Jason to a bright smile, as vapid as any Brucie’s ever worn, except so much worse because the cheery little fucker actually *means* it – every goddamn little sparkle of it – and Jason shudders.

Dick picks up a couple plates of those little fruity-cheese-whip crackers as he passes a waiter en route and Jason narrows his eyes.

“Have you tried these things, yet? They’re delicious.”

Dick offers him a plate.

It’s a bribe and they both know it.

But those stupid little crackers are tasty shit and Jason’s fucking *starving* so… He lets Dick stand with him in the corner, pops a cracker in his mouth with a satisfying crunch, and tries not to glare directly at the fucking sparkles radiating off the stupid shithead.

It’s disgusting that someone can be that much like a fucking puppy dog.

He’s a giant, glittery ass puppy dog, and it’s fucking creepy how well he pulls it off.

“Holding your own over here?” Dick asks, adding, “I know these things can get kind of dull and irritating.”

Jason gives a stiff, one-shoulder shrug.

Dick can’t possibly understand the riot in Jason’s gut whenever a socialite coos at the ‘fine young man’ the fucking street kid is shaping up to be – the clear implication that he’s making progress by their shitty standards but still has a long way to go before he’s anything more than a special exhibit at the fucking petting zoo.

Frickin circus boy laps up the attention – even when he can acknowledge that not all of it is necessarily *good* attention, he still loves it.
Galas like these make Jason wanna take a bath in bleach.

“It’s just weird,” Jason admits eventually, realizing that Dick is going to stand there looking at him with that stupid, forced-patience smile until he gets a verbal answer. Jason looks over at B, scrambling for a topic that he and Dick might possibly agree on. “He’s weird.”

Dick nods, the smile flickers out for a brief second as the ache of that truth pushes passed the mask of sparkles.

The moment of honesty Dick shows pushes Jason to verbalize the admission he’s been thinking from the moment they walked into this place, “And we just have better things to do.”

With a heavy, empathetic sigh, Dick soothingly promises, “We’ll get to them. Soon. We should be out of here in another two hours at most.”

Jason doesn’t audibly groan, but he wants to.

He doesn’t even hide it.

But then movement catches his eye – movement that’s very different from the ebb and flow of the socialites milling about.

It’s purposeful, intent…

Hot damn.

It’s Timothy Fucking Drake. Again.

It’s another fucking museum heist.

Except, this time there’s no Bat computer hiding in the basement.

At least, not that Jason knows about.

Jason’s attention has fixated so firmly on Tim that Dick notices.

“What's up? Someone show up late or something,” he asks, scanning the crowd.

Jason feels the exact instant Dick sees who has his attention – Dick’s whole being vibrates like a golden retriever being shown a fucking stick and being asked in a stupid frickin baby voice ‘wanna play?’…

“Let’s go over and say hi,” he suggests, throwing an arm around Jason’s shoulders and starting to drag him forward before he can protest.

Jason stiffens at the contact – still fighting his instincts in trying to let Dick get away with a little bit of the physical contact he so clearly craves – but he does force down the reaction that would have him shoving anyone else away and kicking them six ways to Sunday for daring to think they could get so close to him.

But then Dick takes his empty plate and drops it on a passing tray and then continues to drag him around the perimeter of the room – towards Tim. The words Dick said before initiating this half-
hug dragging ridiculousness suddenly sink in and Jason stiffens.

“What? No, we don-,” Jason splutters, debating with himself over how much resistance he can show without making a scene.

Because this is a very bad plan.

It would definitely be better to just stalk Tim to wherever he’s going and surprise him there, away from the crowds. Because the last time Jason surprised Tim, he yelped so loudly that if there had even been a single guard on the same floor as them… they both would’ve been running from the cops before any of the other shenanigans got started.

Dick’s greeting is exuberant, and Jason considers straight-up punching him as Dick half-shouts, “Hey, Timmy! I didn’t know you were gonna be here.”

Tim doesn’t even hear him.

Like. At all.

Blank face, totally focused on whatever heist his little brain is running… Tim doesn’t react in any way for a solid two seconds after Dick’s words fade away.

His body reacts before his brain even registers the stimuli – flapping and flailing like a slapped mackerel.

Dick notices the moment Tim begins to fall at the same time Jason does, but Dick’s already reaching for his arm. Dick grabs Tim’s forearm and yanks him at just the right angle to keep him on his feet – all that circus experience finally paying off outside of the sparkles and spandex his Nightwing costume still bears. It’s such a simple move for Dick that he doesn’t even take his other arm away from Jason’s shoulders.

Tim seems a bit shell-shocked. He blinks at his arm as Dick’s hand falls away from it, and then blinks at both Dick and Jason in turn.

“What are you two doing here?” Tim asks, all that confidence and focus evaporating.

“It’s a gala for the Wayne Foundation of the Arts,” Dick points out with a wide grin. He gives Jason a squeeze, that Jason finds a bit condescending and ridiculous, as he adds, “Officially speaking, we’re Waynes.”

Yeah. Officially speaking.

Not really.

He did catch the we bit of that, though. Jason’s not sure what to think about that, doesn’t really care to try sorting it out.

Especially not when he’s distracted as Tim pulls a face and says flatly, “But I thought you’d be gone already.”
He seems almost like he was counting on that fact.

Suspicious, Jason pushes, “You trying to avoid us for some reason, Timbo?”

“No,” Tim responds with a little frown and a shake of his head.

It seems genuine. He wasn’t avoiding them. But he also wasn’t looking for them – at an event he should have known they would be attending.

“Really? Then why’d you come so late,” Jason edges in, pressing for more since it’s clear there is more. Tim is here for a reason, and if it’s not them, it’s probably something Nightwing and Robin should be aware of… “Isn’t it passed your bedtime?”

“I, uh, I had to wait,” Tim admits, speech stilted as he stares at his shoes. He’s embarrassed, sheepish… honest. “For, um, for Mrs. Simz to leave for the night.”

Mrs. Simz is the nanny.

She’s pretty useless as far as Jason can see, even if Tim seems to like her.

Because Tim is here, unsupervised, in the middle of the fucking night on a Sunday for shit’s sake. He’s a fucking twelve year old.

How the fuck did his spoiled little rich boy ass even get here?

This fucking kid is gonna get himself killed.

In the beat of silence that follows Tim’s ridiculous explanation, Tim shrinks – curling into himself under the awkward pressure of making the fucking golden retriever that is Dick Grayson sad enough to lose his smile.

Baby seal, dropped in a god damn desert.

And the worst part is that Dick doesn’t even notice how his attention is making this whole shitty situation Tim’s in so much worse – the situation where Tim can leave home in the middle of the night for hours and hours and hours without any possibility of being caught is bad enough, but to Tim it’s normal and making him feel bad about it is just drowning kittens.

With only the slimmest pause, and a brief huff to kill any sappiness building in his own frickin throat, Jason asks, “What’s so frickin important about this stuffy shindig to have you slummin it?”

Tim compresses further – baby seal seriously regretting the fact that he’s not a fucking turtle with a shell to literally hide away inside. He verbalizes something – clearly hoping that no one can hear him well enough to catch his words – but the only word that comes out solid enough for Jason to hear is laser.

Which. Just.

Doesn’t make sense.

What fucking laser?

Where?
Blurting his confusion as it processes, Jason asks, “You need a fucking laser?”

Tim nods.

“For what?” Jason demands.

Tim’s eyes Slip away from Dick and Jason, anxiously scanning the gallery crowded with party-goers. He clearly doesn’t want to explain here – where people might overhear.

It’s case-related, then.

Jason’s gaze flicks down involuntarily – only for an instant – to scan Tim’s wrists for any new sign of the self-inflicted injuries he’d sustained in pursuit of science.

Stupid fucking shit.

This time, Tim doesn’t seem to notice Jason’s discomfort – or Dick’s whose eyes just flicked down the exact same ways Jason’s did – and while he clearly doesn’t want to share, he forces himself to speak, explaining, “I wanna try separating the drug serum from the victims’ blood without destroying or destabilizing its chemical structure.”

The words mean almost nothing to Dick or Jason.

It’s obvious.

Tim gives a little resigned sigh and elaborates carefully, “The Restoration labs here have a special laser that helps them remove the accumulated organic matter from the surface of paintings. I’m hoping it might do something similar to the blood samples. The serum gets so enmeshed in the blood chemistry that everything else I’ve tried to isolate it results in the samples completely falling apart.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to be working this case,” Jason chides, resigned himself to helping the little fuck do whatever shit he’s trying to pull. He knows he can’t stop Tim, but it feels wrong to not even try making him see the ridiculousness of his plan.

Because this fucking idiot baby seal is definitely going to get himself killed one of these days, but that’s only going to happen over Jason’s cold dead corpse.

Tim takes the chastisement seriously, more seriously than Jason expected.

“But I can help,” he insists – fierce, determined, but still not terribly frightening. Baby seal’s got big scary teeth, but it doesn’t have any fucking feet, so it waddles ridiculously on land and is just impossible to take seriously.

It’s too fucking adorable.

Jason chuckles. “Relax, baby bird,” he huffs, “We’re not gonna get you in trouble.”

“Speakin’ of trouble,” Dick says, attention shooting out to the side, “Incoming, 4 o’clock.”
All of them know better than to turn and look or clam up like they’re guilty. Dick dons his frickin sparkles, and Jason resigns himself to be … not unfriendly.

Tim though…

Tim transforms.

He’s still got the big-eyed baby seal thing going on, but… now he’s in the water, now he’s doing what his stupid little not-legs were meant to do. Now his big ol’ bambi eyes aren’t deer-in-the-headlights terrified, they’re predatory, glinting with an acute focus that somehow doesn’t destroy the illusion of sweetly innocent openness created by his easy smile.

It’s… remarkable.

Tim is a crap liar.

That much Jason knows.

Except… he’s not.

Not when it counts. Not when a drug lord strings him up asking questions – trying to beat the truth out of his tiny little body. And not when Commissioner Gordon steps up to nose into business he wouldn’t even care about if not for the fucking VIPs gathered around.

Dick strikes up a conversation with the Commissioner, but Jason’s not paying it any attention. He’s focused on Tim.

Because the young Mr. Drake persona Tim had slipped into was incredible, bulletproof, and Jason had not seen that one coming.

And he’s watching intently as it begins to melt away – his attention drifting off towards the hallway where he’d been heading before Dick had stepped into his path.

Jason knows that look.

He’s gonna bolt.

Little shit.

Dick’s arm is still around Jason’s shoulders, so unless something changes, Tim’s gonna get away with just zipping off unnoticed – because Jason won’t oust him. Snitches get stitches and Jason’s never been the kind of loser that would consider ratting on a teammate.

That thought strikes him hard and fast – mostly with shock at how easily it flit across his mind. He doesn’t have teammates. Or. He didn’t. And even now that he’s got them, it’s an awkward, forced partnership. They work together well enough, but they’re not… not friends or anything, not family in the way Dick wants them to be.

And Bruce… well, he’s the boss. It makes the team player aspect of being part of a group effort rather null and void.

But Tim… Tim is not his teammate. Not really. Not… in any way, to be honest.

He just feels like it.

And that’s new, that’s different.
And Jason’s gonna roll with it, for now.

Except… the flit of focus and determination that had been on Tim’s face is suddenly gone, evaporated, melted away as if it had never been. And he’s frozen beneath a stilted imitation of that perfect rich-boy mask he’d put on when Gordon first stepped up.

Gordon’s staring at him, frowning.

“Wait, since when are there three of you?”

Jason wasn’t paying enough attention to the conversation to have any idea what he means, or why it’s making the Tiny Timmy spy-bot back into frickin bambi.

And then things get so much worse because Bruce steps up.

Tim actively attempts to make himself vibrate through the floor.

“Are my boys bothering you, Commissioner?”

“No more than usual,” Gordon replies warmly. With an amused exasperation ringing clear, he adds, “But honestly, Bruce, when did you get a third kid?”

Oh.

Well.

That explains Timmy’s short circuit. Sort of.

Except, Jason’s not entirely certain why the prospect of being associated with the Waynes is so alarming to Tim. Like, yeah, Tim’s got his own family and he’s not any kind of charity case like Dick and Jason, but… is it really that alarming to be roped in with them?

Brucie’s response is as shallow and vapid and useless as Jason expects, but it still makes him roll his eyes as B says, “Tim is just an important family friend."

"Uh-huh, right," Gordon replies immediately. "Let me know how that works out for you."

Jason has never been the biggest fan of Commissioner Jim Gordon – the police had given up on even pretending to do their jobs around Crime Alley, after all – but Jason had always appreciated his ace on bullshit meter and his straight-up intolerance of anything more than mild dumb-assery. He was basically B’s, uncle at this point, so he gave B a pass more often than he should, but he always sassed back when B pulled obviously stupid shit.

Tim doesn’t respond well to Gordon’s comment or B’s failure to adequately refute it, but before things get any worse, Gordon sighs and lifts his hand in farewell.

"Just stay out of trouble, boys," he says eventually, "I know it's difficult for you, but at least try, alright? Make an effort."

"Sure thing, Commissioner," Bruce replies jovially.

He receives an eye-roll and an affectionate pat on the shoulder for his trouble.

As soon as the Commissioner is far enough away not to notice the change, Bruce sobers slightly – he
keeps up a minimal façade, but says, "I got a text from Alfred: something's come up with work that requires my immediate attention. I'm sure it's nothing too serious, so I'd like you boys stay here and maintain the Wayne presence. If it seems like I'm not going get back before midnight, I'll send Alfred with the car."

Dick gives an immediate nod, and even Jason can recognize that this is not the time for insubordination and nods himself. Even Tim gives a little nod – being just as aware as Dick and Jason that a text from Alfred means that Batgirl needs back-up.

B nods back, but he lingers instead of charging away immediately – as Jason would’ve expected from Batman after his presence had been directly requested.

B’s gaze is locked on Tim.

It makes the kid squirm, though neither Dick nor Bruce seem to notice – or care.

"And how about we give Timothy a ride back, as well?" Bruce says carefully. He adds to Tim directly, "I'm certain Alfred wouldn't mind cooking for an extra mouth if you'd like a midnight snack, Tim, if you'd like something more substantial than hors d'oeuvre."

Tim flashes a smile – trying to be as unaffected and nonchalant as possible, effective despite being more transparent than his earlier mask – and says, "Thank you, Mr. Wayne, but I've already had dinner and it's a school night, so I shouldn't stay out too late."

Tim’s focus is clearly already shifting away from them – back towards the cordoned off hallway he’d been scoping out from the start.

"Of course, you're absolutely right, Tim, I'm sorry," Bruce replies – Jason hears the frustration, doesn’t care to analyze it. "I still insist on having Alfred give you a ride, though. Would leaving around ten be early enough?"

B’s stupid insistence makes Tim freeze. Panic.

He covers it better than he ever has when alone with Jason, but the tells are there.

"That would be wonderful," Tim accepts stiffly, brain skittering sideways, "You're a very generous man, Mr. Wayne."

Jason snorts – both at the sentiment, because B is shit with the generosity thing since it’s all a publicity stunt, and at Tim’s delivery, because it’s so dry and dismissive that Jason’s almost convinced Tim knows about B’s uselessness. He honestly might.

But it’s much more likely that he’s just running through the rest of his heist, trying to retime it to suit the new circumstances he’s been squished into accommodating.

Meanwhile, Bruce responds, “I do what I can, and it's no trouble at all to help a family friend. You've been spending a lot of time with my boys lately and I want you to feel welcome asking us for anything."

"Of course, sir," Tim replies. It’s flat, dismissive, totally fearless.

Tim’s brain is definitely fixated on his heist again.

Jason can’t help but look away from Tim for a moment as B turns to leave.
He regrets it immediately – blinks and Tim is gone. Again. Jason should have known better than to take his eyes off the slippery little shit for even a second – he knew the kid has a tendency to disappear.

Dick is still so caught up in his own ridiculous angsting that Jason is able to slip out from under his arm and charge in the direction he assumes Tim’s headed. The kid can be devilishly quick on his feet, as Jason well knows, but this heist is not as cautiously controlled as the last one Jason witnessed and Jason can follow Tim’s course by the echoing slap of his rushed steps.

Jason has to sprint to catch up to him, doesn’t manage the feat before Tim slams into the double doors of a mad-science lab labeled ‘Restoration Room’.

“Tim, hold-up,” Jason huffs, “What the fuck has you so freaked?”

Tim doesn’t hear him, doesn’t even notice that Jason’s in the room with him.

“C’mon Timmy, slow down for me,” Jason shouts, trying to break through the little robot’s firewalls and abort whatever catastrophic programing has him so frantic.

It doesn’t work, and Jason’s chest begins to constrict.

Tim is in full-on panic mode – and he’s clearly not built for the exertion of his sprint to get down here, looking red and woozy with lack of proper oxygenation.

He’s still zipping about – moving way too quick for his body to keep up with – messing with a large machine that seems to be the laser he was fixated on getting to use. He’s not hearing anything Jason is saying and that makes Jason’s concern redouble.

Jason gives up on trying not to spook Tim any more than he already is – choosing to forcibly halt the self-destructive process he’s witnessing by physical force.

As Tim finishes slotting something into place with a dramatic, definitive click, Jason grabs his arm. He yelps, predictably, but this time he doesn’t flail – holds tight to a box he’s pulling out of his pocket, the kind of box Jason knows is used to hold delicate vials of sensitive materials… like contaminated blood.

Jason hopes the samples aren’t fresh, isn’t particularly confident in the assertion – ignores it in favor of focusing on getting Tim to calm the fuck down.

"Dude, you have fucking listen," Jason growls. "What the fuck are you thinking?"

"Laser," Tim tells him, frowning at the wheeze behind the word – like he’s finally noticed that he’s breathing hard. Instead of doing the sensible thing and slowing down, Tim pushes himself harder and pants out, "Need to run these samples... Before Alfred –"

“Yo.” Jason cuts that sentence off before it starts – stops the idea in its tracks. He owes Alfie that much, at least. “Alfie’s cool, Timmers,” Jason promises, “You’ve got nothing to worry about from him. So, take your fucking time, a’ight? Don’t give yourself a heart-attack or a frickin concussion. Breathe, you stupid little shit.”

Tim’s frown deepens.

"But he's gonna be here in twenty minutes," Tim protests.

Jason is relieved to note that he seems to be breathing easier.
With a huff, Jason reluctantly lets go of Tim’s arm – the little robot immediately goes back to his Science – but his head is quirked slightly, proving that he’s still listening.

“Told you,” Jason reiterates, “Alfie’s cool. He's not gonna make you leave before you're finished. No matter what B's fucking told him to do.”

That makes Tim pause.

Frown.

Reevaluate the data.

"Does Alfred know?” Tim asks, blood draining from his face. “You know… know that I…”


Jason is not kidding and that rings clear enough in his voice for Tim to recognize it.

Tim blinks. Ponders that.

Visibly shuffles it out of his immediately focus.

Turns his attention wholly back to the laser and the experiments he needs it for.

Jason doesn’t know much about lasers, but he knows a helluva lot about people – and reading their body language, their movement, interpreting intent. Tim broadcasts his movements when working his mad science. It’s like Dick with his ridiculous emotions, but way more helpful. It lets Jason step in to help – to appear at Tim’s elbow with the thing he needs right as he consciously realizes that he needs it.

Anything to help the little robot complete his science smoothly.

Because Alfred might not rush him, but Jason’s pretty sure the abruptness of their exit caught someone’s attention – he’s expecting the museum guards to come investigate soon.

He’s not expecting Dick to burst into the room as they’re just finishing up with the label on the last sample. "We should probably get out of here," he says, a convincing air of easy nonchalance covering the acute anxiety Jason reads in the tightness of his chest – he’s slightly out of breath and using that to cover the tension in his throat. The façade falls slightly as he adds, “The guards are coming.”

Jason’s thrown.

Tim’s just caught up in processing it all, but Jason… wasn’t expecting Dick to still be here, not with Barbara needing back up from B.

"Where the fuck have you been," Jason asks, pulling up a defensive front.

Jason’s first thought is suspicion – that Dick stuck around to keep an eye on him, to supervise and keep Jason from screwing up again.

But no.

If that were the case, Dick would’ve followed them to the Restoration Room immediately and promptly tried to talk them out of continuing.
So then why…?

Dick flashes a grin. His signature, sparkles and mischief all.

"Well, since I couldn't find you guys immediately, I've been leading them on a merry little chase," Dick explains, adding hurriedly and brandishing what is clearly a museum walkie stolen from one of the guards, "but the chase is over now because they figured out I was avoiding this room, and they're coming straight here, so we gotta go. Batgirl can scrub the footage later, but our ride's already here so shut that thing down and let's go."

Jason accepts that, recognizes the need to move quickly.

"On it," Jason says – beginning to get the laser shut down well before Tim’s brain has even processed Dick’s words. It seems Tim’s super-quick motions from earlier have created a speed deficit and now to make up for the previous quickness, he’s unable to make pace quicker than a medium crawl.

It’s alright, though. Jason remembers how Tim turned the laser on. He simply performs the same actions in reverse. Gets Tim’s feet moving – tows him back towards the gala as Dick scouts ahead. They don’t go all the way back to the party. Instead they cut out through a side door, meet Alfred with the car by the curb.

They dive into the vehicle.

Dick shouts for Alfred to step on it, grinning madly.

"To the Cave, then," states Alfred – his voice warmly amused by the antics of the young.

Tim’s been silent and compliant since being pulled off the laser – clutching tight to his vials and the printouts generated by his experiments – but Alfred’s statement seems to jar something back to the surface of his brain. Waking him up to the world again.

His expression is blank, the sadness and resignation inside it are subtle.

Tim musters his voice to say quietly, “You don't have to worry about me. Just drop me off when we get to the mainland.”

"Whatever for, Master Timothy?" Alfred asks, adding brightly, "I'm sure you have a mammoth load of data to go over after tonight's exploits and I'm sure the Cave's computer will be a tremendous asset in wading through the mire."

Jason knows that Alfred means it – that he wouldn't offer if he didn’t – but Tim… is confused. He’s clearly uncertain that Alfred could mean it, but equally uncertain that the butler could possibly lie to him about it.

The little robot brain in Tiny Timmy 2.0 screams to halt again. Blue Screen of Death and then a cut to black. The start-up procedures don’t quite seem able to kick in.

Jason’s seen it before, but this time he doesn’t need Tim to answer any pressing questions or accomplish any immediate task, so Jason’s content to leave him be.

The ride to the Cave is quick – Alfred’s driving is phenomenal, utterly illegal, but somehow still perfectly safe and smooth and utterly invisible to law enforcement. Tim is quiet, but so is everyone else. No one but Jason notices that Tim’s not functioning properly until they get him out of the car and into the open expanse of awesome that is the Bat Cave.
The sight wakes Tim up for a moment, but the sheer weight of awe resulting from what is very likely a fucking wet dream come true for him is too overwhelming for him to maintain any semblance of focus. He wobbles on his feet and Alfred is right there to rest a hand lightly on his shoulder and ground him to something solid.

“Are you quite alright, Master Timothy?”

Tim attempts to nod, but his eyes keep pulling his head around in circles.

Hovering nearby like the stupid anxious puppy dog he is, Dick openly worries, “I think we broke him.” Admittedly, the concern is kinda valid.

Jason’s heading to the gear lockers. He snorts and hides a smile as he says, “Nah. This happens a lot with the little fucker. Sit him in front of the Bat Computer and he'll snap out of it. Shit's a sucker for cool tech.”

By the time Dick appears beside him, Jason’s stripped out of his fucking penguin suit – left it in a careless heap in the corner – and is already halfway into his Robin armor.

“Are you sure he’s okay?”

Jason glances over his shoulder at where Alfred is coaxing Tim into playing with the Bat computer – watches as Tim intuits the controls and begins messing with it on his own. “Yeah, he’s fine,” Jason assures the golden retriever. He knows Dick needs the coddling and adds, “Like seriously, how were you the first time B showed you the Cave? And you didn’t even know about it more than like an hour beforehand – you might’ve suspected, but it didn’t mean shit. Kid’s a fucking fanboy – this shit’s gotta frickin’ floor him.”

With a slow nod as it sinks in, Dick slips into his suit – buckles down the armor with the ease of over half a decade of experience. The pair arm themselves, secure the coms in their ears, fix the masks into place… quietly prepare for patrol.

They sync the coms to the Cave system and immediately, Barbara is there, jabbering away. “This has already been a ridiculous night and you idiots have a lot of explaining to do for this disturbance at the museum. What even was that? Why would you guys, of all people, break into an art gallery’s security zones?”

It’s a private, secure line. Barbara would never expose their shenanigans if B were listening.

Jason barked a laugh. “Wasn’t us BG. Baby bird wanted to play with a laser.”

“T’s there? In the Cave?” Barbara asked, a mix of resignation and interest.

“He’s physically present,” Dick explains. “Seeing the Cave… he’s a little overwhelmed.”

“He’ll be fine,” Jason harped.

“Good. He can help me go over this new sample,” Barbara says, determined. There’s a hard edge behind it – anger, fear, disappointment.

Dick notices it too. “What happened?”

“Nothing dangerous,” Barbara assures them.
It goes unsaid that she called on B for back-up so it had to be something.

There’s heavy reluctance in her voice as she explains, “It was just another overdose victim, DoA… But how he died is… different. Batman is sticking around for the preliminary autopsy, I’m en route to the Cave.”

It was her talk about this later voice.

Dick vibrated with worry – golden retriever going into frickin overdrive – but even he knew there was a point at which to back off and he wasn’t dumb enough to push it with Barbara.

“Alright, BG, fly safe,” Dick says, solemn and quiet.

“You too, big bird,” she replies. “Robin, you and Nightwing better keep outta trouble tonight, I don’t have the patience to scrub another security feed – the museum is gonna take me long enough to deal with.”

Jason doesn’t reply, and Barbara cuts the feed before Dick goes sappy again.

All suited up and settled, Jason and Dick head out into the main Cave.

Tim is focused on the Bat computer’s screens – data readouts flowing over the displays like water. He’s focused, but he’s relaxed in a way that makes the last of the tight knot in Jason’s chest loosen enough to let him breathe easy.

"So, Babs is incoming with a fresh sample," Dick mentions as Alfred looks over at them with infinite patience. "We'll probably be passing her around Robbinsville."

"Very well, Master Dick," Alfred replies, "I'll be running coms until she arrives."

“T’s not here,” Jason asserts quietly, making sure everyone’s on the same page about it.

“Of course not, Master Jason,” Alfred promises.

Nightwing and Robin drift off towards Nightwing’s bike, making their final preps and hailing Batman on their coms.

“Where’s the civilian you were supposed to escort?”

Of course, that would be the first question out of B’s mouth. It’s not like there was a minor crisis or mysterious drug epidemic or anything to worry about. No, the thing on Batman’s mind was whether a stupid kid was in a position to know shit he shouldn’t.

“Your vehicle did not stop at the civilian’s home address,” B elaborates when neither bird jumps to give him an answer.

Jason suppresses the urge to loose a sting of curses and growls, “He’s upstairs. Agent A wouldn’t let him let him go back to that empty mansion without a good meal. Pumped the kid full of hot-chocolate and sent him off to bed in one of the Manor’s guest rooms.”

It was plausible, and more than likely would have been true if Tim were actually ignorant of their secret and not participant in their current investigation.

The only sign that B accepts his answer is silence.

With impressive fortitude, Dick fords the hush and asks, “What’s the situation?”
“Batgirl found another apparent overdose victim,” Batman explains, “Displays signs of doping on the new drug, but the exact cause of death is still unknown. Victim sustained various blunt-force object injuries and wounds from a bladed weapon. Left arm severed at the shoulder, ligaments and muscle show signs of damage from torque – no apparent indication of cause – and the skin around the tears bear the apparent imprints of human teeth.”

Well.

That’s… disgusting.

Damn.

No wonder BG used her talk about it later voice.

Sounding as stunned as Jason feels, and probably twice as horrified, Dick asks, “Teeth?”

“Yes.”

The flat response rankles Jason back to reality. The Bat does not repeat himself, even for confirming details of a situation report that’s as hard to swallow as this one.

“Is Barbara okay?”

“She can handle it. She is heading back to the Cave with fresh samples.”

Dick almost pops a vein as he bites down on the surge of vitriol that rises in him. Jason can see the physical effort it takes him to force it down and refocus.

“Where do you want us?”

“Rendezvous at Chinatown’s East Gate.”

And that was that.

Batman’s words laid down ironclad expectations.

If he and Nightwing are late – which they probably already are, since B hadn’t given a timeline – Batman’s judgemental, brooding silence would be the theme song of the night.

But there’s nothing to be done about it but play catch-up and continue to try the futile effort of meeting B’s impossible standards.

Jason takes the helmet offered by Nightwing and settles himself behind the big bird on the bike. They’re zipping across the city on Nightwing’s neon-glow monstrosity within a few seconds as they make their way through Gotham’s perpetually crime-ridden streets – passing Batgirl somewhere in the night.
Chapter End Notes

If overlap isn't your thing, thanks for sticking with me this long, and I promise actual plot development is on the way!

Next Time: we've got another Timmy/Cape encounter that blows his little brain. And Babs gets more involved!
Rule #7 - Be Supportive

Chapter Summary

All Tim wants to do is help.
But helping is hard.

There's a break in the case, and a couple of strange conversations.
But Science has always been easier for Tim to manage than people.

Chapter Notes

SNOW DAY!!

So, Chapter up early!

It's some Timmy Adorableness for you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seven: Rule #7 – Be Supportive

Tim’s not sure how much time passes between when Robin and Nightwing leave and Batgirl arrives, but he doesn’t think the span is very long.

Tim supposes the sound of her motorcycle tearing up the drive should’ve been his first clue, but he somehow missed that entirely. Tim’s first indication Batgirl has arrived is a low whistle from about ten feet behind his right shoulder.

“Wow, baby bird,” Barbara says, pealing off her mask and running her fingers through her long red hair – mussed from sweat and Gotham grime and compression from her cowl. “No training wheels for you, I see.”

Sheepishly, Tim pulls his fingers off the keys and looks back at her.

He’s caught by the awe again – of being so close to a cape in costume. He’s not the same kind of fun of Batgirl as he is with Robin, but he respects her skills tremendously and admires the contributions she makes to Batman’s crusade – wishes he could be even 10% as helpful as she was even before she took up a cape.

Tim has never been this close to her.
She’s amazing, a domineering presence that makes her stealth even more impressive.

Catching himself staring – possibly slightly slack-jawed – Tim forces his gaze off her before it becomes too awkward. Heat still creeps up his neck, though. His eyes dart away – back to the Bat computer – but looking there makes him feel guilty for daring to touch the tech that Barbara usually operates herself.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Barbara insists with a soft chuckle.

There’s exhaustion in her voice – enough for Tim to hear it clearly – and something more that Tim has no hope to identify. It’s enough to make him look back at her again, though.

Something about his expression makes her flash a soft smile.

It’s a tired, weighted look, void of any pleasure – filled with something… like regret.

“Hey, now,” she chides sweetly, “Don’t you worry about me. I might be a Bat, but I know I’m not quite as cleanly cut out for the streets as the boys… It’s no big deal.”

Tim blinks.

“But you’re great.”

A chuckle traps itself in Barbara’s chest – and a bit of genuine warmth makes it to her smile. “Thanks, but uh-”

“No. You’re awesome,” Tim insists, trying not to think about the fact that he just interrupted Batgirl while she was deigning to speak to him. “You bring something to the crusade that none of the others can – a kind of heart and drive that inspires a lot of people.”

She arches an eyebrow. “You mean because I’m a girl?”

Tim frowns.

“Plenty of other girls can fight, you know,” Barbara tells him.

“No,” Tim replies, shaking his head. Realizes what he said in the midst of his attempt to keep speaking, “No- I mean- Yes- but not- You’re not...”

He stops himself. Pulls back.

Wishes for note cards. He’s got a new pen. It’s a pencil hybrid with liquid graphite – the ink won’t melt away even if he drops his cards in antifreeze again.

But this is a short argument, simple points – ones he realized were important years ago.

Tim looks at his hands, folds his fingers together.

“Yes. Other girls can fight. Probably better than you,” he validates. Tim stops himself from looking up at her to see her face – can feel the force of her confused, vaguely insulted, stare weighing down on his shoulders. “But you’re important because you’re different. You joined as a Bat, not a Robin. You don’t need Batman’s approval, you’re kinda famous for clashing with him over that. You joined the Crusade to fight crime, to save Gotham, not to make a father figure proud, and that makes people want to be better themselves.”

Barbara is quiet as he swallows.
“And you uh- you joined,” Tim says slowly, embarrassment clawing its way into his throat and threatening to force it closed. This point touches on his own, deeply personal admiration of her. “You uh- joined the Crusade, with-um, without an- without an invitation. Batman didn’t find you or recruit you, you joined on your own.”

Barbara smiles at him, soft and warm and genuine. And surprised, if Tim is reading it correctly – which, he actually thinks is possible. Barbara is far more open with her expressions than Jason. And her expressions are more directly connected to her emotions than his.

“You joined on your own, too, baby bird,” Barbara tells him after a long pause. “And you joined up on purpose.”

Tim can tell there’s a sore spot there – can’t tell what or why – and realizes that he is not equipped with any skills or experience to help with any aspect of the situation. He can’t even tell what’s happening – let alone figure out how to fix it.

He should – he should ask if she’s okay, right? Because she’s obviously not.

But is that question insulting?

Jason would find it insulting.

But would Barbara?

It’s different with Barbara because she’s a girl. A girl with a comfortable childhood and a relatively happy and supportive home-life.

Jason’s a boy from the streets of Crime Alley.

So, it’s different.

Very different.

But.

But they both like to be in control of their universe – it’s why Jason trains so hard and why Barbara’s spent so much time perfecting her tech skills. Control.

And not being okay is losing control. Isn’t it?

But Tim can’t tell if that’s the most important factor in this.

He’s getting better at reading people, but just better enough to be able to tell that he knows almost nothing about how to evaluate the data he’s learning to observe.

Is it more important to Barbara that she has a supportive father who would ask her what’s wrong if he noticed, or is it more important that she feel capable of maintaining her façade of perfect control?

How the frack is Tim supposed to tell?

“Earth to Tim,” Barbara says suddenly, her fingers going out to poke his forehead. “BG to baby bird? Anybody home?”

Tim blinks. His eyes widen in shock as he realizes that he’s been staring blankly at her for a long while – long enough for her to braid her hair and take a seat in the bright pink ergonomic swivel
chair beside him. Heat creeps up his neck again – makes it to his ears this time – and he stares at his knees in mortified shame.

It might’ve been okay if he’d figured out the puzzle.

If he’d stared at her until it was awkward but managed to figure out how to help her.

But he didn’t.

He just stared and stayed useless.

“Stay with me, Timmy boy,” Barbara is saying as Tim tries to melt into his chair. “I’m asking you some questions here, about the case we’re working.”

The statement pulls things back into focus.

For Barbara, the most important thing is the work. The case.

The case he can help with.

Because of his museum stunt.

The one the Dick had mentioned Barbara could scrub the footage to make their get-away completely clean. He still blames Dick and Jason for making him need to have any footage scrubbed, but it was his heist.

“I’m sorry for making you have extra work,” Tim blurts. “Scrubbing footage, I mean.”

Barbara chuckles. “Cake walk, baby bird, I just complain about it to make the boys remember that my miracles don’t come cheap even when they come easy.”

Tim blinks. Barbara’s smile is wide. Proud.

That’s good. Right?

Barbara is still smiling as she says, “So, now, tell me why you wanted to break into the basement. Dick said something about a laser?”

Tim nods.

He turns back to the Bat computer’s screens and explains what he was thinking when he’d first conceived the idea. With Barbara, he goes much more deeply into explaining the science of it than he did with Dick and Jason – knowing that she’s far more likely to genuinely understand his exact reasoning.

Barbara nods at each of his points, examines the data with a knowing, critical eye that can pull the important details out of a sea of overwhelming numbers.

They wade through the data together for another few hours.

Until Alfred appears with a warning that Batman is incoming.

“I’ll scrub all the Cave footage,” Barbara sighs. Looking up at Alfred, she continues, “Get Tim upstairs and set him up in one of the guest rooms with some hot chocolate – that’s what Jason told B you were doing when he tracked the car and realized you didn’t take him home.”
Alfred nods.

Tim reluctantly peels himself away from the Bat computer. Drags himself to his feet.

It’s been hours of mostly fruitless work.

The results from his laser experiment are interesting, but thus far seem inconclusive.

He stretches his arms above his head and goes through a recap of the situation as it currently stands, “So, this drug we’re looking for shows up in blood samples as a compound resulting directly from the chemical reaction it has when integrated into the human blood stream… do we even know how it *makes* it to the blood stream?”

Barbara sighs. “Not really. The quantity and saturation levels seem to indicate direct injection, but none of the victims have the track marks of regular junkies that might hide a new injection, and none have fresh signs of injection either,” she explains gravely. “It seems like it’s being imbibed – judging by the stomach contents of the victims. The highest concentration of the unknown chemical is found in the stomach, usually alongside things like alcohol or energy drinks, sometimes even coffee. It wears through the stomach, perforates the lining, and apparently disintegrates the organs from within the body cavity.”

She glances over at Tim – as if suddenly realizing how gruesome a picture she just painted for him, right before the fragile little twelve-year-old’s bed-time – but she doesn’t say anything. Tim’s grateful for that.

Tim might be twelve, but he’s not a kid. Not in the way other twelve year olds are kids.

He can take the gory details – is glad someone finally gave them to him. It’s been a pain trying to hack the GCPD for the police reports of the autopsies. Batgirl has clearly given the GCPD’s systems a boost – leaving a backdoor for herself and locking out basically *everyone* else.

Tim refocuses and reviews the data. “What we have is a compound, resulting from a chemical reaction. We know one of the parent materials and are looking for the other – or the rest, if there’s more than one… but we can’t remove the parent we know without the whole sample disintegrating…”

It’s frustrating. Impossible.

Wait.

What if it *IS* impossible?

They’ve been assuming that the chemical components of the drug have been added to the human system as a self-contained substance that’s entirely separate from the organic matter of the human body.

But.

What they’ve seen so far indicates that it might be viral in nature.

A virus doesn’t *die*, exactly, when it’s removed from a host, but it’s also not exactly alive outside of the host system either.

So, what if…?
“What if we can’t separate the parent material from the contaminated blood because there simply isn’t a pure parent material to separate?” Tim asks, eyes skimming over the data in a frantic search for supporting details as he adds, “What if the parent material is contaminated blood, and the reactivity of it inside the new system is not just chemical, but genetic?”

There’s a pause.

“Tim, that’s brilliant,” Barbara murmurs, diving back into the data with the new lens to give it a fresh evaluation.

Tim wants nothing more than to join her.

But Alfred puts a hand on his shoulder and reminds him, “Master Bruce would be quite surprised to see you down here, if you remain when he returns. Miss Gordon can handle the initial legwork on your breakthrough and you can pick it up again in the morning to capitalize on the progress.”

With a reluctant nod, Tim agrees.

“For now,” the butler mentions, already having somehow steered Tim halfway across the Bat Cave, “Let’s get you upstairs and tucked into a cozy bed with a warm cup of hot cocoa.”

Tim allows himself to be guided like a puppet. Winds up in the coziest bedroom he’s ever seen – has trouble believing this is just a guest room – and feels the exhaustion beginning to weigh on him. Pajamas have been provided for him – soft, silky, and perfectly his size. And the hot chocolate sits warm in his belly.

He’s asleep before he realizes it.

It was probably just after 3am when he was sent to bed, which means he gets a solid five hours of sleep before he wakes.

He dresses quickly – in a crisp store-new uniform for his school, and his grade, that’s perfectly his size, more so even than the pajamas, and it makes him wonder how and why these things are here – and folds his pajamas, makes the bed. He feels guilty he can’t do more, but he’s already running late for school and he needs coffee before he can really think about anything else that needs to happen.

Because there’s probably something he’s forgetting.

He creeps downstairs with the idea of running home – making coffee, grabbing his backpack and his bike, and making a frantic dash for school – but as he hits the landing on the ground floor, the delicious scent of a fresh brew draws his feet towards the Wayne kitchen without his conscious permission.

“Good morning, Master Timothy.”

Alfred’s voice should’ve made Tim jump five feet in the air with shock as it sounds by his elbow, but Tim’s focus is entirely fixated on the steaming mug of dark, rich, beautifully caffeinated deliciousness in Alfred’s hand.

The mug being offered up to him.

Tim takes it eagerly, greedily, but he needs more caffeine in him to feel any shame.
The coffee in the mug is delicious. It’s not quite as caffeinated as his own personal brew, but it’s still strong and it’s been crafted with an expert touch.

“This is delicious,” Tim mumbles – he was aiming for thank you, but feels he got close enough, considering how early it is.

Alfred smiles like he understands.

Tim takes another sip of coffee. Realizes.

“What are you doing up so early?”

Alfred couldn’t have gone to bed at any time that would make being awake now seem reasonable. He’d gone back down to the cave after getting Tim settled in the guest room – to meet Bruce on his return with Dick and Jason.

All three of whom were soundly asleep – and would be for a while, since the gala last night went late enough to excuse them from any regular daytime activities they might’ve been expected to deal with on a normal Monday.

With another soft, subtle smile as Tim takes another sip of coffee, Alfred says, “I’m here to drive you to school, of course.”

Tim blinks.

Perplexed.

“But why?”

“But why?”

“Because, while I would rather send you back to bed,” Alfred explains, “I learned long ago that it is pointless to attempt refusing a person their follies. Sometimes, it is best to simply ease the course as best you can. I do have lines of self-destructiveness that I will refuse to let anyone in my care cross, but sadly, those are rather distant benchmarks. Particularly distant from spending a day at school – in classes where you already know all the material.”

The butler doesn’t exactly sigh – doesn’t move at all really – but Tim feels the lamentation resonate through him.

“Spending the next six hours in a classroom will like prove more restful for you than any other current option,” Alfred elaborates. “And I would far rather you rest through a lecture on the Byzantines than struggle through more chemical analysis in the Cave.”

Tim nods. Actively chooses not to question how Alfred knows exactly what Mrs. Hendrix is going to be lecturing on when he makes it to class.

He won’t be missed in Home Room – he was somehow slotted into a group of athletes whose first and last periods are open practice periods in the gymnasium. He has a standing arrangement with the coach to never attend directly – instead he spends first and last period in the library and is marked present by default. But Home Room is only 40 minutes.

Even with a ride, it’s going to be close.

Especially because he needs to stop at the museum they’d rushed out of last night.

His backpack and his bike are still hidden in the alley where he changed into his suit for the
gala… That’s going to be a twenty minute detour, at least.

He considers another cup of coffee, since he’s clearly going to be late anyway.

“Looking for this?”

Alfred brandishes his backpack.

“How…?”

“Master Jason realized you may not have attended the gala under the usual circumstances,” Alfred explains. “He and Master Dick went back to ensure that your antics with the laser remained mysterious, and while they were there, he located your stash.”

“Oh.”

Tim drains the dregs in his cup, at a loss of what else to do and certain that caffeine will help. Because caffeine always helps.

“Shall we get you to class, then?”

Tim nods, follows Alfred out to the front door. Allows himself to be bundled in a coat – he doesn’t know whose, since he’s a solid two sizes smaller than even Dick was at his age. A scarf is piled on his shoulders in loosely draped circles.

Tim clutches at his backpack as it gets passed into his arms. He toddles after Alfred to the car – already waiting in the loop of driveway that leads right up to the door.

Alfred holds the door open and Tim slips in the back seat – feeling both familiar with the situation, as his own chauffeur had performed the routine many times before Tim announced an interest in biking-to-save-the-planet that went uncontested, and yet also extremely out of place. Because this is Alfred.

The Waynes’ Alfred.

And Tim doesn’t deserve him. He’d also never really thought about the butler who helped run Batman’s operations as doing anything that was actually butler-y. It’s odd.

Especially in daylight.

But Tim rolls with it.

He’d thought last night that Alfred's driving had seemed physics defying, but in daylight it’s even more so.

Tim somehow ends up in his seat in Mrs. Hendrix's room five minutes before the class begins. He’d anticipated being at least ten minutes late, even with a ride.

This is unexpected. Better. Even if he does wish he’d gotten that second cup of coffee he was considering. He’ll live until his lunch period at noon – when he can run across the street and load up on a venti or two.

Probably live, at least.

He seems to be zoning out here, pretty quick, and might not make it all the way to noon.
He’s got a vague hope that the bag of chocolate covered coffee beans he spent last week nibbling on might still be buried in his backpack and starts digging through it as surreptitiously as possible. He’s sneaky enough to pull it off.

Unfortunately, there are no chocolate covered coffee beans. But that’s not surprising.

What IS surprising is the lunchbox. Tim probably owns a lunchbox, but he’s never actually used one – certainly not to pack his lunch. And yet there is a lunchbox in his backpack, with a lunch inside. Apple slices, a chicken salad sandwich, even a cookie for dessert. It’s probably the healthiest meal Tim has ever had without the person who cooked sitting with him as he eats it – and it is definitely the healthiest thing he’s ever eaten at school.

But the thing that makes Tim want to cry – to literally weep with joy and the utterly unconquerable certainty that he does not deserve Alfred or any of his magic – is the slim black cylinder of a cappuccino in a can.

It has a higher sugar value than Tim's usual, but it has almost as much caffeine.

It’s beautiful.

And Tim does not deserve it, or any of Alfred's kindness. He is not a Wayne. And he should not be prancing around as if he is one. Timothy Jackson Drake has his own resources to call on, the resources of wealth and Family that give him the means to provide for himself. He should not be putting extra work onto someone's shoulders who is not in his employ – especially not someone as kind and crucial as Alfred.

It’s not fair of him.

But he drinks the coffee and he doesn’t cry – though he might admit to a sniffle escaping if he were asked to take a polygraph.

The cappuccino in a can keeps him alive until lunch. The lunch Alfred packed him is probably enough to keep him going until school lets out. He almost decides to try it out. He sits down and eats the sandwich, the apple slices, even the cookie.

But there’s that niggle of sleepiness hovering in his brain as the cappuccino in a can wears off. He doesn’t need another cup. But one more won’t kill him.

Just a grande.

No big deal.

It’ll be fine.

And it seems like the universe agrees because he doesn’t pass a single teacher in his way to the door.

Until he does.

Until he passes Vice Principal Alvarez. Who's standing with GCPD Commissioner Jim Gordon. Who looks up and smiles with recognition – it's a warm smile, if a rather serious one.
“Ah, Timothy,” Alvarez says, “How fortuitous, we were just about to have you paged. This is Police Commissioner Gordon. He has a few additional questions for you, regarding the death of your friend.”

“You’re not in trouble and we don’t have any new information to give you,” Gordon says calmly, keeping up the charade Tim had begun last week in GCPD headquarters. Technically speaking, one of the students at this school did die of an overdose recently. Tim, however, had never actually met him – and any moderately decent detective work would show that much beyond doubt.

So… Tim probably IS in trouble.

But at the same time, there probably also is new information on the case.

“Is there somewhere we could talk, off-campus to put you more at ease?”

“There’s a coffee shop across the street,” Tim pipes up.

“That would be fine,” Gordon agrees.

He follows Tim silently outside and remains his silent shadow until after they make the coffee shop. Tim has already used his phone to order a venti of his usual order, and one of Gordon's usuals, and two croissants that he knows Gordon likes.

Tim's collecting the order before Gordon even realizes what's happened. “Timothy,” he sighs as Tim pushes the cup with his favorite into his hand and makes for a secluded pair of armchairs in the corner.

He graces Tim with a look that Tim thinks he's used a lot over recent years – a mix of guilt and regret for allowing a child to buy whatever meal is on the table, and an acute awareness that said child has more money in his bubble gum allowance than Gordon has in his retirement savings. It might sting, but it's the truth.

And he needs the caffeine as much as Tim does. More, even.

With a heavy resignation, Gordon sips his coffee – already too familiar with the feeling of a burnt tongue, but a satisfied craving, to head any kind of caution.

Tim sips his own coffee and picks at his croissant – waiting for Gordon to start the
conversation he isn’t entirely sure he wants to have.

Gordon seems reluctant, as well.

“Tim, I wanted to talk to you about Bruce Wayne,” the Commissioner says eventually.

Okay, that is not where Tim thought this would be going.

Gordon’s looking at Tim intently – eyes scanning him carefully, searchingly.

“You’re not like the other two kids Bruce has gotten involved with,” Gordon says carefully. “An acrobat straight from the circus, who does handstands to walk down the stairs in public, and a kid fresh off the streets, who’s known to pick fights… they both have reasons to have inexplicable bruises… You’re a mathlete, Tim, and it hardly takes a google search to figure that much out, let alone a detective.”

Tim flushes with embarrassment.

He knows he’s not an athlete, he knows that.

He’s scrawny and weak and, yes, he can admit that he’s got zero athletic tendencies.

But.

He can still be helpful.

Tim is small, and sneaky, and smart. He can get in and out of places unnoticed where most people couldn’t even imagine any human being capable of getting. He’s got great camera skills at this point, a fantastic attention to detail, and a knack for connecting dots in casefiles.

Tim is no vigilante, but he can help.

But.

But that’s not what Gordon’s talking about.

It’s literally the opposite of what Gordon is talking about.

Gordon’s not worried about whether or not Tim can contribute – to a cause he officially knows absolutely nothing about – he’s worried that Tim can contribute and that if he does and his contributions somehow do get him injured, it’s going to be very hard to explain to outsiders.

Because he’s definitely not an athlete, or a brawler, or anything that would make sense of random bruises and injuries and such appearing overnight.

Tim very carefully does not hide his wrists beneath the table – the wrists still bearing the last of the bandages needed to heal the incisions he’d made for the sake of Science and forwarding the case. He moves with a casual, multi-staged inclination that does not draw attention. Adjusts his sleeves to more thoroughly hide the evidence.

Gordon takes a bite of his croissant – tearing off almost a third of it in a single go – and chews it thoughtfully as he considers his next words carefully.
“You know, most police officers confronted with a billionaire who’s creating a collection of young boys who frequently sport injuries would tell you that it’s not your fault, but I can’t help unless you talk to me,” Gordon sighs. “I know that’s not the case here, but I still want you to know that you can talk to me. If I can’t stop you from investigating, I want to give you safe options. If you ever don’t want to give him information, you can talk to me. Alright?”

Tim nods.

“And watch yourself, okay?” Gordon insists, “There’s more to all of this than solving mysteries at night. The daytime world has expectations and if you don’t meet them, people may start asking questions you can’t afford to have answered.”

Tim nods again. Feeling more like a liability than ever.

“It’s not fair to put that kind of pressure on you,” Gordon admits. “But I want you to know what you’re getting into before it’s too late to walk away. I’ve seen it happen before and I didn’t want to let it happen again without at least trying to give you an out.”

This time, Tim doesn’t nod. He doesn’t think he’s supposed to – he’s not sure what exactly he’s supposed to do at all here.

“You don’t have to be involved to be supportive,” Gordon says eventually, pushing to his feet. “But you do have to go to class.”

Gordon offers a smile and Tim returns it as best he can.

It can’t be very convincing, because Gordon sighs again. The commissioner escorts Tim straight back to the Vice Principal’s office and lets the secretary know they’ve returned. Tim can feel Gordon’s stare on his back as he treks down the hall to English.

He spends the rest of the day confused and worried, but by the end of it he’s realized that covering for the Bats is really no different than covering his own antics from his nannies and parents. Honestly, it might even be easier.

He’s had a few nannies that could’ve had very successful careers as ninjas.

Even Mrs. Simz – who is definitely not a ninja – has a very finely tuned bullshit meter.

The general public can be led by the nose by politicians. It’s not very difficult to mislead the populace and Tim’s been handling harder assignments for years already.

Gordon was trying to help, and Tim understands – even appreciates – the gesture, but perhaps he doesn’t need it. He’s glad Gordon got him thinking about that part of the Crusade, but it’s not nearly as necessary a caution for Tim as it would be to anyone else in his position.

Tim can handle this.

He’s almost confident with it all as the final bell rings and school lets out for the day.
And then he walks outside and sees Dick Grayson leaning on his motorcycle – propped up across the street, clearly waiting for him.

Panic kicks in instantaneously.

*Why could Nightwing possibly be waiting for him?*

Did he do something wrong last night?

Is Jason okay?

Did something happen?

Tim approaches warily – as quickly as he can without drawing undue attention.

Dick parked far enough away to keep from being a distraction to the general student body, but not quite far enough away to go unnoticed. Which was kind of the point, since he needed Tim to be able to spot him.

Still, Dick has drawn attention.

Even without his Nightwing get up, Dick is an impressive figure – a gymnast’s physic, that famously dazzling smile, and with all of Bruce’s money going in to polish up everything from his clothes to his haircut… people drool, boys and girls alike. The bike doesn’t hurt either.

It’s not the bright blue beast he uses at night, but it’s still a Ducati.

Dick Grayson may not have much experience with money, but the circus kid has learned quickly in his years with Bruce, and Tim can say he’s got good taste.

Mostly.

Tim knows he’s made some questionable choices, including the misguided purchase of an industrial bedazzler, but he’s definitely matured in the last two and a half years.

And he’s a model of the perfect tasteful rich-boy as he shoots Tim a brilliant grin and restrains himself from waving at him like an idiot. Remembering not to draw attention.

He doesn’t quite stop himself from shouting as Tim draws close enough to hear, “Timmy! How was your day at school?”


He frowns.

Dick’s sparkles hardly falter. He looks like he really wants to hug Tim – Tim cannot fathom the reaction, or the reasons behind it. He’s still worried about why Dick’s here at all.

“What happened?” Tim asks in a whisper, unable to wait until they get to more private circumstances. “Is everyone okay?”

“Hm? Oh. Yeah, I’m sorry. I guess my showing up out of the blue might be a bit alarming,
wouldn’t it,” Dick says, deflating slightly as he realizes that he’s gotten Tim worked up with worry. “Everyone’s fine. I’m just here to give you a ride home.”

“How?”

“Because you don’t have your bike,” Dick explains.

Still confused, Tim counters, “I can take the bus.”

“But you don’t have to.”

The smile says as much as Dick’s words do. More. He wants to help.

The grin falters when Tim doesn’t respond to it immediately and Dick backs off with a hurried move to back pedal, “Unless you want to take the bus, Tim. That’s fine, if you want. I just wanna help, if you want my help. But it’s cool if you don’t.”

Dick has been learning how to work with people too, to read them like Tim is trying – and likely for the same reason: to figure out how to work with Jason. Dick’s better at it than Tim is, having started at an advantage and been learning for longer, but he’s still not perfect and his conditioning from having pushed Jason away one too many times to do it blindly again means that he’s probably reading Tim’s shock as anger and insult.

“That’s nice of you,” Tim says – he knows it sounds awkward, overly formal, but he doesn’t know what else to say. Or how else to say that, specifically.

Dick beams at him.

“But why would you bother?”

The light in Dick’s face blinks out instantly.

“You’re part of the team, Tim,” Dick promises softly. “You might be unofficial, but you’re part of the team and teammates help each other. It’s no bother and I want to help.”

He means it. Tim can’t be confident with reading a lot of complex emotions yet, but Dick is broadcasting his feelings loud and clear. Eager, friendly, hopeful, earnest.

He’s… adorable. Tim feels weird describing a teenager who can easily bench press twice his weight as adorable, but… it’s the only word that comes to mind. Jason’s described him as a ‘frickin puppy dog’ more than once and Tim… Tim can see why.

“Yeah, okay,” Tim accepts. The ride, the sentiment of team-ness, the ridiculous description of Dick… Tim’s not sure which one he’s accepting, but it doesn’t matter.

Dick lights up again.

He passes Tim a helmet – emblazoned with the Robin logo, altered slightly from the real one that Jason uses, but close enough to make it a genuine fan-design rather than a tongue-in-cheek misdirect. Tim can’t help but smile at it.

It just so… sassy.

Of course, he’s not Robin, that would be ridiculous. Why would Robin be so obvious about it? Isn’t he trying to hide his identity with the mask? Tim is just a fan, clearly. It’s already an established fact, after all. He doesn’t have any real association with the bird. Obviously.
And beyond that…

It’s a present like the hand-made sweaters with the Robin R. Special. Sweet. Perfect.

A bubble of happiness rises in Tim’s stomach, one that brings a strange sort of smile to his face. He probably looks ridiculous, cradling the helmet against his chest, but he doesn’t care.

Dick is smiling, too.

“How have you ever ridden on the back of one of these?” He doesn’t look worried.

Tim shakes his head. He’s ridden regular bikes, and he’s tried out the video game bike things at an arcade once or twice, but that’s it – and there’s the one time Batman drove him home, but he was propped in front then, and swaddled in Batman’s cape. He understands the physics of how it steers though, and he knows Dick is one of the best stunt riders out there – and that the Ducati is a performance vehicle that can work miracles in the hands of a master.

So, Tim’s not worried either. He pries his fingers off the helmet and slides it on.

Dick’s grin is still in place, as well, while he fixes his own helmet into place and then checks the straps on Tim’s with a practiced hand.

“Just hang on tight to me and try to enjoy it,” Dick instructs, promising, “I won’t let you fall, baby bird – I’m gonna show you how to fly.”

It’s cheesy and ridiculous and Tim’s glad the visor on his helmet is dark because he’s still smiling, and Dick’s ridiculousness simply makes the smile bigger.

The smile stays in place as Dick fires up the engine and kicks the beast into high gear. He holds tight to the gymnast as they zip across the city with a thrilling abandon Tim has never felt before. It’s addicting, he realizes, this feeling of power and freedom and skillful control.

It’s addicting and amazing and wonderful.

And Tim’s completely hooked.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Timmy…

And no worries to you who like the overlap! There will still be plenty of multi-perspective overlays ahead, it just won’t be quite as tight as devoting 3 chapters and 15k in words to the same few scenes. The plot will actually move forward in bursts that cover slightly more than five minutes!
Rule #8 - Offer Help, But Don't Assume It's Necessary

Chapter Summary

Dick just wants to be a good big brother. To Jason. And to Tim. Jason won't let him, but Tim might.

And Dick's case files never complain when he logs a few extra hours of giving them his undivided attention.

Dick's not sure his heart can take much more of any of it.

Chapter Notes

Bit of a heart-render, here. Dick's a sweetie and a sap, and his family is definitely going to be the end of him.

Also, this one ends on a bit of a cliff-hanger, because we're now getting into the thick of the Plot!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eight: Rule #5 – Offer Help, But Don’t Assume It’s Necessary

Dick wakes bright and early – at least for someone in his line of work.

It’s just on ten in the morning, five good hours of sleep after a successful patrol and an hour of running down data in the Cave with Batman and Babs. Jason got sent to bed almost immediately because he’s still very young and needs his rest and he has school today.

It’s a special school that accommodates the frequently idiotic schedules of the super-rich, but still, it’s school and Jason needs to wake up soon. He’s got eight hours during which he was supposed to be asleep under his belt for today – Dick’s relatively sure he got at least six of them.

Dick’s about to go wake him up, but he finds himself detouring to Tim’s room.

Cracking open the door cautiously so as not to disturb him – he had a very exciting night, after all, and Dick expects him to sleep until at least noon – Dick peeks over at the bed.

Tim’s not there.

His pajamas are folded neatly on a freshly made bed. The suit he’d left crumpled in the corner is no longer there.
He’s gone.

Tim is gone.

Panic flares to life in Dick’s chest – an echo of the worst day of his life thus far when he woke up after a fight with Bruce realized that Jason had left them. That he had driven Jason back out on the streets Bruce had found him on – that Jason would rather be homeless than suffer through tolerating Dick’s own selfish angst.

He makes it downstairs before he realizes he’s running.

Skids to a stop by grabbing hold of the island as he realizes Alfred is in the kitchen.

“Tim’s gone,” he pants.

“He doesn’t live here, idiot.”

Jason’s growl from the far side of the breakfast bar is the first moment Dick notices his presence. Jason has a pile of French toast in front of him and he’s glaring into his syrup like he’s as pissed about Tim not being here this morning as Dick is worried.

“Master Timothy is at school,” Alfred mentions, setting a plate of French toast down in front of Dick and passing him some silverware. “He will be in class until three.”

“Oh,” Dick says, plopping down in a chair and fiddling with his food on muscle memory alone as the panic slowly begins to settle. “Okay.”

“Frickin puppy dog,” Jason mumbles into his orange juice.

He’s not exactly a chipper morning person.

And he’s probably annoyed that Tim’s not here – pissed at himself for not immediately remembering why it would be stranger if he were still here.

Dick forgives his grumpiness without thought.

With his fears now solidly settled, Dick digs into his French toast with gusto. Alfred’s cooking is amazing, as always. He’s still hyped from his wake-up panic and he eats faster than Jason – who’s dawdling with clear intent to delay going to school for the day.

“You wanna ride to school?” Dick asks cheerfully as Alfred whisks his empty plate away before he’s even noticed it’s empty.

Jason snorts. “Not with you.”

Dick is crestfallen, if unsurprised, that Jason still kind of hates him.

He doesn’t let his smile fall though.


Alfred’s walked him through this and Dick can handle it.
He shrugs. “Suit yourself.” Pushing to his feet he adds, “Thanks for breakfast, Alfred.”

“Of course, Master Dick,” Alfred replies with a soft smile – warm and proud. He knows it’s hard for Dick to force himself to back off. After recognizing how horribly he’d screwed up with Jason the first time, Dick had screwed up again in exactly the opposite regard – trying to cuddle his insecurities away with the sheer force of his affection and positivity.

His newfound commitment and devotion nearly sent Jason to the streets again.

So. Balance.

Respect.

Jason needs to have his limits set by his own hand and to have those boundaries actively respected. That was even more important to him than being cared for.

And while Dick wants to bundle him up in soft blankets and shower him with all the affection he had while growing up – all the affection Jason was denied – Dick needs to do this on Jason’s terms. And Jason is not shy about laying those terms down.

So Dick picks himself up and heads out of the kitchen – resisting all but the briefest look back as he hears Jason’s chair scrape and the fabric of his backpack rustle.

The sound raises the niggle of concern in him again.

The one that he knows won’t go away until Jason unpacks the go-bag he has stashed he has stashed in the South Pantry. Until the Manor becomes Jason’s safe-space, until it feels like he has every right in the world to make it his permanent home.

The urge to check on the bag rises in him, but he checked on it when he first got back from California and that was only going on 30 hours ago.

He should wait. Give Jason his space.

Because Jason deserves that much. He deserves so much more.

Steeling himself hard to do it, Dick steers his feet away from the South Pantry and makes for the Cave. Bruce, whether he likes it or not, is expected at Wayne Enterprises today – which means Dick has the Cave to himself for a while.

He uses the time to go through the data gathered on the mysterious serum case again. It’s a bizarre case, dangerous. He saw the crime scene that Babs found last night, and it was not pretty. Dick hates that the people he cares for are so frequently subjected to that kind of horror, but he’s immensely proud of their roles in solving these crimes – in reducing the rate of crime as a whole in this city. They do good work, important work. And Dick’s proud.

Focusing on that as he wades through the data helps him sort and file the details without reacting to them emotionally. It’s one thing to look at human bite marks on a human scapula as a person and quite another to look at the same evidence as a detective who can bring the people responsible for this to justice.

Dick’s enrolled in several criminal justice classes out in California – including a criminal psychology class – and he thinks that’s what’s tripping him up right now.

The bite marks are… strange.
Ignoring the idea of cannibalism being strange enough, these bite marks don’t fit any kind of pattern Dick’s seen in class. Serial killers that consume their victims do it with a purposeful, meticulous intent. Starving men eat their fellows with an almost ginger remorse.

This… this looks animal.

Desperate in a way that … doesn’t connect.

It’s like a wild, aimless bite from something rabid.

Some darkly twisted curl of sarcasm in him makes the comment that it looks like a vampire bite in a B-horror flick built up on its gore factor alone.

And the budding detective part of him realizes that he’s right.

That the thing that’s weird about the bite marks is that none of them are in the right place or at the right angle to tear away any substantial flesh.

But the blood spray would be… dramatic.

More dramatic than the crime scene would’ve initially suggested.

The warehouse had been a bloody mess, but looking at the autopsy reports again, comparing it to crime scene photos, using his classes and his own experience to judge the physics of that kind of spray… The bite was not made to be a killing blow in a struggle where limbs were occupied, the bite itself was the goal – the blood was the aim, not the flesh.

Someone walked away from that warehouse absolutely covered in blood.

It’s likely that someone else was there to clean up and hide that exit – because no one reported a blood-soaked maniac wandering the streets like a rabid dog.

That’s something new to add to the casefile.

The idea of the killer being rabid, of someone else stepping in to escort the killer away, and a consideration of what exactly about the drug-doped blood made the killer rip their victim apart like they did… That’s three points opened up for further investigation. Progress.

Dick makes the notes and indicates the evidence and then forces himself to step away.

He could easily get sucked into the files – the morbid details and the desperation to find a clue. But he’s made a step forward. That’s good. That’s progress. And now it’s time to step away and let someone else take a look – see if they can use his new insight to forward any of their own nebulous musings.

It’s just about 2:30 as he leans back in his chair at the computer, stretching out stiff muscles. He’s not used to sitting still this long and his body protests to it vehemently.

Timmy’s off from school soon Dick realizes, perking up with interest.

Jason would never let Dick pick him up from school. But Tim might. Especially because Tim doesn’t have his bike today – they’d found it last night and dropped it at the Drake Estate before going back to Wayne Manor for the night.

Tim might have called his own chauffeur or something, but still, he might not – which means Dick has a perfectly reasonable excuse to go check up on him. To make sure he’s doing okay after
having spent so much of the night focused on such a grizzly case.

Tim’s only twelve, after all.

He’s not the average twelve year old, but still. Dick’s concerned about him.

And now he has an excuse to check on him.

There’s not a shred of hesitation in him as he grabs an extra helmet – the one to which he’s adhered a sticker with the Robin R, a sticker made for this purpose specifically with Jason’s full approval, just in case a scenario came up where it might possibly be necessary – and speeds across town to park himself in front of Tim’s school.

He settles across the street – in full view of the school, but not quite close enough to make it overly obvious that he’s waiting for a student. Dick knows he’s not exactly the most subtle human ever, he draws attention – has cultivated that effortless ability because of how intensely he thrives on most attention.

But Tim is shy. Quiet. Is excellent under interrogation and social pressure, but unused to being the center of genuine, straightforward attention and uncomfortable dealing with it.

A soft approach is necessary.

Stand somewhere Tim could see him and count on Tim’s observational skills to spot him, invite him over with a smile – nothing big or flashy, nothing that will make any more rumors pop up around him. Kids will talk about a student being picked up from school by a Wayne – about anyone being addressed by a Wayne for any reason – but middle school rumor mongers can be vicious, and Tim’s already been subject to one too many destructive rumor-mill disasters.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

Dick could wait to see where Tim heads after school, hide for the moment and follow him to a slightly more private street corner. But that might make any rumors have more force behind them – the fewer first hand observers, the more leeway in the story’s scandal.

Possibly.

The circus was a grade A rumor mill, and middle school is probably similar – the viciousness of the kids involved certainly is – but Dick can’t tell if Tim being picked up by a Wayne will cause him problems. He is a Drake, so he is reasonably associated with the Waynes.

Maybe it won’t do anything.

Maybe it’ll be read as two super rich families being all super rich and exclusive among themselves. Maybe it won’t even brush Tim’s awareness.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it’s a problem.

Possibly a big problem.

Dick sees Tim step out of school and blink into the afternoon sunshine – Gotham winters rarely see much sun but even the miniscule boost of brightness that hits in the afternoons is heartening. Dick sees the exact moment when Tim spots Dick waiting for him across the street.
He sees Tim’s expression freeze, watches as it tightens – controlled and careful as his brain works through a puzzle and does not seem to like its conclusion.

Dick still doesn’t know Tim well enough to be certain of his little tells, but he knows him well enough to spot a high-stress response – and Tim’s stress is skyrocketing.

It’s enough to make Dick’s stomach curl.

Maybe he did make a bad call with this.

Whelp. Nothing to be done about it now except to play the bad hand as hard as he can to spin it back to a better situation.

He forces his usual smile to have even more cheerfulness in it and restrains himself from waving Tim over as the kid makes a beeline across the street.

Tim’s expression is shuttered – but it’s not as air-tight as Jason’s gets. Dick can still read an escalating tension in the kid’s face, growing with every step as his hyperactive brain runs through scenario after scenario that each make his outlook on the situation worse and worse.

Trying to keep his cool, but also to break through Tim’s downward spiral, Dick allows his voice to jump slightly higher volume than could be called subtle, but he keeps it bright and cheerful as he welcomes, “Timmy! How was your day at school?”

“Fine,” Tim replies. It’s an immediate response and reasonable volume, and Tim’s even making eye-contact with him – spiral averted. For the moment.

Dick wants to hug him.

To reward the effort of eye contact with something immediate and impactful – and physical affection is something Dick’s realizing more and more that Tim has been summarily denied. But Tim’s still frowning. Still anxious.

And Dick can’t peg why.

So, he holds himself back and waits to Tim to explain himself in his own way.

“What happened?” Tim asks. It’s a whisper, but it’s steady. “Is everyone okay?”

“Hm?”

Oh.

Oh.

Ooooh.

Dick needs to kick himself in the teeth.

Tim doesn’t have access to any of the bio trackers running off the Cave’s system. And he’s been at school all day, with no way to obtain outside information.

And then Nightwing shows up on the steps of his school.

It’s gotta seem like an in-person, vigilante version of the 2am phone call to an officer’s family. It’s gotta seem like an emergency. A tragedy.
“Oh, yeah, I’m sorry,” Dick says, trying to play it off as something small and simple, to help push Tim along to the next phase of the conversation. He acknowledges his fault in the matter, hating himself for getting Tim so worked up, and still playing it off light and easy as he says, “I guess my showing up out of the blue might be a bit alarming, wouldn’t it?”

Tim’s still fixated on the key point and doesn’t relax by a single degree until Dick promises explicitly, “Everyone’s fine.”

With that, Tim’s being ripples out of the tense stance it had adopted.

“I’m just here to give you a ride home.”

That makes Tim freeze up all over again.

But this is a different sort of tension – not worry, but confusion.

_Bafflement._

“Why?”

The possibility had clearly never occurred to him.

“Because you don’t have your bike,” Dick points out gently.

Tim’s still confused. More confused than ever, actually.

He nods, agreeing to Dick’s point, but he counters, “I can take the bus.”

A twelve year old kid, rich as all get out, taking public transit.

Like he’s done it before.

Like he’s done it a lot before.

How has he not been kidnapped? Repeatedly?

Dick may never let him go anywhere alone ever again.

He doesn’t let the utter terror at letting Tim out of his sights for five minutes delay his response or dim his smile, saying brightly, “But you don’t have to.”

Tim does not react.

He certainly does not relax.

If anything, he gets even more tense. There’s a buzzing anxiety about him that’s almost palpable. Dick reaches for an explanation for the response and the only one he can find is Jason’s – silence means shut down, and shut down means resistance, resentment.

Dick back-pedals.
“Unless you want to take the bus, Tim,” Dick soothes, even as the idea of letting him ride alone – in his adorable, tiny, easily-kidnappable body with his utter obliviousness and microscopic attention span – physically pains Dick to consider.

“That’s fine, if you want,” Dick promises. “I just wanna help, if you want my help.”

Tim’s still not reacting.

“But it’s cool if you don’t.”

Still nothing.


Oh, this was a bad idea.

This was such a bad idea.

Why does anyone let Dick do anything unsupervised? Why does anyone let him sabotage all of his relationships with the important people in his life?

Where the hell is Babs when Dick needs her all-knowing calm?

“That’s nice of you,” Tim says suddenly.

It’s stilted. Odd. Overly formal.

Dick doesn’t have any idea what he’s thinking.

But he’s not angry – probably – and that much is enough to renew Dick’s hope.

Dick stays quiet as he watches Tim’s gears turn behind his eyes. His brow knits in slow motion and his frown grows to match it as he clicks through possibilities – reaches no satisfactory conclusion.

“But why would you bother?”

Well.

If that’s not a direct kick to the heartstrings, Dick doesn’t know what is.

The kid looks truly mystified – utterly uncomprehending of why Dick would go even an inch out of his way to help him.

Like he’s never had a friend before.

Like he’s never had a family before.

Dick knows that Tim officially has parents. But that’s what makes this so tragic.
Tim has a family.
And he’s just as raw and hurt and unsteady as Jason.
It’s a different hurt.
Active abuse verses passive neglect, but apathy is just as harmful as hatred – and it has fewer coping mechanisms to utilize in fighting back.

Poor Tim.

Pity is definitely not what he needs, but Dick doesn’t think he can build a dam thick enough to hold it back. He wants to scoop Tim up in his arms and carry him back to the Manor and get Alfred in on keeping him there forever.

Alfred will help.
It’ll be fine.
It’s not kidnapping if it’s good for the subject – is it? It’s rescuing, right?
Child services, vigilante style?

Out loud, Dick speaks quietly, promising, “You’re part of the team, Tim.”
Tim blinks – hearing the sentence, but not processing it.
It isn’t sinking in.
Tim is not letting it sink in – he’s actively resisting the urge to believe it.
“You might be unofficial, but you’re part of the team, and teammates help each other out,” Dick reiterates, adding, “It’s no bother and I want to help.”
The resistance is slow to fade.
Excruciatingly slow.
But it does eventually begin to crawl away.
The flare of happiness in Dick’s chest is so sudden and solid, he worries that he’s gonna make a sound and ruin the tentative smile beginning to blossom on Tim’s face.
To prevent himself from blowing it, Dick turns around, reaches for the helmet strapped to the back seat. Focuses on the solid shape. Calms down.
Turns back to Tim and hands it over.
The tentative smile creeps its way into something more substantial. Significant.

Tim cradles the helmet to his chest, runs his fingers lightly over the sticker.

He likes it.

A lot.

That much, Dick can tell without any trouble.

It’s unbearably gratifying to see Tim let a real smile, a big smile slide across his face. It’s adorable, the kind of kid-ish cute that makes Dick want to squish his sweet little face between his hands and play with him like the kid he should be at twelve years old.

Dick smiles back at him, trying very carefully not to beam too strongly and risk scaring him off again. He wants to bask in Tim’s smile for a while, but he forces himself to break the moment before Tim can notice how long it’s already stretched.

“What have you ever ridden on the back of one of these?”

Dick asks, affectionately patting the jet-black Ducati he’s perched on.

Tim shakes his head.

Still smiling. Not at all worried. He tears his eyes away from the helmet in his hands long enough to make a beat of eye contact with Dick – trusting, confident.

Dick busies himself with putting on his own helmet to keep himself from cracking open at the sight of such a sweet expression. Tim has faith in Dick – in this tiny little instance, at least – and Dick won’t let him down. Hopefully, it’ll open the door to let Tim trust Dick even more.

Dick swings his leg over the Ducati as Tim pries his fingers off the helmet long enough to put it on. He balances the beast on its tires before twisting around to check Tim’s straps.

Tim lets him access the helmet’s various bits with the fearlessness of absolute trust.

“Just hang on tight to me and try to enjoy it,” Dick instructs, promising, “I won’t let you fall, baby bird – I’m gonna show you how to fly.”

It’s cheesy and ridiculous, but so is Dick and he’s just fine with that.

Tim straddles the Ducati and settles in behind him, cautiously sliding his arms around Dick’s waist. Dick adjusts his hold, anchors it securely, and then kicks the Ducati to life. Tim doesn’t even flinch – he doesn’t react at all until they’re already flying across the city.

And even then, his reaction isn’t to tighten his hold or press his face into Dick’s back, it’s to lean slightly away – keeping his hands securely anchored on Dick, still leaning with him perfectly in sync, but allowing him to feel the rush of air over his whole being.
Baby bird *likes* to fly.

Dick suspected he might, as Jason had, and he is pleased to have it confirmed.

He pushes the bike just a little bit faster to give Tim just a bit more fun – detours slightly to make the ride longer despite the increased speed.

He slows only once they cross the final bridge that takes them to the mainland.

Resists the urge to speed up and just *pass* the turn for Tim’s driveway. Whisk him away to the Manor where Alfred will have hot cocoa waiting for them.

Because Alfred is magic like that.

But Tim leans into the turn when they reach it, and Dick reluctantly angles the bike to suit. Takes Tim right up to his door. Desperately tries to find an excuse not to leave him there.

Fails.

Tim pulls his helmet off – hesitates, looking at it with adoration for a distended few seconds before moving to hand it over. As if Dick could ever dream of taking it back.

“You keep that, Tim,” Dick insists. “For next time.”

Tim hesitates again.

Resists the temptation to believe it.

Dick just smiles harder. Pushes Tim’s doubt down one sparkle at a time.

Eventually, Tim succumbs. Pulls the helmet back to his chest. Nods. That tentative, heartbreakingly sweet smile creeping back across his face.

Dick really, *really* wants to squish it. He wonders abruptly if Tim’s ticklish. Thinks that would be really sweet – and *way* too much fun.

“Thanks for the ride,” Tim says while Dick’s zoning out.

And then he’s backing away, turning towards his door without giving Dick any room to find a reason to go inside with him. Dick considers just chasing after him without an excuse, but knows he’s already pushed a lot today – asked Tim for an awful lot of leeway.

He should back off.

*Knows* he should.

“Tim,” he calls, unable to stop himself. “You’ll be okay on your own?”

“Of course,” Tim replies flatly, like it’s ridiculous to think otherwise – another kick directly to Dick’s heartstrings. “And Mrs Simz will be here in half an hour so I should really go get a few plates dirty and such to make it seem like I was here last night.”

So organized. So careful. He’s snuck out *so* often. And no one’s noticed or missed him.
Dick has never felt more blessed for having the time that he did – limited though it was – with his own, truly wonderful parents.

And he wants to give Tim and Jason everything he had, everything that they deserve and never got – never learned to accept and embrace.

It hurts to watch Tim’s door close on that horrible big empty house, but Dick maintains his smile until he slaps his visor back down – letting the dark tint hide the hurt.

He takes his time going back to the Manor.

Towels the grit and Gotham slush off his bike with painstaking care.

Makes his way upstairs with a grim determination.

“I take it Master Timothy will not be joining us this evening,” Alfred says as Dick winds up in the kitchen. There’s a sigh there, hidden but present – unspoken resignation.

Dick shoots him a sad smile and shakes his head.

“He will come, Master Dick. In his own time,” Alfred promises.

Dick nods. Alfred never lies, and he’s also never wrong.

With a heavy sigh, Dick admits, “It’s just hard to wait. And I just… feel… guilty, I guess, for both wanting him to stay with us instead of his real family and for letting him stay with that sorry excuse for a family he’s got – I know he probably loves them but…”

“Family is not nearly as straightforward as some people will have you believe,” Alfred assuages. “Your family with Haly’s Circus did not disappear because you came to live permanently here at the Manor, and we have not gone away now that you’re growing up and expanding your family into the Teen Titans.”

Dick nods again. Alfred is right, as always. It still takes him a moment to digest it.

While Dick is working to reorder his thoughts, Alfred continues, “When Master Timothy is ready, he will come home to us; and he will not have to rescind or forsake his blood-family to do so. As you have said yourself plenty often, he is already part of the team.”

That settles Dick’s worries more than anything else.

Tim is part of the team. Whether he accepts it yet, or not.

“Master Jason is remaining at school to make up the lessons he missed this morning,” Alfred informs him suddenly. “Dinner will be served at eight, and I believe you have homework to see to before then.”

This was a more familiar resignation; one Dick could actually handle, and Dick is glad for it. He darts in to give Alfred a quick hug – just a short one, as Alfred is not as physical with his affection as Dick is – and then he drags himself upstairs to deal with the coursework he’s been letting slip by the wayside since he’s come back from California.

It was just supposed to be a long weekend. He’s supposed to be heading back today.
That’s definitely not going to happen.

He gets the computer in his bedroom warmed up and sends out a quick flurry of encrypted messages to the Titans – letting them know he won’t be back as planned, and promising that the case he’s working is not one of the world-ending variety.

Then he buckles down and opens up his books – the textbooks, the notebooks, and the online material all get spread out across his desk as he boils down to do the work.

Jason gets home at five, thunders up to his own room – doesn’t quite slam the door as he gets settled in to do his own homework. He needs to finish it before dinner or Bruce won’t let him go out on patrol – no excuses.

Bruce himself gets back around six. He’s so quiet about his return that Dick wouldn’t have even noticed had his bedroom window not been facing the driveway – it had only been happenstance that he’d reached the end of a chapter that was so dry and painful to read that he’d had to take a quick break and stare mindlessly out the window for a few minutes. He’d seen Bruce’s car roll up the lane – subdued, almost, driving in a way that did not make the engine howl above the sound of the constant restlessness of the early spring wind.

Dick just sighs and wishes – pointlessly and without too much resentment – that Bruce could be even half the parent Alfred is…

But there’s nothing Dick can do about that one. So, he turns back to his work.

With just over forty minutes to go before dinner, Dick gives up.

He considers taking a quick nap – 20 minutes of power dozing always does wonders for keeping him up and energized through the night’s patrol. He knows Bruce is going to take one.

He decides against it though, in favor of going down the hall to check on Jason alone before they face the trial that is dinner.

Dick knocks, hears a grunt of acknowledgement, swings the door open.

He finds Jason sitting at his desk, but not looking at his work. He’s leaned way back in his chair, a tennis ball balanced between his eyes and a pen spinning with physics-defying ease through his fingers. His homework is laid out neatly before him – already completed.

So, it’s not a math problem that has him stumped.

“How was school?”

“Fine,” Jason replies. Dick waits, hoping he’ll share more.

Unless something big is on his mind, he probably won’t – so Dick isn’t sure he actually wants Jason to share more. Because that means something else is wrong.

“My teachers are all idiots,” Jason complains. Something wrong it is, then. “Taming of the Shrew is not a finished play. The pacing is all wrong and the cadence is totally off in like half of it. The version we’ve got today is like a third draft, at best, definitely not a polished final.”

“It’s amazing you can tell that,” Dick tells him, honest. He’s not even sure he remembers which one Taming of the Shrew is… he knows it’s Shakespeare, but that’s about it.
Jason huffs, tips head forward. He stops spinning the pen and lets the tennis ball drop into his waiting hand. The other is occupied with gripping tight to the arm of his chair.

“Did you need something?”

Jason asks. His growl is forceful, but not quite irritated.

“Nah, I just wanted to check in before we have to deal with dinner,” Dick admits.

“Bruce is still pissed with me for Friday,” Jason comments after a long, weighted moment. “He’s gonna want me to patrol with you.”

Dick very carefully does not react. “Sounds good to me,” Dick says coolly, “I’d rather have you than fly solo any day.”

Jason swivels his seat to look at him. Squints.

Says nothing.

Dick does not defend his stance – even if it is true. And he doesn’t try to tell Jason that it’s okay, everyone screws up – because it’s not okay and people are dead, and nothing is going to just fix that so pretending it’s okay is an insult to Jason and to the people who’ve died. And he certainly does not try to excuse Bruce’s behavior – though he knows that Bruce being an asshole is likely coming from a good place, a place that says he cares and is worried and knows he’s going to be no kind of company for a hurting, demoralized Jason tonight.

Bruce is still an asshole.

Jason still screwed up.

Dick forgives them both. Loves them both. Is glad to step in and help where he can.

He matches Jason’s silence. But can’t resist the creep of a smile.

The sight of it curls Jason’s lip into a snarl – a vague mix of disgust and amusement.

Dick’ll take it.

He’s the one to break the stare-off, and the silence. “So you ready to head downstairs or you still got stuff to finish up here?”

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Cool,” Dick accepts. He backs out of the room and heads downstairs feeling light.

Dinner is just as trying as he assumed it would be – Bruce is curt as he asks about Jason’s day at school and how Dick’s coursework is going. Both boys give him careful, neutral answers. Dick chatters away about what he’s been doing with the Titans – since this is their first Family Dinner since he got back – but he keeps the topic away from their cases.

When it comes time to head down to the Cave, Batman does assign Robin to Nightwing for the evening’s patrol. And he assigns them to the west side of the city, the quiet side over the last few weeks. He even tasks Batgirl – who’s running coms from a safe house at the moment and will be heading out on patrol herself to Chinatown soon as the last sample she’s running through her genetic sequencer finishes up – with checking in on them halfway through the night. Babs snorts at that, insulted on everyone’s behalf, but she does not dispute the order.
They set out on no worse terms than necessary – slightly better terms than Dick expected, to be perfectly honest.

Patrol starts off just fine and seems to be going the way of a quiet night when they check in with Babs at the halfway mark.

They're sitting on the towering stonework that borders the impressive red-wood structure of Chinatown's North Gate, under the curved belly of a decorative dragon statue – hiding in the shadows created by the very lights set up to blast the structure in brightness.

Batgirl is still caught in her counterfeiting case, having been unable to connect it to more than a handful of isolated incidents where high-priced purchases were made with counterfeit bills – and the exact same number of transactions for counterfeit goods made with real bills.

There’s been a trend of escalating gang violence, particularly in the Chinatown region – right near where the confirmed cases of counterfeit have been recorded, but that is literally all the evidence Babs has to go on.

They’ve already tried connecting her case to the one about the new drug creeping through the city, but no dice. The drug doesn’t seem to be at the center of any monetary transaction, let alone one with counterfeit cash. And the drug keeps popping up in primarily gang-neutral territories.

It doesn’t make sense.

Who else but the gangs would be moving that kind of product? And at this volume?

The trio laments the dead ends they’re hitting over a snack – Alfred always manages to stash an impossible number of granola bars and such in the extra pockets of their costumes – and Dick tries not to fuss over either of his pseudo-siblings.

Jason gets quiet after they run out of easy ground to cover – still smarting from whatever mistake he apparently made on Friday that no one has actually explained to Dick – and Barbara nearly falls victim to the same sort of brooding, which is much more unlike her than it is Jason.

Keeping the tone carefully cheerful, Dick walks Barbara through a few of the techniques he’s learning in his criminal justice classes for backtracking through the psychology of the crimes to start narrowing down a more specific motive.

Most of it she already knows, and if she were at a particularly bad point in hitting a wall, she would get snappish and be insulted by his ridiculous attempt to help her with something she knows ten times more about than he does. But she’s not in a particularly bad place tonight, just a mildly frustrated one – her night has been quiet too.

And there are new theories about the reasons behind how motive is almost always money, sex, or power – new theories that help investigators isolate triggers for specific incidents. And the approach of the California cops is different than that of the Gotham boys in blue she’s grown up with, so they’re able to have a productive, friendly conversation about the variations and how to possibly apply a mix of the two techniques in their current investigations.

Still, Dick treads carefully.

Babs notices and rolls her eyes at him, repeatedly, but does not explicitly comment.

Jason, meanwhile, has gotten very quiet. He’s on the other side of the roof from Dick and Babs and Dick has no idea how or when he got so far away. Or why.
Well, the _why_ is kinda obvious – he feels left out, and he’s still pissed with himself for the mistake that landed him in Nightwing’s company to begin with. Company that’s been ignoring him for at least twenty minutes now.

With guilt swirling in his gut, Dick sidles over to his little brother and gingerly leans his shoulder into the brooding vigilante. “Hey, Robin,” he says softly, “You doin’ okay over here?”

Jason shoves him off with the kind of force – of speed and strength and no-holds-barred intent – that still always catches Dick off-guard. “Back the fuck off D,” Jason growls, “I don’t need to be babied by the circus freak.”

It stings.

But Dick is learning to see Jason’s antagonism as the preemptive defense it is – Jason would always rather be the one to push away than to get pushed. And he’s _really_ good at doing the pushing. Dick’s never met anyone who knows how to sling just the right insult like Jason.

“Robin,” Barbara chastises firmly – neither surprised nor scandalized.

“Shove it, BG,” Jason spits back. “If your supposedly all-knowing ass can’t find a pattern in gang violence, your rep ain’t worth shit.”

Dick bristles, and he sees Babs stiffen – glaring daggers at Jason’s back. But she knows Jason well enough to know better than to engage, and she’s noticed – as Dick finally does, as well – that Jason hasn’t turned around to face off with them.

He’s focused on something.

Something at street-level.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Babs challenges, no real bite in her voice.

It’s just enough to push Jason into spilling his info to prove the point rather than letting him feel the need hold it back and lord his usefulness over them.

Jason huffs. Jerks his chin in the direction of a crowded street corner at the edge of Chinatown’s biggest open-air market.

“If you can’t find _any_ pattern in the violence,” Jason snorts sardonically, “Then who the fuck are those guys?”

It takes Dick a _long_ few seconds of staring to get any inkling of what Jason’s talking about. But eventually he spots two men in the crowd – young, early twenties by the looks of them – wearing finely tailored suits and surveying the scene like they own it. The crowd around them is being subtle, but clearly giving them a wide berth.

They don’t bear any obvious gang affiliations that Dick can see from this distance.

“I… don’t know,” Barbara admits. It’s the first time in months that Dick has heard her admit to not knowing something so completely like that. Even with the drug case, she would say she doesn’t know _much_ but this… she openly has no idea who those people are.

And that makes the obvious power and prestige they’ve cultivated very strange – because if anyone was going to be the first to hear about or notice a new power player on the streets, it would be Batgirl… it _should_ be Batgirl. She knows everything.
But she doesn’t know them.

Dick’s still reeling from the shock as Jason pushes to his feet with a heavy sigh.

“We should get closer, see if we can snap a photo to ID them,” Jason mentions, already reaching for his grapple gun.

Dick and Barbara scramble after him, swinging from rooftop to rooftop in a slow, careful descent that keeps them out of Chinatown’s bright lights as they spiral closer and then proceed to follow the mysterious duo through the marketplace. There’s no good angle for a shot here, and the lights would make the image blurry even if there was a reasonable angle to hit.

But then the duo that the capes are following peel off into the shadows of a block composed of industrial warehouses – quiet, empty, and now too dim for a good shot, unless the pair stops directly beneath a streetlight. They don’t.

Jason’s getting frustrated – Dick can feel the rising tension in his stillness as they watch the strangers meander along. “We need to get closer,” Jason whispers.

A tiny beep sounds in their ears and then Batman’s growl crackles across the radio, “Robin. Do not go rushing in, again. Nightwing run point, Batgirl come in from the blindside. Robin – if your boots hit the street, you’re not going back out on patrol for the rest of March.”

The beep of disconnect sounds immediately – their agreement and obedience simply assumed, no ascent required.

Dick closes his eyes briefly, hoping against hope that Jason is not about to do what he thinks he’s about to do.

It was a vain, ridiculous hope and its dashed instantaneously as Jason shoots a gob a saliva onto the roof by his shoe.

His grapple gun is in his hand in the very same second – aimed and ready to fire.

“Fuck you, B,” Jason snarls at the night.

And then promptly dives off the rooftop.

Chapter End Notes

I just love Dickiebird, and I hate how most aspects of canon paint him as so angry that he straight up despises Jason for like a decade, at least... I think that, given any kind of opening for it, or help to understand, Dick would jump on building a connection... Anger and resentment can still exist in him, but he is SUCH a born-to-please, bred to
help, to serve, to SAVE kind of guy in both his tenure as Robin and his post-everything-with-Jason/Hood/etc...

Next Time: Jason's PoV, and we finally get to meet the bad guys in this story!
Chapter Summary

Jason can spot trouble from a mile away. He's not quite as skilled with avoiding it, but that's intentional. Mostly.

Batman does not help, but an unexpected visit from a flying ninja baby seal might put things into perspective...
Or just make them so much worse...

Chapter Notes

This is easily my favorite chapter so far.
Thank you everyone for the fantastic support and wonderful comments and kudos and just /everything/!
I hope you all enjoy this one even half as much as I do! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nine: Rule #9 – Introduce Yourself with Confidence

Jason has mixed-feelings about patrolling with Nightwing.

On the one hand, it was nice to be able to breathe – to not have the all-consuming pressure of Batman’s stare making him pussyfoot around like an idiot.

On the other hand… well, it’s hard to focus with the knowledge that Bruce is still so pissed at him that he can’t stand to have Jason in his presence.

And it's worse on a quiet night like this, where there’s not enough petty crime to keep him distracted – to convince him, however inaccurately and misguidedly, that his presence on the streets makes a difference.

Especially with the mandated check-in they have to make with Batgirl. Because if that doesn’t make it painfully obvious that Bruce thinks of him – and even Dick – as incompetent, Jason doesn’t know what would.
It gets busier as they get closer to Chinatown, but the people walking around seem better behaved – to a significant, almost bizarrely noticeable degree.

It’s odd, but not the kind of odd that Dick would notice – and not the kind of odd that means much to a vigilante. To Jason even, it just means a power player in the gangbanger sector of daily life is in the area – not necessarily doing anything, but present. Which means the area is just going to be especially boring to patrol – because a crime lord out on the town is usually doing it for the alibi or the PR and that means no one for a dozen blocks around is gonna do so much as shoplift.

Jason hates feeling like he wants a crime to happen – because just fuck no – But he's just so bored and useless like this. It’s a no-win situation and Jason's already lost one too many rounds to stomach it well.

Dick and Jason rendezvous with Barbara at Chinatown's North Gate. Perched in the shadows on top of the massive structure, they go over a brief report of how the night's been thus far – Barbara has had a shit silent night too, and is feeling the tension of it just like Jason.

It’s gotta be hard to be the girl with all the answers and yet be facing a brick wall and a dozen dead ends. But Bruce still thinks she’s just the greatest shit to wear a cape – aside from Batman himself – so Jason doesn’t feel too bad for her.

He can tell she’s frustrated though, very frustrated, as they tuck into the snack of granola bars Alfred stashed in every pocket of their costumes. She's glad to have the Golden Boy to vent to – appreciates his happiness for some bizarre reason that Jason can only attribute to a culturally ingrained girly-ness. Babs is usually so much smarter than that, but sometimes, when it comes to Dickie boy, she goes gooey.

Jason ignores it. Ignores them both.

Scoots away a few inches at a time until he's on the other side of the roof. Lets himself just people watch.

Jason’s not sure if people watching is an interest or a compulsion – curiosity or wariness – But it’s more than likely both at once and he finds himself staring into crowds at any moment there’s a downbeat of productive activity. So far, it’s served him well and he sees no reason to put the reins on a helpful skill – even if it sort of seems like daydreaming.

While Dick and Barbara are yammering on, Jason's zoning out. As the break drags on, he starts noticing patterns in the movements of people in the nearby market strip.

Strange patterns. Around two people moving slowly through the crowd.

Avoidance, with respect; caution, but acceptance and trust.

Minnows around sharks.

In Chinatown, Jason would have to guess that such behavior meant Triads, but those two at the center of the current ripples in the crowd are not Triad.

They’re wearing suits, so technically speaking Jason can’t see their arms to definitely eliminate the possibility of affiliation sleeves inked into their skin – but he knows Triad mooks and these two ain’t them. These guys aren’t as rough and tumble. They’re showy, insistent on playing to an audience and asserting their control through the drama of their presence rather than persistent threat – they are a threat, and everyone knows it without them having to remind people by pulling off constant moves of straightforward intimidation.
They're menacing. Ominous.

Then it clicks.

They wear suits like Bruce wears suits – like they were born to them, and yet have built themselves into bodies that operate with the fluidity and power of machines. At the slightest provocation they could beat you into smithereens – without breaking a sweat or so much as stretching a seam on their expensive get-ups.

It’s actually rather alarming to see being broadcast so unabashedly.

Jason knows they’re trouble. The kind of trouble that’s worth looking into.

Because Barbara is still whining on about not being able to make sense of the escalating gang violence – about not finding any patterns.

But that’s bullshit.

Maybe there’s no fucking pattern in the usual suspects, but that’s only because they have to be reacting to the introduction of these new players to the game – old gangs are probably reestablishing their positions among themselves as the new guys sweep through with unquestioned and indisputable dominance.

And if that’s not a fucking pattern, Jason doesn’t know what is.

He leans forward slightly, intent and truly observant for the first time that night. The movement, however slight, is not as subtle as his other moves thus far in the evening and it seems enough to catch in Dick’s awareness. He doesn’t cut off his conversation with Barbara instantaneously, but he definitely wraps it up quickly.

Then he sidles over to Jason.

“Hey Robin,” he says softly – like Jason is a fucking kicked puppy or some shit, an abused kitten he found in an alleyway. “You doin’ okay over here?”

Jason shoves him off with unrestrained force. Dick is fucking heavy and Jason doesn’t want to waste the effort needed to shrug out from under him like a ginger little pussy. Not to mention the fact that Dick is a stupid shit and doesn’t deserve to be handled gently.

If Dick is gonna handle Jason with the kid-gloves, Jason’s gonna fight back with brass knuckles. “Back the fuck off D,” Jason growls, “I don’t need to be babied by the circus freak.”

The insult stings.

Jason can feel it in how Dick’s breathing shifts.

If he looked at Dick’s face right now he’d probably regret saying it – Dick has the most potent guilt-inspiring puppy pout Jason’s ever seen.

But Jason’s still fixating on the pair of gangbanger somebodies across the street.

“Robin,” Barbara chastises firmly, the rebuke less tired than unsurprised.
Because she’s never expected him to be anything less than awful – which is as refreshing as it is disheartening. He’s never felt the pressure to be nice around Babs, but it is kind of tragic that she doesn’t seem to think he should be capable of it.

“Shove it, BG,” Jason spits back. “If your supposedly all-knowing ass can’t find a pattern in gang violence, your rep ain’t worth shit.”

Jason feels Dick stiffen beside him, feels Babs glaring at his back.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Babs challenges, almost no bite in her voice. Her tone is mainly curious – trusting, in the strangest way… Like she’s certain that Jason’s not being an ass exclusively to piss her off, but also – and mostly – because he has a point to prove.

That he has an answer to the questions, or at least one of them, that she’s been hung up on trying fruitlessly to solve. Which is true enough, Jason supposes.

“If you can’t find any pattern in the violence,” Jason snorts, “Then who the fuck are those guys?” He jerks his chin at the street corner in question.

“I… don’t know,” Barbara admits. It’s the first time Jason has ever heard her admit to not knowing something so completely. Even with the drug case, she would say she doesn’t know much but this… she openly has no idea who those people are.

Which is weird.

Even if Jason like to pretend that Batgirl is shit – because sometimes she’s as annoying as shit – Babs knows like everything. Every rumor, every whisper, every single word on the street… Barbara Gordon has little birdies to tell her what’s what in every capacity.

And she has no idea who the two guys are or how they relate to anything inside the city.

But they clearly have something to do with it all.

“We should get closer, see if we can snap a photo to ID them,” Jason mentions, already reaching for his grapple gun. If these guys are new, and truly as powerful as they seem, they might be related to both unsolvable cases the Bats are struggling with right now.

Dick and Barbara scramble after him, swinging from rooftop to rooftop in a slow, careful descent that keeps them out of Chinatown’s bright lights as they spiral closer and then proceed to follow the mysterious duo through the marketplace. There’s no good angle for a shot here, and the lights would make the image blurry even if there was a reasonable angle to hit.

But then the duo that the capes are following peel off into the shadows of a block composed of industrial warehouses – quiet, empty, and now too dim for a good shot, unless the pair stops directly beneath a streetlight. They don’t.

Jason’s getting frustrated.

It’s clear that these players are important – that they have their fingers dipped in every bit of pie that Chinatown’s underworld has to offer. Which means they probably have everything to do with the drug distribution and the counterfeiting incidents and the escalating tensions in every other area of Gotham’s daily life.

“We need to get closer,” Jason whispers.
A tiny beep sounds in their ears – because of course the fucking Bat has been monitoring their coms like a creepy ass stalker – and then Batman’s growl crackles across the radio, “Robin. Do not go rushing in, again. Nightwing run point, Batgirl come in from the blindside. Robin – if your boots hit the street, you’re not going back out on patrol for the rest of March.”

The beep of disconnect sounds immediately – their agreement and obedience simply assumed, no ascent required.

Jason shoots a gob a saliva onto the roof by his shoe. B’s arrogance and idiotic, holier than thou attitude always leaves a bad taste in his mouth – coppery and bitter but not nearly as satisfying as the run off from a bloody nose.

His grapple gun is in his hand in the next second – aimed and ready to fire.

“Fuck you, B,” Jason snarls at the night.

And then promptly dives off the rooftop.

To piss Bruce off just that little bit more, Jason doesn’t drop to street-level – which means, technically, he’s following Batman’s order. He lands on top of a dumpster with a dramatic boom, curling into a predatory crouch as the pair of strangers turn to face him with reflexes faster than anything Jason’s ever seen.

“You guys seem new around here,” Jason growls.

The pair raise eyebrows at him and then shoot each other amused, vaguely incredulous smiles. They’re of some kind of Asian descent, with expensive haircuts, military grade combat boots, and grins like vipers. It hasn’t phased them at all to have Jason drop out of the sky.

“Halloween isn’t for a good long while, kid,” says the one on the right, he looks a bit more like a brawler than the other – but only just. From this close, Jason thinks there’s a resemblance between them that goes deeper than racial heritage – they’re probably family, cousins at least, maybe siblings. “So, what’s with the mask?”

“He’s a vigilante, Shay,” the other comments. “Isn’t it obvious?”

The first one – the one called Shay – is not impressed. “He’s a what now?”

“A masked vigilante, a ‘caped crusader’. Gotham’s apparently known for them. Don’t you listen to anything Xan says in the briefings?”

Shay gives a shrug. “Not really.”

The other one sighs. Then turns his attention back to Jason. “So, which one are you?”

The question curdles in Jason’s gut. It’s dismissive, unconcerned. The kind of question he would never have allowed himself to answer on the streets.
But Alfred has taught him a lot about how to deal with the rich and entitled.

Showing ruffled feathers is never a good idea, in any circumstances, and when some pampered-ass fucker asked his name without offering his own, he was supposed to introduce himself with unabashed pride in who he was. As a Wayne, and as Robin, Jason had to own his identity and shame the crowd for not knowing who he was on his rep alone.

“I’m Robin.”

“Robin? Like the bird?” Shay demands with an even more incredulous grin.

Nightwing peals himself out of the shadows, swinging into view as he hangs off a fire escape. “Exactly like the bird,” Dick explains – voice steady and strong and entirely without it’s usual idiotic sparkles. “He’s even got a flock to back him up.”

“Who are you supposed to be, Bluebird?”

“The name’s Nightwing.”

“Ooh, Nightwing, that’s almost as good as yours, Rwen,” Shay huffs. “Softer, but still.”

The one called Rwen rolls his eyes.

“So, now you know who we are,” Nightwing says, his voice steel. It grates on Jason’s nerves – that Dick can just swoop in and take control like this without any hesitation or resistance. This was Jason’s idea, but Dick’s the one following through.

It does give Jason a chance to stare at the duo – to observe them at a stretch without having to consider his own words. So far, all that’s let him know is that these two are aware of the threat he and Nightwing represent – and that they still don’t care. All of their training and prowess and advertised aggression hasn’t worried these strangers at all – their postures are still loose and casually at ease.

Dick is still talking as Jason continues to observe. “Why don’t you return the favor and tell us your names? And explain what you’re doing in our city.”

Shay’s temper is mercurial – anger snaps into place in his frame between heartbeats. “I think you should figure that out for yourselves. We don’t hide behind masks, after all.”

“Criminals rarely have the need to,” Dick counters.

“Criminals?” Rwen asks, bristling as Shay drops into an overtly aggressive crouch. “If we’re criminals, what are you?”

They’re not covering their body language at all – allowing the emotions to broadcast clear as day. They’re insulted. For the first time in the conversation, they’re engaged – because they’re offended by Nightwing’s implication.

Seeing it prompts Jason to say, “You think you guys are vigilantes?”

“Well, we’re birds of a different feather,” Rwen returns blithely, elaborating, “But essentially, yes, we perform the same function as you – we take care of the things the police and standard law enforcement can’t. What they won’t.”

A beat passes at an impasse.
And then Batgirl unfolds from the shadows – leaned up against the far wall of the narrow alleyway, blocking the path that could’ve let the duo escape from Robin and Nightwing alone. They can’t escape without a fight now – and with Batman on the way, it’s very unlikely that they’ll be able to win any altercation that gets started. They don’t seem to know that – which works in the Bats’ favor.

“You still haven’t answered the important question,” Batgirl sasses brightly. “What the hell are you guys doing in our city?”

Shay swivels around on the balls of his feet – combat trained and very familiar with the shift of tactical circumstances – while Rwen keeps his focus on Nightwing. They have experience working together – combat experience – and it’s not just training or practice or gang spats.

These people are a lot more dangerous than Jason had initially thought.

Jason’s muscle tense – ready for a fight – as Shay deigns to answer, “We’re just taking out some trash, cleaning up our own mess.”

“And recovering something that was stolen from us,” Rwen adds, still perfectly calm.

“If someone stole something, maybe we can help,” Nightwing comments, voice still cold and hard. It still surprises Jason the wet puppy has such a steely spine.

“After all,” Batgirl picks up seamlessly, “the polite thing to do is let the local capes know you’ve got a case instead of just playing bash up on your own. It’s just lucky you haven’t stepped into any of our cases yet.”

Shay snorts and Rwen looks like he might laugh.

It’s a manic humor, though, not the kind of amusement Jason might’ve expected.

“If there's anything we can do to get you going on your way, let us know,” Dick goes on.

“Sorry, bird-brain, but we don’t play with kids in costumes,” Shay snarls. “If you ever decide to try taking this shit seriously, we might reconsider.”

He isn’t angry, Jason notes warily. He's excited. The arch of Shay's back, the looseness of his posture, the way he’s jutting out his chin with his head thrown back to expose just a sliver extra of his neck… all of it is daring the Bats to attack – and Shay is waiting for it, hoping for it.

Fortunately, Batgirl and Nightwing are both too smart to fall for it, but they're definitely getting riled – Jason too, for that matter.

Another few jabs and the Bats'll start a fight, reason be damned.

The one called Rwen looks just as eager, but more restrained, and he sighs regretfully as he says, “Shankar, we don’t have time for this.”

“But Rwen, the birdies wanna rumble,” Shay – Shankar – whines. “It's been over a week since we fought anyone who could make it interesting.”

Rwen just rolls his eyes.

“Unfortunately, we can’t just let you walk away yet,” Batgirl insists. “I think the Gotham Port Authority would be interested to know that you’re here.”
It's a stab in the dark, Jason knows. To his eyes, Babs is obviously not confident about the assertion – she probably just randomly connected these two strangers to another drop of incongruous information she’s collected, but her odds are good in thinking that if there are two things she doesn’t know about in Gotham, they’re probably related.

Her guess proves good as both Rwen and Shankar stiffen – it's subtle, but definitely present. Batgirl clearly notes it too, ticks off a mental check box.

Rwen barks a laugh and owns up to the unspecified allegation, saying icily, “True as that may be, I sincerely doubt you'll fair well if you try to stop us from leaving.”

“We might be kids but we're pretty good at holding our own in a fight,” Dick announces with a bold ring of confidence. “Don’t count us out yet.”

He’s nervous, Jason realizes.

Dick’s hands are itching to grab his escrima sticks, but he’s carefully resisted the urge because that would be a sure sign of his anxiety. The only reason Jason knows about it is that Dick's fingers are still, his whole body is still – a genuinely calm Dick is a constant, fidgety, chaotic mess of a whirlwind. He couldn’t stand still for a fucking minute if you promised him a million dollars – or all the ice cream he could eat, or even a fucking bucket of glitter.

Stressed Dick is a fucking mountain – utterly immovable.

Dick is stressed right now – reading danger in this face-off as clearly as Jason is – and he does not want to start this fight. He’s bluffing to buy time. If Batman shows up the odds swing in their favor, and there is no doubt in Jason's mind that the fucking nanny-Bat is on his way.

Which would totally piss him off if it wasn’t about to be really helpful.

Unfortunately, the mooks don't seem to be willing to play it out.

Rwen is eyeing Dick with interest, sizing him up like he can read how fast and bendy the circus freak is – like he wants to see the kind of fight that gives him – but instead of following through on the attack, he sighs and says, “Xansa expects us back in fifteen minutes.”

Shankar groans, but otherwise does not protest.

Rwen turns his back on Nightwing, the motion laced with clear regret.

“We're not done talking yet,” Dick announces forcefully, drawing his escrima sticks.

The strangers pay him no heed, and they begin advancing on the alleyway where Batgirl is now balanced on her toes in a fight ready stance.

As Shankar and Rwen approach like Batgirl isn’t even there – let alone any kind of genuine threat – Nightwing hesitates, but readies to launch at them the instant Batgirl engages.

Barbara hesitates too. To those two, it’s unbearably wrong to even consider attacking an unarmed person who is only probably a bad guy.

But for Jason, that kind of gut feeling leap to explosive violence has meant the difference between life and death one too many times for him to just let it go. He’s in the air before anyone else makes a move. His foot connects with Shankar's back on the other side of the same second in which the mook swings his fist into Batgirl's jaw.
Impossibly fast, Rwen's hand is on his ankle – yanking hard. Hard enough to send him careening across the alley as Nightwing lands his counterstrike and is immediately forced to fend off Shankar’s retaliation.

What happens next occurs too quickly for Jason to track it move by move.

It’s enough for him to just let it wash over him as he fights to keep breathing – the fight is quick and brutal, and it does not go well for the Bats.

Shankar and Rwen don’t linger, but they finish the job firmly enough to stroll away from the scene rather than scramble and Batman arrives just after they vanish into the shadows.

He surveys the scene with a stoic fury and clear disappointment. “Robin, you're benched until further notice. Nightwing, get him home,” Batman growls in his fucking imperious rumble.

He turns his back on the boys to face Batgirl and demand, “SitRep.”

There’s no hesitation, no discussion – just the fucking Bat playing at emperor of the whole goddamn universe.

Jason’s on his feet and aiming his grapple at the nearest rooftop before Batgirl's caught her breath. Dick's right behind him – tastefully not shouting after him like the worried little prick he is… being careful not to draw Batman’s attention to the fact that Nightwing is chasing aft him more than actually escorting Robin away from the scene.

The beep of a com connection sounds in his ear and Alfred's voice informs him, “If it's any consolation, Master Robin, Batman did not ask after your health because he has been monitoring the bio trackers since you first identified the unknown subjects as viable threats – refreshing the feeds approximately every three seconds to ensure no technical interference.”

“Thanks for trying A, but that’s bullshit, and you know it,” Jason huffs, yanking the com out of his ear and pocketing it as his feet touch down on the rooftop. “B can just go fuck himself.”

“Robin,” Nightwing shout-whispers urgently as he carefully pockets his own com – even with the tech powered all the way down it’s plausible to think Batman can still eavesdrop, but at least it feels private. And Alfred will probably run enough interference to keep it that way.

“Come on, Little Wing, hold up,” Dick pleads. “You're bleeding.”

“I know,” Jason snarls – though hadn’t actually noticed that bit yet – and he runs his fingers through the too-warm dampness in his hair as he adds, “It’s just a scrape. It’s fine.”

Jason can feel Dick’s sad puppy stare burning into his back, but before the fucking Golden Boy can get any sickly sappy words out, a small shape plummets out of the shadows on top of the rooftop water tank they’re passing. Jason reacts on instinct letting his knees go loose and rolling back his shoulders to prepare for the inevitable impact as he adjusts his position to catch the falling body – a kid, whose shape in the dark of unexpected places is far more recognizable than Jason ever anticipated.

“Holy fuck,” Jason grunts as the weight of Timothy Jackson Drake – god damn flying ninja baby seal – lands in a bundle of bones and oversized sweaters on his chest. The impact sends Jason, and Tim with him, careening backwards into Dick – who is just the right combination of strong and heavy to keep them all from tumbling off the roof.

They still end up in a fucking heap, but at least it’s a reasonably safe heap.
“What, in the ever-loving fuck, are you doing up here?”

God damn psycho baby goat. Jumping off buildings and shit. Like it’s just another day in the fucking Argali highlands.

Jason can’t pry Tim off him – tiny, bony fingers are wrapped desperately in the fabric of his cape, latched onto his armor – and when he gives up the struggle and lets himself sag backwards against Dick, he realizes that Tim is… shaking. Not shivering from the cold.

He’s… Sobbing, but without the wailing to make it obvious.

Jason doesn’t know what to fucking do about it.

He sits, stock still as Tim shudders against him, with his arms curled around Tim’s back purely out of Robin conditioning. At some point, Dick’s arms are suddenly snaking around Tim and Jason alike, pulling them both close in a way that Jason feels uncomfortably confined by – but can’t quite bring himself to hate.

“Hey now, baby bird,” Dick soothes.

As the shuddering slows, he asks, “What's got you so upset here?”

“I thought- I thought they,” Tim starts, struggling to speak while his breathing still isn’t entirely under control. “I thought they were going to kill you.”

“I'm sorry we scared you,” Dick says, giving a squeeze. “But it’s okay now, we're safe.”

“But… those are really bad guys,” Tim mewls pitifully. Certain.

Dread kicks Jason in the lungs and he finds the will to push Tim's shoulder hard enough to force the floppy boneless baby seal back far enough to stare him in the big blue frickin bambi eyes – still red and leaking at the corners.

“Tim. Did you get an ID on those bastards?”

Tim fights for the eye-contact. Loses the battle. Mutters into his coat. “Maybe.”
Dick is fucking flabbergasted.

He loses some of the strength in his hug and squeaks, “How?”

Staring at the R on Jason’s chest, Tim mutters, “I got some good pictures and then used my phone to run them through all the military databases I could hack remotely.”

There’s a lot of information in that statement – a lot of it alarming – but Dick ignores most of it in favor of asking, “How’d you know they were military?”

“Their boots,” Jason and Tim answer in sync.

It makes a tentative smile creep onto Tim’s face. It makes Jason almost want to forgive him for the idiocy of being out here to begin with.

“So, who the fuck are they?” Jason growls, attempting and failing to extricate himself from Dick’s octopus hug – the fucking contortionist has somehow gotten his legs involved with the damn gooey cuddle shit. It’s frickin ridiculous.

Tim’s hold has loosened, but he’s still holding tightly onto Jason’s arm and Dick has limbs in circles around them both and Jason’s squirming hardly seems to register to either of them as Tim tries to refocus.

“They’re former special operations agents for a branch of the CIA that doesn’t exist even on unofficial paperwork,” Tim explains. “Rwen and Shankar Tolovi. Now they’re part of a gang called the Blackbirds. And they each have a rap sheet of murders to their names longer than the casualty list of some third-world wars.”

Well.

That explains why the little fucker was so worried.

But not what the fuck he was doing out here at all.

Jason knows he has to pick his battles when it comes to getting the stupid ass little alien to answer his questions, but he’s got so many fucking fights right in front of his face at the moment that
he can’t pin one down to focus on.

He gives up.

Sighs.

“Lemme see the pics you snapped,” he says.

Tim blinks at him. Little robot brain parsing each word carefully to make absolutely certain that he’d heard right.

Then a smile breaks out across his face that just yanks on every sensibility Jason’s ever cultivated and kicks them off the fucking roof.

Tim whips around and digs into his back pack for his camera. It’s got a ding in it’s casing now from the time it was picked up carelessly by a couple drug dealers working for the Sabini cartek and then whipped around, forgotten, as Tim was tortured. The camera and Tim’s backpack had been recovered the next morning by Nightwing, but the camera’s casing bears a reminder Jason sincerely wishes it did not.

Wriggling around to get comfy – like the fucking floppy ass baby seal he is – and to give the vigilantes a good view of the screen on his camera, Tim gets settled and fires up the device.

He scrolls through a few dozen spectacular shots of the Bats sneaking across rooftops before he gets to the first pic of the Tolovis. Again, the urge rears up to ask what the fuck Tim thought he was doing out in Chinatown in the middle of the night while a new drug and escalating gang violence was sweeping through the city. Jason resists asking and focuses on what the shithead little spybot is showing him – so fucking proud of his stupid little self.

Jason has to admit that Tim is really frickin good at this photography thing.

Not only are there some shots made head on in direct lighting with perfect HD detail that makes them exactly what a facial recognition program would want, but there’s also some epic action sequences and drama shots that tell stories and explain the stakes of what was happening as the Bats stalked the Tolovis through Chinatown. Forget the casefiles, Jason wants some of these pics for like his phone background and shit.

Tim captured their stand-off in the alleyway, and he got the fight itself in about two-dozen frames that make Jason’s gut churn with guilt for how very reasonable Tim’s terrified reaction to the situation had been.
They’re frickin’ fantastic photos.

If Tim hadn’t been too stupid to recognize the ridiculous danger he put himself in to get the shots, Jason would tell him exactly how fucking epic they are. But even with those bambi baby blues going wide and hopeful for a word of praise, Jason can’t forget how vulnerable Tim is when he’s getting these fucking shots.

Dick his vibrating with the same struggle, fighting with himself even more than Jason to resist the urge to shower Tim with praise and hugs and brotherly love – even more acutely terrified for the defenseless little seal all his golden retriever instincts are probably screaming to protect and cuddle.

In the end, both vigilantes cave to giving Tim some epic props for the incredible shots he’s managed to capture. It makes Tim smile in a way that makes Jason consider clawing his own fucking eyes out because it burns like frickin radiation to witness something so adorable.

Jason can’t look at him for more than half a second at a stretch.

He fixes his gaze back on the camera as Tim begins to scroll through the images again.

“Hey, wait,” Jason says abruptly as something he hadn’t noticed before catches in his attention – he’s not even sure exactly what it is he’s looking for as he says, “Go back one.”

Tim dutifully obliges.

The image shows Rwen Tolovi, mid-punch, as fends off an attack from Nightwing he’s holding Jason off the ground by his collar and pushing him against the alley’s damp brick wall.

The shot is from almost directly above the scene. And the part that has Jason’s attention is the view of the flat back of Tolovi’s hand. There’s the blue-black ink of some fairly fresh tattoos – weeks old at most – and on top of that… a fluorescing smudge.

“That’s a club mark,” Jason comments as his brain processes it out. “It looks like there’s a couple of them. I recognize that diamond one, but it’s from the other side of the city. They’ve been club hopping. I don’t know that… circle-y one, but it looks like they’ve been there a few times – recently. That might be where they’re based. We should check it out, try to figure out which ones they’ve been hanging out in; ask around inside if anyone knows more about them.”

Dick sighs.

“You’re benched, Robin,” he points out. “I’m supposed to be taking you back to the Cave and you’re not supposed to leave for any reason except for school.”
Jason shifts. He’s still sitting in Dick’s lap – with Tim still curled up in his – but he gets himself into a position where he can cross his arms as glare at Nightwing’s bland blue mask. The mask is doing almost nothing to hide Dick’s raging concern, his guilt, his regret.

“You can either help me on this, ‘Wing, or not,” Jason lays out flatly. “Even if you drag me back to the Manor, I’m just gonna sneak out and you know it.”

“If I drag you back to the Manor, you won’t be able to sneak out passed Agent A,” Dick counters – making a legitimate point.

It gives Jason pause. He can’t sneak passed Alfred – not when the butler is on active alert to watch him. But Jason could probably fight his way passed him. He won’t like it, but he can.

Before Jason can explain that, Timothy fucking suicidal idiot Drake speaks up to say, “I don’t know if he can sneak out, but I can. And you can’t stop me without admitting to Batman that I’m a risk you’ve actively chosen to ignore for months now.”

Bambi’s laying down some fucking blackmail.

It just.

Does not compute.

Except that it does.

Fucking robot.

He’s calculated all the angles. Recognized which ones will get him what he wants – done the math on the cost-to-benefit ratios… selected the course that will get him the most of what he wants for the least amount of effort, immediately.

And he has no sticky human qualms about following through with it.

Tim is totally serious – blank faced, utterly unrelenting, beyond casual. Like Dick is trying to say Tim can’t take his pet cat to a movie – so frick-ass rich boy decides to just buy the whole fucking building. Because he can. And knows it. And isn’t wasting time with bluffs.

It’s a stab to the gut for Jason – a twisting, rusty blade playing full-on tackle football with his
organs—because the mere idea of Tim going to investigate a nightclub where the Tolovis might be hanging out is terrifying in a way Jason didn’t know was possible.

Poor old Dickiebird looks like he wants to cry.

It doesn’t take long for him to fold.

He sighs heavily and tucks everything Dick away to focus on completing the mission as Nightwing—to keeping Robin and this idiot baby seal he’s accidentally adopted alive.

“Do you even know what club to investigate? We can’t just go in randomly,” Dick points out reasonably. “If we barge in and start asking questions, the Tolovis are gonna hear about it and they’re probably gonna bolt.”

Jason’s almost stumped there. If they go back to the Cave, enhance Tim’s photos, use the Bat computer to suss out the likely location of the Tolovis’ current base… they’ll have to contend with Alfred to get back out on the streets to investigate.

But of course, the fucking ninja bambi robot has a fucking plan.

“I know someone who’ll probably know,” Tim says brightly. “She’ll probably even be willing to help us out.”

An awkward beat of silence kicks up.

Neither Dick nor Jason wants to ask, but they wind up breaking their resistance in the same second, asking together, “Who?”

“Um…” Tim responds, suddenly bashful and utterly fascinated with the ratty laces on his shoes. “If I tell you, you won’t let me come.”

Jason is gonna punch this fucking shit. Hard.

God damn suicidal fucking idiot.

He hangs his head—ceding defeat to fucking robot for the moment.
“Fine, you fucking brat,” he growls as he more or less shoves Tim out of his lap – sending bambi in a sprawl of limbs across the icy rooftop. “Lead the god damn way, baby bird.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun Fact: I'm super lazy with my villain creation in FF, so the Tolovis are actually characters I've already developed for another story (that one's an original storyverse with legitimate publishing potential, so it likely won't end up on Ao3).

Next Time: Timmy's view of events from the water tank over Chinatown. And the Bat's baby Birds meet one of Tim's more problematic 'friends'...

(Also, I may or may not be accidentally working on a bodyswap fic for Jay and Tim and... I was wondering if there's any questions / comments / concerns from you guys in regards to possibly reading it, and especially if there's anything specific you'd like to see happen in it?)
Chapter Ten: Rule #10 – Persevere

Just after Dick Grayson – *fraking Nightwing* – left him at his door after picking him up from school like the vigilante was part of some Big Brother program at the local Y, Tim got down to business. He’d gone through this whole routine before – after late nights and long weekends when he’d spent entire nights and longer out on Gotham’s streets, slinking though its skyline.

Muss a bit of fabric here, nudge a few pieces of furniture there, get exactly enough plates dirty to make it seem like he was here – and because it’s *him*, like he forgot to eat at least once.

He’s finished exactly four and a half minutes before Mrs. Simz arrives.

By that time, he’s already knee deep in going over the research again for the drug case. Dick has left a few new notes – having made a bit more progress while Tim was stuck in school. It’s good, sorta, being that progress is important – *any* progress – but the actual observations Dick made… the *connections* he made. Those are… unpleasant.

They make sense, especially in conjunction with his own earlier supposition about how the drug itself is made with a parent material that *begins* with contaminated blood. The victim who Batgirl found torn apart in a Chinatown warehouse last night had a high concentration of the drug’s signatures in his blood – assuming the attacker could somehow *tell* that… it almost made sense that a
junkie riding a low on withdrawal would do *whatever it took* to score.

Tim’s just finished running though the notes when Mrs. Simz’s key turns in the staff door. By the time she makes it inside and bustles herself up to Tim’s room, he’s switched his screens over to a chaotic game of Starcraft. He’s not terribly good at it, but he knows that Mrs. Simz doesn’t know nearly enough about the game to be able to discern that.

As far as she can tell, he’s logged several hundred hours on it, and has the skills of a master who’s put that amount of effort into learning every in and out of the game.

Which is helpful.

She gives a soft smile and shakes her head, but she does not chastise him. She’s under the impression that playing Starcraft means he’s got friends, even if they’re only pals online, and she likes that for him better than when she finds him drowning in research for ‘school’.

Mrs. Simz tells him that dinner will be ready in half and hour and leaves him to his game. Which he promptly flips back over to his case for the Bats.

He doesn’t make any notable progress before dinner, which he eats with Mrs. Simz as she goes above and beyond to ask after his ‘Star-friends’ and his day at school and those Wayne Boys he’s been hanging out with – Tim’s explained Jason as a fellow rocket enthusiast whom he first began talking to when they met in Starcraft.

They’d already known each other from the Gotham Gala scene, and now that they have discovered how much they truly have in common, they’ve been talking more and more.

It’s made Mrs. Simz very happy.

So happy that after dinner, she only stuck around to watch two hours of TV with him – jeopardy, of course, because she wants to play with him as a team and beat all of the TV competitors and build camaraderie. She left him to his evening by nine – expecting him to do his homework and go to bed on time, as any good young man should spend his night.

As soon as the lights from her car disappeared, he made a fresh pot of coffee and went back to work.

The case is slow going.

Tim is not a biologist. He’s sequenced the genetic codes of the victims of overdose that had provided his samples, but he can’t do much to interpret them.

Honestly, he’s not even sure he did it right – the genetic sequencer prototype from Drake Labs he’s stashed in the Drake Estate’s third (and mostly forgotten) garage space was designed to simplify the sequencing process, eliminating the need for overly complicated mediums and chemicals and processing, but it still takes a certain knack. And he’s pretty sure than knowing what was supposed to happen in the unabriviated version would help him be able to tell if the simplified version actually processed properly.

So instead of spending fruitless hours staring at the same information, Tim embarks on ziplining his way through a few semesters of senior-level college genetics courses.

It’s much more scientific than his study of how to read human body language and he makes significantly more progress. He’s feeling rather satisfied with himself when he decides to take a break just after one in the morning – almost satisfied enough to call it a night – when the alert system he’d
woven through his computer’s access to Gotham’s social networking servers pops up with sightings of the Bats.

More than that, an alert pops up regarding a young girl dressed in purple who has only appeared once before – or rather at one event, during a run that Cluemaster made at terrorizing Gotham, and appearing several nights in a row over the course of a week. She called herself Spoiler when Tim had found her on the fifth night she’d been out, and she’d essentially retired after having helped the Bats catch Cluemaster.

There are currently no reports among Gotham’s law enforcement agencies that Cluemaster has escaped, but if Spoiler’s out… Tim considers attempting to send Batgirl a memo, but he isn’t certain that he can keep himself anonymous from Batman if he tried and that is an awfully big risk to take for unconfirmed information.

Downing the rest of his coffee in a few over-sized gulps, Tim reaches for his Robin sweater. He pulls a coat on over top of it, since it is still only March and therefore quite cold on the windswept Gotham rooftops, and straps on his favorite super-spy sneakers. He tucks a few snacks into his backpack with his freshly-charged phone and his trusty camera.

Then he slips out the back door, locks it behind him, and starts pedaling his bike towards Spoiler’s home-range of Robbinsville.

It doesn’t take long to find her.

She’s not very good at the whole effective patrolling thing – her routes are obvious and regular, and they haven’t changed even with her reemergence. Tim tried to talk to her about that last time, but she’d promised that she wasn’t really in this for the hero thing – that she was only involved because she had a couple keen tips on Cluemaster.

Tim had done his research. Figured out that she knew what she knew because she was Cluemaster’s daughter, Stephanie Brown, and accepted that she really was only in it for the call to share what edge she had with the good guys. Like calling airport security on a suspicious bag.

But she’s back.

Sitting on top of a 24-hour donut shop – basking in the smell of fresh coffee.

“Kiddo!” Spoiler greets when Tim clambers up to the roof. He’s no older or younger than she is, but she treats him like a baby brother. He is a good four inches shorter than her, so... he supposes it isn’t entirely unwarranted. She flings her arms around him like an old friend, blonde ponytail smacking him in the face. Spoiler has always been... friendly. The weirdest combination of puppy-dog sweet and streetwise wary.

Tim has never known how to handle that.

He still doesn’t.

“I brought food,” he offers. It seems to be Jason’s strategy for dealing with humans.

“Yum,” she chirps, releasing him – proving Jason’s strategy sound.

All of the snacks in his bag make it into her hands. One at a time, while he pretends to eat some of them before passing them on to her. She peels her mask off to eat them.

It’s not a very good mask – really, it’s just a bunch of black fabric wrapped cleverly around
her face in a way that ruins photos for facial recognition programs, but it doesn’t actually hide her identity to anyone talking to her in person.

Tim has never chastised her for that.

Batman has the resources of a billionaire to go into researching fabrics and adhesives and creating flexible lenses for a fabric mask that can be applied with a touch but is so well booby-trapped that it can only removed by a positively ID’d fingerprint scan from one of four people. Stephanie Brown is part of a family that sometimes struggles to buy groceries.

And Tim will never shame her for that.

He’s aware of his own wealth, and aware of the pride in people that have never had such bottomless resources handed to them – admires it tremendously, that will and fortitude.

But he really wants to find a way to get her to let him buy a better mask.

Maybe angling it as something she can eat in could help… but that’s for later.

After bribing her stomach, chatting about everything from classes and annoying teachers to the stresses of having parents that just do not understand, Tim steers the conversation to what Spoiler is doing out on patrol after months of being absent.

“I don’t think it’s Cluemaster,” she promises, “But the whole drug thing that’s making news is… weird. I just wanna be out here. A deterrent presence so the Bats don’t have to work the case and be the only good guys patrolling for petty street crime, you know?”

“Yeah, I get that,” Tim accepts. “Just don’t stay out too late?”

Spoiler snorts and ruffles Tim’s hair. “Same to you, kiddo.”

They part ways like two kids playing hero – climbing awkwardly down the opposite sides of the building then then pedaling off on bicycles. It feels ridiculous.

But Tim knows they really DO contribute.

So, it’s bearable.

And since he’s already out here tonight, and his phone’s connection to his ping program still has the Bats touring the south end of the city, he decides to go snap a few pics of them in action before heading back for the night. He guesses that with the escalating pressure of the drug case and the clear danger of it causing Batman stress – enough stress to send gangbangers to the hospital on rather low-key muggings – he’ll have Robin and Nightwing patrol together, and if he does that they’ll probably have to check in with Batgirl, who patrols Chinatown.

Tim can narrow down the place they’ll likely all meet up to a few blocks around the main market strip and makes for the area. He clambers up a fire escape until he’s on top of a string of warehouses that are close together enough to allow him to jump roof to roof without a grappling gun to swing him between the crazy gaps the Bats conquer.

If he can spot them, he’ll be able to watch and follow them for a while.

Probably.

He settles in to wait.
Pulls out his camera.

Snaps a few test shots.

Waits.

Tim is patient. He’s honed the skill into something more than calm – it gives him time to think, to reassess, to let his brain rest and sort through the details of his day like most people do through a good night’s sleep.

He doesn’t get anything dramatic accomplished tonight, but that may be due to the fact that he spots Jason crouched on top of the Chinatown Gate.

Snaps a picture.

Another.

Notes that Nightwing and Batgirl are crouched behind him – all three focused on something they can see in Tim’s general direction. Something a few degrees left of his shoulder.

Tim knows he won’t be able to spot it himself – he’s just not good enough at that kind of thing to feel like he has any chance at all to see what has the Bats interested in the busy market.

Instead of turning to try looking for it, Tim keeps his camera on the Bats.

Snaps a series of action shots as they swing in to get closer to what has them interested.

He stalks them from across the market as they crouch and jog along the rooftops, tailing someone below. The market’s dizzying array of lights makes for fantastic photography, especially when paired with the innate drama of his subjects.

It gives him a thrill to witness. To capture.

He’d started this photography thing to prove to himself that his heroes were real, then continued it to figure out definitively who it was beneath the masks… but now. There is more to it now, a deeper kind of enjoyment… art.

And when that art lets him help keep his city safer… it’s just a special kind of wonderful.

He’s not entirely lost in his musing.

Tim notes when the Bats freeze, swing across the market to his side of the strip and creep forward like they’ve cornered their quarry and have decided to pounce.

The observation is confirmed moments later when Jason stands up, draws his grapple, and dives off the roof – the others following right on his heels.

Tim creeps closer.

Clambers up a water tank to get a better angle.

Spots the strangers who have the Bats so interested – so tense.

Snaps clear photos of their faces to use in facial recognition, snaps detail shots of the elements of them that seem unique – identifiable.
Tattoos on their hands, and on their necks.

Suits without obvious or well-known labels, but that are clearly crafted with expensive Italian fabrics and cut in a chaebol Korean style – expertly tailored.

Boots that … don’t match.

In some ways, the boots are the least identifying aspect of them – everything from their haircuts to the stitching on their ties have an expensive, careful and unique hand behind them.

The boots are uniform – military issue, though Tim isn’t entirely sure which military.

It still gives him a place to start trying to figure out who they are.

The Bats are in a stand-off. Tim can’t hear the words, but he can tell that things are tense – that the Bats are worried, and the strangers are not.

Tim keeps an eye on what’s happening in the alley, but he pulls his phone out of his backpack and taps into the power of the set-up he has back at home in his room. Uses the backdoors he’s spent a few months nudging open to run through facial recognition in about a dozen different military branches, banking on them to have at least cursory scans of all their affiliates. He even runs it through three foreign militaries, the only three he can hack from here… just in case.

He watches the situation evolve below as he waits for facial recognition to ping something. It’s not nearly as long a wait as Tim expects.

Rwen Tolovi.

CIA.

Spec. Ops.

In a sub-agency that is aptly codenamed GHOST.

Tim can’t find anything about GHOST, except that Rwen Tolovi is claimed by them.

Which is odd enough because most sane government agencies would’ve disowned him entirely at this point. Rwen Tolovi was part of a research program and did a lot to forward interrogation and anti-interrogation techniques… but then he went crazy and killed the entire staff of the facility where he’d been staying.

It was a massacre. A bloodbath. Hundreds of people killed by one man.

One boy.

Rwen Tolovi had killed four hundred and thirty-seven people at age 15.

Without any kind of weapon but his bare hands…

And now he's standing in an alleyway with three people Tim cares about.
With his younger brother, Shankar Tolovi.

Who’d been *nine years old* when he’d first killed a handler – in the very same agency that his brother had belonged to… both brothers, Tim discovers.

There’s a Xansa Tolovi listed, as well.

The oldest of the three.

Currently considered to be the second worst.

*Genocides* were listed as things he was directly responsible for… but those were apparently at least *partly* authorized by his handlers.

According to the heavily redacted files Tim is perusing, Xansa has receded into the shadows with his separation from GHOST. Rwen is still on the radar of military law enforcement, and still dropping bodies in every single city his face shows up in. Shankar doesn’t kill as frequently, but the people he leaves alive are *just barely* alive – and most put down on the official record that they *wish* he’d just killed them.

Tim’s earlier feeling of accomplishment evaporates – *sublimates*.

Jason, and Dick, and Barbara… they’re vigilantes, super heroes in so many ways. But they are still human. They might have contingency plans in place to beat Superman, to fight both against aliens and on par with alien teammates, to meet people who could wield *magic* on a level playing field… but they were still only human.

Still only *kids*.

Tim had never *worried* about the Bats before.

He’d fretted for them a bit, but mostly retroactively – *after* they’d been hurt.

He’d never sat around aware of exactly how much danger they were in *before* they got out of it safely – injured, in some cases, but always alive.

But.

Now…

Tim knows what they’re facing, and they're facing down *monsters*.

And all he can do is sit and watch.

To keep from learning any more terrifying, gruesome details, Tim stows his phone.

Turns his full focus back to the alley.

Takes up his camera and starts to click.

Every muscle in his body is taught and tense as the situation on the ground grows more and more obviously fraught. His gut is swirling with bile and his throat is tight and burning.
He’s not entirely sure he remembers how to breathe as the tension finally cracks below.

Tim’s clicking away with his camera, and he catches the instant that Shankar Tolovi’s fist gets launched at Barbara’s jaw – catches that Jason has already catapulted himself at the psychopath and snaps a fantastic photo of Jason’s boot on Shankar’s back and Rwen’s hand somehow already about to grab Jason’s ankle.

Tim’s brain refuses to process the next 97 seconds.

But his camera keeps clicking and he captures each excruciating detail of the fight.

It’s quick and brutal and as the Tolovis stroll away, the Bats lay still against the asphalt.

They’re not dead.

They can’t be dead.

They can’t.

14 seconds pass with no sign of life that Tim can see.

Tim doesn’t breathe for any of it.

Dick is the first to move.

He’s coughing and unsteady, but soon he’s on his feet and moving to check on Jason.

Who also splutters back to life. Shoves Dick away from him. He’s okay. If anything shows it, that does – and Dick realizes it too. Leaves him be.

Barbara is slower to get back on her feet. Shaken. Sore.

Her expression is serious.

Dark in a way Tim doesn’t think he’s ever seen on her.

And then Batman sweeps onto the scene.

Surveys it.

Tim and his camera are the only witnesses to the shudder and the wilt of relief that escapes the Dark Knight’s façade.

“Robin,” Batman announces, his voice rough with more than the usual gravel. “You’re benched until further notice.”
Jason’s face contorts with a snarl.

“Nightwing,” Batman transitions, looking to Dick and waiting until his first son nods with something like an assurance, “Get him home.”

Dick nods again, understanding and obedient.

Batman wrenches himself around to face Barbara, having given her as long as he could bear to allow her to regain her composure. To regroup, and save face. “Batgirl, SitRep.”

She nods, appreciating the normality, the push for focus on the work.

Jason sees it differently.

Does not respond well.

Launches away from Batman like he’d rather punch him.

Swings up to the roof where Tim is crouched on top of the water tower.

Does it under his own power.

Tim isn’t sure if that’s when he starts to cry, or if that’s just when he notices it.

But he’s not even embarrassed by it.

He barely hears Jason growl at something said into his com – the com itself is promptly removed from his ear and shoved into his pocket.

Dick swings up to the roof a second later.

Takes his own com out.

“Come on, Little Wing, hold up,” Dick pleads. “You’re bleeding.”

“I know,” Jason snarls. He runs his fingers through his hair, laying it back in waves that should not be so slick. “It’s just a scrape. It’s fine.”

He’s hurt.

Of course, he’s hurt.

But he’s alive.
Tim vaults off the water tower – not entirely conscious of the action or certain of his goal in careering down to the roof where his heroes are trying to walk off their near-death experiences like nothing at all had happened.

Jason somehow spots Tim falling out of the sky, moves to catch him.

Manages it better than Tim thought possible.

“Holy fuck,” he huffs as he tumbles backwards – into Dick, who also falls.

They end up in a heap and Tim is not entirely sure which way is up.

Doesn’t care because he can hear Jason’s heart beating.

He can feel Jason’s arms move around him – feel Jason’s chest rattle as he growls breathlessly, “What, in the ever-loving fuck, are you doing up here?”

Tim wants to answer.

He really does.

Can’t.

Can’t speak, can’t breathe, can’t stop shaking.

Can’t tell when he started shaking.

And then there’s two more hands on his back – Dick’s.

“Hey now, baby bird,” Dick soothes.

It helps.

It grounds Tim enough to start breathing again.

“What’s got you so upset here?” Dick asks.

Tim still wants to answer.

Still can’t quite manage.

Takes a few beats to pick his words, forces them out.

“I thought- I thought they… I thought they were going to kill you.”

Tim feels the temperature on the roof drop by at least five degrees.
But then Dick’s arms are squeezing tighter and everything is *too-*warm and Dick is speaking carefully. “I’m sorry we scared you,” he says, understanding. Then he promises, “But it’s okay now, we’re safe.”

“But… those are *really* bad guys,” Tim manages. Dick and Jason might not know how violent and terrible the Tolovis are, but he does. And… that terrified him. Still does.

Because they’re still out there.

And Tim doesn’t want his heroes going after them.

Doesn’t want his *friends* going after them.

Jason’s hand is suddenly pushing back against Tim’s shoulder.

“Tim,” he says seriously, *focused.* “Did you get an ID on those bastards?”

Frack.

Tim fights for the eye-contact. Loses the battle. Curls into his coat.

“Maybe,” he mutters.

He doesn’t want to tell them.

Because if he tells them, they’ll investigate.

But they’ll investigate anyway.

And his information will at least make them a smidge safer.

If they press him, Tim’ll tell.

Jason looks like he’s gonna ask, but Dick beats him to speaking. “*How?*”

Tim focuses on the Robin R on Jason’s armor and admits, “I got some good pictures and then used my phone to run them through all the military databases I could hack remotely.”

“How’d you know they were military,” Dick asks.

Jason and Tim respond at the same time, saying in sync, “Their boots.”

It’s gratifying to know he got it right – to know that he did it way Jason had.
“So?” Jason asks – seemingly trying to escape the hug that Dick has wrapped them both in, which Dick is having no part in allowing. “Who the fuck are they?”

Jason gives up on escape as Tim forces himself to focus.

To be calm.

Because this is the hard part.

The scary part.

Deep breath.

“They’re former special operations agents for a branch of the CIA that doesn’t exist even on unofficial paperwork,” Tim explains. “Rwen and Shankar Tolovi. Now they’re part of a gang called the Blackbirds. And they each have a rap sheet of murders to their names longer than the casualty list if some third-world wars.”

There’s a long pause.

It’s awkward.

Tim knows it.

Doesn’t quite understand why it’s awkward.

Or how to fix it.

And then Jason sighs.

“Lemme see the pics you snapped,” he says.

Tim blinks at him.

Not sure he heard right.

Jason wants to see his photos.

Which is a move to normality, and an exciting prospect.

Tim’s never had anyone to show his photography to… not when his subjects need to stay
Tim dives to get his camera, wriggles around as he gets the thing started to ensure Dick and Jason can both see the screen. Begins clicking through the photos.

Murmurs of approval, of praise, of how the vigilantes are impressed.

Tim feels kind of floaty.

He can’t stop smiling.

Can’t quite feel his face.

Dick and Jason smile back – Tim can’t read all the feelings present in their expressions, but he’s as close to certain as he can be that their happiness and praise is genuine.

“Hey, wait,” Jason says abruptly, “Go back one.”

Tim dutifully obliges.

The image shows Rwen Tolovi, mid-punch, as fends off an attack from Nightwing he’s holding Jason off the ground by his collar and pushing him against the alley’s damp brick wall.

The shot is from almost directly above the scene. And the part that has Jason’s attention is the view of the flat back of Tolovi’s hand. There’s the blue-black ink of some fairly fresh tattoos – weeks old at most – and on top of that… a fluorescing smudge.

“That’s a club mark,” Jason comments slowly. “It looks like there’s a couple of them. I recognize that diamond one, but it’s from the other side of the city. They’ve been club hopping. I don’t know that… circle-y one, but it looks like they’ve been there a few times – recently. That might be where they’re based. We should check it out, try to figure out which ones they’ve been hanging out in; ask around inside if anyone knows more about them.”

Dick sighs.

“You’re benched, Robin,” he points out. “I’m supposed to be taking you back to the Cave and you’re not supposed to leave for any reason except for school.”

It’s obvious to Tim that Dick doesn’t want to be the bad guy, but also doesn’t want to let Jason get himself killed – or let him get into a pissing match with Bruce that will wind up with Jason running away to some place ridiculous like California… Dick made friends quickly, but Jason’s not the friendly type and if he runs away, he’ll fight his fights alone.

Dick doesn’t want to let any of that happen and to do that he has to be the bad guy he clearly doesn’t want to be.

Jason shifts to get a glare leveled at Dick.

“You can either help me on this, ‘Wing, or not,” Jason lays out flatly. “Even if you drag me back to the Manor, I’m just gonna sneak out and you know it.”

He’s serious.
Even if Dick *drags* him back… unless he *drugs* Jason… Robin’s gonna be back out on the streets in an hour. At most. And he’ll be alone.

“If I drag you back to the Manor, you won’t be able to sneak out passed Agent A,” Dick counters – making a legitimate point.

Tim knows it’s not enough to deter Jason, but it’s enough to make him hesitate.

Jason can’t sneak around Alfred.

But he can fight him.

And probably win.

But he’ll hate himself for it forever.

And he knows that, but he’ll still do it – because he’s an idiot and determined and can’t back down from a dare.

And Dick isn’t going to be able to stop him.

If Dick ups the stakes in any way, he’s just going to make it worse.

Tim has to stop them.

He *has* to. Because he’s the only one who can.

The words begin to tumble out of his mouth before he realizes it – exactly the right ones to push the vigilantes into doing what they need to and focusing on the job.

“I don’t know if *he* can sneak out, but I can. And you can’t stop me without admitting to Batman that I’m a risk you’ve actively chosen to ignore for months now.”

Dick and Jason freeze.

Shocked.

Horrified.

Perfectly aware that Tim means every word of it.

But he’d rather scandalize his heroes, even make them hate him for it, as long as it means they won’t hate each other. That they’ll have each other’s backs.

Dick looks like he might cry.
Tim holds firm.

He knows that Dick doesn’t want to be the bad guy – that he doesn’t want Tim to be the bad guy either. But Tim can take it better than Dick ever could.

“Do you even know what club to investigate,” Dick asks, his sigh of regret and resignation being swallowed by his rationality. “We can’t just go in randomly. If we barge in and start asking questions, the Tolovis are gonna hear about it and they’re probably gonna bolt.”

“I know someone who’ll probably know,” Tim says, pleased that his plan to keep Dick and Jason on the same side has worked. “She’ll probably even be willing to help us out.”

Another awkward beat of silence kicks up.

Dick and Jason are staring at him like he grew a second head.

That only speaks Swahili.

“Who?” they ask in unison.

Tim winces.

Oh. Right. They don’t know…

The Bats and Spoiler aren’t the only masks Tim’s met on his nighttime jaunts though Gotham’s city skyline.

This… is gonna be an awkward conversation. At best.

“Um…” he falters. Fiddles with his shoelaces. “If I tell you, you won’t let me come.”

And if he doesn’t come, there’s no way she’ll talk.

Which defeats the purpose.

Jason shoves Tim clear out of the hug.

“Fine, you fucking brat,” he growls, “Lead the god damn way, baby bird.”

Tim struggles to his feet, satisfied.

“We need to get to the Opera House,” Tim comments, looking northwest.

It’s only fifteen blocks or so away, but it’ll take him an hour to get there if he has to climb down and get back on his bike.

Dick recognizes what he’s asking.
Clambers to his feet and holds his arms open in invitation. “Think you can hold on tight enough to fly there?”

Jason swivels around like Dick’s question is offensive, but Tim doesn’t look over at him – afraid of what he might see on Jason’s face. Not sure what he thinks might be there.

Tim nods.

Shyly approaches the acrobat. Lets himself be picked up like he weighs nothing at all. Dick makes sure Tim’s ankles are locked together around his waist, and his arms are secured around his neck. One of Dick’s arms is snug against his back – between his coat and his pack.

He feels safe, secure.

*Excited*, as Dick approaches the edge of the building.

Jason’s muttering something under his breath – probably cursing – but he fires his grapple right in sync with Dick and launches with him across the first gap.

And Tim is… *flying*.

More literally than on the bike.

But just as *spectacularly*.

Its…

It’s incredible.

And Tim wants to keep hold of this feeling. Forever.

Dick notices.

Laughs.

“Having fun, baby bird?”

Tim’s grinning ear to ear and can’t stop. Can’t move his mouth enough to reply.

Nods instead.

It makes Dick smile.

Which does nothing to help Tim control *his* smile.

It ends all too quickly.

They make it to the Opera House and Dick lets Tim stand on his own feet again – they’re unsteady and Dick keeps a hand on his shoulder for a solid minute. *That* contact feels weird – over
protective or overly familiar or something, but Tim bears with it to keep Dick happy.

He sees movement in the shadows across the roof – hiding the curve of the elegant gothic arches. Jason and Dick both look in that direction like something registered, but they can’t pin down what exactly.

Tim peals away from Dick and says, “Wait here.”

He pulls his camera out of his back pack and sets the bag down before walking halfway to the arches. Where he waits. You could never force her to do anything. You simply had to ask and hope she acquiesced.

He had a standing invitation to talk to her here, which might be permanently rescinded in the next 40 seconds.

“Well, well,” the voice purrs from the shadows, echoing ominously, “If it isn’t my favorite little stray come to visit.”

“Hello, Miss Kyle,” Tim greets as Catwoman slinks out of the shadows.

He can feel the birds behind him go stiff.

Tim’s not certain if Selina Kyle and Bruce Wayne are in one of their on or one of their off periods. He’s not sure which would be better.

Selina pads over to him, wraps his chin in her claws and inspects his face – lenses on her googles whirring as she squints to inspect him for signs of health and injury. He holds perfectly still as she examines him – doesn’t yelp when she decides she’s satisfied and pulls him into a suffocating hug. As she squeezes she says, “Oh it’s been too long, you cute little kitten.”

She finally releases him and her gaze cuts to Robin and Nightwing.

“I’ve been worried about you,” she quips, adding, “So I forgive you for your company.”

It’s an off period, then.

“You know,” she goes on, raising her voice so the vigilantes can hear her clearly, “Cats generally eat little birdies that wander too far from the nest. Where’s the big bad bat tonight?”

Both Dick and Jason draw breath.

Tim cuts them off.

“I actually came to ask for your help, Miss Kyle,” Tim says, pulling her attention back to him and off of Bruce’s boys. “I know you have the best information network of anyone on the streets and I need a tip on someone staying off the grid.”

Selina resists, but her glare eventually falls away from Dick and Jason – softening to an indulgent smile as she turns her eyes to Tim.

“You have always been a flatterer, kitten,” she sighs. Pinching at his cheek with her diamond encrusted claws turned carefully to the sides so it hurt a bit but didn’t cut him. “What do you need, my darling little stray?”

“Do you know what club these guys are hanging out in?”
Tim shows her the best picture he has of both Tolovis standing together.

Flicks it over to show the pic of the hand that had caught Jason’s attention.

Selina’s face is grave beneath her cowl and goggles – the catty smile, aloof and flirtatious and bitingly aggressive all at once, is gone.

“These are dangerous people, kitten,” Selina tells him.

Equally grave, Tim replies, “I know, Miss Kyle.”

“You’re smarter than this, you don’t pick fights you can’t win.”

In a whisper only a cat could hear, Tim admits, “They hurt my friends.”

Looking at him with pity in the bright green eyes behind her golden goggles, Selina whispers back, “You’re smarter than this. Stray kittens don’t belong in birds’ nests. They won’t have your back on the streets, they won’t take care of you, won’t protect you.”

“I know,” Tim acknowledges. “I don’t need them to protect me. I just want to help them.”

Selina knew a thing or two about that, Tim knows… her complicated history with Pamela Isley is enough to prove that much.

Searching his face carefully, Selina finds something that makes her sigh – and relent.

She still speaking at a bare whisper as she tells him, “Run with them all you want, Stray, but remember that you still run alone.”

Tim nods.

“The Tolovis haunt a club called the Raven, right on the water in southeast Chinatown,” Catwoman lays out, marching up to Nightwing and Robin with her claws extended. “And if you birdbrains get my kitten killed the Bat is going to pay. Got it?”

“He misses you,” Nightwing says unhelpfully – so unhelpfully that even Tim can tell it was not the right thing to say.

Catwoman’s claws are on his throat in an instant – pressure drawing pinpricks of blood.

“I don’t care,” she hisses. “I don’t need him, and I don’t need you to speak for him.”

Unphased, Nightwing replies, “I know. I just thought you might wanna know.”

Catwoman’s lip curls.

She clearly considers throwing Nightwing off the roof. Dick wouldn’t be surprised, and he’d recover easily, so she wouldn’t even have to pretend she cared to watch him fall.

Dick smiles at her, sparkles and trust and gooey nonchalance.

Selina lets him go and clearly considers wiping her hand on his costume – but that won’t do anything to get the glitter off.

“Raven’s closed for tonight and if you sniff around within a half mile in a cape their watch dogs will make you and you’ll never see them again,” Selina says, turning her back and sauntering
away with her usual saucy sway.

Before she completely vanishes into the shadows, she adds, “Be careful, boys. He’s an ass, but he needs you more than he’ll ever admit.”

The boys stand still, absorbing that – processing all the different tidbits of the encounter until Selina is long gone.

And then Tim is being forcibly turned around by Jason man-handling his shoulders.

Jason’s roughly checking him over for injuries, for trauma, for… something.

“Tim,” he growls, “When exactly did you get on a cute pet name basis with Catwoman?”

“Um…”

Tim’s staring down at the camera in his hands – its screen already dark.

“Tim,” Jason pushes.

“Two years ago?” Tim admits cautiously, still fiddling with his camera. “It was right after you became Robin, around when I figured out who, um, who you are during the day.”

Jason’s hands are still on Tim’s shoulders. He pulls in a long breath, grits his teeth, and… doesn’t say anything.

He just lets the air hiss out and releases Tim’s shoulders.

“Time for you to go home,” he growls turning away.

“But…” Jason freezes, doesn’t turn back around. Tim continues, “I need to get my bike. It’s still in Chinatown.”

“Where?”

“Three warehouses south of the Gate, on the side opposite the market.” Tim explains.

“I’ll get it,” Jason says, drawing his grapple.

“Jaybird?”

“Shove it ‘Wing, I’m not gonna go to the Raven or shit, I’m not *that* stupid. Just get the fuckin’ kitten home,” Jason snarls.

Dick nods, but Jason’s not looking. He fires his grapple and leaps off the building muttering, “Frickin psycho.”

There’s a beat of silence in his wake.
Then Dick is saying, “He’s just worried about you, baby bird. You’ve got some pretty
dangerous hobbies.”

Tim frowns at the hypocrisy. “Less dangerous than yours.”

“We’re older,” Dick tells him.

Tim opens his mouth to protest that Dick started defying death with the Flying Graysons at age 4, but Dick beats him to it, saying preemptively, “And we have specialized training. And when
we started out, we had nets. Even in the circus, I might’ve made my first jump when I was half your
age, but I had people teaching me – ready to catch me if I fell. Which I did, frequently.”

Tim’s frown deepens.

His coffee’s wearing off and he’s kinda lost track of the point he’s trying to argue.

He salvages it after a pained beat. “But I’m not jumping off rooftops. I’m not getting involved
with the fights. I’m not doing anything legitimately dangerous.”

“Tim,” Dick sighs – voice swept with too many emotions for Tim to actively comprehend, let
alone name. “You’re twelve. And you’re running around Gotham, at night, alone. That on its own is
very risky behavior.”

With a shrug, Tim refutes, “I know my city.”

“You’re friends with Catwoman,” Dick points out.

“I know she steals things,” Tim admits, but he forges on to add insistently, “But she’s a nice
lady, over all. Besides, Batman likes her.”

“He’s attracted to her, it’s different.”

Certain, Tim asserts, “He trusts her. More than he trusts anyone else he’s dated. He trusts her
with who he really is outside of the cape and cowl, and he trusts her enough to let her walk free even
though she knows his secret identity.”

“She’s blackmailing him.”

“She’s teasing him.”

Dick sighs. Relents – for the moment, at least.

“The sun’s gonna be coming up in an hour, baby bird,” he comments, resigned. “Let’s just
get you home for now, okay?”

Tim doesn’t like leaving the conversation unsettled, but he knows that pushing now is
pointless. He nods and shoulders his back pack. Steps into Dick’s waiting arms.

Nightwing scoops him up again and secures his hold. Then they’re swinging across the city
and everything is wonderful. Tim nestles close as Nightwing carries him all the way to the self-
storage unit just south of Robbinsville where he’d stashed his bike at the start of patrol.

Dick gives Tim Jason’s helmet and then they’re speeding through the Gotham streets out into
the mainland countryside. It only takes a few minutes to reach Tim’s front door once they get the
bike. Tim wishes it had taken longer – is reluctant to pull himself away.
His house is as familiar as ever, but the imposing dark and quiet of it doesn’t seem as welcoming and protective as it usually does.

He feels the chilly night acutely as soon as he hands Jason’s helmet back to Dick.

“Get some sleep, okay, baby bird?”

Tim has school in just over four hours, so that’s not going to happen, but he does plan on taking a nap, so he nods to Dick without feeling guilty about the lie.

Dick smiles like he’s entirely convinced.

He waits on the doorstep until he watches Tim close the door behind him.

It’s still a few seconds after that before Tim hears his bike’s engine kick to life.

Once Dick’s gone, Tim heads up to his room. Washes his face.

Considers making coffee – realizes that he can’t if he wants his daily allotment to get him through his classes. Sighs.

He changes into sleep clothes and curls up in bed – setting his alarm for just under three hours from that moment.

Forces himself into a blackout sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the amazing support! All the comments and Kudos and such keep me hella motivated, and every single time a new alert pops up it makes my day a helluva lot brighter. XD

Next Time: Jason’s PoV on the Selina meet, and a few new developments on the bad-guy research front.

And if there’s ever anything you wanna see out of this story, or anything, let me know. I’ve got a buffer to keep posting this story, but it’s not finished and if there’s anything you guys WANT, I can try to work it in, either here or in the next story.

^_^<3
Chapter Summary

Jason's PoV on what happened with Catwoman, along with a few new developments in his plan for investigating the Tolovis.

Tim intervenes. Like an idiot.

Babs intervenes, too. Like someone with sense and sanity.

Chapter Notes

Jason swears a LOT in this one.
At least as much as he did in the last one from his PoV, possibly a bit more.
He's being squeezed with pressure and tension coming from all sides right now, and he's NOT handling it well.

He'll get a bit better once he gets more focused on a specific problem.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eleven: Rule #11 – Accept What You Can’t Change

There is a point at which it must cease to be surprising that certain kinds of seals are endangered as a species. Jason thinks he should’ve passed that point months ago, but somehow he’s still shocked with every new revelation he makes about Timothy Jackson Idiot Drake.

Catwoman.

The stupid little fucker is friends with Catwoman.

Jason is still trying to process Tim’s ridiculously casual greeting – ‘Hello, Miss Kyle’, seriously who says that to a super villain? – when the paws out, claws out, crazy ass bitch that is Selina Kyle pulls Tim into a suffocating hug and frickin’ squee, “Oh, it’s been too long, you cute little kitten.”

“I’ve been worried about you,” Catwoman coos – fucking coos – tweaking his chin like an affectionate auntie. Then her voice goes hard and her sharp gaze cuts to Dick and Jason, “So, I forgive you for your company.”

She keeps one hand possessively on Tim’s shoulder as she says, “Cats generally eat little birdies that wander too far from the nest. Where’s the big bad bat tonight?”

Jason has plenty of answers for the catty psycho-bitch – and it seems Dick does too, if the
fact that he’s sucking in air to respond is anything worth judging by – but Tim cuts them both off before they get a word out.

“I actually came to ask for your help, Miss Kyle,” Tim says, very effectively pulling Catwoman’s attention back to him. “I know you have the best information network of anyone on the streets and I need a tip on someone staying off the grid.”

Selina resists, but her glare eventually falls away from Dick and Jason – softening to an indulgent smile as she turns her eyes to Tim.

“You have always been a flatterer, kitten,” she sighs. Pinching at his cheek. Like an overly invested mom at a god damn grade-school violin recital.

Straight up *purring* Selina asks, “What do you need, my darling little stray?”

Tim flips his camera around with a practiced dexterity and shows Selina the screen, asking, “Do you know what club these guys are hanging out in?”

The Cat goes stony still – making Jason notice how *un*still she is most of the time, fidgety and restless like Dick. Every pinch of her posture is serious, wary.

“These are very dangerous people, kitten,” Selina tells Tim gravely. Speaking slowly enough to make sure his stupid little robot brain parses every word.

Equally grave, Tim replies, “I know, Miss Kyle.”

“You’re smarter than this, you don’t pick fights you can’t win.”

For half a second, Jason agrees with the fucking Cat.

*Finally*, someone points out the obvious to the stupid baby seal.

Then, so quietly Jason can barely hear it, Tim says, “They hurt my friends.”

Jason isn’t entirely sure why it feels like he just took a roundhouse to the throat – whether it’s Tim’s pitiful, bleating little tone, or the sad, scared curve to his shoulders, or even just the wretched mix of neediness and pride implied by the words themselves – but Jason couldn’t say anything now even if he could grant world peace by saying his own god damn name.

“You’re smarter than this,” Selina repeats – everything about her having gone soft and gooey and sad. She pets at his face, brushes his ridiculous bangs out of his eyes, and simpers with earnest, vehement sympathy, “Stray kittens don’t belong in birds’ nests.”

That’s fair.

Jason can agree.

Tim’s still a baby seal in his eyes, but the metaphor stands about the same.

But then Selina’s voice drops in volume – her tone goes tight and tragic – and she says carefully, *forcefully* and insistent, “They won’t have your back on the streets, they won’t take care of you, won’t protect you.”
Jason can sense a wound there – something dark and twisty and deeply personal – which is tragic as hell, but that bitch has no fucking right to fill that baby seal’s blubber stuffed brain with bullshit like that. Because FUCK no.

Jason is halfway to launching a fist through the frickin Cat’s face when Tim answers with a pitiful, “I know.”

Everything in Jason’s fury deflates.

His gut plummets through the roof beneath his feet.

Because Tim’s response is not an act to appease the Cat, it’s a genuine admission.

He believes that.

Believes that the Bats won’t save him if it ever comes to that.

“I don’t need them to protect me,” Tim says – psychotic, stupid little asshat. “I just want to help them.” God damn squishy little reckless shit.

Selina curls herself around Tim, encircling him in a loose hug he doesn’t seem to register.

She uses a diamond-tipped claw to boop his fucking nose, and whispers with some despondent edge of acceptance of the frickin’ seal’s suicidal obliviousness, “Run with them all you want, Stray, but remember that you still run alone.”

Tim nods.

Jason wants to wring his skinny little neck.

“The Tolovis haunt a club called the Raven, right on the water in southeast Chinatown,” Selina lays out, releasing Tim and marching across the roof towards Dick and Jason. “And if you birdbrains get my kitten killed the Bat is going to pay. Got it?”

That is a fucking insult if Jason’s ever heard one.

Like he would ever willingly be a part of letting this shitfaced baby seal get himself killed – determined though the little shit seems to be to do just that.

Dick beats Jason to opening his mouth, but instead of saying anything that could be considered even marginally not horrific, he says, “He misses you.”

Meaning Bruce, of course.

Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle have… a thing.

They’re not quite dating, but they’re also not quite not dating.

Even the most air-headed of supermodels keen on a fling with Brucie Wayne knows to back the hell off when Selina shows up at a gala.

At least when they’re flirting on good terms.

This past month or so, they’ve been on bad terms – still flirting, but flirt-fighting more than the downright obscene bit of lovey-dovey sex with words they get at on good terms.
And the pussycat is pissed that Dick brought it up.

Catwoman’s claws are on Dick’s throat in an instant – pressure drawing pinpricks of blood and clearly restricting his ability to breathe.

“I don’t care,” Selina hisses – and though Jason knows she’s being defensive in a way that usually means a person is lying, from her, he actually believes it. “I don’t need him, and I don’t need you to speak for him.”

She means it. And is pissed that Dick doesn’t seem to think so.

Unphased, and as glitter-brained as ever, Sparkles says flippantly, “I know. I just thought you might wanna know.”

It doesn’t need to be said that Bruce will never say it himself.

So if idiots like Dick don’t speak it for him, it will never be spoken.

It’s almost imperceptible, but Selina softens.

She did want to know. Didn’t think the Bat would miss her any more than Jason would’ve in her place. Isn’t quite sure she can wholly believe the circus freak’s assessment.

Catwoman’s lip curls.

She clearly considers throwing Dick off the roof – which Jason thinks is a frickin’ fantastic idea, even if Nightwing’s training, reflexes, and freakishly bouncy nature would make the result rather unsatisfying.

Dick smiles at her, sparkles and trust and gooey nonchalance.

Selina decides it’s not worth the effort.

She releases the human puppy dog and considers wiping her hand on his costume – but that won’t get any of the glitter off, so she regretfully folds her fingers to her palm one at a time and plans her next words carefully.

“Raven’s closed for tonight and if you sniff around within a half mile in a cape their watch dogs will make you and you’ll never see them again,” Selina says, turning her back and sauntering away with her usual saucy sway.

Before she completely vanishes into the shadows, she adds, “Be careful, boys. He’s an ass, but he needs you more than he’ll ever admit.”

The boys stand still, absorbing that – processing all the different tidbits of the encounter until Selina is long gone.

Jason’s moving before he consciously realizes it.

His hands are on Tim’s shoulders – turning him around, prodding at him with a cursory
inspection for injuries, trauma, frickin mind control devices… something to explain.

“Tim,” he growls, fairly certain he doesn’t want to hear the answer, “When exactly did you get on a cute pet name basis with Catwoman?”

“Um…”

Tim’s staring down at the camera in his hands – its screen already dark.

Jason isn’t sure if it’s shyness or guilt or something else – because Tim’s not exactly good at understanding his own feelings, let alone sending clear signals on them – but he’s a crap liar and Jason suddenly needs to know.

“Tim,” Jason pushes.

“Two years ago?” Tim admits cautiously, still fiddling with his camera. “It was right after you became Robin, around when I figured out who, um, who you are during the day.”

Two years.

Two fucking years.

The god damn idiot baby seal has been bffs with a super villain for as long as Jason’s been Robin. And he’s been running around Gotham at night on his own for longer than that.

He’s an idiot, psychotic.

Suicidal.

How the fuck is Jason supposed to keep this kid safe, if he spends so much time involving himself with dangerous activities that he’s no longer even remotely conscious of the danger inherent in it all?

Jason’s hands are still on Tim’s shoulders. He pulls in a long breath, grits his teeth, and… doesn’t say anything. He can’t. If he opens his mouth he’s gonna scream at the frickin’ moron – which will not be helpful. He just lets the air hiss out and releases Tim’s shoulders.

If he didn’t let go right then, he’d probably pitch the kid off the roof.

“Time for you to go home,” he growls, turning away.

“But…”

Tim’s protest makes Jason freeze.

What the fuck could he possibly have to say?

“I need to get my bike. It’s still in Chinatown,” Tim explains.

There’s a desperation to the statement.

Sure. Kid needs his fucking bike, but you know, all that health and safety shit about not befriending super villains, yeah, that shit’s negotiable.

“Where?”
Immediately helpful, Tim reports, “Three warehouses south of the Gate, on the side opposite the market.”

“I’ll get it,” Jason promises in a snarl. Draws his grapple.

“Jaybird?”

“Shove it, ‘Wing.” Jason snaps. Fucking worry wart. Jason’s not an idiot and he’s not nearly as suicidal as the god damn baby seal. “I’m not gonna go to the Raven or shit, I’m not that stupid. Just get the fuckin’ kitten home,” Jason snarls.

Dick’ll do it.

He’s gotta be as worried about the little shit as Jason is. More even. Fucking golden retriever staring at a burning building with his frickin’ paws tied.

Jason fires his grapple and dives off the roof in the direction of Chinatown.

“Frickin psycho,” Jason mutters as he swings away.

He doesn’t look back to see if Dick gets Tim safely off the roof, he doesn’t even look back towards the Opera House as he lands on the warehouse Tim described as the place he stashed his bike. And he definitely doesn’t look towards the alleyway where their ill-fated encounter with the Tolovis took place. He’s not sure if Batman and Batgirl are still going over the scene, examining what happened, analyzing it for what could’ve been done better or what it means for the investigation as a whole. He doesn’t care.

Jason simply jumps down to street level and collects the fucking bike he’s here for.

Before doing anything, he tucks a gps tracker inside the seat, so he can at least be slightly more informed of when the reckless idiot goes out on his own. When he gets back to his setup at the Manor Jason can set parameters for it to monitor – to alert him proactively if Tim goes off the grounds of the Drake Estate any time after dark.

Tracker in place – suitably well-hidden and the seat looking exactly like it had before Jason had touched it – Jason straddles the bike and begins to pedal.

It takes him over an hour to get the thing up to Tim’s door, and it’s actually a pretty damn good workout – surprising, considering how floppy the fucking seal is.

Regardless, he gets the bike back to its owner and makes the jog back up to Wayne Manor as the night begins to grey with the eventual coming of the dawn.

Batman hasn’t made it back yet – fortunately.

Jason’s very glad he doesn’t have to have that conversation again.

But Dick is waiting for him with Alfred’s snack cradled in his arms. He exhales when Jason jogs into the Cave – his frame deflating as the tension melts away. Dick clearly wasn’t expecting him to come straight home. Jason’s reckless and likes to work through things with his fists first, but he’s not a complete moron. He knows what he’s doing.

Jason ignores Dick’s big ol’ baby blues begging for attention and brushes straight past him into the Cave’s shower area. He strips and stows his uniform. Then he gets himself clean and pulls on a t-shirt and some sleep pants – the silky kind that sometimes make him itch with how strange the
overly soft sensation still seems – before heading up to his room.

He *does* snag the bowl of post-patrol snackage off the counter where Dick left it for him – pleasantly surprised that Dick actually *left* instead of waiting around for him to finish his routine. Jason had been pretty damn convinced that Dick didn’t have any idea what the word ‘boundaries’ meant, but this is promising.

The snack is more of a meal-in-a-bowl.

A ‘salad’ of hearty roast veggies and salmon in a zesty vinaigrette thing.

Alfred’s made it fairly often before, but never when Jason’s been in the kitchen to see him do it. Which is a shame, because Jason would love to know how to recreate it.

He’s shoveling the food into his mouth as he settles at his desk.

He’s exhausted and has at least a few afternoon classes to force himself through, but he’s gonna set up the alerts on Tim’s new tracker if it kills him. He gets it done and takes a few minutes to finish off his snack before curling up in bed.

He wakes up by ten with six hours of decent rest to his name.

Alfred has pancakes waiting for him in the kitchen and drives him to school without nattering on about the current status of the other Bats.

It’s refreshing and quiet and Jason appreciates it. Because if something was *really* wrong, Alfred would tell him and if something’s *not* wrong, Jason doesn’t care.

School is school.

His teachers are shit, but at least they’re better than anything he could’ve got in Crime Alley. And the material is interesting enough to let his brain invest in it – even if his classmates are so pathetic they had to have even simple things repeated like ten times before they stuck.

The class time lets him relax.

And gives him the opportunity to research the Raven – carefully, one detail at a time so his teachers don’t catch him on his phone, which lets the details sink in without eliciting any kind of visceral reaction from him as he begins to plan an infiltration.

The Raven is a trendy establishment, built for the ritzy club-goers of Chinatown – but with a grungy, underground vibe. The main things it has built its reputation on are the illicit activities it facilitates: drugs and human trafficking, mainly, but there’s also rumors of a kind of back-alley clandestine fight-club going on in the secluded courtyard of the back basement.

It’s gonna be a bitch to get inside unnoticed, but it’s plenty doable for Jason – assuming he can get away from whatever babysitter B sticks on him after benching him last night.

And assuming Dick doesn’t spill everything they learned from Catwoman to Bruce the second he asks – assuming he hasn’t *already* done so (but if he had, he would’ve had to expose Tim, and Jason thinks it's unlikely that he would do so without dramatic cause).
And it’s also assuming that he can somehow get Tim on lockdown before the frickin’ baby seal can waddle his way right into the Great White’s jaws.

That last bit is gonna be the hardest part, Jason knows, because he’s been using his downtime at school to check on the tracker he stuck inside Tim’s bike.

Little fucker went to school.

Like got up at six in the morning – after no more than four hours of sleep at the most – and pedaled his frickin’ ass halfway across the city.

It’s fucking ridiculous.

And to make matters worse, after school – instead of doing the rational thing and going straight home for a fucking nap – the stupid little robot came here, to stake out Jason’s school.

Well, to stake out the coffee shop down the block from his school.

As soon as the last bell rings, Jason bolts for the shop.

Theoretically, he should be sticking around to make up the lessons he missed in the crack-ass hours of the morning. But he only missed Geography, the last class of the Africa unit, and honestly, who the fuck gives a shit? He’s never gonna leave Gotham, so knowing the names and geopolitical situations of places like Angola and Ethiopia are totally irrelevant.

Anything he could ever need to know could be pulled off Google in half an hour.

What IS relevant to his life in Gotham currently is the fact that he’s the only one in a position to save this fucking baby seal from his stupid little robot self. How the fucking kid is even still on his feet after running around Gotham all night, and going to school all day, Jason doesn’t have a clue – is pretty damn sure he doesn’t want to know.

Jason’s shouldered his pack – he never uses the damn lockers at this place, they’re way too easy to break into – and he’s pulling at the stupid tie he has to wear as he marches toward the coffee shop Tim’s parked his bike out front of.

He walks in to see Tim dropping a hundred dollar bill – in cash, like he just carries that shit around for lunch money, like that won’t make him any kind of target for thieves and muggers or shit – on a coffee tab, a hundred bucks on a fucking coffee tab.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Tim whirls around like hearing Jason’s voice behind him is the last thing he ever imagined possibly occurring.

“I, um,” Tim struggles. “I’m uh- I’m putting my allowance on my Gotham Grind card so I can make orders from the app without having a credit card statement get back to my parents.”
Jason arches an eyebrow. “Because they don’t approve of their fucking twelve year old dropping a hundred bucks on coffee every month?”

Tim nods – more easily than he should’ve.

Jason doesn’t want to ask. Narrows his eyes and asks anyway.

“A hundred bucks on coffee every week? Really, Tim?”

There’s the hesitance, the bashful nod. This time Jason hit on the money.

Fuckin’ robot uses coffee instead of gasoline or batteries, apparently.

“You want anything while we’re here?”

Jason cannot fucking believe this kid.

“No, Timmers,” Jason growls, “It’s time to get you home.”

Tim frowns. “It’s not even four, yet.”

“Yeah, and how much sleep have you gotten in the last four days?”

“Enough,” Tim says, trying to sound convincing.

It’s useless and adorable, and Jason has to fight not to crack a smile.

He can’t resist the urge to ruffle Tim’s hair. Tim’s helpless little yelp and flail at the action is extremely rewarding. “Come on, idiot,” Jason says, “Let’s get you home.”

“Fine,” Tim grumbles, following Jason out of the shop. “But I’m going with you to the Raven tonight. I’ve been doing research, and I think I know how to get us inside unnoticed.”

Well, fuck.

Jason’s not the only one who spent his class time involved with other pursuits.

Damn it.

“Timbo, you couldn’t go unnoticed in a night club if you crawled through the fucking air vents,” Jason laughs, grabbing Tim by the scruff and dragging him a few steps forward – just far enough for him to trip himself up and for Jason to try shaking a bit of sense into his stupid little head as he sets bambi back on his spindly little legs. “You’re going home, and going to sleep, and nobody is going to the fucking Raven tonight.”

“Jason,” Tim mewls.

Jason hates to admit that the Cat has a point, but Selina was not far off the mark in calling this stupid kid ‘kitten’.

Tim’s big ol’ bambi eyes are working at full force as Jason turns to face him. They’re like three feet from the kid’s fucking bike, but Jason knows Tim won’t take one more step towards it until he’s answered his unspoken question.

“I won’t go to the Raven tonight, Timmers, I’m benched, remember?”
Tim’s dark expression doesn’t clear.

“That’s never stopped you before.”

Okay.

That’s fair.

Frickin’ little stalker knows everything. Obviously.

That just makes this shit trickier.

And it’ll make Jason just a touch more guilt-ridden when he ditches the stupid seal to go do the investigating that he’s just promised he won’t be doing.

Tim might not stay put if ditched, Jason realizes. In fact, he's quite likely to not stay put – to just run off on his own and straight into danger.

Which Jason will have no fucking part in allowing.

But how to ditch the kid without letting him simply follow after Jason leaves and can’t stop him?

He can’t just drug the kid. With all the coffee in his system, anything Jason might consider giving him would probably be lethal – though the thought of giving him anything at all makes the inside of his skin itch.

And he can’t just dump Tim with Dick or Barbara – Nightwing is gonna have to patrol and Babs is gonna need to run support for him and B, at least, even if she doesn’t want to patrol herself. And Babs will probably be the one designated to babysit Jason, which means Jason won’t have reasonable cause to just stick Tim with her and leave.

“I’m not letting you go alone,” Tim squeaks – jarring Jason back to the present.

Jason snorts. “Well, I’m not letting you go at all.”

The kid is pouting – straight up, in the way that makes him look like a drowned kitten – But his little robot brain is whirring away behind his eyes.

Which means he’s either running through all the possibilities that Jason just worked through, or he’s already hit that beat and is busy scheming up a way to get around them. Jason's willing to put good money on the latter.

Great.

Zip-tie this fucking seal to a lead weight in a god damn bank vault, see if he can Houdini his way outta that shit with nothing but his fucking flippers.

Jason is still trying to finesse a strategy to stuff Tim in a glass box at the aquarium when his phone rings.

It's Babs.
“You're with Tim, right?”

Jason has always appreciated her tendency to skip the small talk.

Eying Tim with an obvious enough gaze that he notices and snaps out of his spybot scheming, Jason huffs, “Yeah, I got ‘im. Why?”

“You’re both coming to my house for dinner,” Barbara announces without ceremony or preamble. “You don’t have any choice in the matter. Either of you.”

“The fuck, Babs?”

“Don’t even, Jaybird,” Barbara huffs. “You’ve gotta know already that I’m your designated babysitter for tonight, so I’m gonna do my damnedest to actually keep you idiots alive. Yes, Dick told me about Tim and Selina, and about the Raven. No, I have not told B, but I will if you make me. And dinner is at five, non-negotiable. I’ve already told my dad that you’re coming, so if you’re more than ten minutes late he will be filing a missing-persons report.”

“Babs.”

“We're having pot roast.”

“Barbara, stop,” Jason tries, but she's already hung up. “Fuck, BG.”

Jason hangs his head with a heavy sigh as he slides his phone back into his pocket.

This is gonna make getting out to the Raven tonight almost impossible. It’s a mess.

“That was Barbara?”

Tim’s not pouting anymore, but the blanket curiosity and confusion pealed across his face is even more distractingly ridiculous.

“Yup,” Jason harrumphs. “We’ve got dinner plans.”

“We do?”

With a nod, Jason elaborates, “Babs is playing babysitter. To both of us.”

Tim puzzles over the statement for a moment and then he nods as well. “It makes sense.” It does, too. BG’s always been smart like that.

“Unfortunately,” Jason agrees.

“When do we have to be there?”

“In about an hour.”

Tim heaves a sigh. “I have to call Mrs. Simz.”

“Have at, baby bird,” Jason replies with a shrug.

Tim looks reluctant as he pulls his phone out of his backpack. Jason edges backwards to start fiddling with the bike lock on Tim’s ride as the kid dials up his babysitter and spins a fairly impressive bullshit story about working on a school project and having dinner with a friend. If Jason had to guess, the school project thing is mostly true – and Tim is not particularly fond of the partner
he’s been saddled with.

The friend thing is kinda true too.

Jason’s not exactly friends with Tim, at least not in terms of traditionally defined friendship, but they’re essentially friends – better friends than any other Jason’s had.

And Tim believes in it.

Jason is just finishing up with cracking the code on Tim’s bike lock as Tim promises that he’ll be getting a ride home from his friend’s parents, yes, he has his keys, and yes, he’ll eat his vegetables at dinner, and yes, he won’t stay up past nine-thirty.

A smile has crept across Jason’s face as he’s listened to Tim’s side of the exchange – almost directly proportional to the petulant frown that’s been spreading over Tim’s face.

Wrapping the bike lock’s chain in loose coils, Jason straddles the bike and waits for Tim to finish up his phone call. He finally disconnects with a disgruntled huff and stows the device in his pack – jumps when Jason presents him with the coil of bike lock.

Takes it and adds it to his pack with an amused resignation at the fact that Jason managed to finagle his way through the lock without any trouble.

Jason smirks.

Passes Tim his helmet.

“Hop on, baby bird,” Jason says as Tim secures the helmet. “You got any stops to make or are we heading straight to BG’s place?”

Tim steps gingerly onto the back axle as Jason hold the bike steady – his hands tentatively finding their way to Jason’s shoulders. “I’m good,” Tim promises.

“BG’s it is,” Jason says, starting up the roll. He goes slow enough on the first block for Tim to gain his sea legs and then starts kicking down the streets in earnest. They’ve got more than an hour to get there, but biking through Gotham’s streets amid a building rush hour means that getting all the way to Old Gotham will take almost all of their allotted timeframe.

Tim hangs on tight, but he balances himself easily and isn’t clinging for dear life.

Jason’s pretty damn sure the kid is grinning ear to ear and that brings a smile to his own face. This pause on the Tolovi investigation is irksome, and all the unanswered questions regarding the dangerous drug Jason is sure the Tolovis are involved with are irritating, but it’s not the worst-case scenario it could have been.

A break might even be good.

Help him clear his head.

Give him time to figure out a way to keep Tim out of this shit.

Tim is a determined, tricky little bastard, so Jason knows it won’t be easy to keep him on
lockdown, but there’s got to be a way to manage it.

Jason intends to get BG and ‘Wing in on it, too – they’ve gotta be just as concerned about the stupid kid as Jason.

For now though, it’s enough for him to focus on getting across Gotham in time for dinner, and to enjoy the fact that his stupid little pet robot likes to go fast.

Chapter End Notes

Also, Chalala made me some fanart! Which is like the sweetest thing that anyone's ever done for me in regards to anything I've ever written! Yay for adorable Robin Piles! (Because cuddles sometimes ARE the answer!)
[ https://www.picz.in.th/images/2018/04/11/YkAN9v.jpg ]

Next Time: Dickie bird is kinda freaking out, but Babs, Bruce, and Alfred are there to help him find some stability.
Rule #12 - Don't Judge

Chapter Summary

Dick knows his Family has their faults, knows better than to blame them or to try changing them.

And he knows how important it is to check in with them.

Chapter Notes

Some Dickiebird sweetness for you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve: Rule #12 – Don’t Judge

Dick’s familiar with the feeling of an anxious swirl of fear and worry roiling in his gut.

He’s been feeling something similar since he first recognized how dangerous every day life inside the circus could be, and he’s been getting more and more familiar with the layer of guilt and inadequacy that’s come into play since he’d stepped into the role of Robin.

It’s been years since the first time he failed Jason, so even that feeling is familiar.

Dick still hasn’t gotten used to it.

He’s pretty sure that, in the long run, that’s a good thing – But he’s about equally certain that every minute he spends feeling like this takes a solid hour off his life span.

Letting Jason go off alone to retrieve Tim’s bike was a mistake, and he’s being irresponsible to just sit here waiting and hoping that Jason will actually do what he said he would and then come straight home.

Dick knows it’s irresponsible of him.

He should've dropped Tim off and then gone back out to meet Jason mid-way. That's what Bruce would have done. Well, actually, Bruce would never have let Jason go off on his own to begin with, but the point still mostly stands: Bruce would not be sitting here uselessly, waiting for Jason to come back.

Dick knows this.
And he knows that if Bruce gets back before Jason does he is going to have a lot of explaining to do – and that he will well and truly deserve every drop of disappointment Bruce will drown him in…

But he also knows that Jason is a smart kid.

And the smart thing to do tonight is to come straight home. There's no reason to go to the Raven tonight, alone and in costume, and Jason is smart enough to know that. But he's also proud and bull-headed, and everything that's been happening with this strange drug and the Tolovis is grating and frustrating – and this is the first solid lead they've had for a while.

It's gotta be tempting to chase down the lead while he’s got it.

Dick himself half wants to run back out to Chinatown – to at least get a visual of the building. *Something.*

Jason must feel the itch twice as terribly, and Dick knows it's not likely that he will be able to resist the temptation.

But still, he let Jason go.

And is waiting and hoping that he'll come home – soon, and in one piece.

He downs an entire bowl of Alfred's post-patrol snack while he waits, and fights the urge to put on a pot of coffee when he's finished. Caffeine may be tempting, but it won't help the riot in his gut or the jitters in his fingertips. And he does need to sleep eventually.

Instead, he picks up the snack bowl Alfred left in the kitchen for Jason and walks it down to the Cave, taking his time and trying to keep his continuing freak out to a minimum.

Babs and Bruce have *got* to be on their way back by now. There's no way Jason can beat them here unless he's already more than halfway.

Dick knows it's useless, but he stands in the Cave, waiting and fretting, until Jason
miraculously strolls inside without preamble. The wave of relief hits Dick like a tsunami and he barely manages to keep on his feet with Jason's snack safely in-hand.

The relief, and the doubt implied by it, must show on Dick's face because Jason looks pissed to see him and refuses to so much as make eye-contact as he stomps over to the showers.

That's fair.

Dick would be upset if Jason had doubted him, after all – it’s not the same, but still…

And honestly, Dick had never actually doubted Jason. He’d doubted himself and his own ability to judge the situation – because if Jason had run off to the Raven, it wouldn’t have been Jason’s fault so much as it would’ve been Dick's.

Either way, Dick is probably the last person Jason wants to talk to right now so Dick leaves his snack on the counter where Jason will see it and makes his way upstairs.

It's not ideal, but it’s the best he can do for the moment.

He debates with himself over whether or not to stay up and debrief with Babs, but as soon as he touches down on the Manor landing exhaustion hits him like a truck. His anxiety about Jason had been holding it off, but now, Dick knows he's gonna collapse in about ten minutes. He makes it to his bedroom, and manages to check his desktop for the bio trackers that give him reassurance that Babs has calmed down after their ill-fated altercation with the Tolovis – and that prove both she and Bruce are still safe – But after that, he relaxes into his pillows and is out for the count.

He wakes early enough to catch Jason before he leaves for school, but chooses to stay in his room until he sees Alfred drive the car away.

It's only after Alfred and Jason have disappeared that Dick wanders downstairs for breakfast. He grabs a bowl of frosted flakes and heads back towards his room – gets sidetracked when he sees Bruce in his study with the door left ajar.

Bruce is focused, clearly puzzling over a serious problem.

It's not case-related.

He’d be in the Cave if it were – there’s no way he’d risk putting any Bat casefiles on a server less secure than the vault that is the Cave’s secure storage and his study’s desktop connects directly to the Wayne Enterprises day-to-day operational cloud.
But it’s also probably not WE related, because it’s just short of noon on a Tuesday and if Bruce wanted to handle something for the office he would probably just go to the office. Typically, Bruce only uses the study for WE pursuits when a quandry comes up at four in the morning on a Sunday or something – usually in response to something discovered while roaming the streets as Batman.

So Dick is perplexed.

Not quite concerned, but a bit more actively interested than merely curious.

He nudges the door open slightly further and knocks lightly on the doorframe to politely gain his mentor’s notice. Bruce doesn’t look up from his work, but the focus in his expression softens in the way Dick has learned to read as invitation.

“What’s got you so interested in the real world this morning?” Dick asks brightly.

“Solar power cars,” Bruce responds slowly, “With the potential to expand into independently powered, self-driving, wholly automated taxi services within the city.”

Dick takes a bite of cereal and crunches on it as he raises an eyebrow. He knows Bruce won’t offer more without prompt, but he’s never given up on the hope that he might.

Swallowing, Dick asks, “What’s brought this on?”

“The Solar Car is currently one of the most promising pet-projects being researched in the labs of Drake Industries,” Bruce explains. “And it’s a means of creating a joint-project between Drake Industries and Wayne Enterprises that is not threatening – a friendly opening to the possibility of partnership.”

Dick cracks a smile around another bite of cereal.

“This is about adopting Timmy,” he supposes confidently.

“I’m not adopting him,” Bruce replies – Dick thinks he hears a tinge of regret in his mentor’s tone, knows he hears a bit of defensiveness. “But I would like to ensure he’s looked after better. His parents are out of the country again, and will be gone for the rest of the month.”

Dick nods, still amused but now slightly grave. “Jason’s mentioned something to that effect,” he comments, “Tim doesn’t seem the least bit surprised by it.”

“He’s left alone far too often,” Bruce says with a controlled vehemence. He goes on to justify his designs, saying, “If our two families can develop a relationship as neighbors and business partners, perhaps we can ensure that Tim is looked after properly.”

“I can get behind that. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help,” Dick insists – knowing it’s futile. Bruce never delegates. But Dick wants to make sure he always leaves the option open for him to share the load, just in case he ever figures out how to survive it.

Bruce gives a noncommittal sound of having heard and Dick backs away.

He’s glad Bruce is trying to find some way to keep Tim safe – feels guilty all over again for not laying out exactly how much danger the kid willingly puts himself into on an almost nightly basis. Feels guilty for not know how to stop him – for not being certain that stopping him is the best option to keep him balanced between safe and happy.
Tim does not belong on Gotham’s streets as part of the Crusade.

He’s too young, too fragile, too sweet…

But he’s brilliant and valuable and dear god the kid is good at what he does. He’s provided more data on this case alone than the entire GCPD has on any of the Bats’ cases over the last two months. He’s an invaluable asset and he knows it.

Tim can contribute, and he wants to – but he’s just so young.

Dick honestly doesn’t have any idea what to do.

Telling Bruce would put an immediate stop to Tim’s activities. Probably for good. And it would tarnish both Dick and Jason in Bruce’s eyes – lead to restrictions on their contributions.

He wants to tell Alfred, to trust in the old butler’s infallible judgement.

But it’s not fair of him to pass off such responsibility to someone who already bears the weight of so many concerns within this messed up household.

There is one person he has to tell about last night’s developments – and he’s already neglected that responsibility long enough.

As soon as he makes it back to his room, Dick texts Barbara. Asks benignly if she’s got a bit of free time between class duties to have lunch at the aquarium with him, like old times.

They’d met there a lot during high school, mostly while they were dating. For starters, it was a nice, calm, fairly private place on a weekday afternoon. But mainly, they met there because of the water. Because of the water and steel and lead-linings that would block any transmitters they couldn’t find that Bruce had stuck on them during their nights running around the city as Robin and Batgirl.

Today, it means they can have the discussion that they need to regarding Tim without fear of Bruce overhearing – and without arousing Bruce’s suspicions.

Dick isn’t entirely sure that Bruce is wholly aware that he and Babs aren’t dating any more – aren’t romantically involved at all, really. Dick still cares about her, but he’s definitely not interested in dating her – nor she him. They’re friends, family. But not romantic partners.

Which means that Dick asking Babs to meet at the aquarium is not in any way a romantic overture – and will not be mistaken as one by Barbara. He’s telling her that he needs to talk unsupervised and she’ll understand that immediately.

Dick knows that much with certainty.

He’s not surprised when he gets a response within seconds of message delivery – Barbara agreeing to meet and suggesting a time, giving him two hours to get into the center of the city. He agrees with an anxious reluctance.

Finishes his cereal.

Takes a shower and gets dressed.
Slips quietly downstairs. Pulls on an insulating sweater and his black leather jacket.

Grabs his helmet and gloves and the fob for his Ducati. Charges out into the March chill, jogging around the Manor to the main garage. He could’ve gone through the side door, but the cold is bracing – helps him focus on his body, his muscles, his movements. Keeps his mind from digging into a rut of trying and failing to figure out what to say.

He’s never been the best with words. He’s always been better than Bruce, but that hardly says anything. Dick has always talked more with his body than his mouth, wearing his heart on his sleeve and keeping connected to his Family via physical contact.

Dick’s awareness that he’s not great with words has stabbed him in the foot more times than he can count – he overthinks every word when he has the time to plan anything like a speech or a report or even just a comment of concern. He has to keep his mind out of it – to just step back and stumble through his words with as little idiocy and embarrassment and foot-eating as possible. He knows it’s not entirely avoidable, but he’d rather embarrass himself than hurt whoever he’s trying to talk to – and Barbara is definitely a ‘handle with care’ case.

Instead of focusing on all the things he needs to say to her, Dick pours himself into the ride – melding with his bike as he zips across the city. It’s calming and grounding.

It lets him arrive at the aquarium as less of a wreck than he would’ve been otherwise.

Babs is waiting for him in their usual spot in the tunnel beneath the shipwreck in the shark tank – laying back on the bench and staring up at the serene shadows of black tips patrolling their domain.

She somehow senses his arrival and sits up to greet him with a warm, but serious smile.

“Let me guess: something happened with our baby bird?”

Dick nods, settling down beside her on the bench. “How’d you know?”

“Because Jason’s been logging onto the Cave’s servers every ten minutes to check on a new tracker he’s installed,” Barbara reports. “Since it’s currently parked outside Timothy Drake’s school, I presume he’s tracking the kid’s bike.”

“ Probably,” Dick admits. “He had quite a scare last night. Tim was apparently there in Chinatown with us, and he saw everything that went down in the alley. Couldn’t have been more than ten yards away from it all. He pounced on us as we started to head back to the Manor.”

Barbara blinks, digesting the words and controlling the flair of rational terror that rises up at the thought of Tim being so close to such danger.

“He got an ID on the guys,” Dick goes on. “Used his camera to get clear pictures and apparently has his phone hooked into a military database or two.”

Barbara nods. “I just got the IDs myself. The Tolovis are pretty bad news. Tim’s gotta be pretty freaked out by all of it.”

“Yeah. But uh, he’s not being scared off. He wants to help more than ever, and he’s got a very special contact to help with that: Selina Kyle. They’re apparently pretty close,” Dick details.
At that, Barbara arches an eyebrow.

“How’s Jason taking that little tidbit?”

“Well, he’s apparently checking Tim’s whereabouts every ten minutes, soooooo, I’m gonna say he’s not taking it terribly well,” Dick replies. “It’s got him pretty freaked that Tim’s been putting himself in so much danger for so long. Honestly, it’s got me pretty freaked, too.”

Barbara nods again, wholly in agreement.

“He’s so young,” Barbara sighs. Shakes her head regretfully.

“Should we tell B? Get him to make Tim stop investigating?”

“I don’t think we can stop him,” Barbara admits. “And I don’t think getting B worked up about it is gonna be helpful for anyone. Least of all Tim”

After a moment of quiet solidarity, Dick reports, “He got Selina to tell us about the place where the Tolovis hang out, a club in Chinatown called the Raven.”

Heavily resigned, Barbara says, “I’ll check it out, see if I can finagle a connection to tell B about that doesn’t expose Tim’s involvement, or Selina’s.”

“Jay and Tim are pretty set on investigating tonight,” Dick mentions tentatively.

Babs rolls her eyes. “Of course, they are. I’ll babysit the idiots. I’m not patrolling tonight anyway, so I may as well.”

Dick tries his best not to stiffen.

He’s glad for this opening, though. He knows he needs to ask how Barbara is holding up – knows that she probably doesn’t want to talk about it.

Instead of bunging things up with his words, Dick just grabs her hand lightly.

Encouraging, supportive.

She gives him an exasperated side-eye, but she squeezes back.

“I’ve been thinking about retiring, you know,” she sighs eventually. “Not all the way, but with Batman and Nightwing and Robin on the streets… I know the city needs as many boots on the ground as possible some times, but I think Batgirl can spend more time in the Cave, running tech support. Agent A is pretty awesome, but the capes ask a lot of him.”

With a soft, pained chuckle, Dick agrees, “That they do.”

He has no right to question her thoughts on the matter. It’s entirely her decision to go out on the streets every night and entirely her decision if she choses to stay in the Cave every night – or if she settles into a less extreme mix of the two.

Dick can’t stay entirely quiet. His mouth gets away from him before can even think to bite his tongue. “It’s not all or nothing, you know,” he says quietly. “You don’t have to retire, BG, and you don’t have to patrol if you don’t want to retire.”

“Try telling Bruce that,” Barbara huffs. “He’s 100%, all or nothing. You know he is.”
“Hey. B’s an idiot. But if he can’t see the sense in anything beyond black and white, I’m sure Nightwing can knock a bit of sense into his thick skull,” Dick promises.

Barbara chuckles. “Batgirl can give Batman a kick in the pants anytime she wants to, Big Bird, she doesn’t need Nightwing to swoop in and save the day for her.”

“She never has,” Dick asserts. “Batgirl’s never needed Nightwing, or Robin or anyone else, but she does need to know that she’s got backup if she wants it. For anything.”

Dick squeezes her hand.

Waits a beat. Two.

Barbara squeezes back, flashes him a smile.

“This whole code names thing gets weird sometimes,” she chuckles. “We talk about ourselves in the third person way too often and easily.”

Dick shrugs. “I haven’t noticed anything strange about it. We used to do that kind of thing all the time in the circus.”

Babs pushes him clear off the bench.

He tumbles through the fall and bounces into a heap at her feet, grinning up at her.

As she shakes her head, he rolls his feet over himself and uses the momentum to pull him upright – offers a hand to help her up off the bench.

Barbara takes it and Dick waltzes a smile out of her as he leads her down the hall.

It’s not romantic, and Dick doesn’t miss that. It’s just light and fun and warm.

They head upstairs, gorge themselves on massive, delicious, salads and then go their separate ways. Just before they part, Barbara tells Dick that she’s gonna make pot roast tonight and will leave a bowl out on the balcony if he wants to swing by during patrol, maybe even invite him inside if he asks nicely. He’s not gonna miss out on that for anything.

He feels good when he leaves the aquarium. Sad, somehow, but good – peaceful.

He’s still worried about Jason and Tim, but Babs is in a good place – a place where Dick is certain that she knows he’s willing to help with anything she might want help with.

Alfred is there to greet him as he pulls into the garage.

He hands Dick the towel he needs to clean his bike off with a serene smile. “And how is our Miss Barbara fairing today?”

“She’s good, Alf,” Dick reports earnestly. “A little shaken because of all the recent craziness,
“She is certainly a feisty young girl, one wise beyond her years,” Alfred agrees. “And I take it she'll be looking after young Masters Jason and Timothy tonight?”

Dick nods. “She’s probably the only person capable of keeping those two out of trouble,” Dick sighs, adding thoughtfully, “Aside from maybe you, Alfred.”

The butler sighs heavily as Dick pushes to his feet. “Unfortunately I feel that is beyond anyone's capabilities,” Alfred laments. “As for myself, I seem to have already let yourself and Master Bruce, and even Master Jason, get into more than your fair share of trouble.”

Guilt kicks up hard in Dick's gut. “Aw, Alfred. You couldn’t have stopped us with a train wreck,” he says sadly. “That is absolutely nothing against you. You’ve saved all our skins too many times to feel bad about that. There's just nothing you could’ve done to stop us from being stupid to start with.”

A rueful smile quirks Alfred's face for a moment before he says, “Alas, I fear the same may have to be said regarding Master Timothy's involvement.”

“He's only twelve, Alfred,” Dick replies, feeling his throat tighten with a resurgence of worry he hasn’t set to rest. “I don’t want him anywhere near the stuff that we face every night.”

“And you are only seventeen, Master Dick,” Alfred explains. “I can’t imagine Master Bruce feels much better about letting you run amok through the Gotham underworld than you do about allowing the same of Master Timothy.”

“I can’t stop Tim from investigating this, can I?”

“No, Master Dick, I’m afraid you cannot,” Alfred confirms, giving Dick's shoulder a sympathetic squeeze.

Defeated, Dick asks, edging on desperation, “So what am I supposed to do? How can I keep him safe? Him and Jason?”

“Simply go on as you already are: helping and supporting wherever you can, while making absolutely certain that they can come to you – that they never feel like they have to hide their activities from you,” Alfred asserts.


“I am sure you will, Master Dick,” Alfred says with a warm touch of pride in his tone.

He leads the way into the Manor and adds, “Perhaps you can help convince Master Bruce to aid you. I dare say it won’t take much to get him on board with protecting Master Timothy, but perhaps a lighter hand than Batman’s gauntlet could be set to the matter.”

“Convincing him of that might take an army,” Dick sighs.

“Or one very capable acrobat,” Alfred sasses. “You may not be his older brother yet, my dear boy, but you understand his needs. As you've come to understand Master Jason's. You may be the only one capable of helping Master Bruce understand them as well.”

Dick can’t resist the snort. “I dunno about that, Alf,” he counters, “I'm pretty sure you’ve got the corner on that market. You’re the only one I know who’s ever been able to actually teach Bruce
“While I have indeed taught Master Bruce a great many things, I am afraid I have never quite managed to properly communicate the finer points of understanding an individual child's psychological needs, and how to adapt to them,” Alfred confesses as he leads Dick towards the kitchen. “He struggled to make friends with other children while he was growing up and even now, most of those he associates with have befriended him in spite of his interpersonal skills, rather than because of them.”

It almost makes Dick chuckle to think on how true the statement is – But he refuses to make light of something consuming so much of Alfred’s legitimate concern.

“I'll try talking to him, Alfred, but no promises,” Dick says softly.

“That you will try is more than promise enough, Master Dick,” Alfred says, just as soft.

Dick dives in for a quick hug – one that is warm and heartfelt and emphatically returned.

As Dick pulls away, Alfred mentions, “Dinner will be served at eight, as usual. You may wish to inform Master Bruce that your brothers will not be joining us.”

“Sure thing, Alf,” Dick replies, already heading up the stairs.

He makes it to the second floor study where he left Bruce that morning and finds his mentor still there – now buried under substantially more paperwork.

Dick knocks again and slips fully inside when Bruce grunts approval.

“I see Operation Adopt Timmy Drake is slow going,” he jokes.

Bruce sighs.

“I’m setting up a summer camp revolving around the Solar Car Project,” Bruce explains, leaning back in his seat. “Tim has applied for every Wayne Enterprises summer camp we've offered in the last five years, so he will likely apply for this one as well. All I have left to do is program the system to flag his application and pass it through automatically.”


“That he is, and I intend to see him mentored by Lucius Fox directly,” Bruce agrees.

With a low whistle, Dick comments, “I think they’ll both thank you for that one.”

Bruce hears what Dick doesn’t say.

Crosses his arms and quirks his head, arching an eyebrow as he prompts, “But?”
“You’re going to have to let him in on what we do after dark,” Dick points out gingerly.

“Absolutely not,” Bruce shuts down immediately. “That is out of the question.”

“Bruce,” Dick sighs, understanding his mentor’s urge to nip this in the bud all too well – fighting with his own feeling of validation at the vehement rejection of allowing Tim anywhere near the stuff they faced at night.

“No. He’s too young, it’s too dangerous,” Bruce insists.

Dick knows he’s not just projecting his own feelings onto Bruce’s stoicism when he reads anxiety in the response – when he sees the undercurrents of concern and fear.

And he understands.

Because he doesn’t want Tim to be involved either.

“But Tim is smart, Bruce,” Dick explains, slowly and carefully. “And he’s a fan. Even though he doesn’t know anything about us now, you put him in a room with Lucius Fox – the guy who has personally invented almost everything the Bats use to fight crime – Tim’s gonna figure out the secret.”

Bruce is not so blind to have overlooked that possibility – that inevitability.

He’s a detective, a great one, so he definitely had to see it as clearly as Dick could.

He’s simply choosing to evaluate it as a non-relevant factor.

“Even if Tim does figure it out,” Bruce says – admitting to the likelihood that Tim will figure it out more openly than Dick anticipated. “He will not be permitted to participate.”

Bruce has put up his wall.

Dick knows he won’t make any more progress tonight, not here at least. He might be able to bring it up again on patrol. Just nudge and nudge and nudge until Bruce can see that he might not be the end all authority on what Tim can and cannot do.

Accepting that, Dick sighs.

“Babs is watching Jay and Tim tonight, they’re both going to be at her place all evening and won’t be home for dinner,” Dick informs his mentor.

The flicker of a relieved smile appears briefly on Bruce’s face and he nods.

It’s not quite a ‘thank you’ but it’s as much as Bruce is going to offer.

Dick doesn’t roll his eyes, but he can’t resist another sigh as he turns to go.
He makes it to his own room feeling that same unsettled, but peaceful niggle of an overarching concern – the feeling that he’s not quite finished, but he also doesn’t have room to keep stepping forward just yet.

Dick can wait.

He can be patient.

And he knows better than to blame any of his Family for the choices they make – for the people they are. They can’t help it. And he can’t help them if doesn’t make the effort to understand and accept them, flaws and all.

Because Alfred is right.

He can’t stop Tim from investigating, and he can’t stop Bruce from trying to stop him, but maybe he can help them get on the same page about it – to prevent the kind of fights he’s faced against Bruce, or the wars Jason’s waged against them both.

He may even be able to prevent the conflicts between himself and Bruce and Jason from getting any worse – might be able to fix what all three of them let break.

But not tonight.

And that’s okay.

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Chapter End Notes

It has been absolutely AMAZING hearing from all of you guys in comments! Thank you so much for reading!

Next Time: Tim's PoV of cuteness and angst over a casual dinner party.
Rule #13 - Pull Your Own Weight

Chapter Summary

Dinner at the Gordons' place.

Tim does not deal well with the pressure.

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys SOOOOO much for reading and commenting and kudo-ing and everything. It always makes my day so much brighter to hear from you.

Slightly shorter chapter this time, but still cute!
Timmy Drake angsting over being a normal person, then over being a cape, with a bit of ridiculousness thrown in from the alien that is CIVILIAN Jim Gordon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirteen: Rule #13 – Pull Your Own Weight

Tim’s not entirely sure what’s happening.

He sort of understands, conceptually speaking.

Barbara Gordon has been assigned by Bruce Wayne to babysit Jason Todd, because Batman benched Robin and all parties involved are aware that Jason will not sit still when told to unless someone is there to make him.

And Tim is aware that he’s put himself in the same category of unruly caped crusader – despite his lack of cape – because of his own rather drastic, and perhaps slightly flawed, methodology of ensuring that Jason did not run off on his own to investigate last night.

So Tim and Jason have both been non-negotiably ‘invited’ over to Barbara’s place for the evening – they are both, essentially, grounded.

Tim understands the framework.
What he doesn’t understand is how exactly he came to be perched on the edge of an old couch – a couch that is more akin to quicksand than any reasonable chair-like object should be – clutching some sort of overstuffed pillow to his chest while in the midst of a staring contest with a fluffy white cat while GCPD Commissioner Jim Gordon watches a hockey game from the other side of the couch that is most definitely trying to swallow Tim whole.

Jason and Barbara are in the spacious condo’s kitchen.

Initially, Tim had split his focus between looking around the condo with interest and tracking the antics of the pair in the kitchen – following the exact steps of the culinary processes he still largely regarded as magic.

But after about an hour of split focus, he realized that every time he looked away from the kitchen the cat – that had started out as nothing more than a pair of eerie yellow eyes in the shadows of the staircase to the second level – was closer to him than the last time he’d looked.

At this point, Tim is fairly certain that if the sofa doesn’t eat him, the cat will.

He’s not sure which death would be preferable.

Meanwhile, Jim Gordon, lounging across from him with an untucked t-shirt, no shoes, and an actual, genuinely relaxed smile is attempting to explain the finer points of the hockey game to him. Tim’s not even sure he remembers who’s playing, let alone who he theoretically should be rooting for in light of present company.

Also meanwhile, the sounds of chopping, good natured bickering, and quiet discussion coming from the kitchen are slowly becoming accompanied by a tantalizing smell.

Tim really wants to look over to see what they’re doing – wants even more to hear what they’re talking about – but if he looks away from the cat one more time it’s going to be within easy striking distance. Tim’s priorities may not be aligned in quite the traditional order, but there are some things he is aware take universal precedence.

He usually likes cats.

He’s always gotten on with them rather well – it’s one of the reasons he managed to befriend Selina Kyle like he had.

This is not a normal cat.

Tim’s half-convinced it’s some sort of super-advanced Batgirl babysitter robot.

That may or may not be malfunctioning.

But that is very likely going to kill him.

A crash sounds from the kitchen.
Tim surrenders to the urge to look and sees a colander rolling across the floor and some sort of oblong vegetable tumbling in the opposite direction – Tim doesn’t have any idea what kind of vegetable it is, he’s impressed enough with himself for knowing the silver thing is a colander. Barbara chases after the colander, Jason chases the vegetables.

“You kids okay over there?”

“Fine, we’re fine,” both kitchen-bound vigilantes shout over each other.

Jim Gordon chuckles as Babs snatches the fallen colander off the kitchen tiles mid-roll and shoves a curtain of bright red hair out of her head. “You just stay where you are, Dad,” she huffs with a budding smile, “We got this.”

“Alright, I’ll stay banished,” Gordon sighs, relaxing back into his seat and returning his attention to the game. “Just don’t burn the house down.”

That is why Tim is on the couch.

He’s one of the people banished from the kitchen.

That much is also understandable.

Tim has zero culinary experience, so it would hardly make sense to have him attempt to help. Tim understands that. He is a bit… not put out exactly, but confused, as to why he’s not even allowed to watch them cook.

He wants to watch.

He’s always watched Mrs. Simz cook – always enjoyed it tremendously.

And watching Jason cook, the few times he’d done it in the Drake kitchen, had been… magical. Jason had a panache in the way he moved, the way he worked, that was entrancing to watch – it was one thing to watch and expect that of him when he was out as Robin, but entirely another to see it in how he operated outside of the costume. He was just as flashy, just as efficient, and just as brash and confident – the only difference was a looseness and an easy calm that permeated everything.

And the humming.

Jason hums while he cooks.

Tim’s not even entirely certain Jason knows he does it.

But Tim knows. And enjoys it. A lot.

And wants to know if he does it even if he’s cooking with someone.

He wants to know if cooking with Barbara would change how Jason moves as he works – thinks it would, based on how Robin’s movements change on patrol with Batgirl as opposed to when he’s out with Batman. Like how when he’s out with either of them it’s different than when he’s out
with Nightwing, or a combination of them.

   It’s a subtle difference, seamless and efficient, and Tim wants to see if it translates.

   Thinks it probably does.

   But he was banished.

   To the couch of quicksand and the hockey game of questions and the robot-babysitter cat.
And the creeptasic civilian Not-Commissioner Jim Gordon.

   It’s weird.

   He doesn’t like being banished.

   If he can’t be in the kitchen, he’d at least like to be helpful.

   Maybe that’s why the cat is going to eat him. Because it’s taking his uselessness to the team as personally as Tim should be.

   The thought makes Tim remember that the cat is probably going to eat him now, since he’s been looking at the kitchen for the last few minutes.

   Tim whips his head around to find that the cat is… gone.

   Like he’d just imagined it.

   Okay.

   He’s pretty sure he’s not on that much coffee.

   He’s also pretty sure that neither caffeine overdose not caffeine withdrawal would lead to him hallucinating a cat. That wants to eat him.

   Because he’s slacking off.

   He should be doing work – if not on dinner, then on the case, or something.

   Something helpful.

   Gordon is explaining something about one of the teams being off-sides. Tim nods.
Slides his phone out of the sleeve where he stashed it when Barbara took his coat and backpack. She’d given him the wifi password. That’s permission, right?

More than permission, even, it might’ve been her way of telling him he should use it.

Maybe even while he’s banished he can get something done.

He keeps hold of the pillow he’s been holding since he sat down.

Arranges it to hide the careful movements of his fingers across the screen from the keen-as-ever eyes of sorta civilian Jim Gordon.

Dives into his research – using Batgirl’s impressive piggybacking set-up to back door his way into everything that might have a shred of information he could use.

He can even access live footage from security cameras all over the city.

The set-up is so glorious Tim wants to link it into the one back in his bedroom. He thinks Batgirl would allow it, but he doesn’t want to do it without explicitly asking Barbara first.

Because that won’t go well.

But he’s getting a surprisingly good amount of data considering that, until yesterday, the Tolovis may as well have simply not existed.

Right away, Tim can tell that it’s not all useful information. A lot of it is more details that create terrifying profiles on each of the Tolovi brothers. And on the gang they’ve started up on the west coast – the Blackbirds.

There’s a surprising amount of information on them when he can use Batgirl’s database access – and the stores of information she’s created herself – to crossreference all the mismatched details. And with her access to international databases, and to original copies of heavily redacted files, he’s able to clear up a lot of the miscellaneous and focus on the overlap.

What he gets is confusing.

And he can’t tell how it affects the case.

Mostly, it seems like it doesn’t – other than confirming how terrifyingly dangerous the Tolovi brothers are to confront, to oppose.

They are practically inhuman.

It’s not even a stretch to say so – their health records are from an era before the idea of meta-human was defined or recognized, but Tim can’t imagine they are anything but somehow more than human. A single year of medical records contains more pages listing seriously life-threatening
injuries than the logs generated by an entire spec ops battalion in the middle east in twice that time, of even the minor injury reports.

The three Tolovis alone get shot more frequently than an entire battalion even gets so much as a papercut deep enough to need a bandaid.

And the reports on the Tolovis include almost zero down-time for recovery.

Even for things like an *incendiary bullet through the right ventricle*.

Rwen Tolovi got shot through the heart at point blank – with explosive ammunition that set the fat beneath his skin on fire. It happened as part of an operation GHOST had apparently authorized on the Chinese border of North Korea. The grand total of *fourteen hours* of down time he had been prescribed had been described as ‘excessive and unnecessary’ by Rwen Tolovi in his mission debrief when he returned to the states.

Tim carefully avoids reading the statistics of his mission – avoids looking up the targets eliminated, the civilians endangered, the collateral damage – and tries to focus on the niggling suspicion that something in his framework of understanding is… wrong.

Because all of this information is terrifying.

But none of it seems to explain anything about the current situation.

Like what on earth the Tolovis are doing in Gotham.

And… Tim has to confront this eventually… why they didn’t kill Nightwing, Batgirl, and Robin in that alley the other night… because they could have. Easily.

And their track record suggests that they wouldn’t have had any qualms about it.

Honestly, it probably would have been easier for the Tolovis to just kill the Bats than to systematically disable them – without so much as breaking any of their bones to do it.

The Bats had been shaken and a bit bruised, but not *injured*.

And with the histories that Tim is learning, he can’t avoid acknowledging the fact that the Bats’ lack of injury is significant.

It *has* to connect somehow to the reason behind *why* they’re here to start with.

Barbara has connected the Tolovis to an unregistered yacht that has been spotted flitting in and out of Gotham’s harbors. And she’s connected the Havrani’s sporadic appearances to the instances of reported counterfeit in the area.

*So those* are connected.
But that still doesn’t explain why.

Between his own photographs of the Bats’ encounter in the alleyway, the Bats’ audio recordings of the same encounter, and the collection of security camera stills and clips of their activities Barbara’s collected over the last eighteen hours, Tim can put together a fairly complete picture of the Tolovis’ last 48 hours.

Barbara’s done a recreation herself and has set up a program to keep scanning for their movements and to attempt to find a pattern to link them up to plausible causes.

It hasn’t come up with anything yet.

Barbara is too good for it to be a flaw in the programing, but Tim brings up the source code anyway – just to see what parameters she was working with – and quickly realizes that it might not be a flaw in the programing, but in the methodology.

Computers are terrible at independently assigning a value system to data assessment, so Barbara has allotted place values and importance percentages to certain field observations – organizing the information like a cop would to pick out a criminal’s activity pattern.

It makes sense, and the way she did it shows her brilliance in regards to both computer programing and criminal investigation.

But it won’t work.

It’s an approach that conflicts with the most important piece of data – well, the three most important pieces. Tim can understand why the Bats are a bit blind to the importance of the factors Tim is slowly coming to accept as relevant – even Tim didn’t want to look at them as the important points they are.

But he’s an outsider and that gives him a special perspective – an important perspective, that allows him to contribute.

Because he can recognize the important things.

Like the fact that the Tolovis could have, and did not, kill the Bats in the alley.

Like the fact that the Tolovis did not initially engage the Bats because they don’t ‘play with kids in costumes’.

Like the fact that the Tolovis consider themselves vigilantes, and the reason they gave the Bats for being in Gotham was that they were ‘cleaning up their own mess’ and ‘recovering something that was stolen’.

The Tolovis don’t wear masks and are not hiding from law enforcement, or from competition. They simply don’t need to.

So they won’t be taking cover or laying low or doing any of the pursuit evasion activities
Barbara would be looking for in regards to a normal gangster.

The reason they haven’t been caught yet is that they’re efficient and task-oriented. The arrive at a scene, accomplish what they mean to, and leave immediately.

And, as vigilantes, they are likely still involved with law enforcement – and with their experience in GHOST, they have a detailed understanding of how law enforcement works – and therefore have the means to proactively counter a traditional detective’s approach.

Because they are not a traditional detective’s targets.

And none of the Bats or GCPD detectives know what task the Tolovis are oriented around pursuing. But a blunt-force data crunch might be able to illuminate something.

So Tim builds his own program.

To overlay all the data available from every instance in which facial recognition could place any one of the Tolovis at a given location.

He sets an alert to ping if any point of comparison shows up more than 50% of the time, and others to ping at 75%, 85%, 95%, and (very optimistically) 100%.

Tim has just set the program to run – utilizing the full combined power of both his own system and Batgirl’s – when a shout from the kitchen calls his attention.

Dinner is ready.

Tim and Gordon are expected to set the table.

Tim has never actually set a table before.

His first instinct is to google it.

But his phone is running the overlay comparison.

He’d prefer to have a hardcopy of instructions, but he can learn by example and he keenly observes Gordon’s resigned ease as he moves through the mechanics of something so familiar to him that it’s likely been decades since he gave it conscious thought.

It’s not difficult to copy him, and with only four place settings, it’s not difficult to fully accomplish their task with the expected result.

Dinner itself is… strange.

The food is delicious.
But Tim feels twitchy and unsettled the whole time and can’t find room in his stomach to clear his plate, can’t find the air in his lungs to add to the conversation in any way other than answering a direct question.

Jack and Janet Drake are not the kind of parents that enforce a ‘family mealtime’.

The closest they’ve had is informal breakfasts together, that merely happened to have their busy schedules overlap, and the occasional formal dinner with important guests and business partners. Those dinners had very strict codes of conduct, and attire.

Rules he could fall back on.

This dinner is nothing like that.

There are no rules that he can identify – other than the basic ones of politeness: chewing with his mouth closed, swallowing before he speaks, elbows off the table.

Except.

Not.

Because Gordon’s got his elbows on the table.

And when Jason and Babs are arguing a point, they have to break in before they can fully swallow down the food they’re both literally inhaling.

Tim doesn’t know how they don’t choke.

There are discussions about classes, and television shows that Tim has never seen, but some he has seen. And there are references to movies he knows, and video games he owns, and Tim thinks he can participate, but he can’t quite wrap his tongue around he words.

He’s happy when the meal is over – but he also realizes that even while it was unsettling and rather nerve-wracking, he enjoyed it. He didn’t feel inadequate or like he’d failed at something expected of him, and now he feels… included.

It’s different than the meals he’s shared with nannies.

And he likes that, enjoys the difference.

Wants immediately to try again, now that he knows better what to expect – how it works.

He knows he’ll still be awkward and uncomfortable, but he thinks he can be better the second time around. Isn’t quite sure how, but is still sure none the less.

Because he kind of has friends, now.

Jason and Barbara are his friends.
Which makes it even more important to Tim that he help them with this case.

His program is still running on his phone.

Getting results, if the regular pulse of the red indicator light he programed in is anything to judge by. He’s itching to check the data.

But he and Gordon didn’t cook, so they are apparently responsible for cleaning up – but Gordon is working a late shift so the fact that he stuck around for dinner and lingered as long as he did is already pushing it. Babs volunteers Jason to take his place and hurries her father into getting himself back to the fully-dressed GCPD Commissioner version of himself.

Barbara is straightening her father’s tie and giving him a kiss on the cheek and passing him his briefcase and shutting the door behind him in a flurry of movement that Tim can barely track. Barbara is striding over to the couch before Tim’s even finished drying the first plate.

Instead of settling down and getting comfy or anything, Barbara starts digging through the cabinet beneath the television.

Jason flicks water at his face to get him back on task.

By the time they’ve hand-washed everything they used for dinner Barbara has a veritable mountain of wires and tech – which she’s assembling into… a drum kit?

“Rockband Karaoke night? Really?”

“Well, I sure as hell am not gonna play blackjack with you again, and Tim’s gotta have a sneaky little head for numbers, too,” Barbara counters. “So we’re doing good old fashion karaoke, Bat-style. I’ve got every song ever, Jaybird, so try your damndest to stump the program, but I guarantee you’ll be impressed.”

Jason sighs, adjusting his stance beside Tim and crossing his arms over his chest.

“You on keys, Barbie?”

“If you’re on guitar,” Barbara challenges.

Then her gaze shifts to Tim.

He shrinks.

“Drums.”

Tim looks desperately to Jason.

Who is looking at him with an interested gleam in his eyes – mischevious.

Tim shrinks further.
Oh.

This.

This can’t be good.

He’s not even entirely sure what this is.

“Drums would help him build up his hand eye coordination,” Jason muses, “It’s a lot of work to keep track of those spindly little limbs. I think he might just trip over a cape if we gave him one right now.”

Hurt flares up in Tim’s chest – unexpected and twice as forceful because of it.

It’s worse because he doesn’t even know why he feels hurt.

He’s not a cape. He’s not.

He knows he’s not – knows he’s not cut out for it.

But he can still help.

He can pull his weight.

He can.

Tim opens his mouth to defend himself – to tell them about the program he’s running – but no words come out. His brain has looped back around to replay exactly what Jason said.

Build his coordination.

Give him a cape now.

“Oh, now, he gets it,” Barbara coos.

“It takes a sec, he tends to over-focus,” Jason dismisses.

Tim should probably be insulted by that.

But… he can admit that there’s some truth to the statement.

And… he’s a little distracted.

By the implied promise of a cape.
By the idea that Jason and Barbara think he can contribute to the crusade.
They think he can help. They're certain of it.

They’re so certain of it, they want to start training him.

Because hand-eye coordination is important for the capes on the street. Critical.

And he can practice it.

By playing a fake drum kit, apparently.

“It also builds camaraderie, baby bird,” Barbara explains. “You’re part of the team, kid, and while you are nowhere near ready to go out on the streets, you won’t always be a kid. Start training now and you might be able to go out before you graduate.”

Tim’s not sure about that.

Looking to Jason, Tim realizes he’s not sure about that either.

Tim’s not sure what Jason’s thinking, can’t read him well enough to tell more than Jason’s unhappy with whatever is going through his head.

Tim worries briefly that it’s because Jason doesn’t think he can hack it on the streets. Tim wouldn’t really blame him for thinking that – Tim’s not like the others and everyone knows it. He’s weak, soft. Really can’t even pretend to hold his own in a fight.

But this might be a step towards becoming slightly less pathetic.

A baby-step, certainly, but a bigger step than he’d ever taken towards a goal he’d never actually considered plausible before.

“So what’cha say, baby bird,” Barbara asks with a teasing grin, “You up to playing at being a Bat-tastic Rockstar with us?”

Tim nods. Attempts to flash a confident smile.
Knows it doesn’t quite come off as confident, but he’s still pleased to have managed a smile at all. His stomach feels a bit melty with nerves.

He’s aware that he doesn’t quite know what he’s getting into.

Tim has never played Rockband. He’s never even done Karaoke.

But the grin Barbara shoots him when he nods makes his smile grow.

“Well come on then, skinny jeans, get your scrawny little butt over here,” she barks.

Jason has to knock shoulders with him to actually get his feet moving, but he does come without being dragged. Barbara gets him set up on a neat little stool behind the MIDI drum kit while Jason adjusts the strap on his guitar. These aren’t exactly the obviously-fake plastic tools Tim expected out of a music video game. If he looks carefully he can see a Bat logo embossed on all the equipment – it’s the longer, slightly pointier Bat of the two being used for the crusade, the one Batgirl modified to give herself a calling card that both identifies her as different than Batman, but also links her clearly to his crusade.

Barbara built this equipment herself.

Using the rockband video game as a loose framework.

His drum kit has different color accents on each individual piece, but it’s all real gear. And Jason’s guitar is a genuine electric instrument, with different-colored layers of something that is presumably pressure sensitive secured between the frets. And he’s got a pedal pad set up just the same, with real effects keys locked into a color association.

Barbara’s own keyboard is an electric piano, with brightly colored keys that run the gamut of the entire rainbow. She’s also got a MIDI pad at her feet, and a second small one at her elbow, for synth sounds not immediately transferable to a piano.

It’s kind of awesome.

Jason’s suddenly twirling a drum stick in Tim’s face.

“You ready for this or what?”

Jason tosses the drum stick to Tim – who fumbles the catch, but manages to snatch it up before it hits the floor.

Barbara settles herself behind the keys and shoots Jason a look of challenge.

“It’s all you, Jaybird,” she says, “Do your worst.”

“We’ll start out with an easy one, to help Timbo here get adjusted,” Jason promises.

His wicked grin is not reassuring as he turns away to face the tv.

Tim’s brief burst of pride and validation in the fact that he can accurately read that much in Jason’s impossibly difficult-to-read body language is squashed by the terror of attempting to keep up with the blur of color-coded instructions scrolling by on the screen.
It is not an easy one.

Or, if it is, Tim’s not going to be able to survive the hard ones.

He doesn’t do very well with actually landing any hits on his equipment when he’s meant to do so – but at least he doesn’t fall off the stool or otherwise embarrass himself by trying.

And Barbara and Jason both have microphones – are singing along with the lyrics as they flash up on the screen, and Tim gets a little lost in listening. They’re both actually amazing at this, excellent musicians and fantastic singers – and they each have ridiculous lung capacity.

Tim sees how this could help their training.

Giving them timing practice, working on hand-eye coordination, and building up their lungs for cardiovascular endurance. And Barbara’s right, it does build camaraderie. Tim actually feels like he might almost be part of the team here.

And that’s cool.

It’s a new feeling, different and strange and … kind of wonderful.

Tim never wants to let it go.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, this brief little plot point was going to be shown in a super long chapter from Jason's PoV, but it messed up my pattern to do it that way, so I whipped up this little bit, and expanded both Tim's thought process through this part and in his next PoV chapter, while streamlining Jason's so it's not obnoxiously overlong.

And it lets the pattern stand a is: J.T.J. D. T.J.T. D. J.T.J. D. T...

Which means that next time we get dinner and a show from Jason's PoV (with a special appearance from Nightwing)!

(Also, this week is super special because I may be putting up the first chapter of that bodyswap fic I mentioned a while back... I've actually ended up doing kind of a lot of work on it lately...)
Chapter Summary

Jason's view of the relaxing night in.

Babs and Jason have a heart to heart regarding Tim. Everyone tries to make Tim feel more comfortable. It kinda works.

And then Nightwing arrives...

Chapter Notes

Jason fluff and cuteness.
He swears a helluva lot.

Babs knows everything.

Tim has no idea what's happening.

It's a bonus prize for Kentucky Derby Day / Cinco de Mayo to get a chapter up early! Also, I might not be able to post at all next week for various reasons, and this chapter ends on a nice, well-rounded pause kind of ending. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fourteen: Rule #14 – Be a Good Sport

Timothy Drake is a ridiculous little creature.

From the moment they arrived at the Gordons’ condo complex, he shrunk into himself and is currently proceeding to give his best imitation of a terrified little bunny rabbit.

He’s sitting stiffly on the edge of the couch – as far away from civilian Jim Gordon as humanly possible – with a perfectly straight back and a pillow clutched to his chest. He looks ridiculous, terrified – like he thinks Gordon is gonna arrest him at any moment.

Either that or he thinks Barbara's spoiled marshmallow of a cat is going to eat him – which is at least slightly more probable.

Duchess is very interested in the strange little newcomer – far more interested than she was in
Jason when he first showed up – which makes a brief flicker of worry rise up in Jason's gut as it reminds him how interested in Tim Selina Kyle had been.

Stupid baby seal making friends with frickin’ vengeful mountain lions.

Jason doesn’t care how goddamn tight her ass looks in all that leather or how much frickin cleavage she shows – that Cat is bad news and Tim’s got no business being bosom buddies with her. It’s insanity.

“Yo. Earth to Jay,” Barbara huffs, right before flicking water in his face. “Baby bird must be rubbin’ off on you – you’re not usually the type to zone out.”

“Shove off,” Jason grumbles, going back to chopping carrots.

Technically, their job in the kitchen is done. The pot roast is already in the oven.

Now they’re just prepping for other meals Barbara wants to make this week – her dad is pretty much useless in the kitchen, so she has to handle just about everything food-wise. And she’s not shy about making use of Jason’s help while she has him here.

Jason finishes cutting the carrots into perfectly even 1/8 inch thick disks and passes them off to Barbara to do what she will with them. He moves on to the zucchini – grabbing several of them and tossing them into the collander for a quick wash.

He knows Barbara is watching him – he can feel her stare on his back, see her still and hazy reflection on the shiny backsplash behind the sink. She’s got the bowl of carrots propped on her hip and she’s looking at him with… it’s not pity. Jason’s never gotten something so insulting as pity from Barbara, this is … something prickly that makes the inside of his skin itch.

“So,” Barbara starts carefully – mindfully introducing a new topic that she knows Jason won’t want to talk about and inviting him to face her for it. “I heard about Tim and Selina.”

Jason turns halfway to her – deeply suspicious and rather surprised that she could possibly want to chat about this now.

“I think it’s good.”

Jason whirls on her – only just managing to keep himself from shouting – and demands in a harsh whisper, “What the hell, Babs? Seriously?”

Unfortunately, the colander of zucchini did not handle the shock of his whirling around very well and his surprise slowed his reactions too much to counteract the trajectory as it began to skitter away from him.

The zucchini flipped out of the colander, which crashed to the floor and rolled clear out of the kitchen while the vegetables tumbles around the far side of the island.

“You kids okay over there?” Gordon shouts from his place on the couch.
Great.

Because getting the police commissioner's attention at this particular point in the conversation is just what they needed.

“Fine, we’re fine,” he and Barbara shout together as they chase after the fallen items.

Righting herself with the collander on-hand, Barbara shoves a handful of red hair out her face and says, “You just stay right where you are, Dad, we got this.”

There’s a tense few seconds as Jason sweeps up the last of the fallen zucchini as Gordon doesn’t answer and Jason can’t see him to tell why he’s staying quiet.

Jason almost doesn’t dare to stand up with his prize – to let himself be visible above the island. But to stay down would be more suspicious at this particular moment and he forces himself to move as naturally as ever while he piles the zucchini back into the colander.

“Alright, I’ll stay banished,” Gordon sighs, relaxing back into his seat and returning his attention to the hockey game he’s been watching. “Just don’t burn the house down.”

Jason wants to grit his teeth and glare, but Tim’s big ol’ worried bambi eyes are staring straight towards him – searching for any sign that all is not perfectly well with the world.

It’s not – not by any means – but fuck if he's gonna get the stupid seal worried about it.

The stupid little shit looks ridiculous over on the couch – sad and worried and just a touch fearful as he stares towards the kitchen.

Duchess, meanwhile, has gotten bored with him and wandered away; and Gordon is fully fixated back on his hockey game. Gordon knows he’s shit in the kitchen and is entirely content with being banished from all culinary activities.

Tim is not quite as settled with the arrangement.

He has no cooking skills whatsoever – Jason is half convinced the blubber brain would burn cereal if left unattended for too long – but he seems to want to be close to the action.

Crazy little awkward robot likes to watch.

Which is cool with some people, Jason supposes – but he thinks it’s weird.

Fortunately, Barbara does too.

So Tim is banished.

Forced out of the kitchen entirely and sent to sit with Gordon on the couch.

At least he has enough sense to follow orders and settle down with the weird civilian version
of Commissioner Gordon that exists off the clock.

Tim has little enough good sense for that to have been in question when Barbara first proposed it. But when Babs puts her foot down even *Batman* has to take notice.

So, Tim is currently behaving.

The kid’s head whips back around towards the tv as a buzzer sounds and Gordon makes a fuss about some call or other. The kid is totally out of his depth when it comes to sports.

When it comes to most things.

Like basic rules of personal and child safety guidelines.

Fucking *Catwoman*.

Seriously.

How does someone – even someone with as much blubber gumming up a *clearly* experimental little robot brain as Tim – how does *anyone* find themselves chatting with a frickin *super villain* in the middle of a crime spree on a rooftop at midnight not recognize that their choice of lounging location is a fucking *poor life decision*?

It’s frickin’ ridiculous.

And god damn Barbara Gordon – the usual sole bastion of sanity in this shitshow of a crusade – thinks that it’s a *good thing* Tim’s involved with the Cat?

Zucchini recovered – now freshly washed with extra care – Jason settles the colander on the counter and turns to face Barbara with as controlled a glare as possible.

Waits for her to explain.

She’s drowning the carrots he cut in butter and cinnamon with a careful focus as she shoots him a quick smile of sympathy and says, “Think about it. Tim’s apparently been doing this Bat-stalker thing for a lot longer than we thought he had. Like *years* longer. But at least *somebody* has known he’s been out there. He hasn’t been *completely* alone.”

Jason arches an accusing eyebrow as his glare strengthens.

“It’s fucking *Catwoman*.”
“Who is not the worst super villain he could be friends with,” Barbara points out. “She doesn’t pretend to be a good person and then whip around and betray her ‘friends’, she’s never launched any kind of destroy-Gotham or rule-the-world plot, and she takes care of lost causes.”

Jason grumbles an unwilling acknowledgement at the validity of her point.

“Selina has been a huge part of how we’ve solved an awful lot of cases,” Barbara enforces, going on, “Probably more than any of us even know about.”

“I get it,” Jason growls. “The Cat is not a worst-case scenario. Still doesn’t mean it’s good that Timmers has been running around Gotham at night for years. With a super villain looking over his shoulder, no less. Stupid fucking seal.”

Barbara blinks at the mutter he’d meant to keep under his breath.

“Wait, wait, wait. I’m sorry. What did you just call him?”

She’s grinning like a maniac.

Jason refuses to be embarrassed.

He grits his teeth and nods his head in the kid’s direction. Snorts, “Look at that little shit. You’re tellin’ me you don’t see a fuckin baby seal yanked outta the water?”

Barbara’s hand lifts to cover her smile as it curls yet wider and her gaze darts over to examine Tim with the new filter Jason’s provided. She giggles.

“Oh, my god,” she squeaks quietly, “That’s exactly what he looks like.”

Bolstered, Jason agrees, “Damn straight.”

She giggles again when she shoots Jason a conspiratorial look. “I bet you’ve considered trying to talk him into letting you pin a radio tag through his ear, haven’t you?”

No.

Jason had not.

He hadn’t actually gotten that literal with his snide mental comments regarding the ASPCA protection squad he wanted to sic on the stupid little self-destructive seal. Yet.

But.
That’s actually not a terrible idea.

A subdermal GPS tag would be quite handy in keeping track of the suicidal idiot.

Tim probably won’t consent to it.

But… he might.

Especially, if he makes the concession in an apology for being such a stupid little fucker to start with to make such an extreme seem so reasonable.

It’s unlikely.

And yet, it’s not outside the range of possibility.

Jason tucks the idea away for later consideration.

Barbara gives one last giggle before regaining her composure.

She looks back at Tim as she sobers.

He seems to be staring very intently at the tv – still squeezing the pillow for dear life like it’ll keep him afloat in the ocean – and nodding at something about the game that Gordon is explaining to him. Tim looks so serious, sitting there while trying to interpret all the sports jargon Gordon is probably spewing at him. He may even be taking notes, if Jason’s seeing it properly from this angle – Tim’s fingers are tapping away, but he can’t quite tell if the motions of his fingertips are just nervous energy escaping or intentional skittering across a screen. He doesn’t seem the tappy type, so Jason’s betting on there being a screen beneath his fingers.

“You know we can’t stop him from investigating, right?”

Jason frowns, glare snapping back into place as he looks at Barbara. “No way. He’s too fucking tiny,” Jason snaps, “It’s too dangerous to let that kid anywhere near this shit.”

Barbara’s sympathetic smile twitches with something softer – something almost amused – though it vanishes without settling into her expression. “If we don’t support him and his plans to keep investigating, he’s just going to keep doing it without us,” she points out gently, “He’s been able to evade our notice this long and he’s only going to get better at evading our notice if we make him feel like he has to learn how. If we actively oppose him, all it’s gonna do is push him to take bigger risks, and do it without letting us help and keep him safe.”
A growl builds in Jason’s chest, but he doesn’t have any words to form a legitimate counterstatement. He knows Barbara’s right – even if he doesn’t like it.

Not only does he trust Barbara’s judgement on the matter to start with, he knows Tim well enough at this point to have no doubt that her assessment of the stupid seal’s utter lack of survival instincts is entirely accurate.

If Jason doesn’t get on board with helping Tim be part of the team, all it’s gonna do is let the idiot flop his blubbery way into mortal peril without back-up. Even with the tracker he planted in the seat of Tim’s bike, it’s not enough to really keep him safe when it counts.

And after hearing Tim admit to Catwoman that – while he considers the Bats his friends on some level – he doesn’t fully believe they’ll tear down the city to save him… Jason’s worried that if he does get himself into trouble all alone, he won’t even try contacting them for help.

Which is utterly unacceptable.

The hot air trapped in Jason’s chest huffs out roughly as he asks, “So, what do we do?”

“What you’ve already been doing, mostly,” Barbara explains. “Keep him close, don’t punish him for investigating, reward him when he shares. Include him.”

“That’s not enough,” Jason protests – chest constricting with anxiety over the fact that he’s been doing that and yet he still keeps learning more and more about additional dangers Tim’s just blithely blundered into. It doesn’t seem like it’s helping at all.

Barbara sighs heavily. “I know,” she admits. “But it’ll get better. He’s here tonight because you’ve been keeping him closer than before, and if we keep him even closer – make him really feel like part of the team – he might start sticking around because he trusts the bond between us is genuine, instead of just because we’re making sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

It’s still not enough and Jason doesn’t like it, but he doesn’t have any other suggestions.

He does have other concerns, however.

“If we’re gonna make him part of the team, B’s eventually gonna find out about it,” he points out. “And he’s not gonna be happy with us when he does.”

“You don’t even have to worry about that,” Barbara says forcefully – determined, confident, and most importantly vehement. “I’ll handle Bruce. That idiot has never known what’s good for him without someone putting it right in front of his face with a ten page dissertation to explain it to him.”
Jason can’t help the chuckle that escapes him.

Barbara’s right – Bruce is absolutely useless sometimes – but her antagonistic breakdown is backfilled with… an affection that’s less frustration than it is understanding. It makes Jason feel good – warm and… almost hopeful.

He wants so badly to trust Bruce.

It’s been more than two years now and he knows that Bruce – and Batman, too, for that matter – can’t be the savior he’d conned himself into hoping for during those first few weeks in the Manor. Well, the first few weeks after the first few weeks while he still had managed to keep himself as wary and alert as he had been while actively on the streets.

Jason knows B can’t be the father he imagined, but he still – in some bright little delusional corner of himself – hopes B can still be the father he never had, even if he’s not the perfect specimen of fatherhood he’d dreampt of having.

“About the Raven,” Barbara presses lightly, her tone quiet.

Jason stiffens anyway and waits warily for her to explain.

“I haven’t told B about it yet, but I have to connect it for him tonight,” she says. “We can’t let the Tolovis keep running around without any kind of checks to keep them in line.”

Immediately, Jason asserts, “You can’t tell him about Tim and Selina.”

“I won’t,” Barbara promises.

With a firm nod to reassure himself, Jason tucks that promise away. He doesn’t have to worry that Babs won’t keep her word.

Barbara lets his brain settle down out of fight mode before she comments, “Dinner is almost ready. You julienne that pile of zucchini and I’ll get the rest of this cleaned up while the idiots set the table.”

She barely waits for Jason to nod before she calls out to the pair sitting banished on the couch. Gordon hauls himself to his feet with a familiar and easy resignation, but Tim looks more like bambi on the train tracks than ever.

It’s hilarious.

He’s legitimately panicking about the concept of having to set the table.
Jason watches Tim fight with his panic and win out over it. The baby seal is a floppy mess, but he latches onto Gordon’s easy calm and mimics the commissioner’s actions.

Gordon even goes extra slow through the motions, subtly making sure to broadcast the movements in Tim’s direction, and allowing the calm he feels to permeate the air. Clearly, even off the clock, the police commissioner is a pretty sharp tack – and dedicated to making every citizen of his dreary city feel as safe and comfortable as he possibly can.

A ghost of a smile appears on Gordon’s face as he recognizes that Tim has successfully latched onto him and is easing into something less panic stricken.

Tim’s moment of relative calm is short lived.

As the time comes for them to all gather around the table and actually eat the god damn delicious pot roast they’ve whipped up, Tim begins to freak out again. He does the little quiet turtle thing where he pulls into himself and tries to vibrate his way into invisibility.

It’s very clear that the Drake family is not one that has ever done any kind of typical family dinner thing over the course of Tim’s childhood. He’s completely out of his depth here and that is just… tragic. Jason’s not entirely sure if the spikey heat behind his lungs is anger at the Drake parents for being so clearly hopeless, or… something like grief for the fact that Tim’s ‘privliged’ home life is one Jason wouldn’t wish on anyone.

Catherine wasn’t a great mother by any estimate, but she’d been a loving one and had managed to impress the importance of Family onto Jason. If she was healthy enough to be cognizant, they always ate together, even when they didn’t have anything but Ritz crackers and peanut butter to munch on. Even right before the end there…

Dinner at the Gordon house was startlingly warm and friendly the first time Jason had been here for a meal, but it hadn’t been a wholly unfamiliar experience to him.

Tim has no idea what to do with himself – with his hands, with his feet, with his food… he looks like he may have lost track of his nose as Barbara starts up a conversation about the upcoming release of another new chapter in the Star Wars cinematic saga.

It’s very clear through the whole meal that Tim is very uncomfortable.

He spends most of his time pushing bits of food around on his plate instead of actually putting any reasonably sized bites into his mouth.
If he’s asked a direct question, Tim manages to wrangle his tongue into giving an answer, but he can’t quite find the means of contributing to the conversation of his own accord.

Tim doesn’t seem unhappy uncomfortable – he’s alert and attentive and following everything that’s being tossed about between the three who are more used to this kind of setting with a keen interest in his eyes and a tentative half-smile trying not to break across his face.

More than that, as the meal comes to a close, Tim’s willingly got an actual smile on his face. It’s nothing strong or confident, but it’s genuine and one he’s consciously allowing to form, to openly be expressed – and it’s happy in a way that’s clearly more than just relief at the fact that the trial of the meal itself is finally over.

It’s a *reflective* happy.

The kind that says Tim enjoyed himself, even if he seemed quiet and uncomfortable.

It makes Jason feel satisfied.

Even though Tim needs to be force fed a fucking cheesecake, ASAP, to make up for the calories he left on his plate in uneaten pot roast.

Babs and Jason cooked, so theoretically, Tim and Gordon should clean up, but Gordon’s working a late shift and has to leave as quickly as he can be convinced to go – it’s clear he doesn’t want to. He would much rather stay home; safe and warm, and where he can watch his daughter and her pseudo-sibling friends flourish and enjoy themselves in complete security.

But he *has* to go and Barbara whirlwinds him into getting ready for his shift – volunteering Jason to take over Gordon’s clean-up duties.

Tim is practically entranced with watching Hurricane Barbara do her worst – transforming civilian Jim Gordon into the GCPD Commissioner in about fifteen minutes.

Barbara is straightening her father’s tie and giving him a kiss on the cheek and passing him his briefcase and shutting the door behind him before Tim’s even fully recognized what’s happening. And then instead of settling down on the couch, Barbara starts digging through the cabinet under her tv – which lights a fire of dread in Jason’s gut.

Tim is fascinated.

Jason heaves a sigh.

“Rockband Karaoke night? Really?”

Jason knows Barbara takes her game night philosophy very seriously, but they’ve got like a hundred other, far more important, things to do right now.

But, that’s kinda the point of this whole thing exactly, Jason realizes.
He and Tim are here to be babysat – forcibly kept out of trouble and angled away from all of the more important, case-related things they should be doing.

At the same time, though… If it means keeping Tim out of the mess on the streets… Jason thinks he can deal with one night of playing around when he should be working.

“Well, I sure as hell am not gonna play blackjack with you again, and Tim’s gotta have a sneaky little head for numbers, too,” Barbara counters firmly. There’s a bit of pride in her tone, affection, and there’s a harsh little twist to her expression that dares Jason to even consider trying to make a case about how they should be doing other things.

It’s subtle, but because she’s proactively looking for it, the resignation that filters into Jason’s expression is enough to soothe Barbara’s worries.

She goes on with a notable chipperness in her challenge as she says, “So, we’re doing good old fashion karaoke, Bat-style. I’ve got every song ever, Jaybird, so try your damndest to stump the program, but I guarantee you’ll be impressed.”

Jason sighs, adjusting his stance beside Tim and crossing his arms over his chest as he inconspicuously eyes the little fucker.

Tim still looks more confused than anything, but there's an exuberance in him – a continuing keen interest and an intrigued anticipation.

Fine.

Jason can play along with this shit for one night.

Especially if it’s gonna make the baby seal look like that a little longer.

“You on keys, Barbie?”

“If you’re on guitar,” Barbara challenges.

Then her gaze shifts to Tim. He shrinks into himself immediately – loses at least three solid inches in height as he damn near cowers at Jason's side.

“Drums.”

She says it with a pointed arch to her brow that’s aimed more at Jason than at Tim. This is
part of that team inclusion thing that she was pushing earlier – not just a game night to build camaraderie, but one to make Tim feel included in the other side of their lives.

The Crusade side.

If they are going to let Tim keep investigating, then training him up a little is now a pretty frickin high priority. And baby steps are gonna be necessary for that… Baby steps that are hella tiny little things, and can be cached inside something that doesn’t look like training…

While Jason is musing, Tim is consumed by looking desperately up at him like Barbara just suggested they all go scuba diving with stingrays or some shit.

“Drums would help him build up his hand eye coordination,” Jason muses slowly, actually considering the possibilities. “It’s a lot of work to keep track of those spindly little limbs. I think he might just trip over a cape if we gave him one right now.”

Barbara gives a satisfied little huff and flashes him a relieved smile to show she's grateful for his trust and willingness to play along.

Jason doesn’t give her anything back – He’s still not happy about the fact that he has to let Tim be involved with this at all, but he does honestly get why Barbara's saying that they have to let him be a part of it.

And he means what he'd said about the drumset helping to train up Tim's nonexistent coordination. It will help. Not much, but it’s a start – and that’s important.

If he has to let the fucking baby seal swim with sharks he’s gonna make damn sure the slippery little shit is capable of keeping himself alive.

Not to mention the potential hilarity of watching Bambi struggle with the input overload… it’s gonna be a good show watching the little fucker flail.

Jason’s personal amusement is dampened slightly as he watches hurt bloom over Tim's expression – like the honestly rather gentle little jibe he'd just thrown had stabbed Tim straight through the throat of his self-esteem, and then mucked up all his organs with a tumble through some god damn rattlesnake infested cacti.

Panic flares in Jason's own chest at having so thoroughly wounded the harmless baby seal until he realizes that Tiny Timmy's little robot brain is glitching again – fixating on the wrong parts of what he'd said. Tim had taken the light-hearted jibe as a direct reasoning against his current ability and potential to ever earn a real place on the team.

The mere illusion of the thought that Jason didn’t think he was good enough – think he could ever be good enough – is devastating to him and it’s enough to gut Jason's own self-worth like a fucking katana through bare skin.

Suddenly what Barbara had said about supporting him as one of the Bats made a lot more
sense. Even wounded as he was by the illusion of his heroes deeming him unworthy, he would never stop investigating – he would simply stop coming to them with what he found.

And it would be *so easy* to push him away accidentally by doing anything other than offering outright blanket support and rewarding the *smart* choices he might make – though the little shithead certainly seems to make the smart choices with a startling rarity.

Jason is determined to change that particular statistic.

As Jason lets his resolve settle firmly into place, Tim’s robotic brain unglitches and dispels the illusion of his heroes deeming him unworthy – replaces it with the genuine notion that they consider him *very* worthy, that they see him as more than a merely adequate tag-along or anything so shitty and pretentious as whatever disheartening thought had wormed its way into Tim’s stupid little brain.

He lights up as the proper realization hits. Ecstatic, honored, bashful… *proud*.

“*Oh, now,* he gets it,” Barbara coos, having clearly predicted the way this discussion would go. Tim’s little angst spiral included.

“It takes a sec, he tends to over-focus,” Jason dismisses gruffly – forcing himself back into a relatively good humor and trying not to be annoyed that Babs had been knowing enough to plan a spurt of emotional devastation into the evening’s itinerary.

A flicker of awareness crosses Tim’s face that shows he *knows* he should probably be insulted by Jason's comment. But the giddy brightness about him doesn’t dim.

He's happy in a way Jason's never seen in him – in *anyone*. It makes his chest squeeze tight around his heart and lungs.

“It also builds camaraderie, baby bird,” Barbara explains with a sweet, reassuring smile – the kind that says her stomach is doing the very same somersaults that Jason’s is. “You’re part of the team, kid, and while you are no where *near* ready to go out on the streets, you won’t always be a kid. Start training now and you might be able to go out before you graduate.”

Tim’s clearly not sure about that. But he just as clearly wants it to be true.

Looking to Jason, Tim radiates concern over Jason’s opinion.
Jason’s not sure about what he should project – because there is no fucking way Tim will be ready to hit the streets before he graduates, and Tim is smart enough to know that, and the last thing Jason wants to do is get caught in a lie.

Whatever Tim sees in Jason’s conflicted expression dims his glow, but just a little bit – like it hasn’t killed the dream, but simply put it into reasonable parameters.

“So what’cha say, baby bird,” Barbara asks with a teasing grin, “You up to playing at being a Bat-tastic Rockstar with us?”

Tim nods. Attempts to flash a confident smile. He fails miserably at it, but the grin Barbara shoots him when he nods makes his smile grow.

“Well come on then, skinny jeans, get your scrawny little butt over here,” she barks, clearly relieved her plan is working – apparently having been more anxious over that point than Jason had previously realized.

Jason has to knock shoulders with him to actually get his feet moving, but Tim does wobble his way over to the living room without being dragged. Barbara gets him set up behind the drumset while Jason picks up the modified electric guitar and checks to see that the strap hasn’t been adjusted since he last used it.

It’s still perfect, and Jason turns his attention to watching Barbara try to convince the stupid seal that his floppy little flippers have to be able to reach the ground from his stool. Tim’s just sitting there, blankly uncomprehending, with his toes four inches free of scraping the carpet and he’s kicking his heels like a content little toddler with no understanding that his feet need to be able to manipulate the kick pedals and such littering the floor around him.

It’s ridiculous.

Hilarious.

Almost entirely worth the niggle of guilt in him for not pursuing the leads they have on the drug case he’s already fucked over sideways. He’s bunged the case up so badly he’d probably only make it worse if he were actively pursuing the narrow leads they’d secured – well, that Tim had secured for them…

Tim’s not even a real Bat yet, and frankly Jason’s not entirely sure how the floppy little fucker has kept himself alive this long, but even so… between the two of them Tim’s the only one who is actually making any worthwhile progress on the case. Jason just keeps screwing it up.
It strikes Jason suddenly that… perhaps he’s not cut out for the crusade, at least not the way B and Dick are… The thought has plagued him since the beginning and he’s been fighting to prove it wrong every second he’s been part of the crew – and to be legit about it, he’s kinda been failing to make the definitive statement he’s needed to genuinely assert it.

But this time… the thought doesn’t bother him as much as it usually does.

This time… he’s thinking that maybe he shouldn’t be fighting so hard to earn a place that he’s clearly not good enough for… maybe he should be thinking about altering his role. Like Barbie and the divine levels of tech support she provides – he knows that, even though she’s better at some of the case-solving boots-on-the-roof aspects of the Crusade than he is, she doesn’t like most of what happens while she’s patrolling.

She likes the flips and the flying, but Jason can’t see how anyone wouldn’t like that bit.

Barbara *doesn’t* like the stumbling onto a crime scene they were too late to stop bit.

She *really* doesn’t like it.

To the point that it’s now routine for her to take a few nights off after something like that happens… she *likes* the tech support side of things, and she’s really damn amazing at it.

Maybe Jason has something similar. Instead of being the one to handle the situations on the ground with the vanguard, maybe he’s just supposed to be the one keeping Tim alive long enough for *him* to solve the fucking cases.

Because seriously.

Jason’s screwed up twice in a week – so badly he’s still pretty damn sure he’s not gonna be welcome in the Manor much longer – and in the same amount of time, Tim has provided literally every new piece of information they have to work with in attempting to move forward.

Jason’s not sure how he feels about that thought.

Which is a dramatically different reaction to the abject refusal to acknowledge the possibility of it that he would have felt at any moment previously.

It’s worth filing away for later consideration.

Shrugging off the strangeness, Jason reaches for the drum sticks Tim will need once this ridiculous Karaoke night really gets started.
Twirling the artefact in Tim’s face until he blinks with recognition that it’s appeared there, Jason asks, “You ready for this or what?”

Tim nods – so tentatively, Jason’s pretty sure he’s not even aware of the action.

Jason tosses the drum stick to Tim – who fumbles the catch, but manages to snatch it up before it hits the floor.

Barbara settles herself behind the keys and shoots Jason a look of challenge.

“It’s all you, Jaybird,” she says, “Do your worst.”

They’ve had this discussion before. About how video games never have the right songs, just the stupid trash that’s popular in the frickin useless USA. Jason’s spent years running around neighborhoods with bootlegged tracks from all around the world that are leagues better than any officially promoted American singles. And he’s made a sport out of making sure that none of the other Bats can recognize anything on his playlists.

Barbara has done pretty well with managing to create an adaptive program that can manage to obtain, analyze, and parse out a Karaoke array for their MIDI tracked controllers, but Jason still manages to out-niche the program on occasion.

“We’ll start out with an easy one, to help Timbo here get adjusted,” Jason promises, with a wicked grin growing on his face as he turns to face the tv.

He manipulates the controls with the specially modified buttons on his guitar and lines up what is definitely not a track that could be considered an easy one. It’s not the hardest Jason’s got in store for them tonight, but it’s still a rock song from Japan that spins at a sedate 185 bpm – which, while it’s pedestrian for Jrock’s average beats per minute, when compared to the American average of 120 is… exciting.

Tim becomes distinctly aware of the possibility that he may not survive the night within the first eight bars. His ridiculous flailing is even more hilarious than Jason anticipated – to the point that he flubs a few transitions himself due to his distraction and he can barely keep enough air in his lungs to sing and laugh at the same time.

Jason’s blue in the face before the first song ends.

By the end of the night, he’s sure he’s never laughed so hard for so long in his entire life.

He’s even managed to forget about the guilt of taking a night off. He doesn’t remember it until after they’re cleaning up for the night – because unlike B, Barbara has neighbors, and neighbors don’t like 2am Karaoke... even with the epic soundproofing Babs has outfitted the condo with, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall.

Tim is helping to carefully wrap the wires – in the exact manner Barbara showed him, because ‘sound cables are not just extension cords that can be wound up like a frickin’ garden hose,
They've just finished clearing the room when a light tapping at the window leading to the balcony gains their attention – Nightwing’s dropped by… because he has exactly zero understanding of appropriate boundaries and is just idiotically unaware of what seeing one of the heroes dedicated to patrolling Gotham’s streets will do to Tim’s currently buoyant mood.

Jason actually watches the tick of awareness that Nightwing’s here domino through Tim’s brain to make him remember that Jason and Barbara should be out on the streets with him – that they aren’t with Dick because they’ve been stuck here with Tim.

If Jason didn’t already want to just push Dick off the balcony for sport, now he wants to do it hard enough to make him land face first in the river.

But Barbara lets him in with a smile like she was expecting his arrival.

“I’ve got that bowl of pot roast waiting for you,” she comments as she locks the door behind him with a light hearted ease.

“Yum,” Dick accepts, eagerly making his way towards the microwave.

It’s only after he reaches the kitchen that Jason realizes he has a duffle bag monogramed with the Wayne Family Crest slung over his shoulder – stuffed to nearly splitting its seams.

“What’s that you’ve lugged all the way out here?”

The question belongs to Barbara – Jason’s too grumbly at the moment to have any way to articulate a query, let alone one that doesn’t come off as straight up angry.

Dick takes a moment to answer as he sticks his head into the fridge to grab the bright blue bowl Barbara set aside for him. As he sticks the bowl in the microwave and pounds ‘express’ a half dozen times, Dick sticks his thumb under the strap and replies, “It’s stuff for Jason and Tim: clean uniforms for tomorrow, and some PJs for tonight.”

With an accepting nod, Barbara lets it drop.

Jason’s inclined to do the same, albeit with a less accepting tolerance, but Tim’s too perplexed to roll over without asking, “But why?”

Barbara slings an arm around Tim’s shoulders and ruffles his hair. “Because you’re a guest, kiddo,” she tells him. “Just because you didn’t realize you were gonna be here tonight doesn’t mean you’re gonna have to live like a prisoner.”

She releases Tim and heads over to chill with Dick on the island. Tim wobbles where he stands, but as Jason drifts towards the kitchen, Tim toddles after him.

He reaches the island as the microwave beeps and Dick pulls his steaming prize free. He inspects it to make sure his idiotically imprecise method of warming it up made the heat reach all the way through and then stabs a fork right in the center before beginning to shovel it ingloriously into his mouth.
“I can warm up some more if you guys want any seconds,” Dick offers, glancing at Tim with hope filled puppy dog eyes.

Tim blanches – the thought of food, apparently terrifying.

“Nah, we’re good,” Jason supplies so Tim doesn’t have to.

Barbara steps in to help, saying, “Besides, it’s almost bedtime for these two and they do not need a big calorie surge keeping them awake when they’ve got school in the morning.”

Dick shrugs, and keeps right on guzzling his own midnight meal.

“Speaking of bedtime, it’s getting late,” Barbara continues, moving to relieve Dick of the duffle he’s still supporting, “Tim, your shower’s up first since Jason’s gonna hog all the hot water if you let him go ahead of you.”

Barbara digs through the duffle and produces a bundle of clean sleep clothes. Pressing the bundle into Tim’s chest and hardly waiting until his arms come up to secure them in place, she grabs his shoulder and whips him around to face the stairs.

“It’s the first door on the left,” she tells him, “Just passed the edge of the loft area.”

It takes a nudge to get him started, but eventually his little gears hum to life and he stiffly motors his way up the stairs – still a bit baffled as to how he wound up in this situation.

Barbara waits until the sound of the shower starting up roars to life above them and then turns gravely to Nightwing to say, “Facial recognition has officially placed the Tolovis at the Raven often enough for you to bring it to B when you head back out tonight. I can ping the data on the Cave’s system and forward you the location directly.”

Equally seriously, Nightwing nods.

He swallows the bite he’s working through and then asks quietly, “Are you gonna be online at all tonight?”

Barbara pulls in a breath, her shoulders lifting as she legitimately considers just staying offline for the evening. Then she says, “Yeah, I’ll put in a couple hours on coms while checking on the new data we’ve gathered for the serum synthesis once the kiddos hit the sack.”

At that, Jason can’t resist a snort. “You’re not watching porn, Barbie,” he growls, “You don’t have to wait for me and Tim to be banished to bed before doing any real work.”

Barbara slings an affectionate arm around his shoulders and digs her knuckles into his scalp as she grumbles, “Yeah, but if I don’t wait, I’ll have two little gremlins hanging off my elbows and stupidly back-seat hacking all night.”

It’s true enough.
And Jason’s almost smiling as he swats at Barbara in a futile attempt to get her off.

She gives him a kiss on the cheek – noisily smacking her lips to make it just *that* much more mortifying – and only *then* does she release him.

He can almost resign himself to heading straight to bed.

It gets even easier when a sleepy-eyed, damp-haired baby seal appears at the top of the stairs with a baffled little babmi face.

Bedtime it is, then.

And Jason’s actually entirely okay with that.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Cinco De Derby, and always drink responsibly!

Also... I kinda sorta might have another story started in this verse... set between this one and Trading Faces, timeline wise... about Tim reacting to Jason’s death (I know a lot of people are hoping that it's not gonna happen, but I think the character development tumble that happens because of Jason's death is too marvelous to pretend away, and having met Tim earlier is gonna help Jason recover faster, as explained in that chapter of Faces I've already posted...) and kicking B's butt into gear...

The new story is very Tim-centric, but definitely goes into a lot of other perspectives, and I really like it so far, even though it has all of these sweet people in very very /very/ bad head spaces... Interesting head spaces, but quite possibly triggering head spaces. LOTS of angst.

I might post the first chapter of that today as well...
Depending on how my financial standings look as the day's race card at Churchill Downs progresses. XD
Chapter Summary

Tim finishes his sleep over with Jason at the Gordons'.

His day starts out deliriously wonderful, but then he gets down to the real work and makes an unpleasant new discovery.
And an alarming realization strikes before he can do anything about it.

Chapter Notes

<3

You guys are always SO sweet and I'm so glad you're liking the other stories I've caved and started putting up!
No worries, though, this one is still my highest priority. And it WILL continue to be updated as scheduled.

Warning on this chapter: it's mostly fluff and cuteness, but it ends in a kind of cliffhanger... the plot is about to pick up its pace dramatically.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Fifteen: Rule #15 – Don’t Interrupt the Grown-Ups

Tim can acknowledge when he’s out of his depth.

And right now, he can admit that he has absolutely no idea what the framework he’s supposed to be working off of even looks like…

Tim’s never participated in a sleep over before.

Ever.

He’s never even had friends enough to make entertaining the idea of potentially having a sleep over something he might plausibly have daydreamed about.

Tim has no context whatsoever for what he’s apparently about to do.
Or rather, for what he’s currently participating in... because, though it only occurs to him after he’s spent over twenty minutes in the meditational incubator that is a hot shower, he realizes as he gathers up his old clothes and the massive towel he used dry off, that this whole evening is probably what a theoretical slumber party would be like.

So. There's that.

He doesn’t know what to do with the towel he used – though he’s certain that he should not put it back on the hook. He almost didn’t take it off the hook, but having neglected to remember to ask what towel to use prior to getting soaked, he decided that it was less rude to use a towel without permission than to drip a trail of water across the hardwoods.

Tim tries not to be self conscious about the fact that Nightwing brought him his favorite PJs – about the fact that those PJs consist of black pants peppered in tiny yellow Bat Symbols and a red shirt with the robin R in black and yellow emblazoned on his chest.

Tim is a pathetic little fan boy and while he’s mostly come to terms with his own weirdness, but he still doesn’t really want to advertise it in front of the actual people he idolizes... He's never really had people to be self conscious in front of before, and he's quickly coming to realize that the force of the feeling is something he dramatically underestimated.

It takes a monumental amount of mental effort to force himself to head out of the bathroom, but he eventually manages the feat. He makes it to the top of the stairs before he freezes up again – knees locking stiffly into place.

Jason, Barbara, and Nightwing are gathered around the island in the kitchen, almost directly beneath Tim's feet, and they're talking in low tones about something that is both very serious and clearly case related. Tim can’t tell what they’re saying from here, but it’s obvious that they waited to have this discussion until he was not present to be part of it.

He shouldn’t go downstairs. If they see him, they'll stop talking – keeping him off the case is one of the main rationales behind why this sleep over is happening. They're babysitting him because everyone knows he’s not cut out to be with them on the streets and they don't think he knows better than to run headlong into danger.

There’s no possibility that he could feasibly convince them otherwise, so it’s almost entirely his fault that Jason and Barbara have wasted all this time playing rock band. Even if Jason's benched for the night, he could still prove tremendously useful to the Crusade from behind a computer screen and there’s no one better to have supporting them than Barbara...

And it's Tim's fault they’re not helping out tonight, despite having such a high priority case to manage. The Bats are stretched thin to start with, and he’s just one more distraction.
The guilt hits him like a sucker punch. He'd been having so much fun, and spent so much time pretending it would help in the long run, and yet… it’s shameful that he let himself believe the delusion he’d created. It had been so nice, hanging out with them, like real friends…

But they have work to do.

Work that Tim can’t help them with, because wasting the effort to convince them he truly can help would only be a distraction to them.

And if they’re wasting time and effort and attention on worrying about him, they won’t be focused on the case – or on the most important thing of all: protecting each other.

But just as Tim’s coming to the decision to back away from the stairs – to hide for long enough that it lets the Bats get some semblance of work done – Jason looks up and spots him hovering at the edge of the loft.

Tim’s not sure if there’s actually an awkward pause, or if his perception of time just distorts so violently in his sudden panic that it seems like there’s a pause, but after what seems like an eternity after Jason spots him, Barbara is calling his name and telling him to come on down and chuck his old clothes and the wet towel into the laundry room that’s tucked behind the wall in the part of the kitchen with the fridge.

It’s not like Tim can say no without making things even more painfully awkward.

By the time he gets downstairs and is forced to relinquish his hold on the clothes serving to hide the worst of his embarrassing bed time attire’s iconography, Dick has finished his pot roast and is digging through the Gordons’ freezer – apparently searching for ice cream.

Barbara has offered coffee – which makes Tim perk up with possibility – but Dick is vehemently refuting, “Coffee is not dessert, Babs. How do you not have any ice cream? You don’t even have something to replace it! There’s no cookie dough in here, no pie, no chocolate-covered anything, not even a box of like sugary cereal or anything. How do you survive like this?”

With an affectionate eye roll that is startlingly reminiscent of her father’s version of the gesture, Barbara sighs, “Not everyone needs over fifteen hundred milligrams of sugar saturating every liter of their blood – in fact, most people would be considered unhealthy at those levels.”

Conceding a temporary defeat, Nightwing folds himself over the island as Tim tentatively edges towards the closest empty chair to the laundry room door – set right between Barbara and Jason. “Fine,” Dick sighs dramatically, “But I still think you sugar-free-by-choice creatures are just secretly aliens attempting to enforce your bizarre monastic lifestyle of dietary restriction on all us poor unsuspecting earthlings.”

Jason snorts. “Aren’t like half your friends aliens?”

“Maybe,” Dick admits in a whine, “But they like sugar.”
Jason blinks bemusedly at how wholly, complete and utterly, Dick has missed his point.

A crooked grin cracks Jason’s expression and he shoots a conspiratorial glance at Tim as he asks, “So, doesn’t that make you the alien?”

With a chuckle as Dick squeaks with a wordless protest, Barbara adds, “You are dressed up as a character from Kryptonian legend. And you grew up in place where legal IDs and paperwork are all questionable, at best. How sure are you that Haly’s Circus was actually an entirely earthbound enterprise?”

“You people are all just sugar hating heathens,” Dick wails, unflopping from the island’s countertop. Stretching out his joints and muscles in a way that absolutely does not help his case for being a genetically natural earth-made human, Nightwing adds, “Fine, I can tell when I’m not wanted at a party. I guess I’ll just head back out to the cold dark streets with only Mr Grumpy ‘I am the Night’ for company, no more conversation for Nightwing tonight, I suppose… just grunting and brooding and silence and rain.”

“It’s not raining,” Barbara sighs, shaking her head affectionately as she follows Nightwing over to the balcony door to lock it behind him.

“Yet,” Dick corrects emphatically with grim, vehement certainty, “It’s not raining, yet.”

It’s a fair point.

No one can honestly dispute it.

Which means that Nightwing fires his grapple gun and swings off into the misty and mysterious drape of shadows over Gotham’s skyline with an air of both victory and defeat being broadcast through his elegant aerial maneuvering. Tim’s always been impressed with how he can tell such a complicated story through nothing but a back flip, and this time is no different.

Tim sighs after his exit.

It’s only a quick beat that passes before Barbara huffs, “Alrighty, Jason: you’re up for the shower. Tim, you want anything for desert or a bed time snack?”

“No coffee,” Jason cautions firmly as he pushes to his feet with a warning look. He stretches out his broad chest and then trundles towards the stairs.

Barbara repeats her question, saying that sadly, she agrees with Jason because he and Tim have school in the morning. “But is there anything else you want?”

Tim assures her that he’s fine.

“If you’re sure, then it’s officially bed time,” Barbara insists with a bright cheer and a soft smile. “I’ll show you the guest room.”

Tim nods and moves to follow her up the stairs – pouncing on the phone he left resting on the edge of the couch before dinner and then chasing after his hostess.
He’s back to feeling somewhat lost, unsure of exactly what’s happening and what he should be doing about it. But he follows Barbara up the stairs and she opens the door across the hall from the bathroom and leads him into a cozy room that hosts a wall of book cases, a pair of large armoirs clearly used for seasonal storage, and a pair of inviting twin beds.

One of the beds is pushed long-ways against the wall and the other is tucked beneath the window across from the door. Tim could guess which one Jason liked before Barbara pointed out the one beneath the window and says, “That’s Jay’s, so you’re gonna be over here tonight.”

With an agreeable nod, Tim edges towards the one that’s his – temporarily, at least.

“Can I get you anything else before you turn in?”

Tim shakes his head, unable to verbalize anything.

“There’s coffee for you in the morning, and we’ve got bagels and such for breakfast, and your bike’s all set downstairs,” Barbara lists out. “Otherwise, Jason knows where everything is, and if anything else comes up, I’ll just be down the hall, alright?”

Tim gives another nod and manages to squeak out something like a ‘thank you’.

Barbara flashes him another smile, this one warmer – and also more private and reserved in a way Tim can’t quite read.

“It’s nothing, baby bird,” she promises, “You’re one of us, now. That means you'll be trying to beat our helpfulness off with stick before you know it, just ask Jason.”

She gives him a wink and then whirls around and vanishes out the door before he can process her statement.

At a loss of what else to do, Tim clambers into bed and starts checking over the data being gathered by his phone. Predictably, nothing’s pinged at 100% recurrence – it’s extraordinarily unlikely that anything ever will – But there’s a good two-dozen items being logged as present at more than 75% of the data his program has scanned through so far.

He expected that much. It’s likely the number of data items being logged as recurring frequently will drop as more data is scanned, but that it has already isolated and logged this much is proof that he can be helpful.

It’s nothing concrete enough to bother the Bats about, but soon it should solidify into something that is actually worth telling them about.

After running through the night, it should provide legitimately actionable information.
He’s not worried about his battery wimping out, he already has a power pack hooked up to his phone’s case – so it will definitely last through the night – and he’s got two more in his backpack to swap out for tomorrow.

Out of curiosity, Tim taps his way through a selection of the currently flagged data – just to see what kind of recurrences his brute force program has deemed relevant enough to log. So far it's not a lot that’s feasible to act on – the presence and subsequent disappearance of large shipping crates, there’s a few new faces being flagged, and at least three motorized vehicles with active registrations, and what seems to be a group of either military or paramilitary forces in the area exactly six hours prior to the appearances of the Tolovis.

Tim can’t tell much from what he’s got so far, but he can tell that it’s very promising.

He’s planning to go over it all while he’s at school and if something important pops up he’ll be able to let the Bats know about it before they plan their evening patrols. And if he gets anything really solid, he’ll be able to pass it off directly by catching one of the Bats while they’re on patrol and handing over a flash drive with the program itself and the evidence it collected.

Tim thinks it’s a solid plan and he’s almost entirely satisfied with it as he taps back through the pinged data points. Some of the faces being keyed as recurrences are … bothering him. He doesn’t know why exactly, but there’s a definite niggle of something he should know rearing up in his brain when he looks at the faces – one in particular, but with at least two others to a lesser degree.

The unsettling puzzle of it is still distracting him when Jason walks in, wearing far less ridiculous sleep clothes than Tim – same color scheme, black pants red shirt, just without all the Bat-fan logos. And the shirt's a darker red, burgandy, which would’ve made Tim look even pastier than usual, but that brings out the almost olive undertone of Jason's skin.

Tim suddenly feels that vicious self consciousness again, which digs in violently as Jason casts a funny look his way. “You comfy over there, Timmers?”

“Yeah,” Tim chirps with conscious effort not to squeak. “Why?”

Jason huffs and shakes his head, saying with a chuckle, “Just makin' sure you can breathe under all that shit.”

Tim blinks, confused until he watches Jason get settled in his own bed – by selecting a single blanket and pillow by some unknown criteria and then promptly shoving the remainder into a small mountain on the floor by his feet. That's when Tim realizes that Jason had been remarking on his sleeping arrangements and the veritable nest of blankets and pillows he’s created for himself.

Heat crawls up Tim's neck, but it’s fairly easy to push down because Jason’s not looking at him any more.

Instead, he's abusing his pillow – practically beating it into what he considers a comfortable shape – and curling up beneath the one fuzzy blanket he elected to retain.

He curls away from the desk lamp on the night table between them, but he makes no comment about it being on. In fact, he makes no further comment whatsoever before he settles down
and closes his eyes.

Tim has barely managed to comprehend that the dramatic motion of settling was Jason’s way of saying good night when he’s hit with the realization that Jason is already asleep. He blinks at the sense of whiplash and then shrugs into a resigned decision to turn in himself.

Before snuggling down for good, Tim frowns at the lamp. Jason didn’t say he wanted to leave it on, but he also didn’t ask Tim to turn it off… He didn’t say anything, either way.

Frustrated, Tim waffles over whether or not to turn it off for well over a solid minute.

In the end, Tim decides off would be better – because Jason is curled away from the light, and because Tim always sleeps better in pitch black. He still feels a bit guilty as he flips the switch, but he soon forces himself into a fitful sleep where the guilt is not disruptive.

Tim wakes easily when the alarm on his phone goes off after just under five hours of sleep, feeling remarkably rested albeit groggy and distinctly like he’s running late. He is late for his usual schedule, but Barbara's condo is much closer to his school than the Drake Estate – which means he can afford the extra hour of sleep and still be reasonably enough on time to have a cup of coffee. Or two.

Being in an unfamiliar place grinds again on his self consciousness – enough to prompt him to make his bed before he even heads downstairs for coffee. He can’t get dressed first, because the duffel with his clothes is still by the island in the kitchen, and he awkwardly edges downstairs while being as quiet as possible as he pokes around.

Jason is still asleep – still curled up in exactly the same position as he’d been when Tim had gone to sleep – and Barbara probably just went to sleep to start with… Tim doesn’t even know if Gordon’s back yet to worry about.

It takes a long few minutes for Tim to find the coffee.

Tall people are unreasonable, and they have a ridiculous penchant for storing the most important things way higher than anyone could ever explain rationally.

At least it was stored above the coffee maker’s place on the counter, so he could find it, but Tim still has to climb precariously onto the countertop and reach above his head – twisting awkwardly backwards to put the container on the counter before tumbling off to bounce lightly onto the tiled floor in a way that kept his landing as silent as possible.

It’s not an elegant move, Tim can admit, but it is a quiet one.

Unfortunately, it’s not an unobserved one.

As Tim rights his balance and begins to turn back towards the coffee maker, he spots Jason
kicked back against the railing at the foot of the stairs – smirking.

Far too lacking in caffeine to care that he should be mortified, Tim just stutters into his task of prepping the pot and grumbles, “Shut up.”

A chuckle bubbles up in Jason’s throat.

Doesn’t make it all the way to Tim’s ears for a distended few seconds.

Doesn’t wholly register until after Tim’s absorbed the satisfying beep of confirmation that his coffee is beginning to percolate.

It’s *then* that the crawl of heat starts up his neck.

It gets worse when Tim realizes he doesn’t have a mug for his coffee until one appears beneath his nose – held there by Jason, obviously.

“Move,” Jason commands.

Tim blinks into his empty mug. Puzzled.

“You’re blocking the stove.”

Tim shuffles backwards – staying within arms reach of the coffee pot, but angling as far away from the stove as possible. Jason fills the space immediately and begins pulling things out of the cabinet below the island; mixing bowl, measuring cup, whisk, and a flat piece of cast iron which he lays across two of the stove’s burners.

As Tim’s coffee beeps with an alert that the pot is ready, Tim snaps his hand out to grab it. He pours himself a cup, downs half in one scalding hot go, and refills the mug to brimming before he cautiously offers some to Jason – who turns the offer down in favor of acquiring a box of pancake mix from the cabinet where Tim found the coffee.

He also takes a moment to put the coffee back in the cabinet – no countertop clambering required. Jason makes sure to shoot a smirk at Tim to gloat as he manages the feat.

Eggs and milk are retrieved from the fridge as Tim drifts to the far side of the island.

Pancakes appear like magic in the next few minutes.

A small stack is set in front of Tim, along with butter and a bottle of syrup; presented with the clear expectation that he eat them… Tim’s not sure his stomach will submit to that, but he makes a valiant attempt as Jason settles in beside him with a stack that’s easily three times as tall. Jason’s clearly trying not to overwhelm him with the food thing, and Tim really doesn’t want to tell him that it’s not working even a little bit.
Tim fights down two whole pancakes, but he can’t make himself even look at the third.

Jason takes it off his hands without a word – having already downed all of what he’d put on his own plate. He’s in the midst of inhaling it while Tim pours his third full mug of coffee.

Downing half of it, Tim realizes he’s going to be late for school even if he leaves right now – breakfast is time consuming, which is yet another reason that Tim’s never understood the rationale behind bothering with any of it.

He leaves his half-full mug on the counter as he starts digging through the duffle for his uniform. Securing them, Tim heads upstairs at a tip-toeing jog – distinctly aware that, at the very least, Barbara is still sleeping.

Dressed for the day, Tim swaps out the power pack on his phone – checks to make certain his program is still running seamlessly – and then makes his way downstairs again.

Jason’s managed to clean the kitchen up in the time it took Tim to get dressed.

Tim finishes his coffee, feeling anxious. It’s still too early in the morning for him to connect the dots with any reasonable speed, but eventually he realizes what’s bothering is that Jason isn’t going to school yet… which means he could be going to investigate the case while Tim is locked away and cut off from everything in class.

With Nightwing and Batgirl asleep… he wouldn’t even have any back up.

Jason notices Tim’s pause – easily reads his exact thoughts.

“Shove off, baby bird,” Jason growls – clearly insulted. “I’m not gonna do anything stupid like go check out the god damn Raven on my own. Just get your ass to school already.”

Ducking a nod, Tim does as he’s told – feeling remarkably reassured.

Tim’s still worried about Jason, about his clarity of judgement after spending a few nights in the background when Robin could’ve been helping work the case on the streets. But he’s not worried about being actively deceived. He doesn’t think Jason is going to go back on what he’s said now that he’s said it. Tim would be very worried if Jason had dodged around the subject and refused to make a definitive statement that he would not be going to the Raven.

But he hadn’t dodged, he’d made the statement – and made it easily – more insulted that Tim would think to doubt his intelligence like that than bitter about still being benched.

Tim spends the entire bike ride to school going over every detail of the exchange, trying to make absolutely certain that he hadn’t overlooked anything because his coffee hadn’t quite fully kicked in or something. It doesn’t seem like he missed anything.

And he’s able to sit through the dull hours of class time in peace.
At least until lunchtime.

When he checks the data on his phone.

The program is still running smoothly – still wracking up interesting data points – several of which seem to be retaining a recurrence over 85%, and some over 95%.

One of them is a packaging code: [SAP] SYN-DKT xxxx-SS-0591987-BASE-00.

One of them is a face.

A face that Tim feels like he has seen before and now he finally remembers why he’s got a vague recognition of it: he has seen it before. In the skeletal GHOST files he acquired from the one redundancy storage system he stumbled upon with information on the Tolovis.

He’s got dark red hair and it’s combed the same way in the latest picture that’s popped up as it was in a picture he took with Rwen Tolovi. The photo was captioned SSAs Rwen Tolovi and Tavian Ross after successful execution of Operation Foxhole: Honduras.

Tavian Ross.

It’s another name. Another door to open. Another rabbit hole to dig through.

Information they hadn’t had before.

It’s too important to ignore until he gets home tonight.

The packaging code, too, is important to investigate – Tim thinks the coding might be government related. Which means he has two narrow avenues to begin pursuing.

Both of which could give the Bats enough information to keep them just a little bit safer once he’s sussed out the details.

So instead of going to the cafeteria or even just using the computing power of his laptop, or that of the school’s admittedly impressive data stacks, Tim decides to go home. He’s been systematically acquiring and improving tech from DI for years now. His set-up might not include a quantum computer, but it’s still the closest thing he can possibly get to recreating the Batcomputer without breaking into the Cave.

Admittedly, Tim does consider trying to gain access to the Batcomputer, but it would be too much trouble. It would delay his investigation more than it would speed up any of the actual investigating. And probably blow his cover out of the water. So, he bikes straight home.

Gets up to his room.
Boots up his system.

Autogenerates a nesting doll of two dozen heavily encrypted proxy IPs.

This time, instead of passively letting his backdoor programs happenstantially nudge their way into whatever black budget corner of the NSA or Homeland where GHOST surely lurked, Tim decides to just retrace the pathway his facial recognition program forged and hack it by hand to hopefully gain deeper access.

It’s a difficult feat – both getting in and then staying in… the GHOST servers are ridiculously advanced and actively rolling through procedures to kick him out. He ends up using his laptop to run a seek-and-store program while he uses his desktop to focus on keeping the avenues open long enough for that program to actually accomplish anything.

And as soon as the GHOST system trips an alarm on his own system about back tracking through his proxies, Tim pulls out and shuts his whole system down – dead silent, even pulls the power cord on all of his devices, and his router for good measure.

Resets and leaves them off for at least an hour.

Spends that time fretting and trying to make himself eat something – Jason’s disparaging voice is in his head prompting that bit, a demand for a god damn cookie at least echoing vaguely in his brain. He doesn’t have any cookies; he’s never really liked the ones that come prepackaged and his family is not homemaker-oriented enough to bake any.

Mrs Simz bakes cookies on special occasions.

Holdiays, his birthday, the first and last days of school. Things like that.

None of which are occurring this week. Or even this month.

But he does have food.

He makes himself a small peanut butter sandwich – if he eats too much and ruins his dinner, Mrs. Simz will lecture him for at least an hour… which would be an extra hour that could not be spent helping the Bats. So… Just a small sandwich.

By the time he gets back from upstairs that, he feels secure enough to turn his laptop back on – still keeping his router unplugged and keeping his wifi antenna turned off to block any potential stray signals from getting to his system. Just in case.

Because hiding from GHOST is probably a very high priority.

While he’s hiding, he skims through the data collected by his seek-and-store program.

A significant portion of him is elated with his success, with all the new data he wrested from
the black book, unacknowledged branch of the kind of shadow-government agency that is GHOST. There’s a lot of information here that GHOST definitely does not want accessed by the general public. Or anyone – not even just general public, but anyone not subject to iron-clad top-secret government non-disclosure agreements.

Which is why a different part of him is less than thrilled with his success.

The stuff he’s learning is all pretty bad news.

Tavian Ross IS a GHOST agent.

One that is apparently still entirely active with the agency.

There’s no information on what Tavian Ross is doing in Gotham, but it seems like he’s in the midst of running some sort of official operation. It’s all black book, black budget, totally unacknowledged and all of that, which bodes especially poorly for any hope Tim may have had for getting GHOST involved with controlling their own assets.

Hopefully, the reason Tavian Ross is in Gotham is that GHOST is already trying to clean up the mess that exists with the Tolovi Trio running free.

Unfortunately, Tim thinks it might have more to do with the shipping crates.

And that it’s Tavian Ross and those crates that have brought the Tolovis to Gotham, rather than it being the other way around.

The [SAP] part of the coding is government. It stands for ‘Special Allocation Project’ which is how the regular branches of the NSA and Homeland Security reference the agencies like GHOST when expending taxpayer funds and resources on activities that will never make it to being reviewed in the light of day.

Tim thinks that’s what the Tolovis are in Gotham for – to acquire (or reacquire, if their assertions about retrieving something that was stolen from them are to be believed) whatever is inside those shipping crates.

In cautiously turning his phone back on, he checks the data on his brute force recurrence program one more time. By now, it’s gone through every known appearance of all three of the Tolovis. Nothing shows up at 100% of the scenes, but the shipping code shows up at 95%, and the facial recognition places Tavian Ross at 85% of the scenes within four hours on either side of the appearance of a Tolovi on the scene. That number rises to 95% at any scene where all three Tolovis show up, drops to about 75% if it’s only Shankar or Xansa. It edges closer to 99% if the sole Tolovi on site is Rwen – the timeline also contracts to being a range of two hours on either side of Rwen’s appearance instead of four.

It’s clear that Rwen Tolovi and Tavian Ross have an extensive history between them, they were clearly in the same military squad for at least a while, and now it seems there’s a very strong grudge of some sort tying them together.

Tim hopes that’s a good thing.

At the very least, he hopes it means something like mutually assured destruction if the pair of
them wind up in the same place at the same time. If this is a fight between those two, Tim hopes they can come to a head sooner rather than later – in a way that ensures the Bats are kept well away from it as it unfolds. Just let the grown-ups duke it out alone.

It’s a plausible, almost reasonable hope.

Tavian Ross is hanging out in Chinatown, as well.

Not at the Raven, but at what seems to be another night club.

They’re close enough together to make it possible for them to simply happen across each other. They’re also close enough to make it obvious that neither party has access to any kind of advanced facial recognition tech, or even to a reasonable array of security feeds.

Which is fortunate. Probably.

These crooks are doing things the old-fashioned way. By hand, essentially.

And no one in *Gotham’s* Chinatown is gonna be talking about any of it.

Chinatown’s residents are more famed for being tight lipped about the on-goings – criminal or otherwise – of their neighborhood than even those living in Crime Alley or on Park Row, and Gotham’s residents in general are a secret saving bunch from the start. So, even if the Tolovis, or Ross, or any other current GHOST agents, or former agents currently operating in the area are actively asking questions about any sightings of the others… they’re not going to be getting anything close to accurate information.

Home court advantage to the Bats.

They know this ground, and the people that have claimed it as their home.

Tim is almost starting to feel confident about it by the time Mrs Simz arrives to give the house it’s daily once-over of cleaning and to make Tim dinner. He’s able to blather on for over an hour about the school project he supposedly spent last night working on – using legitimate details of the evening as his story goes into the antics they got up to after their homework period was over and done with.

Mrs. Simz is clearly pleased as the meal wraps up.

She’s very supportive of Tim’s budding new friendship.

To the point that she recommends that Tim return the sleep over favor this weekend, by inviting Jason over purely for a play date / slumber party.

Tim thinks it might be a decent idea.

Jason would enjoy actually getting to *use* the selection of video games he’d been awed over this past Saturday… Dick and Barbara might even like to participate in the antics – assuming that this
case they’re working on gets wrapped up and nothing new pops up.

The brief bubble of warmth, and almost excitement, that had suddenly swelled to fill his chest bursts. He’d let himself get way too far ahead of reality at the thought of another evening devoted solely to fun and games with the Bats.

They have jobs to do.

Important, dangerous, necessary jobs.

That Tim has no right to get in the way of them doing.

He’s already interfered enough.

Tim does have to tell them about what he’s learned about Tavian Ross and what he has to do with those shipping crates that are apparently the goal of the Tolovis.

But he can do that easily enough tonight, it’s just a simple data handoff. He doesn’t want to pass the information over a network – heavily encrypted or otherwise – so he’ll load it all onto a portable hard drive and physically hand it to one of the Bats once they head out on patrol. Just like he’d planned to initially even though he hadn’t been certain he’d find anything genuinely worth reporting to them.

With Tim’s social media tracers and his own first hand experience with intercepting them from a distance, it shouldn’t be too hard to arrange a face to face with Nightwing or Robin.

He’s not entirely certain if Batgirl will be patrolling.

The way the others were talking last night, Tim thinks she might be taking a few nights off – or at least off the streets. He has no doubt that she’s still dedicated to running their technical operations, and there’s no one he’d trust more to manage it, but he is a bit worried…

Mostly, he’s worried because he is so precariously involved with the Bats that he doesn’t want to push his luck by asking if she’s okay.

He can tell something’s up, and he can’t ask about it. So, he’s worried. But only mildly.

Tim considers the possible risks with contacting her at home so he doesn’t have to plan any kind of carefully coordinated intercept, but if Commissioner Gordon is home when he gets there… Tim arriving on his doorstep at midnight with a portable hard drive will lead to serious and terribly complicated questions Tim will not want to answer.

So that possibility is out.

Coventry intercept it is.

Mrs. Simz leaves him for the evening by nine, perfectly satisfied that Tim is doing well and will behave better than any other child she’s ever looked after.

Tim’s hopeful to keep it that way.
It’s so much easier to break the rules when there’s no one checking up to make sure he’s following them – when he’s just assumed to be behaving.

He checks his phone again as he gets ready to head out to Midtown to intercept the Bats – no matter what’s happening, unless something truly dramatic occurs, they’ll at least have to pass through the Midtown area. What he finds on his phone makes his blood run cold.

It’s Spoiler.

She’s out again.

And the twitter snap he’s looking at shows her standing next to a shipping crate with a perplexed expression on her face. The shipping crate has a terrifyingly familiar code on the label.

[SAP] SYN-DKT xxxx-SS-0591987-BASE-00.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading and commenting and just being generally epic.

Next Time: Dick winds up in the midst of a Big Brother-ing crisis.
Chapter Summary

Dick wants SO BADLY to be a good big brother.

He's really feeling the pressure.

It's hard to know where the line is... what makes it OVER-protective of his Family, OVER-aggressive against those who would harm his Family, OVER-zealous about keeping his own little world safe...

Especially when things go wrong.

Chapter Notes

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Happy Royal Wedding! (Yay, Harry & Megan!)
***
Happy Preakness! (Come on, Justified!)
***
To Celebrate: chapter up early!

We're jumping back in time by a fair bit (to just after Nightwing leaves Babs, Jay, & Tim to their sleepover), and then quickly playing catch up with Dick's PoV.

Warning: It's another cliff hanger people, almost all of them between here and the end probably will be...

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixteen: Rule #16 – Exercise Restraint

Batman is even more brooding than usual after Nightwing brings him Barbara’s information about the Tolovis hanging out in the Chinatown night club known as the Raven.

They do not approach the building that night, but they get close enough to identify the structure – and to clock the goings and comings of a few people who, by the reactions of the bouncers, were obviously notable figures in the Tolovi enterprise. They even spotted the Tolovis themselves, all three ventured out and returned at least once during the three and a half hours Nightwing and Batman spent watching the Raven’s doors.
There’s a lot of movement.

Constant, systematized activity.

Whatever operations are being run out of the Raven, they’re extensive and organized.

Barbara’s babysitting Jason and Tim, but she’s still running several automated analysis programs in an attempt to uncover and isolate the Tolovis’ current goal. If the Bats can figure out what the Tolovis want in Gotham, they can either get it to them right away – trade it on the direct agreement that they leave the city immediately and do not return – or they can have the advantage when stepping in to block them unequivocally from their objective.

Dick is hoping very strongly for the former.

As much as he would like to beat the Tolovis sideways for having apparently brought a dangerous drug into Gotham – and obviously bearing no remorse for the action – Dick is aware of his own limitations. The exact degree to which the Bats lost their little painfully one-sided scuffle in the alley last night in Chinatown proves that Dick will not be able to get his own revenge – at the very least, he’ll need to call the Titans if he’s going to take on the Tolovis again.

While Bruce is probably at least partly-metahuman somehow, Dick is only human. Even if his family jokes about him being some secret alien hybrid, he is genuinely only human. He’s a well-trained, extra-strong-and-bendy human, but human nonetheless – which means that no matter how much he may want to charge in and kick butt and arrest these assholes, he has to move carefully or the odds of him being killed in the attempt immediately skyrocket.

Dick knows that, in the midst of his silent brooding, Bruce is combatting a tangle of very similar thoughts. Bruce would like nothing more than to smash a few of the Tolovis’ teeth out – they hurt his kids, after all, and perhaps more importantly, they’re still in the process of poisoning his city – but he’s older and wiser than Dick, and knows far better than to rush in recklessly. Batman might have a reputation for invulnerability, but Alfred, Dr Leslie Thompkins, and a slew of other discreet and well-compensated medical professionals working out of 24/hr clinics, know otherwise.

Batman can take a beating better than any non-enhanced person Dick has ever encountered, but he is still a non-enhanced, entirely human person. And the Tolovis’ are not.

Justice League involvement may be necessary.

Scratch that. Their involvement is necessary.

Even if Dick doesn’t like it, or want to admit it.

Superman can probably take the Tolovis in a fight, but he’s likely the only one truly strong
enough to handle it. The other League members would be helpful for assists, but having already fought them directly once… Dick knows that even Diana’s strength is likely not an level match-up to the Tolovis – and Wonder Woman is a respectable warrior who would believe her opponent willing to fight fair until the very instant they chose to cheat… The Tolovis would not hesitate to kill her with that kind of opening – at least, Dick *thinks* they wouldn’t.

He doesn’t actually know enough about their histories to be entirely certain.

But it seems likely.

The Bats know who the Tolovis are, but only to a very basic extent. Even Batman’s groundwork is not enough to truly gain insight. At the moment, their only hope for gaining new information – legitimately helpful information about the Tolovis’ goals and histories – is found in Barbara’s hacking abilities.

And she’s coming up mostly dry.

A few scary details in some deeply buried, heavily redacted old mission reports.

After Jason and Tim were sent to bed, she dove right into attempting to find more information on the Tolovis’ past employment with a shadowy sub-agency known as GHOST and most of what she’s found is that GHOST does not officially exist – and is only referenced unofficially on very rare occasions.

“It’s very clear that the Tolovis’ have broken with GHOST, but there’s no formal reports on the instances of separation or on any circumstances around their operations prior to that point. There’s only a few reports of *incidents* prior to their separations – such as Rwen killing everyone at the facility he was in charge of, but there seems to be continued operations with GHOST dated after that, so it was *not* the impetus for separation,” she explains as Batman and Nightwing regroup on the very same Chinatown Gate from which Jason first spotted the Tolovis.

Dick can hardly believe that development occurred only last night.

He’s so distracted, he almost misses it as Barbara continues to say, “The only thing I’ve been able to find that’s *new* is a few references the Tolovis having tense relations pre-retirement with a Special Allocations Project, that has GHOST insignia on the letterhead. But first, get this: the GHOST insignia is a screaming eagle perched on top of a flaming skull – not even kidding.”

“*Batgirl,*” Bruce chastises in the deep growl that used to make Dick quake in his boots – that still does, on occasion…

She huffs, “*Fine,*” she relents, having wanted to break the tension with a lighthearted moment instead of owning up to the unpleasantries of the data she’s found. “The SAP is referenced as something called ‘Project Vertigo’ and it looks like some sort of super-soldier program – the kind of ultra-experimental, *not* FDA-Approved, kind of research program that’s straight out of those ridiculous Captain America comic books ‘Wing loves.’

“What does that mean for us?*"
Dick is the one who asks it aloud, knowing that Bruce’s version of the question is to wait in pressuring silence until Barbara volunteers an answer – having psychically figured out what it is he wants to know.

“It means that not only are the Tolovi’s enhanced, the science that created them is on very shaky ground,” Barbara explains heavily. “It means there’s almost no way of knowing what their exact abilities are – or how environmental factors affect them. Just one of the brothers took out over four hundred people in a day, B, by hand. Now, I’ll admit that half of them were scientists, but the other half… the security forces guarding GHOST facilities seem to retire into the Green Berets on a regular basis. We need to get the League involved.”

Batman draws a slow breath into his lungs, chest silently expanding to its full capacity beneath the layers of Kevlar, Dyneema flex-foam, and metal plating of his armor.

“I will contact them in the morning,” Bruce declares, eventually.

He doesn’t want to – that much is obvious. Bruce rarely involves the League in any home-grown affairs, preferring to keep Gotham’s problems in Gotham’s hands.

Typically, Dick agrees with the strategy.

No one from outside of Gotham could understand her well enough to finesse the proper solutions out of the problematic scenarios she presents. Most of the heroes who know anything about Gotham are surprised the city is still standing – even Oliver Queen is baffled, and his family is a huge part of the reason that Starling City is, both, half in utter ruins, and half running smoothly with a couple of Michelin Five Stars continuing to draw in tourists despite the nationally recognized dangers...

Gotham is a grin-and-bear-it city, and Gothamites are a tough crowd, gritty and determined and proud and private. Gotham has not, and likely will not, fracture or collapse the way Starling has – and Gotham certainly will not be descending on the spiral of chaos that Starling is certainly going to face in the fairly near future.

Gotham needs to be handled with the kind of respect fit for veteran warriors.

Diana once compared the city to Themiscrya – a darker version, filled with hurt and sadness instead of joy and kindness, but an honorable example of humanity’s steadfast designs.

Bruce abjectly hates having the League interfere with Gotham’s affairs.

But if even Dick can see the necessity for their involvement… the idea must have occurred to Bruce long ago.

A flare of frustration rises in Dick at the fact Bruce didn’t take this step earlier. If he’d suspected they were chasing enhanced persons, had called in a few enhanced allies of their own… perhaps the whole debacle in confronting the Tolovis last night could have been avoided.

Part of it is Dick’s own brusied ego at being so thoroughly and easily trounced. Part of it is the lingering ache of worry that it could’ve gone so much more poorly than it did – it now seems like a miracle that all three of the young Bats walked away without major injury.
Regardless, League involvement is definitely necessary.

And Dick focuses on how he’s glad that Bruce is admitting that – and taking steps to facilitate it – instead of fixating on his frustration that it didn’t happen sooner.

It helps.

With the rest of the city proving quiet, Bruce decides to wrap up patrol just before four in the morning and they make it back to Wayne Manor before dawn even begins to threaten its break over the horizon.

Dick throws himself into bed and tries not to worry.

It doesn’t work terribly well, but he at least gets a bit of much needed physical recovery.

He wakes up on Wednesday feeling cold… not quite hollow with worry, per se, but definitely anxious and unsettled.

It doesn’t help that Jason spent the night at Barbara’s, because Dick can’t even ask Alfred how his brother seems to be fairing… He can check the bio tracker built into the watch that also serves as Jason’s emergency beacon – the gps shows he’s at school already and the embedded pulse-rate, oxygenation, and stress hormone meters show that he’s not in any kind of notable immediate-danger related distress. Though, he does seem a bit understandably stressed.

At this point, they all are… and it would be more worrisome if he weren’t stressed.

Unfortunately, Dick can’t do the same kind of check for Tim.

They should definitely consider getting him an emergency beacon at the very least, and hopefully they can get him to wear a bio tracker… Dick doesn’t know how they’ll hide that one from Bruce, but still… Honestly, he’s not even sure they need to hide it. Bruce is already halfway convinced that Tim needs to be adopted into the Bat-clan. Dick wouldn’t put it passed him to already have a strategy formed to convince Tim to wear the tracker…

Still, for now, all Dick can do is check on the tracker Jason put on Tim’s bike as he shovels cereal into his mouth. The tracker shows Tim’s bike parked outside his school.

Dick can only make assumptions and use them to convince himself that Timmy’s fine.

A second bowl of cereal and a mug of heavily sweetened coffee help settle his stomach.

Then he goes downstairs to find Bruce hunched over the computer in the Cave.

The moment Dick gets into easy ear-shot, without even turning around, Bruce announces with his usual grim drama, “Clark and Diana will be here by noon tomorrow.”
With a slow, weighted nod, Dick accepts the declaration.

Then he asks, “Should I see if the Titans are available for an assist?”

Bruce gives a slow breath – a sign that he’s already considered the question and has an answer, but is evaluating the details one last time before he cements the decision into a definitive statement.

“No,” he settles on. “We don’t want to attract any more attention to this than necessary. The more people that get involved, especially those outside the local Community, the higher the likelihood of someone getting hurt in the confusion of an ill-conceived encounter.”

Nodding assent, Dick mentions, “I still have to give them an update. I was supposed to be back in California by now. When I told them I was extending the trip I only said a few days, but I’m not leaving until Monday, at least.”

This makes Bruce shift quizzically. He still doesn’t turn around, but he’s clearly watching Dick’s reflection in one of the darkened screens on the edge of the Bat Computer’s extensive array. Again, Dick waits hopefully – holding out for Bruce to make an attempt at being human and actually ask his son about his intentions.

He doesn’t, but he is attentive, and Dick plows onward undeterred.

“With Super Man and Wonder Woman joining us, we should be able to wrap the case up by Friday – assuming the Tolovis and the new drug and everything is all tied together like we think it is – but I wanna have a Family Weekend,” Dick announces.

The stiffness in Bruce’s shoulders is telling of near-panic at the idea.

It would be hilarious if it weren’t so frustrating.

“This has been a long, hard case and it’ll be good to reconnect as a Family instead of just teammates, and it’ll help the team work in the long run,” Dick validates.

Bruce and the social dynamics of legitimate team-building have never meshed well; that much Dick had figured out without Alfred having to tell him about it point blank. This has always been an avenue Dick excelled in – being that the Circus was unquestionably the ultimate team/family-building experiment. He’d learned enough in his early childhood to know what was necessary to keep a group glued to each other with genuine connection.

He may have botched it a few times in trying to force the same sort of bonding from the Circus onto his new family members at Wayne Manor, but the basic principles remained the same, even if the degree of force and the exact execution needed to differ.

The current panic Bruce is exhibiting is almost understandable after the last attempt Dick made – forcing a celebration of Jason’s birthday on him last August. But Dick knows Jason better now, knows how he functions in relation to Bruce better, and knows better than to plan anything extravagant. Or, honestly, to plan anything without consulting Barbara first.

“It’ll probably just be a movie night, or something,” Dick soothes, but he remains steadfastly adamant that something Family oriented will happen this weekend.
They are *way* past overdue for it.

Bruce grunts, officially giving his grudging approval, and qualifies, “Only if the case *does* get wrapped up cleanly.”

Feeling a smile creep across his face, Dick agrees, “Of course.”

He forces down the bubble of warm excitement in his gut, refusing to let his optimism get too far ahead of itself. It’s only Wednesday afternoon. A lot can happen between now and Friday, and while Dick doesn’t want to think about anything bad that could happen he also knows that ignoring that possibility is a great way to be blindsided by a worst case scenario.

Resolutely refocused, Dick asks, “So whatcha workin’ on down here?”

“Studying the layout of the Raven to figure out where the Tolovis’ stockpile of the new drug is being kept,” Bruce states. “And devising a way to safely isolate it, and to seal in the Tolovis to keep them from escaping without endangering the crowd of club-goers.”

“Babs said there’s no surveilence cameras inside,” Dick commiserates. “It’s gonna be impossible to tell how the crowd will react to evacuation stimuli without getting eyes inside.”

“There are promotional photographs that depict the interior layout,” Bruce reasons. His tone is not hesitant, but it’s also not entirely satisfied with utter confidence.

“It’s not the same,” Dick intuits. “Promos are shot when the club is empty. Those pics won’t tell you where the clusters form or how they move as the music shifts.”

Bruce doesn’t correct him, so he must have guessed it right.

Pausing briefly to consider the options, Dick muses, “You know, if you patrol with Robin tonight, BG and I could make a plain-clothes visit to gather intel.”

Predictably, Bruce shuts the idea down immediately. “Absolutely not. That is an absurd risk to take. Even if you stay strictly to the public areas, you’ll still be too close to the Tolovis directly. The risk that they will recognize the both of you far outweighs the benefits of gaining a limited look inside their base.”

“We were in costume the last time they saw us,” Dick points out.

“Your costumes aren’t infallible,” Bruce decrees.

It’s frustrating that Bruce can just declare a verdict like that, no explanation. Dick shifts his stance and tries to figure out how to explain that to his mentor without simply shouting at him that his blanket ruling is just not good enough.

“We won’t be seen, we won’t draw any attention,” Dick pushes. “We’d just get inside, spend a few hours as legitimate patrons, and leave. Maybe record a bit of eye-cam footage, possibly stick an AV Bat Bug on a pillar or two. It would be fine, and give us a live look inside.”

The anxiety thrumming through Bruce at the thought of Dick and Barbara spending an evening so close to such dangerous people as the Tolovis, while almost entirely unarmed, shows
itself in how he elaborates, “The Tolovis are trained in urban military subterfuge. They aren’t going to assume that someone who demonstrates an interest in their activities is a casual observer. If you’ve found them at all, it means you’re actively investigating them, and they’re good enough to know that the number of people who could viably attempt to investigate them is small – small enough to connect Dick and Barbara to Nightwing and Batgirl.”

Dick appreciates the explanation, however curtly it was given.

It’s far more insight than Bruce usually gives on his feelings.

Part of it, Dick knows, that he’s trying to teach Dick how to effectively evaluate his opponents – the military training in subterfuge is something that Dick would’ve overlooked in terms of how the Tolovis would interpret even a vague interest in their activities.

Bruce wants to be a mentor, an instructor, to teach Dick what he needs to know to be a truly successful vigilante.

And Dick appreciates that.

But it’s still frustrating that Dick’s argument of not being seen has been entirely ignored, that Bruce completely dismissed the idea of Dick and Barbara getting in and out as totally legitimate patrons – who just happen to be trained in how to remember exactly what they saw.

Holding himself back from snapping at Bruce that he and Barbara know what they’re doing is difficult, but Dick manages. Barely.

He huffs.

“Fine, we won’t go,” Dick relents.

The tension in Bruce’s shoulders eases microscopically, just enough for Dick to see it and connect it to the anxiety Bruce must be feeling about letting him, letting any of them participate in the case to begin with… Dick forces himself to think about how he would feel if Tim suggested a plain-clothes operation that would put him as close to the Tolovis as a jaunt to the Raven would put him and Barbara.

It would not be pretty.

Dick is not above admitting that if Tim had even proposed it as a thought experiment, Dick’s reaction would probably be to wrap Tim up in a blanket and lock him inside his closet for the next six months or so.

Hell, if Jason proposed it, Dick would want to burrito him in blankets and never let him leave the house again.

Even so, thinking of Jason…

“Is Robin still benched?”

“Yes.”

Bruce’s reply is immediate, indisputable.
Dick sighs. “You can’t just keep sticking him on the sidelines because you think he’s reckless,” Dick explains. “All that’s gonna do is make him more aggressive about participating when you actually let him get involved. He’s gonna stop proposing ideas and just start running with them, even the bad ones – especially the bad ones.”

Bruce lets his wrists drop to rest on the edge of the Bat Computer console, carefully considering Dick’s statement. It’s a human-behavior thing, not a concrete data thing – and while Jason’s not exactly irrational, he’s more like directly anti-rational when he’s frustrated and facing a blank wall of resistance.

It’s taken a long stretch of careful study for Dick to scrape the surface of understanding Jason’s psychology – and Dick has always prided himself on his effortless people skills.

For Bruce… the assessment is likely hard to swallow.

He knows Jason is a smart kid, respects that aspect of him tremendously. So it’s difficult for Bruce to comprehend why Jason would actively make the stupid decision over the smart one – why punishing him for that behavior is only going to exacerbate the problem.

But if Dick is patient, if he keeps explaining it over and over using different words and compounding examples, Bruce may eventually grasp the concept.

Possibly.

“We’ll need every cape on hand that won’t actively draw outside attention for any confrontation we make tomorrow,” Bruce concedes eventually.

It’s not exactly an admission that Dick may have a point, but it is a step towards acceptance – a step towards getting Jason back on patrol and actively involved in a way that will keep him feeling valued and included and like he’s actually part of a team that cares he’s there.

“I’ll tell Jay if you want me to, but I think he’d like hearing it from you,” Dick mentions.

He can feel Bruce frown as his mentor turns the bulk of his attention back to his screens and the Raven’s blueprints. “The messenger does not change the information,” Bruce comments.

Dick restrains his sigh.

Picking his battles, choosing the smaller fights, winning one point and walking away, that is how Dick has begun managing his relationship with his evolving family and thus far it seems to be working much better than his previous methods… but it’s hard to make himself do it.

“I’m gonna take a nap before dinner,” Dick announces, dodging in to sling an arm around Bruce’s shoulders and give him a quick squeeze.

Bruce with his super-ninja training, manages to lift a hand before Dick withdraws to give Dick’s forearm a squeeze in return – still stiff with physical affection, and unsure of how to initiate it, but willing to return it with earnest regard. Bruce wants to do right by him, and by Jason, and Dick can see the effort Bruce puts into it – when he steps back and wrests his own emotions out of the equation.

Withdrawing his arm, Dick feels at least moderately satisfied as he makes his way back upstairs – which is about all he thinks worth hoping for while Bruce is stressed with a difficult, dangerous, achingly drawn-out case.
Dick sticks his head into Jason’s room with a chipper hello that is ignored.

That piques Dick’s curiosity. And concern.

Typically, sticking his head into Jason’s room without knocking either gets something thrown at his head – with ever improving accuracy – or he’s met with a blacked out computer screen and deeply offended grumbles.

“Whatcha workin’ on, Jaybird,” Dick asks, folding himself over the back of Jason’s chair.

Jason just grunts, it’s a little huff that’s probably telling in his unique version of broody-man’s English, but Dick can hardly tell one grunt from another. It would make him smile for how ridiculously similar to Bruce’s version of language it is if he weren’t already so frustrated by trying to learn how to speak it.

Instead of trying to interpret the grunt, Dick tries to decipher what he’s looking at on Jason’s screen. It’s a map – very local, literally just the area within a three mile radius of Wayne Manor – with the blip of a GPS tracker blinking away in the lower right corner.

“Jason, is that Tim’s house?”

Another grunt. This one, probably, an affirmative.

“Is there a reason you’re watching it like a KGB fanboy?”

Jason frowns. Rolls his eyes in a smooth motion that manages to also send a glare at Dick – it’s mild, though, just annoyance and nothing truly vitriolic.

“He skipped out on class today,” Jason explains slowly as Dick continues to lean on his chair, “Just cut and run in the middle of the day, for no reason – for no obvious reason.”

“You think he has one?”

Jason’s brow crinkles and he side-eyes Dick like he’s being ridiculous to think Tim doesn’t have to have a reason to cut class.

Which makes sense. Dick probably is being ridiculous.

Tim seems like the kind of kid who always has a reason for doing things. Sometimes those reasons are bad reasons, like staking out a rooftop in the middle of downtown Gotham at midnight in order to snap a few pics of the local capes in action, but there always is a reason.

Questionable logic, but reason.

“What do you think his reason is?”

Jason grunts again.
Which is just oh so elucidating.

Dick sighs.

“If you’re worried about it, you can probably go over to his place after dinner,” Dick brightly suggests. “Alfred might even drive you there.”

Jason snorts. “Alf’s running coms for you while Barbie continues her totally illegal hacking spree, idiot. I’ll just walk.”

Dick’ll take the insult if Jason’ll take his suggestion. Having him head over to keep an eye on Tim is a fantastic idea, that’ll probably keep them both out of trouble.

It’ll also keep Jason’s mind off the fact that Robin is still benched. Which means that Bruce is going to un-bench him tomorrow is a detail Dick doen’t need to explain – because mentioning it at all right now will only serve to distract him from Tim by making him brood.

So Dick doesn’t have to bring it up, Tim and Jason will keep each other occupied, and Bruce himself gets to tell Jason that he’s off the bench tommorrow.

Win-win-win, all around.

Dick peels himself off Jason’s chair and ruffles his adoptive brother’s hair.

“Just promise me you’re not just gonna stare at that little dot until dinner time, okay?”

Jason gives another grunt, this one accompanied by a shrug that is not at all promising.

Dick sighs again.

“Whelp, I’ll be taking a nap if you need me,” he mentions casually, heading towards Jason’s door. All Dick can do is hope that Jason eventually feels comfortable asking for his help.

If Jason can keep Tim out of trouble, and Dick can keep Jason out of trouble, then maybe they can all stay safe enough to get Bruce to lighten up a little.

Maybe.

Dick has always been a dreamer.

Everything will work out however it will regardless, so he sees no point in being anything but positive about the potential possibilities.

Dick leaves Jason to his stalkery and makes his way to his own room, flops into bed and starts flicking through his phone. Loads up a mindless video game that will let his brain and body rest – it’s as close to legit meditation as Dick can get at this point. He’s gotten better doing it the right
way – working with Raven in Titans’ Tower has helped tremendously – but he still fidgets and gets antsy and thinks himself into a hole that is not relaxing.

But he can zen out on tetris all day.

Dick relaxes himself into a doze that’s actually restful and he’s perfectly able to rouse when Alfred sounds the warning gong for dinner.

That echoing boom had damn near scared him out of his socks the first good dozen times he’d heard it, but now it makes his muscles zing with that wonderful feeling of home.

Dinner itself is uneventful, as are the first forty minutes of the patrol they embark on about an hour afterwards.

And then Barbara pops up in his ear saying, “Don’t react. We’re private. Tim just spent his afternoon hacking the NSA. Deep. Then he pulled out and went dark. Like unplugged everything in his entire house that connects to the internet dark. He’s been offline for two hours and his phone just turned back on. For five minutes. And now it’s dark again.”

Dick doesn’t even let his breathing shift.

Bruce would notice, even while he’s distracted by scanning the streets of the Fashion District for any hints of criminal activity.

“Camera to the north, right across the intersection,” Barbara continues with a whine of pained resignation in her voice, “Show of fingers, how worried should I be?”

Carefully adjusting his posture in the way he usually doesn when he can’t sit still, Dick shifts to show his hand to the camera Barbara referenced – and hide it from Bruce.

Then he slowly and deliberately taps each of the fingers on his right hand to his thumb.

Twice.

Barbara groans.

“Stand by.”

A beep disconnects their private line and spins some sort of story over the main com that will take Batman to the West Side while sending Nightwing north. Dick can’t hear it over his bulding panic and the force of will it takes to keep his heart rate from kicking up wildly.

Bruce looks to Dick and nods – the Bat version of well-wishing – and then peals off to the west disappearing into the skyline’s shadows within a single shot of his grapple.

A beep in his ear alerts him to the fact that Babs has taken their conversation private again.

“So… why should I be worried?”

“I dunno exactly, but Jason’s been stalking Tim’s tracker since he got home from school today,” Dick explains. “Jason said Tim cut class halfway through the school day.”
“Do we know what he was doing out of class?”

“Jason might,” Dick suggests, feeling a bit of helplessness creep into his lungs. “Can you tell what he was looking at while he was hacking?”

Barbara sighs. Dick is learning about computers, but he’s not the natural Jason was when introduced to the subject. Dick can use all kinds of tech, can intuit how it functions and how those functions can be applied to crime fighting, but he’s not the best with making tech, or with manipulating it from the inside.

“I possibly could, if his phone or laptop or computer was turned on, but even then it would only be a maybe,” Barbara laments. “With everything off, I can’t tell anything. In some ways that’s good. It means the NSA and Homeland and whoever can’t backtrace him from his hack and if he switches up his IP like I think he does while he’s hacking government agencies, they’ll never find him. But it also means that we’re in the dark about what he’s doing too. I just texted Jason, he should be joining us on coms soon.”

“If he has one with him,” Dick mutters. “He was gonna take a walk over to Tim’s place after dinner, I dunno when he set off.”

“Dude, seriously, it does not take that god damn long to fucking walk here,” Jason’s voice grouses suddenly. “Tim’s gone, by the way, his bike’s halfway to Coventry according to my phone and it’s gonna take a bit to get there without a motor.”

“Well, I’ve got a bike, but I’m twice as far away, so even with the motorcycle, I’m still at least twenty minutes out,” Dick comments, starting to swing his way towards his stash.

Jason curses and his breathing changes rhythm as he picks up into a jog. “So, Barbie, you got any wheels stashed nearby?”

There’s a long pause. Then Barbara sighs and says, “I’ll ping you an address. There’s a dirt bike in the shed out back, combo on the lock is 11-42-23. Don’t break it.”

Jason chuckles but it’s clear he’s running too hard to have any air in his lungs to reply.

A low beep sounds and Dick knows Barb’s cut them an even more private corner. She’s speaking in a low hiss as she demands, “I swear to god, Dick, you had better make it there before Jason does or I’m backtracking immediately and calling Bruce in on this. If Jaybird and Tim aren’t in bed in half an hour, we are all in deep shit. I am not explaining any of this idiocy to Alfred if they get themselves hurt.”

Dick winces and steps up his pace. His bike is fast enough to beat Jason, but he has to get to it first. And Dick is in full agreement with Barbara about not wanting to explain this to Alfred, about not wanting them to get hurt and therefore needing to explain this to Alfred.

Dick makes it to where he has a bike stashed faster than he would’ve believed possible, and then he pushed the Night Cycle faster than it really should’ve been safe to go – taking corners with an acrobat’s daring.

And, to tell the truth, he probably enjoys it more than he should’ve.

Any cheer he felt from the break neck ride evaporates as he turns into the parking lot of a 24 hour donut place and promptly has to swerve so hard the bike nearly flips out from under him as a crazy person draped in a purple bedsheet falls out of the sky in front of him.
It’s a girl, Dick realizes as he fights the bike to swirl around him and land both its wheels back on the tarmac. It’s a young girl, and she’s crying.

“You’re Nightwing, right? You can save him, you have to save him,” she shouts at him as he tries to gain his bearings. “It’s my fault they took him.”

“Who?” Dick asks, grabbing the girl by her elbows to hold her steady as dread sinks into his gut. “Who did they take, and who are ‘they’?”

“They took the kid who sometimes comes to hang out with me, um, I think his name is Tom? Maybe Tim? We don’t really talk about that,” she explains, sealing in the dread and making Dick’s lungs clench up. “I don’t know who the guys are that took them.”

Barbara is in Dick’s ear to prompt, “Ask her if the guys had black feather tattoos.”

Dick follows orders and learns that the girl wasn’t actually present when Tim was taken.

That she learned about it a few minutes ago because of a phone call from Robin.

Dick isn’t sure if that’s good news or not.

It’s good, because this girl wasn’t there – because she’d likely just be another kidnapping victim if she had been present – but it’s also not good, because now they’re running blind.

And Jason is…. Robin is…

Dick sighs. “Where’s Jason?”

“Almost halfway to Chinatown, unresponsive on coms,” Barbara huffs. She doesn’t sound as pissed as he expected though, she sounds distracted… occupied. A moment later she muses, “I think he stuck another tracker on Tim somehow. He might even be using the com he’s got to do it… I might… be able to get a location off it…”

There’s a pause, and the continuing sound of keyes tapping, and then Barbara chirps with a much-needed edge of triumph, “He is and I’ve got a clear connection straight to it, I’m sending you the GPS signal. Dick, be careful, but bring him home.”

“I’ll get him back,” Dick promises, speaking to both her and the girl standing in front of him who is still fighting her body’s impulse to sob. Then he asks Barbara, “Where’s B?”

“West Side,” she tells him, adding immediately, “I’m calling him in for an intercept on Jason. I dunno what I’m gonna say about any of this shit, but I am not letting Jay go in there alone and you can’t get there fast enough.”

“I’ll get there as fast as I can,” Dick promises vehemently.

“You have to take me with you,” the girl in purple interjects.

Dick softens. “No can do, pretty girl, I make it a point to never take a damsel into distress. And where I’m going is very distressing.”

The girl in purple glares at him with a force that rivals Babs at her worst. It doesn’t help that
he hears Barbara groan in his ear at the same moment. “Dick, you loser,” she moans.

“Besides,” Dick continues, unphased, “I don’t even know your name.”

“I’m Spoiler,” she introduces, crossing her arms as she adds, “And you’re taking me with you to rescue that kid. It’s my fault they took him, so I’m gonna help get the little weirdo back.”

“Her name is Stephanie Brown. She’s helped us before, with that Cluemaster case last summer,” Barbara supplies. “Just let her come for the moment, you have to get moving. We’ll deal with keeping her on the sidelines when we catch up with Jay and need to keep him on the sidelines too, alright? Just get on the damn bike already.”

Dick sighs, but knows she’s right, knows that getting to Jason is the only priority at the moment. Stopping Jason from rushing in blind and then getting Tim back from whatever psychopaths have taken him captive.

He pulls off his helmet and hands it to Spoiler – to Stephanie. “Fine, get on.”

She fastens the helmet and practically leaps onto the bike behind Dick, securing her hold and shouting at him to hit it.

And damn does Dick rise to the occasion.

Barbara’s gone silent, presumably talking to Bruce about cutting off Jason’s route.

While Dick races across the city – using Spoiler’s weight on the bike with him to damn near rocket around corners. He gets to Chinatown before Barbara pops back up in his ears.

“Batman is a mile west of you, he’s about two blocks from Jason’s signal, and ten blocks from Tim’s,” Barbara informs him. “Get there. Um, take Broadway, there’s something on the traffic cam on the next block if you stay on Fairfax – can’t tell what, but it’s probably best to avoid it for now.”

About ten seconds later, Babs is cursing, but Dick doesn’t hesitate to dive onto Broadway even as his hacker / guidance system starts mumbling. “Humvee, it’s a Humvee,” she says after another few seconds. “Nightwing stop the bike, they see you and might try to ram.”

Dick slams on the breaks, whips the bike around and barely manages to control his limbs as he tumbles off and lunges to keep Spoiler safely tucked under his arm as they lurch awkwardly to the pavement. In front of them, the massive black Humvee – military grade, but outfitted with custom modifications well outside the standard military specs – squeals to a stop in the center of the intersection.

Out of the Humvee’s back seat steps Rwen Tolovi, furious and focused.

He stalks across the pavement toward Nightwing and Spoiler – whom Dick promptly shoves behind him as he regains his feet and draws his escrima sticks.

Nightwing flicks the switches to charge up the electrical pulse emitters embedded in the shafts, warily dropping into a fight stance.

“What have you done with the box,” Tolovi asks, his voice cold and calm in a way that made the fury clearly showing in his posture even more apparent.
Dick, however, is not nervous this time.

This time, he’s angry too.

“Give me back my brother,” he demands.

Tolovi chuckles dismissively and tips his head to the side, an arrogant amusement in the piercing gaze he directs down his nose at Dick. “Where is the box?”

“We don’t have it,” Spoiler shouts, drawing even with Nightwing. “Your crazy goon squad took it – and we want they kid they took with it.”

This gives Tolovi pause.

His stride doesn’t stutter, but it does slow and he runs his gaze over Dick with a new cant of careful evaluation. It’s a slow, measured motion that lets Dick see that there’s something… wrong about his eyes – about the color.

They’re green.

Which Dick should not be able to tell from this far away.

There’s something bright and iridescent about them that makes the color pop in way that looks so unnatural – now that he’s noticed it – that Dick has to suppress a shudder as Tolovi’s gaze lifts back up to meet his own.

“You have no reason to be involved with this,” Tolovi doles out. “I suggest you leave it alone before you get hurt.”

Dick’s teeth grind together.

He steps forward, adjusting his grip on his escrima sticks as he says, “You’re in my city, endangering my Family, I have every reason to be involved.”

“You don’t understand what’s happening.”

“No. You don’t understand,” Dick snarls, bearing his teeth as the frustration and anger he’s been holding back from everything bubbles up. “Keeping our city safe is what we do. The vigilante thing is not just a gag or a gimmick for us. We keep our streets clean – keep them safe for those who can’t protect themselves like we can. It doesn’t matter how big or how bad or how ‘uninvolved’ we are from something that’s hurting people in our city. It’s always our business, our responsibility, to protect our people. It’s a crusade, and it’s our crusade – simply because we’re capable of contributing.”

Tolovi stares for a long moment – his expression clouded with some emotion Dick can’t quite put a name to. “Not this time, you’re not,” Tolovi said quietly – almost… sad.

“We’re capable of trying,” Spoiler pipes up after an aching pause as Tolovi’s words sink in with a poignant weight. “And that’s the part that matters.”
Dick agrees. Hates that this young girl is putting herself in so much danger with such sub par equipment, but he agrees with her whole-heartedly. “Even if we can’t actually stop you successfully,” Dick explains, “We also can’t just let you go around hurting people.”

There’s a beat of tension and then Tolovi turns his back.

“That’s an unfortunate choice,” he shouts over his shoulder, “You don’t really have a choice.”

He would make it to the safety of his Humvee before Dick would be able to get close enough to land a blow, so instead of trying, Dick stows his escrima sticks and turns his attention to his bike. Barbara pops up in his ear with a stern warning, “Don’t you dare, Dick. Bruce is just half a mile away, Jason’s still on the loose, and Tim’s phone is still on. Regroup with B, get Jaybird thinking clearly, and then coordinate to get our baby bird back.”

She huffs and the sound of a motorcycle engine roars to life in just one of his ears.

With the pull of exertion tugging on her words, Babs continues, “I’m on my way to Chinatown, too, with Robin’s gear and an extra chest plate of mine for Spoiler. Ten more minutes and we’ll have a chance of getting everybody out of this alive.”

Dick wars with himself, revs the Night Cycle.

Then Tolovi’s Humvee screams out of the intersection and it takes everything Dick has in him not to charge after it. If he’d been wearing his helmet instead of Spoiler, Dick’s not sure he would’ve been able to hold back. As it stands, he slams his hand down onto his bike so hard that he cracks the black and blue polycarbonate casing.

He lets Spoiler get on behind him without more than a word to check that she was doing alright and then zooms off in the direction of Batman’s beacon.

Chapter End Notes

We’re getting to the tipping point people!
Things are getting exciting!

Next Time: Jason's turn to react as Really Bad Things begin to happen very quickly!
Rule #17 - Don't Be Late

Chapter Summary

Jason knows that something's up well before the Really Bad Things start happening.

But knowing something isn't right and knowing how to fix it are very different things, and when Jason fails to meet his unforeseen deadline, he has to play catch-up in the worst possible way.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: LOTS of swearing in this one... and, you guessed it, ANOTHER cliff hanger!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seventeen: Rule #17 – Don’t be Late

Jason is sure that something’s wrong.

He’s certain of it from the moment he realizes that Timothy fucking Drake cut class.

The only thing he doesn’t know is what is wrong.

Because when Tim decided to cut class, he went home. Which is what Jason would expect of a normal truant with the kind of entertainment resources Tim has at his stupid little rich boy fingertips. And it doesn’t sit right with him that Tim just went home.

Tim doesn’t have a reason to skip school and go home.

It’s not like he’s got a new video game he’s obsessing over, or people visiting from out of town, or even a tv show he can’t just stream for some reason… There’s no reason for Tim to go home in the middle of the day… At least, nothing that Jason can think of without falling back on the
possibility that Tim has a very specialized computer set up in his room that he can utilize for sensitive, case-related research.

Which is probable.

But Jason isn’t sure why Tim would skip school for it.

That set-up isn’t going anywhere. He doesn’t have to skip out on class to get the most out of his research time. And Tim doesn’t seem like the kind of kid to cut for kicks.

So why?

There had to be a trigger.

He had to have thought of something, or have learned something, that meant he couldn’t just wait until he got home to investigate it.

Which means that whatever he found is pressing.

But it can’t be too pressing, or he would’ve contacted the Bats, right?

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Tim has Jason’s cell phone number.

And he has the number for Wayne Manor, and the ones for Barbara’s cell and condo.

Not to mention the web access he has to the social media feeds and hotlines specifically established by Barbara and the GCPD to funnel Bat-relevant information to the proper recipients – and have it all sorted and categorized by case and urgency.

Tim could easily drop them a line if he found something important.

Unless it wasn’t something concrete.

Tim’s the kind of kid who’d wanna fact check like a dozen times before he actually told anyone about whatever weird little discovery he might’ve happened upon, even in regards to something with much lower stakes than a case like the current drug investigation.
Jason does not cut out of his own classes – except for the stupid after school supplementary lessons he’s expected to go to, but not technically required to attend – because B would probably kill his ass for skipping twice in two months.

He’s antsy all afternoon, though.

Couldn’t accurately report on what happened in his classes if you paid him a million bucks for each step in a play by play. Isn’t really upset by that.

As soon as Jason gets back to his room at Wayne Manor, he uses the epic-powerful desktop setup he’s got there to check the GPS data from the tracker he stuck on Tim’s bike. He’d spent most of the day refreshing the feed on his phone, but it’s not too insanely difficult to fool a phone-based program into reading a looped feed as live.

His desktop is much more difficult to fool.

A quick look at the GPS history shows that his phone has been accurate.

Just after noon, Tim had biked home from school. No pauses, no detours, and he honestly made some pretty impressive time.

Since then, the bike has been parked right inside the Drake Estate’s main garage.

Tim’s probably been doing research this whole time.

Jason wants to know what he’s been looking at, and he knows the easiest way to do that is to just hack into Tim’s system and see what the little idiot has up on his screens. But Jason also knows that even with his natural talent and his Bat-enhanced tech skills, he’s not good enough to hack Tim’s system without Tim noticing.

Which would be a breach of propriety and trust and whatnot that Tim probably would not appreciate… at all.

So, Jason’s stuck.

Sometime soon after Jason realizes that he’s caught in a corner with no helpful options available, Dick sticks his head into Jason’s room with an obnoxiously chipper hello that Jason summarily ignores out of hand.

Unfortunately, that does not discourage the ridiculous gymnast and Dick slides into the room – folding himself over the back of Jason’s chair like Jason’s cold shoulder is a warm and eager invitation.

Still going strong with that unreasonably chipper tone of voice, Dick asks, “Whatcha workin’ on, Jaybird?”

Jason gives a huff of annoyance – partly directed at Dick’s decision to ask instead of using the keen observational skills Jason knows Bruce has trained into him, and partly at himself because he’s not exactly working on anything… he’s just sitting here, stuck.
“Jason, is that Tim’s house?”

Jason grunts an affirmative.

“If there a reason you’re watching it like a KGB fanboy?”

Jason frowns. Rolls his eyes to level a glare at Dick for the idiotic insult.

Really? The KGB? That’s the best Dick can come up with?

Like the frickin police state of old world Russia is the worst kind of systematic stalkery ever devised. Like it’s even got a pretend claim to relevance as an impactful insult in the modern world, where Dick’s own ex-girlfriend / current sister effortlessly makes Big Brother look like an Orwellian teething toy.

Like, Seriously. The circus freak would last like ten minutes in the real world.

Even Tim could probably pack a harder punch with his words than Dick.

Speaking of Tim, though, Jason needs to focus, and with the right info Dick may actually find a way not to be utterly useless here.

“He skipped out on class today,” Jason explains slowly as Dick continues to lean on his chair, “Just cut and run in the middle of the day, for no reason – for no obvious reason.”

His amendment prompts Dick to ask, “You think he has one?”

Seriously?

Dick is not that stupid.

Jason undercuts the human puppy dog’s intelligence on a regular, well-deserved basis, but even Jason can recognize that Dick isn’t really even half as dumb as his pretty boy smile would theoretically indicate.

Frowning like he’s actually using that blue-bird brain of his to puzzle through the possibilities – or rather, like he’s attempting to puzzle through and is coming up as dry as Jason has been – Dick asks, “What do you think his reason is?”

Jason huffs.

He doesn’t know.
Not for certain.

And even what he thinks he knows is up for debate because he doesn’t know what Tim’s actually found or if the Bats should be concerned by it.

Dick sighs.

“If you’re worried about it, you can probably go over to his place after dinner,” Dick suggests, still idiotically chipper. “Alfred might even drive you there.”

Jason snorts.

But honestly, that’s not actually a terrible idea.

Tim and Jason are… friends. Kinda.

Jason totally has the right to go over there and see what Tim’s up to for himself.

But no way in hell is he gonna make Alfie drive him.

“Alf’s running coms for you while Barbie continues her totally illegal government hacking spree, idiot,” Jason retorts. “I’ll just walk.”

The mere hint of a probable instance in which Jason might be taking a suggestion from him makes Dick fucking sparkle beside him.

It’s disgusting.

Jason is hugely relieved when Dick peels himself off of Jason’s chair a moment later. He’s even okay with the idiot’s act of senselessly ruffling his hair – because it means his exit is imminent. Just before he goes, Dick says, “Just promise me you’re not just gonna stare at that little dot until dinner time, okay?”

With a one-shoulder shrug, Jason grunts a noncommittal answer.

He’s not gonna turn his map off for any reason in the new few hours.

Because there is no way in hell that he’s gonna let Tim sneak out from right under his fucking nose if the idiot decides that he needs to get some on-the-ground data for some shit-head ridiculous reason.

Dick sighs again.

“Whelp, I’ll be taking a nap if you need me,” he mentions casually, finally heading towards
the door. Seconds later – after a weird lingering pause in the threshold – Dick is gone and Jason can relax slightly.

He keeps his desktop screen showing the GPS readout for Tim’s bike, but he pulls a few textbooks out of his back pack and gets down to work on some of the assignments he’s got due in the next week. May as well knock as many out as possible while he’s got the time.

It’s all just fucking busy work anyway.

Tim’s bike doesn’t move while Jason pushes through like ten pages of upcoming math assignments and it’s still holding steady when Alfred rings the warning gong for dinner.

The sound means that he’s got ten minutes to get his ass downstairs. Jason supposes that the gong makes sense – its sound carries well, echoing through the whole Manor easily, and it certainly seems more reasonable than expecting Alfred to go through the halls shouting that grub’s on, but Jason still thinks it’s weird.

It is efficient though.

Jason checks his feed one more time to make sure it hasn’t been looped and then he heads down to endure the meal with a relative satisfaction.

It’s hard to maintain that feeling through the meal, but not impossible. Bruce asks his usual boring questions about school and such, and Dick manages to talk everyone’s ears off, but over all, it’s fine. There’s no tension or raised hackles, so honestly it goes rather well.

After dinner, Bruce and Dick head down to the Cave to get ready for patrol.

Robin is still benched.

Bruce hardly shoots Jason a glance – but that’s preferable to the sickening drip of sympathy that pours off Dick’s face.

Jason checks his phone to make sure Tim’s bike is still where it’s supposed to be and then volunteers to wash the dishes, so Alfred can go do any one of the thousand other things he probably has left to handle tonight on that fucking unreasonable task list of his.

The dishes give him a buffer – a chunk of time where he’s not just twiddling his thumbs as he waits for Bruce to get far enough away from the Manor to fail to notice Jason heading out to check on Tim. He’s not exactly sneaking out – he is just using the front door and Bruce didn’t explicitly ground Jason when he benched Robin – but it’s always best to take careful precautions, especially with B.

Because while he’s not explicitly grounded Jason is very probably not supposed to be leaving his room for any reason tonight.

He gets all the way to the edge of the Drake Estate before something goes wrong.
His phone beeps.

Tim’s bike has left the perimeter of the area Jason defined as ‘safe after dark’.

It could’ve just been stolen, but that is just too fucking unlikely to really consider a viable possibility. The fucking shit-head is running off to investigate. Alone. Again.

Bab’s snarky suggestion about fitting Tim with a radio tag suddenly seems totally reasonable. Kid needs a fucking shock collar and one of those god damn invisible fence things.

Jason doesn’t bother walking the rest of the way to Tim’s mansion.

The kid’s bike is moving fast, but it’s not more than a half mile away yet. There’s no way going all the way back to Wayne Manor to boost a bike from the Cave will let Jason catch up to him before he gets himself into trouble.

Jason just hikes up his pace and steers his feet towards the Kane Memorial Bridge – it’s the only bridge on this side of Bristol that’ll let Tim get into Robbinsville and the maze of Gotham beyond in a reasonable amount of time. If Jason yard-hops and takes a straight course while Tim stays on the roads, Jason might even be able to head him off.

And if not, he’ll probably be able to find some wheels in the process of chasing Tim through Robbinsville once he gets across the bridge and into more traditional suburbs.

Jason’s just approaching the far side of the Drake Estate boundary when his phone gives another alert, this one the buzz of a text.

It’s frickin Barbie.

‘Tim just spent all afternoon hacking the NSA and now he’s gone tech dark. You still have the coms you swiped from me last night on you?’

Jason curses loudly in the silence of the evening.

He shoots off a quick maybe as a reply and starts fishing through the innermost pocket of his coat for the special split in the lining he’d added ages ago. Inside it is one of the coms he borrowed from Barbara’s stash – it’s one of the older ones, bulkier, with a physical on-off button and limited-sync capabilities. Jason honestly thought Barbara wouldn’t even notice two stupid little prototypes just walking out the door when she’s got so many frickin’ others that are like a thousand times more awesome.

Jason presses the power button and sticks the com in his ear just in time to hear Dick say worriedly, ‘He was gonna take a walk over to Tim’s place after dinner, I dunno when he set off.’

“What the hell is going on?”, Jason growls. He skips the small talk, so fucking glad that Bruce’s com protocols makes ignoring niceties the norm, and goes straight to reporting, “Tim’s gone, by the way, his bike’s halfway to Coventry according to
my phone and it’s gonna take a bit to get there without a motor.”

Dick doesn’t even whine about Jason’s matter-of-fact-ness.

That could be because the Bat’s task-oriented training has finally won out over his bird-brain or it could be because Dick’s worried enough about whatever Babs told him about what’s going on with Tim to already be the kind of focused that let Robin become the uncontested leader of the Teen Titans.

Dick is all about the mission as he says, “Well, I’ve got a bike, but I’m twice as far away, so even with the motorcycle, I’m still at least twenty minutes out.”

Jason curses again.

Checks his phone.

Tim’s bike has almost made it to the bridge.

Kid’s fucking booking it.

Jason picks his pace up even further and huffs without any real hope holding out behind the words, “So, Barbie, you got any wheels stashed nearby?”

There’s a long pause.

Jason can almost hear the viscous clash of Barbara’s different frustrations as she wars with herself over what option she has available would be the least wrong to utilize.

Then Barbara sighs and says, “I’ll ping you an address. There’s a dirt bike in the shed out back, combo on the lock is 11-42-23. Don’t break it.”

Jason chuckles but he’s running too hard to have any air in his lungs to reply.

His phone buzzes with another message from Barbara – this time it’s a link to the GPS coordinates of his new destination. The shed’s at an address just on the outside curve of Robbinsville, just a quick sprint across the bridge and Jason will have some motorized wheels to use for chasing down Tim.

He puts all his focus into the sprint. Keeps his breathing careful and even, keeps his posture straight and his joints loose. Some of it is the Bat training, the exact posture and technique, but Jason’s had his fair share of straight experience with running hard and fast because his life is on the line for it, so it’s easy to ignore the burn as his body starts to vehemently protest against the exertion.

He makes it to the proper shed, twists in the code Barbara gave him, and pulls out a feisty looking red and white Yamaha. He closes up shop and locks it all back into place like he was never there. He walks the bike over to the road and keeps walking until he’s about a block away before he starts the engine.

Settling himself astride, Jason checks his phone again.
Tim’s still in Robbinsville.

In Jason’s whole sprint across the bridge, Tim only moved about ten blocks.

His bike is in a parking lot – stuck out front of a 24 hour donut shop, by the looks of it.

Which is just… odd.

Tim totally needs to down a box of sugar-glazed heart-attacks, but Jason’s pretty damn sure that Tim would never voluntarily go buy himself a box. Especially all the way out on the far side of Robbinsville. Tim had to have passed at least two other donut shops in the same frickin’ chain, not to mention all the additional places where donuts could be acquired.

So, what’s he doing at that one?

In the middle of the night after skipping school?

He’s gotta be investigating something.

But what could be so worth investigating at a donut shop?

Jason supposes they could be a part of the distributing chain for the new drug; hell, they shit they served legally was addicting enough to start with.

But Tim’s not dumb enough to go poke the tiger directly.

If he knew something that concrete, he would’ve let the Bats know about it.

Right?

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Aw, fuck it.

Jason decides to just text Tim himself. ‘Where the fuck are you?’

He’s not honestly expecting a reply.

He’s not really sure what to do with the one he gets – he doesn’t get anything for several
minutes and he’s already guided the motorbike halfway to the Upper East Side when his pocket gives a buzz. ‘U = Kiddo’s friend?’

That is not how Tim would fucking type.

Jason hits call.

The instant the connection takes, Jason demands, “Where the fuck is the kid?”

“Why the fuck should I tell you?”

The voice is female, young, and … distressed – but covering for it like a true bred Gotham City girl that was born and raised on the wrong side of the tracks.

“ ’Cause I’m the little idiot’s friend.”

“You’re not listed in his phone like you’re his friend,” the girl accuses.

Jason frowns. “Really? What’s the caller ID for me?”

“It’s just a bunch of symbols and squiggles,” the girl replies. “You could be a drug dealer or some shit for all I know.”

“Why would that idiot have a drug dealer’s number in his phone?”

“I dunno, the kid’s weird.”

Jason’s hand finds his forehead, fingers pinching at the bridge of his nose because, yeah, okay, that’s fair. Tim’s weird. And Jason’s caller ID apparently does not scream ‘friend’.

But actually… that gives him an opening.

“I’m not a drug dealer,” Jason promises, “I’m Robin, and I’m a friend.”

“Robin, like Batman’s Robin?”

“Yeah, that Robin,” Jason affirms. “Now, where’s the kid?”

There’s a shaky breath on the other end of the line.

“I don’t know,” she admits. “His bike’s here, and his back pack, but he’s not.”

Jason curses. “Camera,” he realizes suddenly, “Is his camera there?”

There’s a crinkling sound, and a shuffling, and then the girl says, “Um, no. There’s no camera here that I can find.”

Jason nods and exhales – not relieved exactly, but settled into executing a back-up plan with functional plausibility. Paranoia is annoying, but damn is it useful sometimes.
“Okay, um,” Jason fights to reorganize his thoughts – to do the investigating thing properly, the way Bruce trained him instead of diving into his back-up plan and just charging off like his street kid instincts are trying to make him do. “First, do you have any idea why he was there to start with?”

“Uh, not really,” the girl says. “He meets me here, sometimes. He brings snacks.”

Of course, the idiot brings snacks to a donut shop. Drops a hundred on a coffee tab, but won’t spring for anything with the calories that could actually keep a human alive.

“How does he know when you’re going to be there?”

“How do you know he doesn’t just call and meet me here like a normal person?”

“A, that kid is fuckin’ weird. You just take one look at him, and what he does with his time, and tell me how many normal friends you think he has,” Jason points out.

The silence he meets with says enough about *that* point hitting home.

“And B, he left his house abruptly, which means it was probably unplanned. He went to a donut shop to find you, but he didn’t stay,” Jason lays out, adding, “So, either you called him out there for an emergency, or he saw something that made him think he *needed* to talk to you – as fast as possible. So, if you didn’t call him, what were you doing 20 minutes ago?”

“I um… I twitter tagged a suspicious package and sent the location info to GCPD.”

“Send it to me,” Jason says. He pulls the com out of his ear and syncs it to his phone, which takes it off the channel he’d been using with ‘Wing and BG, but that should be fine – he needs to keep this girl on the line, but he needs to head to the location she’s sending him. The com’s been quiet for a while now, anyway.

The girl fumbles for a long moment, but eventually manages to send him a map linked through a twitter account called @Spoilers_vault_of_Spoilers.

The userpic is a fuckin kid in a black scarf and a purple bedsheet – like seriously, this kid is the lowest rent vigilante Jason’s ever seen. He’s heard the name before though, remembers it from a case with Cluemaster or two. But he’s never looked her up.

At least Tim manages to stay like five feet back from the shit the capes wade through in Gotham’s underbelly… this Spolier character can’t be much older and she’s already playing dress up… fuckin’ shithheads.

*God,* Jason’s gotta talk some sense into these losers eventually.

Even if Spoiler’s a tough girl, she’s *way* too young to be a cape.

*God damn* it.
Jason’s starting to sound like Bruce.

Next thing you know he’s gonna *adopt* the idiots.

Fuck.

Speaking of the idiots, the sound in Jason’s ear seems to be Spoiler getting ready to run back to the scene where she left the box… *Fuck* no.

“Your name’s Spoiler, right?” Jason drawls, kicking his borrowed bike into high gear and balancing his phone on the edge of the steering column pressed into windscreen – secure enough to drive with… -ish. Close enough.

“Yeah,” she confirms as he tears through the quiet streets towards the blip she tagged.

“Okay, Spoiler, I’m gonna need you to stay right where you are,” Jason says.

Deeply offended, she protests, “Fuck that. If that kid’s in trouble, I’m gonna help him.”

“But if he’s trying to find you, and you’re not at the warehouse you tagged, he’s gonna go back to the donut shop,” Jason reasons. It’s probably true, Tim’s stuff is still there, after all.

Spoiler’s silence says that she’s considering his words.

“Besides, I’m closer anyway,” Jason pushes to seal it.

“Fine,” Spoiler grumbles.

Jason revs his engine in victory and kicks it faster as he feels the ease of one problem settle so he can put his full focus on the original problem.

Tim.

Idiot.

Stupid fucking baby seal…

Jason makes it to the warehouse in just a few minutes.

But it’s empty.

Void of everything save for the I-beams and lumber piles that are *supposed* to be here, that are actually registered inventory being legally housed at the off-site storage facility.

Nothing *important* is here.
No Tim, and no box.

Spoiler hears him cut the engine and asks, “So, is he there?”

“No,” Jason replies cautiously. “He’s not. And neither is the box.”

“Well, he’s not here,” Spoiler informs him – tightness pulling at her throat. She’s nervous, had been worried since the beginning, and she’s now starting to lose her cool.

Jason’s already opened his mouth to soothe her worries when he finds the scuff marks and disarray that tell of a struggle – so he can’t stop the curse falling from his tongue.

“What?”

Jason ignores Spoiler’s question.

“What did you find?”

Jason keeps ignoring her, scanning the area and trying to interpret the scene – to figure out what happened here… and if Tim was actually involved with it.

“Fuck, Robin,” Spoiler shouts, loudly enough for her voice to clip in the speaker, “What the fuck did you find?”

And then Jason spots a tiny, ratty, little red high top in the corner.

It’s got a subtle little Bat-patch on the instep, and a slightly less subtle R on the outside.

It’s Tim’s.

“Oh, hijo de perra,” Jason sighs.

“Robin. What?”

“Spoiler,” Jason huffs, sorting out his thoughts and priorities. “Um. There’s a guy called Nightwing on his way to you. He’ll know the guys who took him, and he’ll know who he needs to get on the case. Stay there until he gets to you. I have to hang up now, I need my phone to track the kid. Stay down, stay quiet, and tell ‘Wing what happened.”

Jason doesn’t let Spoiler protest before he hangs up.
As soon as he’s disconnected he takes his earpiece out and switches it back to the frequency he’d had it set on before he’d linked it up to Barbara’s system when she’d texted.

Then he uses his phone to remotely push on a little pneumatic actuator he’d linked to the system in a bout of paranoia he’s really annoyed with needing to utilize. The actuator is fixed to the other earpiece he’d swiped from Batgirl.

He flips the switch and gets the com turned on – uses the power-source to fire up the GPS inside it and syncs that location to his phone.

Sticks the com he has with him, the one that he’s already got paired with the one he stuck into Tim’s camera case back into his ear.

Debates with himself as he gets resituated on the dirt bike – he wants to talk into the com to see if Tim will find it and maybe even put it in his ear; which would make this whole thing a lot easier. But if Tim’s really been taken like the evidence suggests, then speaking might get the com found by the people who took Tim – and destroyed.

Jason can’t risk it.

He doesn’t have anymore back-up plans to pull out of his ass.

He needs this one to work.

Radio silence it is.

Jason even mutes his input so there’s no possibility of the mic picking up the noise from his dirt bike. He keeps the output on, though… just… just in case.

It’s not long before that ridiculous optimism is miraculously rewarded.

“Robin?”

The word is tentative, and just a whisper – but it’s still enough to make Jason nearly fall off his borrowed bike.

He unmutes his own com and whisper-shouts over the sound of his dirt bike’s madly whirring motor, “Hey, baby bird, you doin’ alright?”
“I, um,” Tim’s whispering, hesitant – his throat clearly tight and straining. Jason can’t hear him well enough to know if he’s keeping quiet because he’s close to the assholes that took him and needs to be quiet, or if he’s just too scared or something to keep in perfect control.

“Are you alone? Able to talk? If not, just stay quiet, baby bird, it’s just good to hear from you at all,” Jason tells him.

“I, um, I think… I think I messed up,” Tim admits.

“It’s okay, Tim,” Jason promises, “We’re comin’ for ya. I’m using the earbud to find you and I’m already getting’ close. Just give me another ten minutes.”

“It’s not the Raven,” Tim warns, adding, “It’s not the Tolovis. They brought me to a different night club. I think it’s called ‘Obscura’.”

“Obscura, got it,” Jason relays. He hears Tim sigh on the other end, is glad that the com standards B drilled into him have actually functioned to make Tim feel understood, that let him breathe a little bit easier in the midst of the terrible situation he’s caught in.

He wants to keep Tim talking. Keep him focused – keep him from panicking.

“So, it’s not the Tolovis?”

“Mm-hm,” Tim replies. “It’s some people working with the organization that the Tolovis separated from – GHOST. The only name I know is involved is Tavian Ross. I think he’s the leader. There’s at least six guys here besides him, but I don’t know if that’s it.”

“GHOST. Tavian Ross, and six cronies,” Jason repeats, adding, “That’s a pretty good rundown, Timmers. You’re doin’ fine.”

There’s a long stretch of quiet.

Then Tim says softly, “I’m sorry I screwed up.”

“We are gonna have to talk about how you keep running off alone,” Jason tells him, honest and serious, but not accusing. “Why the fuck did you go off tonight? What happened?”

“Spoiler,” Tim breathes. Then he stops breathing and rambles, “It was Spoiler – it’s not her fault, should couldn’t know, but… I figured out what the Tolovis were after and… and Spoiler found a box, labeled like the ones the Tolovis have been stealing. I don’t… I don’t have any way to contact her, but I had to try… It was- , I thought – I thought I had more time. Usually, there’s GHOST activity, and then the Tolovis arrive a few hours later, and then GHOST comes back… I miss-timed it, or miss-read it, or something… I’m sorry.”

“We’ll get you out of this, baby bird,” Jason promises again.

There’s another silence as Jason holds his breath and hopes that Tim believes him – hopes that Tim isn’t holding his own breath simply to keep his words back because he wants to apologize.
again and thinks that Jason’s getting tired of hearing it.

“Why didn’t you come to us, though?” Jason asks quietly, not entirely sure Tim can hear it over the roar of the engine. The com he’s using is old tech, hardly sophisticated enough to be expected to pick up his muttered, “Why didn’t you come to me?”

At first, Jason’s certain Tim didn’t hear.

“I was going to,” Tim promises.

Jason waits, not sure what to think – not sure if Tim’s gonna say more.

Eventually, Tim elaborates, “I was going to; I was. I’d just figured out enough concrete details to make it worth telling you and I was going to hand it off tonight. I’ve still got the flash drive with me… I don’t think my system’s as secure as the Cave’s, so I didn’t wanna send it wireless. I was gonna give it to you or Nightwing when you went through Coventry on patrol.”

Jason sighs.

“Kid, your system is like the third most secure system on the fucking planet,” Jason huffs with an exasperated something… affection, frustration, and possibly some kind of distraught disbelief… Jason doesn’t even know at this point. Tim is just plain ridiculous.

There is no possible way he could think that riding his bike out into the middle of the city just before midnight to physically hand a fucking jump drive to a vigilante mid-patrol could be safer in any regard when compared to shooting out a fucking email.

“I’m sorry.”

“Shit, kid, it’s okay. We’ll talk about it later, just be safe until I get there, alright?”

There’s an agonizing wait before Tim says, “Okay.”

“I’m almost there, Timbo, just another few blocks,” Jason promises.

Jason is just about to promise Tim that he’ll stay on the line, keep talking, keep letting Tim know he’s not alone, when the silent jet black phantom of the Batmobile appears in his rear view. This model of the Batmobile has an electric engine, nearly the same model that powers the record-holding Zombie 222. Jason can’t out run it without a huge head start, and because it runs almost perfectly silent, he’s already lost any lead he could’ve fought to keep.

There’s a burst of static in his ear as B gets close enough to use the Batmobile’s system to
forcibly establish a commlink to the device in Jason’s ear.

Jason’s not sure if Tim hears the static too, or if he just hears the curse that slips through Jason’s tightly gritted teeth, but the kid’s voice is tremulous as he asks, “Robin?”

“It’s okay, baby bird,” Jason swears immediately, rushing out his words in case Batman acquires exclusive access to the feed. “I might have to go off coms for a second here, but I’ll be right back, and all us Bats are coming for you, alright?”

Jason doesn’t get to hear Tim’s reply – if he makes one – because B has control of the feed and is already talking.

B’s interference signal is way stronger than the natural commlink – which makes his already booming voice sound so loudly in Jason’s ear that he has to fight his reflexes to avoid ripping the com out of his poor ear canal to hopefully save his soon-to-be-exploded eardrum, but he manages to keep the bike mostly under control and still heading towards Tim’s signal as B shouts, “What the devil do you think you’re doing out here, Jason?”


There’s no response, not even a chastisement for his cursing – but the ringing in his ear from feedback overload eases.

Breathing slightly more evenly, Jason explains, “It was just gonna be a donut run.”

Silence.

Even through the com, Jason can tell that B’s restrained hush is filled with furious disbelief. B’s not buying his story for a fuckin’ cent. “I stuck a tracker on the kid, on Timmy fuckin’ Drake,” Jason expands, “And he left his house for this donut shop in Robbinsville like half an hour ago and I was just gonna go pick ’im up, see what the fuck he was doin’ out there.”

More silence.

Still oppressive and disbelieving.

Jason would need to see the fuckin’ Bat to know more. B’s body language is hella microscopic, but it’s still easier to read a brick wall than to read empty air waves. But hell if Jason’s gonna stop for B to corner him and chat this out while Tim’s still a captive.

Without knowing what the story BG and ‘Wing spun to explain what the fuck is going on with all this, Jason has no real point of reference to guess at what might convince the Bat to let it drop for the moment – at least for long enough to get Tim back from whoever fucking took him.

“I dunno what happened, exactly,” Jason finishes, “But T’s been snatched by some dude called Tavian Ross, kid says he works for GHOST.”

There’s a pause – possibly as B relays the new information to BG, and likely as he confirms
“Robin is benched tonight,” Batman growls dangerously.

“Well, I’m not in the fuckin’ bird suit, am I?” Jason shoots back. “Look, B, I’m gonna be savin’ the kid tonight, costume or not. You can either get on board with that or not, but I ain’t gonna just twiddle my thumbs back at the Manor while Tim’s getting’ his cakes fried. Now get the fuck off of my com so I can keep talkin’ to the idiot.”

There’s another stretch of silence.

Then B growls, “I am not rewarding this behavior. Your stunt tonight has benched Robin for the rest of the month and you are not to leave your room for anything other than school – to and from which you will be escorted directly by Agent A. Nightwing and Batgirl are en route, BG has Robin’s gear. You may stay on the line with the civilian target, but you are not to approach or engage or make any promises as such until the others arrive and we regroup.”

Under his breath, Jason huffs, “Too fuckin’ late, B.”

Fortunately, it doesn’t seem like Batman hears, because the static of interference fades out and the Batmobile drops back to a respectable tailing distance as opposed to active pursuit.

“Hey, T,” Jason prompts. When he gets no response, he asks, “You still there, baby bird?”

“Robin,” Tim whispers, sounding distinctly more terrified than the last time Jason heard his voice. “I think they’re coming back.”

“I’m almost there, baby bird,” Jason promises, “Just hold on a bit longer for me.”

Tim doesn’t quite manage to verbalize a response and Jason claws a bit more speed out of the dirt bike he borrowed.

Chapter End Notes
Y'all are gonna have some really strong fingertips at the end of this from all of this cliff clinging I'm making you do...

I am trying to up the posting frequency, though, so hopefully it won't hurt TOOOOOOO much. <3

Next Time: Timmy’s PoV on the mistake that got him nabbed, and of Stage 1 of the Endgame Confrontation!
Chapter Summary

Tim is so distracted by his worry about Spoiler that he makes a critical mistake and winds up in the clutches of a psychopath.

He angsts over the mistake and its consequences.

Jason shows up and things get better... and then they get much worse...

Chapter Notes

We've got another cliff hanger people!
Just a few more and it'll stop, I promise. <3

WARNING: Tim jumps straight to a terribly unhealthy, self-deprecating, fatalist, and victim-blaming headspace when he realizes that he's miscalculated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Eighteen: Rule #18 – Admit When You’re Wrong

Tim is not usually wrong.

He’s aware that sometimes he doesn’t guess correctly, but that’s usually when it’s a guess – when whatever information he’s working with is notably incomplete. Sometimes he doesn’t understand a situation, or its framework, and at times like that he can’t even manage to fathom a guess. He knows that happens, knows that he’s not always entirely right or perfectly prepared.

But he’s not usually flat out wrong.

Tim can’t actually recall a moment when he felt like he’d really messed up.

A moment prior to the current one, at least.
Because he has definitely messed up now.

*Oh, sweet Science*, has he messed up now...

He’d thought he had more time.

The box that Spoiler had found was problem enough. The box that she had found and then posted a geo-tagged picture of on twitter; the box that she *knew* was not supposed to be where it was and had accordingly alerted the authorities about it… that box probably had a few cases of the new drug inside it – that was Tim’s current hypothesis, at least – and on its own, the box was dangerous. Not to be touched or messed with.

That was the main worry that had consumed Tim when he’d set out to find Spoiler – that she’d get hurt without any means of knowing how to stay safe. He’d sent Spoiler a direct message through her twitter about it, but he’d done that before and none of the messages had even been registered as ‘read’. Since he couldn’t contact her, he *had* to get to her before she decided to poke at the crate, before she decided to investigate what it held. That Tim knew of, not a single person had survived exposure to the new drug.

Tim doesn’t know how much exposure constituted a fatal dose, but he’d left his bedroom with a firm refusal to let Spoiler become one of those casualties.

He’d made it all the way to the donut shop where he usually met Spoiler before he realized that she probably wouldn’t be there.

That was her usual half-way point in patrol.

But she was at least two hours away from being mid-way through if she was following her normal patrol route. By now, Tim thought it was likely that she’d left the warehouse where she’d found the box, but he could work backwards through her usual route from the donut shop towards where she’d tagged the box and hopefully run across her as she patrolled.

He’d left his bike in the parking lot and his backpack on the roof.

For two reasons: first, to travel light and quick across the rooftops of the denser construction in northwest Robbinsville, and second, to let Spoiler know he’d been there if she got to this point in her patrol without having crossed his path.

Hopefully, she’d wait for him to get back before moving on, because he *had* to talk to her tonight – before she could find another box and get more boldly investigative about it.

He had spent the half hour afterwards jogging across the rooftops of mid-rise apartment buildings – scouting for another silhouette against the gloomy backdrop of the night’s cloudy sky. There were only a few minutes when he wasn’t actively on the rooftops – when the alleyways he could cross via fire escape or a simple, daring step ran into a wider street and he had to climb all the way down to ground level before crossing and climbing all the way back up.

He’d gotten really good at that kind of transition over the years, so there wasn’t too much time he missed when he couldn’t possibly have spotted Spoiler, but still… it was enough. And since *she* didn’t have the kind of grapple guns that effortlessly carried the Bats across Gotham, there was plenty of time while Spoiler too had to descend to street level herself.
Tim didn’t find Spoiler before he made it to the warehouse where she’d tagged the box for GCPD’s narcotics team. They likely wouldn’t be able to get out here for another few hours, but Tim didn’t think that would be too much of a problem.

From what his program made it look like, the boxes usually sat unattended for at least a few hours at a stretch before they were disturbed by the Tolovis.

So Tim hadn’t hesitated when he considered jumping right onto the warehouse’s roof to peek inside just in case Spoiler had decided to stick around until GCPD showed up. It’s something she would do. She hasn’t posted anything else on twitter or even his camera’s limited connectivity would’ve pinged an alert, but since he’d apparently left his phone in his back pack, Tim can’t be sure that she’s not sending emails to GCPD every five minutes to complain about their slow reaction times.

Tim had just stepped onto a catwalk inside the warehouse – having crept through an open window that he could access easily by hanging onto the edge of the roof and curling over the side of the wall. The window was probably less than two feet from the ceiling and the catwalk inside the window was about three feet below it. So Tim could stand up easily, but almost anyone else would have to crouch.

What Tim failed to realize was that even someone who would have to crouch uncomfortably on the catwalk would consider the cramped conditions a worthy sacrifice for the advantage of a high angle for surveilling the warehouse below. He failed to realize that just because conditions were tight it did not eliminate the possibility of a large person being able to move with great stealth. He failed to realize he was not alone.

A shadow made of thick muscle and sinew like steel had him by the scruff before Tim even managed to realize the figure was there – had him held aloft by a single hand on his collar, dangling over the three story abyss to the warehouse floor before Tim could yelp at the realization he wasn’t alone.

The figure holding him captive maintained his grip effortlessly as Tim went limp with terror – maneuvering to the catwalk’s primary ladder and then sliding down its rails with reckless speed to land hard on the warehouse floor.

“Ross,” the brute holding Tim shouts, as if the boom of his landing wasn’t enough to alert whoever else was in the warehouse to the fact that something attention-worthy was occurring.

It was in those thirteen seconds of waiting for Ross – Tavian Ross, Tim assumed and was swiftly proven correct – that Tim realized he had severely misjudged some variable. He’d messed up, and now he is in deep trouble.

Tim is still dangling with his toes over a foot off the ground – his captor proving to have utterly inhuman reserves of strength and stamina – when Tavian Ross ambles into view within the dim warehouse.

He’s a terrifying sight – rugged and hulking, with dark, angry eyes and hair cropped so close to his skull Tim can’t tell its color. Tim knows it’s brown because it was longer in the picture he took with Rwen Tolovi, but the current ambiguity feels more even intimidating, more militant and aggressive, than the cutting grin he’d worn after Honduras.

He’s not smiling now.
Tavian Ross doesn’t speak when he arrives. He simply shifts his posture, like he’s settling in to wait, and gives the man holding Tim a look.

“I told you,” Tim’s captor growls, “It’s not just the Tolovis looking into this.”

“That is a child,” Ross points out with a sardonic sigh.

“A child with a camera.”

Tim flinches, pulling up his knees instinctively to curl around his camera case like it’s a teddy bear that will somehow magically save him from the monsters. It had been automatic for him to take it out of his back pack when he’d ditched the rest of his stuff at the donut shop – he hadn’t even realized it was with him until shortly before he slipped into the warehouse.

Ross lets his eyes flick over Tim’s shape – taking in a thousand different data points with a keen gaze that makes Tim think of Jason’s skillful evaluation. Which is troubling, because Jason is like the one person Tim had met who hadn’t immediately underestimated him.

It was cool when Jason did it, exciting and validating.

When Ross is looking at him like he might see the same things Jason had… it’s not a good feeling at all. It’s terrifying.

Especially as the guy holding Tim aloft goes on, “It’s a child with a camera who chose to sneak in through a third story window instead of poking around like a normal kid by coming through the open door. If it was just local kids and curiosity, they would use the door.”

Those are fair points, Tim has to admit.

And certainly things to think about for the next time he winds up faced with the problem of a warehouse to investigate… which is not something he should be thinking about now, seeing as it’s very unlikely he’ll face a similar problem in the future if these drug lords decide to kill him in the next few minutes.

The man holding Tim drops him and Tim’s knees fail to hold his weight as it hits them.

He falls hard to the concrete floor, still more or less curled around his camera.

Ross sighs. “Well, he’s too young to be one of ours, and too old to be clean if he’s one of the Syndicate’s… He might possibly be one of Tolovi’s, though… or one of the Tsingani Vipers. We’ll take him back to Obscura and investigate him further once the Serum is secure.”

Tim closes his eyes – squeezing them shut as tight as they’ll go – and pictures the warehouse blueprints. Tim knows the location of the nearest exit, he knows that the next building over has an active alarm and that it’s an auxiliary storage facility owned by one of the wealthy corporations that will actually prompt a swift police response.

And he knows that the statistics say cooperating with a group of happenstantial kidnappers like this only delays the moment when they’ll kill him; that if he allows them to move him off-site, his odds of survival drop to less than one percent – that his best option is to make an attempt to escape.
To run like a bat out of hell.

Tim counts five new goons stepping out of the shadows as the whole group’s attention shifts starkly to the white crate that had drawn Spoiler’s attention amid the dark shadows of steel beams and lumber stacks.

It’s as the goons begin to lift the crate that Tim pushes everything he has into sprinting for the door. He knows almost immediately that it’s not going to work.

Tim gets further than he thought he would, managing to dodge the hand that snatches at his shoulder and miraculously avoiding a collision with the concrete beneath his sneakers as his second dodge sends him tripping over a low stack of hardwood flooring.

But then a hand wraps around the hood of his coat and he steps hard on his own shoelaces as his momentum shifts. A few dark crates are knocked around – their contents must be something extremely light for Tim’s wild flailing to affect the containers – and one of Tim’s high tops is flung into the shadows, but that is the grand finale of Tim’s pitiful escape attempt.

After that he’s toted back to the group without his feet touching the ground.

Then he’s carried outside and shoved into the back of an SUV.

Tim can’t see out of any of the windows – they’ve all been completely blacked out – so he can’t confirm that they’re moving quickly, but between the feel of the inertia when they slow or take a corner and the sound of the engine reving, Tim thinks they’re going fast.

Possibly fast enough to make it all the way to Chinatown during the short ride.

Tim can’t confirm that either, because the car doesn’t stop outside the venue of their destination. Instead it pulls straight into a small underground parking area. When Tim is carried out of the van he sees that the lot is tiny, and secured by a steel door – it’s secure enough that it’s probably an area meant for staff parking and deliveries and VIP arrivals in the middle of a relatively bad neighborhood. Even if Tim could somehow get his feet back on the ground, he’s never going to make it out that door on his own.

Still being held aloft – at arm’s length no less, and by one hand – Tim is ferried by the goon to what seems to be an empty supply closet. It’s a square little room well below the night club’s floor – but not so far removed that Tim can’t tell it is a night club. Tim can almost touch two opposite walls with his outstretched arms, his fingertips are just an inch or two shy of brushing the black painted concrete. The door is also painted black, but it’s a heavy metallic structure and it’s bolted from the outside.

There’s a single unshielded light bulb high above his head.

He almost thinks it would be easier to sit here in his failure if it were dark.

Almost.

Tim leans his back against the wall and sinks to the floor.

Curls up around his knees.

Wonders if anyone is ever going to figure out what happened to him, if anyone will ever realize what a stupid series of mistakes he’d made to land himself in the position…
Tim puts his forehead on his knees and stares blankly at his camera.

Thinks about the capes he’s captured with it.

Spoiler might figure out that something’s wrong, because his stuff is still waiting abandoned at her usual rest-point donut shop, but she doesn’t have much to go off of… And she doesn’t know anything about him really, he might be friendly with her, but he’s still just slightly less than totally random in terms of by-chance civilian acquaintances.

Robin will be worried. Jason will probably be the first person who knows him to show up somewhere he’s supposed to be and think that something’s wrong. But that likely won’t be for a while, a couple days at least.

Jason will tell Dick and they’ll investigate, probably. They may even bring it to Batman once they link it to the Tolovi drug case. Batman barely knows Tim’s alive, but he’ll still give the case a thorough enough look to solve it.

His parents will be informed eventually.

Probably by Mrs. Simz who will notice his absence in… well, it’s Wednesday night, she’ll be concerned if he’s not home on Thursday evening, but it’s likely she won’t really raise the alarm until he’s gone Saturday – seeing as he still officially spends Fridays with his chess club.

Mrs. Simz will worry.

Tim feels bad about that one.

He takes heart in the fact that Batman will probably have his case mostly solved by the time Mrs. Simz realizes something’s wrong.

She’ll have answers almost as soon as she has questions.

Tim hopes that Mrs. Simz isn’t the one who has to make the phone call to his parents.

She will definitely call them, it’s her job to report in on any problems relating to Tim, but Tim hopes she won’t be the first call – the one that informs them. She’d likely be fired on the spot for lying, sued for it too most likely – because his parents will never believe the first person who calls to tell them their son was kidnapped and murdered by drug dealers.

They probably won’t believe it until they’re required to come identify his body… if GCPD even needs to do that any more… or if there’s even a body for them to find.

Instead of going down that rabbit hole, Tim goes back to thinking about Mrs. Simz.

She probably will be fired.

But maybe she won’t be sued for libel.

But still…
Drakes do not get murdered in Chinatown by drug dealers.

The fact that Timothy was able to engage in such salacious activities so as to get himself murdered is something that clearly couldn’t be his own doing. She’ll be in trouble for not controlling him better. But she might not be in legal trouble for it…

Though… Tim’s parents won’t grieve in any conventional ways. It would be uncouth.

They’ll sue.

They’ll sue Mrs. Simz.

They’ll sue Gotham City, GCPD, and probably Obscura’s management, too.

They might even sue the national government, with multiple suits: the NSA and CIA and Homeland for hiding GHOST to start with, and then GHOST for allowing operatives like the Tolovis and Tavian Ross to exist at all.

The Drake lawyers will do a lot of damage.

It’s actually very satisfying to consider how much shit the government is going to have to deal with because of this mess. It might honestly be enough to make a significant dent in the city’s crime statistics, possibly even the nation’s.

He’ll probably do more for the actual cause of the caped crusade as a martyr than he ever could have as an active, boots-on-the-roof participant…

Maybe that will make it worth it.

He still feels bad for Mrs. Simz, though.

Suddenly, he thinks about the plausibility of writing a note to exonerate her. And to point detectives – and vigilantes – in the right direction, to deliver the info he’d gathered for them in the lead-up to his idiotic miscalculations.

He usually keeps a small notepad and a pencil or two tucked into his camera case – so he could take notes on something he saw while out stalking Batman and Robin, and take those notes in a hiding place where a backlit screen would give his position away.

Digging through his bag, Tim spots something he doesn’t recognize.
It’s a light tan little circle with a clear gel contour thing on it, and it stands out starkly against the black fabric. It’s *not* his.

Cautiously picking it up, Tim see that it’s a wireless earpiece. Not exactly the most sophisticated version of tech like that, but it’s still pretty advanced to be anything but government or Bat tech – and he’s pretty sure it’s not government.

Looking closer, Tim sees there’s a tiny pneumatic actuator clipped onto the edge of the flesh-colored base for the earpiece. It’s a pre-sync wireless actuator, essentially a remote button-presser like the kind used to set off back yard fireworks displays.

And it’s been triggered.

The switch is attached to the power button on the earpiece.

A power button currently in the *on* position.

Tim carefully unclips the actuator and gingerly finagles the gel contour into his ear.

There’s no sound on the other end – not even stray bits of background noise.

The silence helps Tim keep the vicious flare of hope in his chest from setting his lungs on fire as he forces out a whisper.

“Robin?”

The response is immediate.

Half a second after his whisper, Tim’s ear is assaulted by the roar of an engine. And then Jason’s voice is whisper-shouting over the din, “Hey, baby bird, you doin’ alright?”

Tim’s brain has stuttered to a halt. “I, um-”

His throat is tight and hot and… he thinks he might almost want to cry. Hope is a *very* painful thing, and so is guilt, and Tim isn’t entirely sure how to deal with either – but in order for his hope to actually have any valid meaning, Tim has to admit his guilt.

Because this is his fault.

Before he can force any words out, Jason’s voice is asking, “Are you alone? Able to talk?”

Tim can’t make his voice work.
And that worries Jason, prompts him to add, “If not, just stay quiet, baby bird, it's just good to hear from you at all.”

He sounds relieved. Very relieved.

Relieved like he’s already gotten really worked up with worry. Like he knows Tim’s in trouble, like he already knows how badly Tim screwed up. Which doesn’t make Tim’s words come any easier, but it forces the apology out with more immediacy.

“I, um, I think... I think I messed up,” Tim admits.

Fresh guilt sinks into his stomach as he says it.

"It's okay, Tim," Jason promises immediately – sounding like he really means it. "We're comin' for ya. I'm using the earbud to find you and I'm already getting' close. Just give me another ten minutes."

That vicious breed of hope claws at Tim’s throat again.

Jason’s coming for him.

Robin is on his way.

Tim forces his brain to switch over from guilty wallowing to helping Jason accomplish the mission laid out in front of him.

"It's not the Raven," Tim warns, adding, "It's not the Tolovis. They brought me to a different night club. I think it's called 'Obscura'."

"Obscura, got it," Jason relays.

Tim sighs. It feels good to know that Jason has the information, but he wishes he could offer up something more – not just more intel, but more useful intel.

He tries thinking over his encounter, trying to discern what about it would be useful.

Before he figures out something to say Jason is talking again, asking with a mission-focused calm and Robin’s well-honed soothing, “So, it’s not the Tolovis?”

"Mm-hm," Tim replies, unable to resist the urge to shake his head even though Jason can’t see the gesture. "It's some people working with the organization that the Tolovis separated from – GHOST. The only name I know is involved is Tavian Ross. I think he's the leader. There's at least six guys here besides him, but I don't know if that's it."

"GHOST. Tavian Ross, and six cronies," Jason repeats, adding, "That's a pretty good rundown, Timmers. You're doin' fine."
It’s a *decent* rundown, not a good one – just the bare minimum.

It’s a decent rundown of a terrible situation that Tim should never have been stupid enough to get himself stuck in… This is his fault, and he doesn’t even have enough information to make a rescue attempt even *kinda* safe for the capes doing the would-be rescuing.

Eventually, Tim manages to force himself to say, “I’m sorry I screwed up.”

Jason breathes out carefully, but forcefully enough for Tim to hear it over the roar of whatever engine he’s using to cross Gotham.

"We *are* gonna have to talk about how you keep running off alone," Jason tells him, heavy and serious, but not accusing. "Why the fuck did you go off tonight? What happened?"

“Spoiler,” Tim breathes.

Then he realizes that it sounds like he’s blaming her and he hurries to elaborate, “It was Spoiler – it’s not her fault, she couldn’t know, but… I figured out what the Tolovis were after and… and Spoiler found a box, labeled like the ones the Tolovis have been stealing. I don’t… I don’t have any way to contact her, but I had to try… It was- , I thought – I thought I had more time. Usually, there’s GHOST activity, and then the Tolovis arrive a few hours later, and then GHOST comes back… I miss-timed it, or miss-read it, or something… I'm sorry."

"We'll get you out of this, baby bird," Jason promises again.

That guilt kicks Tim in the stomach again.

They wouldn’t *have* to get him out of this if he hadn’t been so stupid.

*His* idiocy is risking *their* lives.

Tim doesn’t think Jason’s gonna blame him for it, but Tim knows he should.

After a stretch of silence on the air waves, Jason asks quietly, “Why didn’t you come to us?” As Tim pulls in enough air to squash the guilt and let him respond, he hears a muttered addition to the question, “Why didn’t you come to *me*?”

The air gets stuck in Tim’s lungs.

If he lets any of it out, the guilt will break him in half.

Eventually, the pressure starts to equalize and Tim manages to promise, “I was going to.”

It’s a weak defence. Stupid, useless, unable to affect anything – but at least it’s true.
"I was going to; I was,” Tim swears earnestly. “I’d just figured out enough concrete details to make it *worth* telling you and I was going to hand it off tonight. I’ve still got the flash drive with me... I don’t think my system’s as secure as the Cave’s so I didn’t wanna send it wireless. I was gonna give it to you or Nightwing when you went through Coventry on patrol.”

Jason sighs.

"Kid, your system is like the third most secure system on the fucking planet," Jason huffs, probably working very hard to keep from sounding pissed in an attempt to keep Tim as calm as he currently is. Tim’s just a dumb kid, after all, he needs to be managed carefully or he’ll panic and screw up again and blow the mission meant to rescue him.

“I’m sorry.”

The apology just aggravates the wound.

"Shit, kid, it's okay. We'll talk about it later, just be safe until I get there, alright?"

Yeah.

Jason is definitely pissed.

And Tim is definitely useless.

But he’s probably not so stupid that he can’t manage to stay small and quiet and wait for the Bats to get here and get him out. “Okay.”

There’s a beat of something Tim can’t quite interpret.

"I'm almost there, Timbo, just another few blocks," Jason promises.

Hope and dread and guilt and fear and some kind of ridiculously happy excitement zip in and out of Tim’s conscious awareness.

Then suddenly, there’s a burst of static and Jason curses.

“Robin?”

"It's okay, baby bird," Jason vows immediately, rushing out his words. “I might have to go off coms for a second here, but I'll be right back, and all us Bats are coming for you, alright?"

“Okay,” Tim replies, but he meets static in a way that makes him think Jason’s already gone and can’t hear him.

Tim sighs.

Loneliness descends on him – swift and painfully unexpected.
Tim knows he has no right to feel like that and tries to squash the ridiculous sentiment.

Doesn’t quite manage it.

Curls tight around his knees and listens to the static, trying to convince himself that the static itself – the fact that Jason stuck an earpiece in his camera bag to start with – means he’s not entirely unwanted, even if he is being intentionally excluded from whatever conversation Jason’s got going on at the moment.

It’s fine.

It is.

And Tim’s fine.

Really.

But then the static crackles and Jason’s voice is back inside his ear and the relief that claws at Tim’s lungs and throat and at the back of his eyes is absurd, ridiculous, but it’s also utterly undeniable. “Hey, T.”

It seems like Jason wants a response, but Tim can’t make even a single one of the myriad of muscles involved with producing his voice respond in any way.

After a moment of silence, Jason prompts, “You still there, baby bird?”

Of course, Jason thinks something’s happened. He can’t see Tim to know otherwise, so Tim has to make his voice work.

“Robin,” he manages to croak.

And then there’s a shuffling sound outside, boots.

“I think they’re coming back,” Tim whispers, almost pleased with himself for being able to warn Jason with a clear statement that he might not be able to respond if Jason asks another question. Tim does not want to worry Jason… at least not any more than absolutely necessary considering the fact that he’d gotten himself stupidly involved in this to begin with.

Though… It doesn’t seem like Jason understands the warning, exactly.

He seems to think it’s just Tim starting to panic.

"I'm almost there, baby bird," Jason promises, "Just hold on a bit longer for me."

Tim doesn't quite manage to verbalize a response before the handle on his closet jiggles and Tim has to force his words to silence.
The goon who’d caught Tim on the catwalk swings the door open – a dark scowl on his face as his gaze skims over Tim’s curled up figure.

“Get up,” the goon demands.

Tim scrambles to comply, clutching tightly to his camera bag.

That heavy hand finds Tim’s scruff again and the goon hauls Tim out of the closet. The good drags Tim up a narrow flight of stairs, to the night club’s main floor, and then up another one to a wrap-around balcony that overlooks the floor packed with oblivious patrons.

Then Tim’s towed up one more flight of stairs, passed a pair of bouncers, and into a VIP lounge that’s lofted above writhing masses.

Tavian Ross is seated at a table in the center of the loft. He’s surrounded by others – all in black coats that make Tim think they’re all active agents, or at least GHOST affiliated.

Tavian Ross looks over at Tim vaguely, but other than a disinterested flick of his gaze across Tim’s figure and a nod to the goon holding Tim’s scruff, he doesn’t react. He simply carries on his conversation with the young goon seated directly to his right – leaning close so he doesn’t have to shout over the deafening boom of the EDM that’s blasting through Tim’s body and vibrating down to his bones.

It’s an odd sensation.

One Tim never would’ve imagined could be enjoyable – especially considering the surrounding circumstances – but one that he finds is… strangely… exhilarating. Either despite the circumstances, or perhaps because of them… the music is both calming and energizing.

The goon who dragged him here deposits him on the floor by the loft’s railing – so he can’t even pretend escape is possible unless he wants to make the three story drop over the rail.

Tim might’ve considered that option – that 90 percent certainly unsurvivable option – if he didn’t have Jason in his ear making promises about how the Bats are almost there and that everything is going to be alright… if Tim did take that out… Jason will probably feel guilty about, and he’ll likely fret over how Tim hadn’t trusted him enough to wait to be saved.

There’s a moment or two of static and shuffling that Tim can’t interpret, but Jason’s voice is nearly constant in his ear – spilling out the exact kind of reassurances that Tim needs, demonstrating Robin’s almost magical ability to know exactly what to say. It doesn’t just keep Tim calm on a psychological level, it does something physiological to him, too.

The music helps too, somehow, and between the music thumming in his bones and Jason’s reassurances in his ear, Tim manages to calm his breathing, relax his muscles, unclench his jaw, and even ease the pressure that’s stuck behind his ribs, weighing on his heart and lungs.
And then Jason’s saying, “I’m here, baby bird, just walked in the door. Now, I’m gonna need your help for this bit, so guide me to ya, alright?”

Tim carefully does not react.

Slides around inch by inch to get a good view of the floor below.

He spots Jason by the bar faster than he would’ve thought he could manage in such a sizeable crowd, especially considering that Jason his not sporting his characteristic Robin mask.

But… Tim can’t pick out any of the other Bats in the crowd.

Jason can’t… he can’t be alone here, can he?

Either Jason is somehow able to read Tim’s question in his silence or Tim muttered it aloud – with the pound of the music and the com in his ear, it’s actually rather difficult for Tim to tell whether the words in his head are staying entirely internal.

“Those Bats you love are in costume and staging for an infiltration,” Jason promises.

Soothed, albeit rather concerned that Jason might just be saying that to keep him calm, Tim keeps his voice low and says, “I can see you. I’m in the VIP loft on the, um… south side of the building. Ross is here, with at least two associates and four goons. I don’t know where the others are, or why they brought me up here, but… I think Ross is waiting for something.”

Jason’s head turns upwards, gaze scanning the dim shadows behind the first layer of lights and lasers for any sign of Tim – freezes when he spots his ghostly face between the bars of the loft’s railing. He shoots a smirk Tim’s way.

“Well, whatever he’s expecting, I’ll put good money down on betting that he’s not expecting us,” Jason tells Tim with a cocky confidence that Tim wants to believe in.

He knows Jason’s too smart to think that so securely, not with the Tolovis’ records being on the Bats’ radar. But he still hopes that Jason’s statement is only half bluster.

Tim can almost convince himself of it as he watches Jason move easily through the ebb and flow of the tidal waves of shifting bodies – effortlessly harnessing the energy of the music to slide unopposed through the passive human barricade.

It’s… mesmerizing to watch.

A shark cutting effortlessly through a school of fish.

Jason’s moving at a good clip and he makes it to the staircase of the first loft before the
current song transitions into a new one. He’s rounded the east wall and is approaching the second staircase that will take him up to where Tim is being held when he’s blocked by the bouncer positioned at the bottom of the staircase.

“I have business with the kid you’ve got upstairs,” Jason informs the bouncer, his voice ringing clear in Tim’s ear – sending a thrill through Tim even though he’s not the one those words are directed at. It’s still the Robin voice – and one of Tim’s favorite variations of it, to boot – it’s the brashly confident version, the one meant to antagonize a mugger into forgetting about their victim. This one is Jason-specific, drastically different from the chattery distraction Dick used to employ in the same kind of situation.

There’s some reply from the bouncer while Tim’s musing over the differences between Dick’s Robin and Jason’s own unique version, but Tim can’t hear it well enough to parse it.

He can guess that the answer is something along the lines of ‘doesn’t matter, you can’t go up’, but the exact words don’t matter since Jason has no intention whatsoever of obeying the sentiment. He makes to push passed the bouncer, who grabs at his shoulder – which opens him up to Jason’s twisting grab of his wrist, with a disabiling kick to the back that almost certainly dislocates the bouncer’s shoulder.

Tim winces.

Both with an automatic sympathy for the bouncer, and for the certainty that Jason’s just gotten himself benched for being overly brutal – Batman has been trying to curb Jason’s street-kid destructiveness, to mitigate the instinct Jason’s honed to hurt his targets. Whether it’s a drive for vengeance or some sort of street-schooled sense of needing to hit hard enough to keep them down to get away… Jason’s sent more people to the hospital in each one of his two years as Robin than Dick did cumulatively in five.

It’s a quick move on Jason’s part, a brilliant show of his instincts and his training with Batman working perfectly in sync.

There’s another bouncer at the top of the stairs.

Tim doesn’t see how Jason gets passed this one, but there’s a few pointed grunts of exertion that hint at a very similar encounter to the one below.

There must’ve been a goon Tim hadn’t seen waiting in the wings, because there’s a third interaction – the grunts of a tussle coming though the com – before Jason appears at the edge of the loft. His arrival does not immediately draw the attention of Tavian Ross, but it does put the goon who’d been Tim’s babysitter on edge.

It’s that goon who gives Ross a look and finally makes him notice Jason.

Jason isn’t trying to get the boss’s attention. He’s fixated on Tim.
He refuses to do anything until he’s caught Tim’s eye – and until after Tim returns the careful nod he gives. Once Tim nods, and even manages to generate a shaky smile of welcome greeting, Jason turns his attention to Tavian Ross.

He eyes the drug lord with only a slight tension in his stance, and a deeply unimpressed look in his eye – one that Tim knows is pure bluff only because he’s been stalking Jason on the streets with Batman for over two years now and he’s seen how Jason works a typical thug over for information while he’s mostly trying to buy time.


Tavian Ross runs his eyes over Jason with a small frown and a growing furrow on his forehead. He looks less than unimpressed. He looks confused.

A lion being hassled by a sparrow.

“And what would that be?” Ross asks, tenting his fingers beneath his chin.

Jason jerks his chin in Tim’s direction. “Him.”

Ross arches an eyebrow. “We picked him up in a warehouse on the otherside of town, in the midst of breaking and entering,” Ross counters, “And he was after some valuable merchandise of ours – merchandise we’d rather he not tell anyone about.”

With a snort, Jason, responds. “Everybody fuckin’ knows about your god damn drugs. I don’t give a shit about that crap, or your little government conspiracy. I want the kid.”

At this, Ross’s eyes narrow.

“Why?”
Jason frowns.

“Why what?”

“Why do you want him, if you know what else we have?”

The goon that’s been babysitting Tim has been drifting towards Jason – which has not escaped Jason’s notice – and as the goon starts to flank him, Jason is forced to take a step back to keep the goon in view while keeping his direct attention on Ross.

“Why the fuck do you care?”
“It’s significant,” Ross replies.

The baby sitter tacks on, “If it’s true.”

Jason’s arms are still crossed over his chest, but his weight is leaned back on his heels – not quite defensive, but certainly strained and uneasy. He clearly feels the rising tension in the room, dislikes the way Ross and the baby sitter have so effectively flanked him. Jason definitely knows that he couldn’t win a fight against either of them without substantial back-up, and there’s no possibility of winning against both on his own – let alone against the other goons gathered in the area, who all have their eyes glued on Jason.

“What the fuck do you even want with the kid anyway?”

Ross huffs, and indulges, “He’s a witness, and also a bargaining chip. I would even be willing to trade him to you, honestly, but you don’t have anything I want.”

Uncrossing his arms as the babysitter gets another step closer to him, Jason shoves his thumbs into his pockets – a slightly more fight ready stance, while still playing at the image of being cool and nonchalant. “And how do you know I don’t have something interesting on offer?”

“Because I don’t even know who you are,” Ross drones, indulgence already wearing thin as he goes on, “Which means that you’re clearly not a relevant player on our particular chess board.”

Jason’s teeth grind together as he fight the urge to snap back with some sort of probably-unhelpful vitriol. He barely gets a chance to settle, and doesn’t get one to give Ross a more carefully considered retort, before a shadow appears at his back that sends Tim’s stomach plummeting through the floor.

It’s Rwen Tolovi.

“He’s with me,” the criminally violent former government operative explains easily with a cuttingly amused smile at the others’ darkening expressions. “Aren’t you, Robin?”

Oh, frack.

Tim isn’t entirely certain how he manages to maintain consciousness, so much blood has drained away from his face – from his skull, and from the delicate brain matter inside it – because, oh, frack this can’t possibly be good.

Because Rwen Tolovi knows that Jason is Robin.
And because Rwen Tolovi is declaring a tie between Robin and the Blackbirds.

This cannot end well.

____________________

Chapter End Notes

Only a few more cliff hangers to go, people, I promise. Well... four more...

But after that there's gonna be a few chapters of almost pure fluff to wrap things up!

Thank you guys SOOOOOO much for sticking with this for so long already!
We've still got a ways to go before the end, but it IS in sight! <3

Next Time: Jason faces off with the baddies to secure Tim's freedom. Consequences be damned.
Chapter Summary

Jason faces off in a verbal pissing match of a negotiation for Tim's freedom.

He doesn't really have a plan, and things get complicated, but Jason only has one goal: Tim.

Chapter Notes

Cliffhanger, again...

Only three more, I promise...
Also, Jason swears a lot in this one... I mean, it's Jason... and his baby seal is in danger.
So, yeah...
–

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nineteen: Rule #19 – Stand Your Ground

Jason keeps blathering on at Tim with soothing words he isn’t even sure the stupid baby seal could possibly be hearing. Between the roar of Jason’s engine as he nears Obscura and the pound of the night club’s music that Jason’s picking up through Tim’s com, Jason’s pretty damn certain there’s too much background noise for any of his half-panicked mutters to be heard.

But he keeps talking anyway.

If there’s even the slightest chance that Tim could hear him, Jason knows he needs to keep talking – to keep offering the reassurances he knows that Tim specifically needed to hear right now. Jason had seen Tim in a kidnapping situation before, had learned a lot more about his particular variety of mental resilience – knew from his own experience that the promise of an impending rescue from the Bats made Tim a thousand times more determined to stay alive.

Frankly, Jason was surprised they hadn’t just killed Tim when they’d found him poking around the warehouse where they’d stashed their drugs.

He is not going to let the minor miracle of that bizarre little blessing go to waste.
So, keeping Tim’s morale as high as fucking possible is Jason’s top priority while he rushes to weave his bike through the narrow streets of Chinatown – utterly ignoring the alarmed and offended shouts of the pedestrians he’s unceremoniously knocking aside.

Additionally, beyond helping to keep Tim’s morale up, the blathering on helps Jason control his breathing – keeping his heart-rate manageable and his panic-stiffened lungs from locking up on him entirely. He can’t afford to hyperventilate or to let himself pass out, Tim needs him too much for that shit – Tim needs him focused and fight-ready.

Jason whips into the alley behind Obscura barely seconds before Batman’s silent speedster slips into the backlot’s shadows.

Batman’s swept himself out of the car and across the alley to tower over Jason before Jason has even manged to fully remove his helment. Jason doesn’t have time for a fight with B right now. If B wants to start one, Jason’s gonna have to scamper out of it – and he’s only got a 50/50 shot of doing that successfully, so he stays tensed to bolt as B holds out his gauntlet.

“Earbud,” Batman growls.

Warily, Jason holds an open palm beneath B’s curled fingers, snatching up the tiny piece of tech Batman deposits. He sticks it inside the ear not occupied with the com linking him to Tim as Batman instructs, “Locate the target, secure acess to the target, and do not engage beyond what’s necessary to play for time. Nightwing and Batgirl are en route, eta 10 minutes.”

Jason nods, still wary.

He doesn’t verbalize anything – not wanting to confuse Tim with a sudden change in what he’s saying. B seems to get it, bizarre as that seems. His mouth is a grim line and his expression serious beneath what the cowl hides.

Then Jason turns his back and strides towards Obscura’s front door.

Bruce Wayne’s bankroll provides an effective shortcut as Jason uses a couple sheets of specialized cotton-paper with Ben Franklin’s face on them to cut the line and bypass the ID check and slip out onto the floor without delay.

And then Jason’s saying, “I’m here, baby bird, just walked in the door. Now, I’m gonna need your help for this bit, so guide me to ya, a’ight?”

The wait for any hint of a response is agonizing.

But eventually, there’s a triumphant little hum that Jason thinks might mean Tim’s spotted him – followed quickly by curling whine of worried confusion, likely as he fails to spot any of the other Bats and as he realizes that Jason’s still dressed in civies.

Tim mutters half a worried question about Jason being all alone.

"Those Bats you love are in costume and staging for an infiltration," Jason promises.

Tim’s sigh proves that Jason hit the mark.
A moment later, Tim actually talks to him. Sensibly, Tim keeps his voice low and his words slow as he says, “I can see you. I'm in the VIP loft on the, um... south side of the building. Ross is here, with at least four goons. I don't know where the others are, or why they brought me up here, but... I think Ross is waiting for something.”

Jason's head turns upwards, gaze scanning the dim shadows behind the first layer of lights and lasers for any sign of Tim – freezes when he spots his ghostly face between the bars of the loft's railing. The kid looks tired and sickly pale and terrified, but seems unharmed.

Relief floods Jason’s system with enough force to make his fucking knees wobble like he’s a god damn pansy. But that shit won’t get Tim rescued.

He might not be grievously hurt just yet, but he’s still not out of danger.

Jason shoots a confident smirk Tim's way – hoping to reassure him visibly that he’s gonna get the kid out of this mess.

Because he is.

Even if it damn well kills him to do it.

Which it might, but whatever.

Jason can do his job, he can be a half-decent Robin – can get the civilians out and safe without being too overly concerned about his own chances of getting out alive.

"Well, whatever he's expecting, I'll put money down on betting that he's not expecting us," Jason tells Tim with a cocky confidence that he hopes Tim can believe.

Tim gives a tiny nod – so tiny, Jason’s almost worried he just imagined it because it’s hard to honestly see a gesture like that from this distance with the interference of so many lights and shadows – but it’s enough to let Jason drag his eyes away from the haunting little face above him. He turns his gaze on the club itself, letting his body fall into the rhythm of the music as he plots a course to the first staircase he needs to climb.

Obscura’s got a hot beat droppin’ – and with it only being a Wednesday night, it can’t possibly be any special guest, which means their usual House DJ is playin’ on point. It’s actually quite a shame that Jason’s here under such unfortunate circumstances. This place would make for one helluva night out when the only thing at stake is trying not to laugh himself silly watching Tim make an utterly adorkable fool of himself – and trying not to die of embarrassment as Dick doesn’t even bother attempting to be cool.

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Jason makes it to the first staircase before the track playing when he walked into the club to start with begins to transition into the next one. Again, Jason has to mark the skill of the in-house beatmaster – the transition is seamlessly smooth and most of the patrons don’t even notice the switch until recognition of the new track’s unmixed version kicks in completely.

The franklins Jason dropped at the front grant him VIP access to the balcony that rounds the main floor, but – being a place of criminal enterprise – Obscura’s upper loft is guarded with more than a playboy’s blasé use of bills can bypass.

The bottom of the staircase that marks the last 20 yards between Jason and Tim is blocked by bouncer who is not impressed by Jason’s clear intent to pass.

“Sorry, kid,” he growls, using his height and bulk to try to seem imposing – which might’ve
worked if Jason were actually just a brainless rich boy, but doesn’t even have a micron of potential to phase a kid from the streets of Crime Alley. “Upstairs is invite only.”

Jason smirks and lets his Narrows’ grit and streetfight smile show.

"I have business with the kid you've got upstairs," Jason informs the bouncer, his voice ringing clear and cocky.

Unless this no-name bouncer is on the fucking take directly with whoever Tavian Ross works for – which Jason thinks is laughably unlikely – he’s not got a drop of that special roid-rage fueling super juice inside him. Jason can beat this fucker’s ass to hell and back for shits and giggles any time he wants – would do so now to prove a point if Tim weren’t waiting upstairs.

“Doesn’t matter, short stop,” the bouncer replies stupidly, “I got orders.”

Jason makes to push passed the boucer, who grabs at his shoulder in the most predictable move any door thug has ever made in the history of brainless door thugs. The grab opens the goon up for Jason to twist around and snatch hold of his wrist, leavering that arm over his shoulder and pairing it with a disabling kick to the back that cracks the bouncer’s joint in a very satisfying way.

If Jason wasn’t already benched three times over, that move’s excessive brutality would probably be enough to land him back in the hot seat.

Jason doesn’t particularly care.

He’s been on his way out of Wayne Manor since this case got started.

There’s no way he’s gonna be able to pretend he’s still allowed to stay there now.

And he sure as hell isn’t gonna let the nebulous potential for adding one more black mark to his fucking coal mine of a spotty record stop him from getting his ass upstairs to save Tim as fast as possible.

So, the instant he disables the bouncer by dislocating his shoulder, Jason jogs upwards.

There’s another bouncer at the top of the stairs.

This one knows Jason won’t be stopped with words or an intimidating arm-cross, so he goes straight to the man-handling phase. It goes as well for him as it did for his colleague.

There’s a third tough-guy bouncer waiting in the wings, but Jason doesn’t let that slow him down for more than half a second.

And then Jason’s at the edge of the VIP loft where Tim is being held.

There’s an odd power dynamic between the people in the area, made achingly apparent by their at-odds body language, but Jason’s not really keen on analyzing it just yet.
He’s fixated on Tim.

The kid looks more like a fuckin’ baby seal than ever, curled up on the floor with his pasty ass face looking even paler up close in the low light and those big blue eyes of his going perfectly round with a heartrending mix of hope and worry and terror.

Jason catches his gaze and nods.

He waits as Tim sorts his brain out enough to nod back.

Tim even manages to attempt cracking a shaky smile.

It’s enough – more than enough – to let Jason know he’s alright for the moment.

Once he’s confirmed that Tim is doing well enough, considering the current circumstances, Jason turns his attention to the bad guys in the room.

The oddness of the power dynamic strikes him again.

Tavian Ross is easy to mark, aloof and splayed wide with the imposition of power. But there’s an anxious twist in him, a tension in how the set of his shoulders doesn’t quite line up right with the angle of his hips or his knees. For an almost physically invulnerable drug lord, Tavain Ross is throwing out some vibes that make him seem hella nervous.

On Tavian’s left is a kid – seriously can’t be more than a couple days older than Dick, at the absolute oldest – who’s throwin’ out the exact opposite vibe. He’s cool as a cucumber, sittin’ pretty and getting a bit bored as he’s waiting for the show to start.

On Tavian’s right is another youngster – though this one’s old enough to be a reasonable addition to the table. He’s bored too, but more on the agitated side and he’s forcibly involving himself in a hushed discussion with Tavian to keep himself occupied.

But the one that really interests Jason is one of the floater goons standing on the fringes like they weren’t considered important enough to get a seat at the little round table.

The goon standing near Tim is different.

He stands out because he’s not like the others – down to the way he fuckin’ breathes. The posture is different, the movement is different, the focus is different. Whoever that guy is, he’s not from around here, and this is not the kind of crew he usually runs with… And he’s got an unnervingly keen gaze trained on Jason.

He’s probably employed by Tavian Ross, but very little about how that guy’s body language is representing him says that he’s just gonna roll over and take Tavain’s orders.

"So, Rossie," Jason drawls, trying not to show how carefully split his attention is – caught between Tavian and the goon that doesn’t belong. "You got somethin' of mine."
Tavian Ross runs his eyes over Jason with a small frown and a growing furrow on his forehead. He looks less than unimpressed. He looks confused.

His shoulders angle towards the goon, attention split just as thoroughly as Jason’s currently is – Tavian’s at least as concerned as Jason himself is by how much interest and overtly biased attention the goon is showing towards him.

"And what would that be?" Tavian asks, tenting his fingers beneath his chin.

Jason jerks his chin in Tim's direction. "Him."

He doesn’t leave room for negotiation in his stance. It makes Tavian’s eyes narrow and the goon that doesn’t belong begins a slow stalk towards him – a subtle, and potentially problematic display of aggression, but it’s more of an attempt to intimidate him than to genuinely sneak around to flank him.

"We picked him up in a warehouse on the other side of town, in the midst of breaking and entering," Tavian counters, carefully arching an eyebrow. "And he was after some valuable merchandise of ours – merchandise we’d rather he not tell anyone about."

Jason snorts, annoyed and unimpressed by Tavian’s attempt at reasoning out his motivations for kidnapping a twelve year old and proceeding to use him as a hostage threat.

It’s a rather gentle threat, considering how dangerous the drugs are, and it’s still unclear who exactly Tavian wants to hold him hostage against, but Jason thinks that Tavian might not realize just how much he knows about the operation – a random gangster threatening a kid over witnessing run-of-the-mill illegal merchandise is one thing, but a government agent threatening a kid over a drug so dangerous it doesn’t even have an official Schedule status is quite another.

"Everybody fuckin' knows about your god damn drugs," Jason announces brashly, adding, “I don’t give a shit about that crap, or your little government conspiracy. I want the kid."

His theory is validated as Tavian goes still.

The only thing Tavian has really reacted to is the implication that more people know about the situation than just the kid who’d been caught poking into the warehouse where they’d been keeping the drugs. Tavian’s playing a closed game with a very tight knit group of players, so having not one but two outsiders seemingly aware of his chessboard and what’s happening on it is almost definitely more than a little alarming.

He certainly seems nervous enough about it all.

"Why?"

Jason frowns. That is not the reaction he was expecting.

"Why what?"
"Why do you want him, if you know what else we have?"

Because the kid is his friend, and this guy holding him hostage is a super human psychopath, and the stupid drugs involved are killing just about everyone they have recorded as ever even touching them?

It doesn’t strike Jason as a very logical question, it doesn’t seem like the answer could be anything but obvious.

The goon that doesn’t belong is now thoroughly flanking him, to the point that Jason has to take a step back to keep the goon in view while keeping his direct attention on Ross.

As he watches the goon out of the corner of his periphery, Jason keeps his posture tense and his joints loose as he asks, “Why the fuck do you care?”

"It's significant," Ross replies gravely.

The goon speaks with an aggressive authority when he tacks on, "If it's true."

Jason’s arms are still crossed over his chest, but his weight is leaned back on his heels – not quite defensive, but certainly and overtly uneasy. He can feel a rising tension in the room, a strain that goes beyond the idea of a conflict of opinion between who’s the boss and who’s the goon. This tension eats at something bigger, a stressor that crosses into the territory of some sort of wider idealism.

Jason knows that he can’t possibly win a fight against either of them without substantial back-up, they’re both clearly on the roid-rage inducing take that allowed the Tolovis to trounce the Bats in that alley and let that stick of a dockworker throw Jason through a wall last week.

However they’ve managed to survive the drug this long is questionable – to the point that Jason considers the likelihood of there being more than one strange drug in circulation.

So, there’s no way he can win against one of them on his own, and there’s absolutely no possibility of winning against both, at the moment. And that’s even entirely discounting the potential of having to fight against the other goons gathered in the area, the perimeter floaters who all have their eyes glued on Jason.

"What the fuck do you even want with the kid anyway?"

Tavian huffs, and indulges, "He's a witness, and also a bargaining chip. I would even be willing to trade him to you, honestly, but you don't have anything I want."

It’s a ploy to see if Jason’s more involved in Tavian’s current game than he’d previously assumed. He is utterly convinced that a genuine outsider couldn’t possibly know so much.
The goon that doesn’t belong seems to agree – stalking even closer to Jason.

Hating the necessity of giving up ground and revealing his anxiety, Jason uncrosses his arms and lets his posture drop into something a bit more fight-ready. That goon is much more of a threat than Tavian, and even if Tavian’s got that drug in his system to make him a god damn monster, the goon would be a threat even if no drugs were involved at all and Jason needs to keep an eye on him directly.

Feeling the creeping edge of desperation clawing it’s way higher up his trachea, Jason shoves his thumbs into his pockets – feeling for whatever Bat-gadgets he’s got stashed away that might be useful.

It’s not much, but there are a couple flash bang grenades and an emergency repelling line attached to a folded up batarang… Using the repelling line for a quick get away would be murder on his hands, and would definitely peel the skin off his palm entirely if not simply cut straight through the muscle, bone, and sinew altogether, but it’s not the worst option Jason can imagine for escaping at the moment. The line is meant to be flung across a gap, attached on both ends, and then slid down with the use of an additional object to grip hold of – like a pipe or even shoelaces in a sinch, none of which Jason really has time to grab.

But if Jason employs it here, the only goal would be to nab Tim and jump over the balcony railing – using the repel line to slow their fall to make a survivable landing. It’s not at all the high tension wire’s intended use, but it might serve the purpose adequately enough.

Jason needs to buy a bit more time, to wedge himself closer to Tim, in order for that wild idea to have even half a chance, so he pushes back against Tavian – plays up his suspicions.

“And how do you know I don't have something interesting on offer?"

His question is laced with a light antagonism, just enough aggression and arrogance to make Tavian believe he really has something worthwhile to trade.

"Because I don’t even know who you are," Tavian counters immediately, voice going ice cold with severity. The barest edge of anxiety shows itself in the pinching at the corners of his eyes as he can’t help but add declaratively, “Which means that you're clearly not a relevant player on our particular chess board.”

Jason’s teeth grind together as he resists ripping off a triumphant slide of sass. He even got the god damn metaphor right. Tavian Ross might be a fucking super soldier spy drug lord or whatnot for GHOST, but he’s still a god damn entitled shithead and Jason knows how to work his type of cocky ass bastard. Even if Tavian can throw Jason’s ass into next Tuesday without breaking a sweat, Jason might be able to pinch and pull at Tavian’s own anxieties and spark a fight between Tavian and his own god damn goon squad.

Which would leave an opening for Jason to secure Tim and get the fuck out of here.
Before Jason can even finish celebrating the development of a new, almost reasonable, plan, the hair on the back of his neck gives a twinge. His hackles rise and he drops his knees into a straight-up fight-mode stance as a shadow appears at his back – alarmingly close to him considering how late he’d managed to react to it.

In front of him, Tim’s face goes even more ghostly white – the last dregs of blood draining away from his face so quickly and completely, Jason’s actually surprised he doesn’t pass the fuck out from it.

Unfortunately, Jason can’t dwell on Tim’s current status as the shadow behind Jason’s shoulder speaks – revealing himself as Rwen Tolovi, as he says, “He’s with me.”

Jason doesn’t want to turn his back on Tavian, but he cannot let Rwen Tolovi stay in his blindspot – and he’d rather have his back to Tavian than to the goon that doesn’t fit – so Jason half-swiveles to get Rwen into his eyeline, with Tavian’s shadow just barely staying visible while he almost directly faces the goon.

He takes another twisting step and abandons keeping Tavian’s figure in sight at all when Rwen goes on to ask, “Aren’t you, Robin?”

Oh. Fuck.

This is not good.

Because Rwen Tolovi knows that he’s Robin. And now, Rwen Tolovi is declaring a tie between Robin and the Blackbirds.

And Jason – for once in his life – has no idea how to snark about what’s happening.

Desperately wracking his brain for even the most slipshod plan to attempt weaseling his way out of this – for anything with a bit more plan attached than his initial idea of just tackling Tim before diving over the rail and hoping for the best – Jason falters, hesitates.

It’s not like him.

But he knows that rushing through this blindly will just get Tim killed.

Which is not an acceptable outcome.

And with the rest of the Bats outside… Jason is hoping that their combined brain power is enough to come up with something.
Because he’s got nothing.

And he does not like the little hint of a smile Rwen Tolovi is wearing as he looks Jason over – evaluative, with a calculating gaze skimming him from head to toe.

Rwen’s gaze lingers on Jason until Tavian asks what the hell Rwen thinks he’s doing and Rwen’s eyes drift over Jason’s shoulder to pin the government approved drug lord to his seat.

“I’m offering you a champion, Tavian,” Rwen replies lightly, legitimately bored by Tavian’s question, but with an undercurrent of interest in the potential situation. “A local volunteer who knows what he’s getting into – because you know how we Tolovis are about informed consent. You wanted to know how it reacts with fresh blood, well here’s your chance to see it. And I can guarantee you that, if it’s administered properly, his body won’t reject it.”

Jason can feel Tavian glaring into his back, but he keeps his eyes on Rwen.

“How do you know he’s compatible,” Tavian asks, his demand cautious and slow but caught fast inside an undeniable interest.

Rwen gives a dry shrug. “To the right eyes,” he explains with a frustrating vagueness.

Even the fucking Batman has the god damn decency to finish his sentences when he deigns to give unhelpful explanations for things.

Rwen goes on to add, “I’m sure that Khan can verify it for you, and as an outside contractor he’s got no reason to side with either of us.”

Both Rwen and Tavian look to Jason’s left and eye the goon that stands out from the rest of Tavian’s little squad. The goon – Khan, apparently – looks Jason over again, but the gesture is far more like a play for time than any legitimate evaluation.

It was probably whatever observation he made of what the fuck Rwen’s talking about that made the goon so interest in Jason to start with…

Khan looks to Tavian and nods.

Just once, firm and certain and deliberate – confirmation.

Trepidation swirls in Jason’s gut. He does not like this conversation one bit – thinks he understands just enough of it to know that none of it can go well for him.

Rwen Tolovi is offering him up as a guinnea pig for some sort of experiment that Tavian Ross wants to run, probably involving the god damn drug sweeping through the city. Why they’re seemingly working together now escapes Jason, but it’s clearly the most likely conclusion – which makes Jason question how closely tied to GHOST Tavian is in current actuality.

The Bats had been assuming that the Tolovis were stealing shipments that Tavian was legally, or at least quasi-legally, transporting for the government agency he belongs to… but now
Jason’s thinking that maybe Rwen is calling in a final favor from an old brother in arms.

There’s clearly an old connection of some sort between them, their body language screams that much without any room left for doubt.

What he doesn’t know is what any of that means for Tim.

A low tone alerts him to a new com connection on the line he’s got set up with B, and then Nightwing’s voice is in his ear, cool and calm, “Talk to us, Little Wing. We don’t have any eyes but yours in there, so we need you to tell us what’s happening.”

Jason can do this.

He’s been trained for this.

It’s only been about two years that he’s been in the thick of it, but still, he’s been trained and he’d always been a fast learner, so he’s more than prepared – he can do this.

Jason turns back around to face Tavian.

“So, Tavian Ross,” he drawls, “You’ve got all these goons up in here, and that guy who’s apparently an outside contractor, and you’ve got Rwen Tolovi offering me up on a platter. Tell me again why you feel the need to keep such a tight hold on that stupid little kid?”

Tavian works a muscle in his jaw.

“I thought he was one of yours, honestly,” Tavain said, addressing Rwen rather than Jason as he spoke. “Either that or a Tsingani youngling working on your behalf. Forgive me for being a bit twitchy on the topic of betrayal by a Tolovi. It’s not exactly unprecedented.”

Jason can feel Rwen rolling his eyes behind him as Dick’s voice trickles urgently into his ear, “The Tsingani are a Roma Tribe, distant cousins to the Romani I come from – but they’re Tinkerers, not Travelers, and they don’t live anywhere near Gotham. A few small groups live in Florida and Louisiana but other than that, they’re entirely west coast.”

With a snort, Jason relays the relevant bit to Tavian, saying, “The Tsingani don’t live anywhere near here. Gotham’s too friggn’ cold for ‘em.”

The collective attention of those in the loft lasers back onto Jason and he stands up straight and tall beneath the pressure – casts a smirk about the crowd.

“And I’m not exactly a Tolovi twat, but I’m willing enough to work with Rwen here to get you what you want, Rossie,” Jason barrels on, “So, ain’t it about time you let my brother go?”

“Brother?” Tavian scoffs. “No wonder Rwen is so willing to help you convince me. All that family drama and whatnot. Does Xansa even know you’re here, Rwen?”

Rwen gives a bored shrug and says, “He is the boss.”
“So people keep saying,” Tavian scoffs in return. “And yet, you’re the one who always seems to show up right before the important things happen.”

Jason doesn’t much care for the direction in which the conversation has turned, and to get the conversation back on track, he growls, “Yeah, criminals have office politics. Big shocker, there. Now, can I just have the kid back before you talk us both to death?”

The comment makes Tavian glower, and it makes Tim shrink further into himself.

But it does refocus the conversation on what Jason wants.

Tavian looks between Rwen, Khan, and Tim on the floor with a skeptical disdain.

“Fine, he’s free to go,” Tavian dismisses with a wave of his hand. “We’ll leave him here, since I presume, Rwen, that you are our formal escort to the Raven this evening.”

As Rwen shrugs again and drawls out a response of ‘essentially’, Jason bites down and grinds his teeth together.

“Uh-uh, I get to watch the kid walk out of here,” Jason snarls before anything else can happen to change the landscape he’s operating with. “Right now. Out the front door and onto a very public street. Who knows how many extra friends you’ve got hanging around in your little goon squad to pick him up again as soon as I’m not looking?”

With a resigned huff, Tavian says, “Fine. Khan, get him up. Send him on his way.”

As the goon grabs Tim’s shoulder and lifts him to his feet, Jason bears his teeth. “Let him walk alone. He’s had more than enough of your grubby paws on him”

Khan shrugs and releases his hold on Tim.

Tim wobbles slightly, but remains upright – albeit looking like a spooked little deer. Jason sends a cocky wink his way as Tim shuffles passed, making his way slowly to the stairs.

Musteriing a small smile, Tim tries to hide the fact that he looks like he’s about to cry and Jason pretends not to notice the concerning crack in Tim’s carefully arranged façade.

It’s an excruciating wait for Jason as Tim disappears around the corner and makes his way down the stairs wrapped around the club’s perimeter, but eventually, Tim’s dark fluff of hair and eerie pale skin catch in the swirl of spotlights. Jason tracks his movement carefully as he strides towards the main entrance – Tim’s not exactly graceful as he maneuvers around the club goers, but there is a certain elegance to his directness, to the intent behind every step and the ease with which he anticipates and dodges through the flow of people around him.

He makes it to the door and only hesitates for the barest second as he fails to fight down the urge to take one last look back at the loft where Jason’s definitely hidden from view, but still present enough to make Tim need to just look back.
The glance only lasts a second, and then Tim’s vanishing out the door.

It’s another excrutiating wait for Jason until Nightwing pops up in his ear saying, “We got him, Little Wing. Baby bird is safe and sound. We’re sending him back to the nest, and Agent A is gonna take good care of him. You did good, Little Wing, and now we’re gonna get you out.”

Jason lets the air in his lungs slide out through his teeth.

The Bats have Tim.

As long as he’s safe…

Well, everything else is negotiable, as far as Jason’s concerned.

He turns his full attention back to Tavian Ross and lets the Robin smirk slide across his face with a hellraising slice of devil-may-care bravado.

“Let’s get this show on the road, then, eh?”

Chapter End Notes

... Remember how I said the end is in sight?

Yeah... that's suddenly like ten more chapters away now... only like four/five of those chapters are really plot heavy, but yeah... we've got ten more chapters to go!

NEXT TIME: Basically...Dick panics. Things go badly. And then they get worse...
Chapter Summary

Rescuing Jason is not a straight forward affair, and Dick struggles to keep his head on straight.

Chapter Notes

We have yet another cliff hanger...

But we're almost at the final confrontation!

WARNINGS: Dubious consent to drug use mentioned here; it's off camera, but it happens. And Dick's in a terrible head space that spirals around self blame for events well beyond his control.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty: Rule #20 – Know When to Ask for Help

Dick knows when he’s in hot water.

Knows when it’s boiling around him.

Knows that he’d rather be poached like an egg under Bruce’s disappointment than face the consequences of keep any potentially harmful secrets from him for even half a second longer than he already has – knows he’d rather let Batman ream him out like he deserves for his reckless and idiotic choices to endanger an underage civilian than to let Tim get hurt.

Dick doesn’t know exactly what Babs told Bruce, but Dick intends to give his mentor no answers but the truest ones if he gets asked any kind of questions about what’s going on.

He’s got Spoiler on his bike behind him as he streaks into the alley way where Batman’s going over schematics – her anxious grip so tight on his hips that he knows her fingertips will be
leaving bruises. She seems to realize it as he pries her off to dismount the bike, but doesn’t verbalize anything as she nervously follows suit – eyes scanning the blank back wall of the building where the bad guys are presumably holding Timmy Drake.

Spoiler hangs back as Dick strides over to join Bruce in going over the Obscura schematics. Alfred pops up in his ear to say, “Miss Batgirl is now less than two minutes out.”

Nightwing can’t resist the nod as he accepts the information, even though he knows Alfred can’t see it, and he settles in to wait for her and to study what he can before Batgirl arrives. He knows that Batman will only be coerced to give the briefing once – that he’ll wait until everyone relevant is present – and that no other concerns or conversation will be raised before the mission has successfully concluded.

Though, honestly, with how quickly the landscape keeps changing, Nightwing isn’t even sure there will be a briefing. Robin might just call an audible and force them to adapt without any kind of overview or legitimate plan to guide them.

It would not be Jason’s first time doing that.

Honestly, it wouldn’t even be his most reckless move of the evening.

While he waits, Nightwing syncs his com to the frequency that Batman is on with Robin – keeping his end muted while he listens to Jason talk.

Connects the dots to conclude that he’s talking to Tim directly – to conclude that since Jason’s babbling soothing Robin nonsense, all while somehow managing to avoid saying that he is Robin outright. And since he’s got that edge in his voice that says determined rather than inscensed, Tim’s alright – which eases some of the ache in Dick’s gut.

Jason has gotten Tim to participate in his own rescue, it seems.

Though Dick can’t hear Tim’s side of the conversation, he can hear Jason confirm the facts regarding Tim’s placement in a loft on the south side, two open stories up from the main dance floor, and his acknowledgement of Tavian Ross being present along with two unknown associates in addition to multiple goons.

There’s a brief pause, and Dick can’t actually hear Jason’s air catch in his throat over the boom of Obscura’s music when he gets a visual on Tim, but he can feel it through the underwritten layer of relief that backfills Jason’s tone with confidence and grit.

“Whatever he's expecting, I'll put money down on betting that he's not expecting us.”

Dick agrees vehemently.

Nobody messes with his Family.

Jason is straightforward and brutal by the sounds of a few scuffles he gets into while bypassing the club’s basic security in order to get upstairs to where Tim is being held. Nightwing can almost track his progress by sound as his gaze skims across the blueprints laid across the Batmobile’s hood.
When Jason makes it to the loft, there’s some snappy banter between him and Tavian Ross. Jason stays focused on Tim. Ross allows himself to be lead through the conversation.

The government black ops goon / gang lord has no intention of giving Tim up, and no real worries that Jason can take him without Ross’s approval. Until Ross comments that Tim’s up on offer if Jason were to have something worthwhile to trade – and Jason snaps back that he does have something worthwhile.

Ross’s tone goes cool over his unconcered response, but what sends a shard of ice down Dick’s spine is the voice the chimes in just seconds later. He’d recognize it anywhere.

It’s Rwen Tolovi’s voice.

Even as it’s being picked up over the coms, there’s no question it’s him.

Somehow, he recognizes Jason as Robin.

And asserts that Robin is there with Rwen to trade for Tim.

It shocks the snark right out of Jason in a way that makes Dick’s gut swirl.

Because Dick can’t see Rwen Tolovi’s face, but Jason can, and he clearly does not like what he sees. And Dick remembers all the scary statistics they’ve dug up on the middle Tolovi.

The next turn in the conversation sets Dick’s pulse throbbing through his ears… he can’t understand how the words are still making it into his ears and up to his brain when his heart beat is so loud. It should drown everything out, but Dick still manages to hear that Rwen Tolovi is offering up Jason to Tavian Ross as some sort of living test subject for some sort of experiment – presumably an experiment that involves the vile drug the Bats have been tracking.

They want to pump Jason, his Little Wing, full of drugs…

It makes Dick see red.

Not just for the horror of having his little brother subject to something so vile and deadly, but for the additional torment of knowing that Jason watched him mom die via something far too similar to make this ordeal anything but straight forward torture.

Jason had never explained as much openly to Dick, but Dick had been raised by Batman and he had done his own investigating. It had been mean-spirited research, begun when he’d first found
out he’d been replaced as Gotham’s Robin, but he’d had enough shame even then to know better than to use anything he’d found about Catherine Todd as ammo in their spat.

He’d buried the information, tucked away the knowledge in the part of his mind where he stashed the horrible things he knew better than to let himself think about.

Never let it show that he knew anything he shouldn’t – that Jason wouldn’t want him to.

But the idea of this nearly shatters everything that keeps him solid.

Beside him, Bruce has stilled as Dick had.

_Bruce, not Batman, and Dick can feel_ the difference in the reaction radiating though him even from beneath the Cowl.

It only lasts a second, but it makes Dick feel better about his own almost break down.

Batman refocuses as Batgirl’s bike roars onto the scene.

Nightwing refocuses while Batgirl gets her com synced and gets herself sorted.

There’s been a pause in the conversation inside Obscura. Posturing.

A lot happening that needs to be seen to be understood – or narrated.

Slotting in his Nightwing voice to drown out the frantic worry inside _Dick_, he unmutes his com and says coolly, “Talk to us, Little Wing. We don’t have any eyes but yours in there, so we need you to tell us what’s happening.”

It works enough to get Jason to recount the scene.

Prompts him to press again for Tim’s release.

A bit of back and forth politicking happens between Rwen and Ross that Nightwing should probably care about, but he can’t bring himself to examine it in face of Jason’s successful gambit to get them to let Tim walk out the club’s front door.

Nightwing volunteers to snag him, and rushes off without official confirmation from Batman – _Spoiler_ hot on his heels, having missed just about everything going on, because she doesn’t have a Bat com in her ear, until ‘Wing mentioned Tim’s imminent exit.
The tiny figure is unmistakable and Nightwing barrels into him with such force he’s worried about causing harm. He can’t stop himself however, and only manages to loosen up his hold in order to pet over every inch of Tim’s form to check him for injuries.

He’s wheezing and wearing a pained, distressed expression, but Nightwing thinks that has more to do with the fact that Nightwing has tackled him than any aches or injuries from prior to that instant.

It also probably has something to do with the fact that Jason is still inside – still in grave danger with no real escape plan.

Jason… who has got to be panicking about whether or not the Bats actually picked Tim up instead of allowing him to get snatched back by more bad guy goons.

Hurriedly unmuting his com, Nightwing promises, “We got him, Little Wing. Baby bird is safe and sound. We’re sending him back to the nest, and Agent A is gonna take good care of him. You did good, Little Wing, and now we’re gonna get you out.”

While Nightwing’s attention is split between Tim and Jason, Spoiler finges her way into the hug to tackle Tim herself. “Kiddo!”

“Oxygen,” Tim wheezes after a long moment, the sound clearly an effort to make audible.

Nightwing and Spoiler both give one last squeeze and then more or less release him – though both keep at least one hand on him as they essentially drag him around back to where Batman and Batgirl are waiting.

“Jeez, let the boy breathe,” Batgirl says, a slight smile creeping across her face.

The situation is too serious to really joke, but it’s always been a high priority for the Batkids to laugh in the face of imminent doom. It’s part of their stichke, part of their characters.

Nightwing grins back at her.

Doesn’t let go of Timmy.

Then Batman is looming over them. “Spoiler, you are to escort civilian Timothy Drake to his home and ensure that he stays there,” Batman declared. “Then you are to head home yourself. And retire, as we discussed the last time you came out to patrol.”

Spoiler glared to kill an army, but it turned sullen quickly against the indomitable blankness of Batman and she looked silently at her shoes instead of voicing any protest.

She and Tim are quickly shuffled into the Batmobile, obviously well before Tim’s head has stopped spinning because he looks surprised and moderately betrayed when the vehicle promptly locks them both safely inside with no possibility for them to wriggle their way out.
The Batmobile begins to silently roll out of the alley – quickly disappearing into the dark shadows of a Gotham midnight.

“I hope you’re sending them to the Cave to be checked out by Agent A before they head home,” Nightwing says, conscious of keeping his com muted so Jason doesn’t hear about the potential wrench being thrown into Nightwing’s promise regarding Tim’s care.

Batman nods – just once, but irrefutably.

The gestures allows some of the tension in Nightwing’s chest to unknot.

“So, now the question is how do we get Jaybird out of there?”

Batgirl jumps in to say, “Well, Obscura looks pretty damn impenetrable without a ton of collateral damage and civilian casualties, so I don’t think we’re gonna be able to get him out – at least not before closing time. My guess is that they’re going to be taking our boy, and the crate of drugs they nabbed from Robbinsville, out of here themselves – probably heading over to the Raven, if our data’s giving us an accurate picture of their routine.”

“We’ll take them in transit, then, when they’re most vulnerable and our maneuverability can effectively counteract the advantage they have in numbers,” Nightwing concludes.

He looks to Batman with a curl of the familiar desperation he developed as Robin to be right, to be acknowledged and praised – to do good enough at being the hero to make his mentor proud. He’d left most of that unhealthy edge of anxious desperation behind when he’d finally come to terms with no longer being suited for the pixie boots, but apparently, he hasn’t outgrown all of it.

Probably never will.

Definitely never will, if the excited flutter of joyous butterflies erupting in his stomach at Batman’s nod of approval is anything to go by… but he can reflect on his own childish mental shortcomings later.

Right now he has a little brother to save – an incredibly bullheaded and brave and kind and stubborn but frighteningly, stupidly, brilliantly reckless little brother.

“Will they be coming out of this garage?” Nightwing asks, refocused and nodding at the corrugated face of the sheet metal scroll keeping Obscura’s delivery bay closed off.

“It’s doubtful,” Batman explains. “This garage only has the capacity to hold three large
SUVs and the manner of backing them out onto the street would leave them obviously vulnerable. The sub-basement has a secured tunnel beneath it that could serve as a temporary staging ground for a convoy.

“The only catch is that the two outlets of the tunnel are over eight blocks apart, and neither of them point conveniently towards the Raven,” Batgirl elaborates.

“Then which one do we stake out to get Jay back?”

The grim line of Batman’s mouth tells Nightwing that he’s landed right on the million dollar question. Which is unfortunate, because if Batman doesn’t know, then all they can do is divide and conquer – stake out both places and hope the others can get to whichever one proves accurate with enough time to spare to effectively launch an interception.

The two outlets are only eight blocks away, but the Raven is only twenty blocks from Obscura. No matter what happens, it’s going to make for a very tight timeline.

In a resigned sigh, Nightwing volunteers, “I take east, BG takes west, Batman hovers here to make it quicker to get over to whichever one turns out to be right?”

Batman gives another nod and BG flashes him a grim smile, holding out a fist.

Nightwing bumps both sides of BG’s fist and then moves to straddle his bike. He and BG peal out of the alley seconds later, heading directly away from each other.

It doesn’t take long for him to reach the area where his end of the tunnel lets out, but it’s definitely long enough to make a difference in their rescue attempt – which is a thought that does nothing to soothe his nerves as he scales a building to get a clear look at the exit.

Once fully settled in his perch, Nightwing radios the update, “In position, clean visual on exit, no activity.”

Just over a minute later, Batgirl relays the same information.

The next five minutes of radio silence is excrucitating.

Made even more unbearable by the fact that Jason hasn’t said anything on his frequency in twice that time. Dick is both desperate to know why he’s gone quiet, and achingly anxious for the reason to be something innocuous – like there’s nothing happening to report on…

This has gotten way out of control and Dick knows that he can’t handle it.

He probably can’t even handle it with Batman and Batgirl taking up the lead.
This has spiraled into something way bigger than anything the Bats can control – their whole ability to successfully enact and manipulate other situations is entirely dependent on their control over all the information in a given scenario.

They don’t have that advantage right now.

They don’t even know half the information right now… and even what they do know keeps being rendered ineffective as unknown breeds of metas are consciously and actively altering the informational landscape.

This is the kind of situation in which they need to meet raw power with raw power.

Dick’s already in hot water with Bruce as it is, so he doesn’t think much of disobeying one more order as he flips his right forearm to expose the microcomputer built into the underside of his gauntlet.

He drops a quick line in an encrypted email to the Titans and hits send with a feeling of resigned hopefulness. Turns back to his vigil with determined focus rather than high strung anxiety. Settles in to wait it out – shifting in slow circuits of a gentle routine composed of moves from tai chi, gymnastics, pilates, and yoga to keep his muscles warm.

He listens carefully to the frequency Jason’s com is open on.

Latches on to the fact that the pulsing riot of music is beginning to fade – like they’re moving Jason away from the club floor.

It’s still eerily quiet, with none of the goons or gangsters saying anything at all – without even Jason’s usually constant mouthing off. Whatever posturing is happening is entirely body language, and it’s all forceful and tense enough to keep a lid on the verbal back and forth.

Dick does not like it.

Wishes for some sort of super special kind of x-ray vision.

The stark white lenses on his domino have multiple filters – including infrared – but none of it helped at Obscura when the main floor was packed with people and the mass of bodies was blocking off any hope Dick had of seeing through to the level he actually wanted to see. And it certainly doesn’t help now that what he’s looking at is a blank door over an empty tunnel.

Which just adds to the already compounding frustration in Dick’s gut.

It eases slightly into anticipation as he picks up the sound of car doors opening and closing through the com. The convoy is getting ready to roll out.
They’ll be getting Jason back in the next twenty minutes.

The thought gets his blood pumping hard through his ears.

So hard that he almost misses the sound of doors closing and then that of a drink being poured and then Jason’s snort of blatant derision before he comments, “Lemonade? I didn’t think drinks were gonna be served on this trainwreck of a drug deal you and Ross got goin’.”

“It’s not just lemonade,” Rwen Tolovi drawls, making Dick’s stomach drop with dread of aching certainty, “And it’s not exactly a drug deal. It’s a little more illegal than that.”

Dick can hear Jason’s raised eyebrow in the silence that follows.

“The drug starting to appear on the streets of almost every major American city is being leaked from the meltdown of an experimental government program – the current… restructuring is creating a lot of disgruntled former employees with high level access,” Rwen casually intones. Like he’s discussing the recent rash of rain storms.

He sounds almost bored, but there’s an energy behind the words that make Dick think he’s watching very carefully for Jason’s reactions, “Those people are all rather enterprising individuals who are distinctly not pleased to be missing out on a fat retirement fund and are currently compensating.”

Rwen pauses a beat, possibly as Jason nods – or rather, knowing Jason, as the teenager shoots snark filled look that questions where the story is going and why he should care.

“My brothers and I have been… correcting their rash, selfish decisions and erasing their supply lines. However, I was part of that project and my formula has recently begun appearing among the leaked samples. I’m blackmailing Tavian to return the bulk of my research to me.”

This time, when Rwen pauses, Jason huffs a laugh.

“So straight up treason instead of just the string of felonies found in the counts of murder and drug possession,” Jason synthesizes. “You assholes don’t fuck around.”

Dick wishes again that he could see Jason’s face. His tone is lose and joking, impressed almost, in a way that Dick doesn’t understand – can’t tell if it’s bravado or genuine ease.

“No, we don’t,” Rwen replies – voice soft and light and even more unreadable than Jason’s is when coming over the com. “Invulnerability will do that to you.”

Without a pause betraying any hint of anxiety, Jason snorts, “So you really think you you
There’s a long moment of silence over the coms and then Rwen sighs.

“You need to drink that if you want to survive the night,” the drug lord says – voice empty of anything Dick could hope to identify. It’s emotionless and steady, broadly clinical as he goes on, “You might be genetically compatible with my serum, but if your system isn’t prepped before a real dose, even something small will send you into shock. That will help.”

“Sure, it will,” Jason returns with an aggressive skepticism.

“If I was going to kill you I would have done it already,” Rwen sighs, bored but also… indulgent. “That is a lower dose of what else you’ll be receiving tonight, along with some special fillers of my own design. It will help ease the transition. I told Tavian that you were an informed volunteer, but we both know that's not true, so you're just going to have to trust me.”

“Why did you tell him that?”

“I enjoy seeing him panic, for one thing,” Rwen responds right off. “And the unauthorized administration of a new Serum formula to an unknowing human subject is one of the things I’m blackmailing him with.”

There is the sound of ice shifting in a glass, like someone shrugged.

Or, Dick realizes with an ache in his gut, like someone drank something. The sound was quiet, so Dick hopes that if it were the later, it was Rwen drinking and not Jason.

Just a few more minutes and they’ll be able to get Jason back, Dick tells himself again – hopefully they’ll be able to do it before Jason is coerced into ingesting any of the drug himself.

Dick has to check his mic is muted when it seems like Jason responds to his whispered plea that he hold off on drinking that horrible drug for just a little longer, saying slowly in a clear play for time, “You say this stuff will help me survive the night, but why would you bother? Like, I get that you could’ve killed me a hundred times over, but why help me not get myself killed?”

Rwen sighs again, his patience clearly beginning to wear through the indulgent understanding that had coaxed him to answer Jason’s previous questions.

“The data, mostly. Tavian wants to see how my formula affects an unaltered system, and I won’t turn down a chance to gather more evidence of the fact that my hypothesis is correct. All data is helpful data in science, to a point, at least,” Rwen tells him. “Besides, contrary to popular belief, I am not a completely psychotic monster. I don’t enjoy death or killing. I enjoy the fight, certainly, and
I can be ruthless and unyieldingly brutal at times – but mostly for the sake of protecting my Family.”

Jason huffs at that, and Dick understands why.

It’s hard to deny the appeal of being absolutely vicious to keep his Family safe – and Dick knows the intoxicating appeal has to be twice as tempting for Jason, who was forced early on into a world view that desensitized him to violence as he did what it took to survive Crime Alley.

“So, I drink this shit and what happens?” Jason asks, running out of options.

“It hurts,” Rwen replies without any gentling. “And then everything starts to itch, and tingle. Once the buzz settles, it’ll feel like you’re up on nothing more sinister than an unhealthy amount of caffeine. Exactly six and a half minutes after that, you’ll be able to take twice the dosage with the same severity of mild side effects. If you can finish that one with at least four minutes to spare before Tavian wants you in the ring, you might survive the dose Xansa will put you on for the fight.”

“Fight? Who will I be fighting?”

“My little brother, probably. And possibly Alistair Blake, as well,” Rwen returns, adding with a clipped edge hurrying his tone. “And you’ll need every advantage you can get to have any hope of surviving a bout with either of them, so drink.”

Dick holds his breath – right up to and beyond the last second.

The sound of Jason making a disgusted noise makes Dick’s stomach pinch and he nearly bites right through his lip – tastes the bitter tang of blood as his teeth push through the skin.

“God damn that’s rank,” Jason splutters and coughs, his voice rather hoarse. “Got any vodka to wash it down with?”

Rwen almost chuckles. “You think vodka would resolve the flavor issue?”

This time, Jason laughs.

It’s a sharp, bitter bark of a laugh, but a laugh none the less.
“Vodka resolves a lot of issues,” Jason supplies, “And since it feels like I just chewed up a whole damn pack of frickin’ expired cigarettes, yeah, I think some vodka would fucking help.”

“Noted,” Rwen replies, still far too amused with it all for Dick's taste.

Dick is prevented from letting his thoughts start to spiral off into picturing exactly what he’d like to do to that Tolovi bastard by the sound of gears shifting at the tunnel outlet across the street from him.

He's about to radio it in when Batgirl beats him to it, saying, “I've got movement.”

With grim foreboding, Nightwing unmutes his com and comments, “Me too.”

“There's two convoys,” Batman supposes, pained with resignation. “These people are trained, well trained. Experts in urban military tactics and modern day espionage.”

The theory resonates uncomfortably well with what they know about Rwen Tolovi and those he associates with in the underworld.

But Dick keeps trying to convince himself it isn’t true until he sees a line of four identical humvees roll out of the tunnel – all of them with blacked out windows and hints of a good number of other special enhancements – and hears Batgirl report in that she’s watching the same thing on her end.

“Can we tell where Jaybird is?” Dick asks, pushing down the wavering ache.

“I was hoping that it's just been the tunnel lining that blocking his gps, but unfortunately, we're still blind,” Batgirl announces.

“Robin's GPS is actively being blocked by the vehicles,” Batman concludes, confirming Dick's fear. “Nightwing, Batgirl, each of you follow the convoy in front of you. I will rendezvous at the assumed destination. Do not engage. Even if you get eyes on Robin, wait for back up.”

“Copy that,” they both reply at once.

Both of them are vocally opposed to the course, as made clear by their aggravated tones, but they both know better than to disobey in this scenario.

Getting Jason back is the priority – but rushing in like desperate idiots could only serve to make the situation more dangerous, and it might end up getting all of them killed.

It’s painful to stalk the convoy without knowing if this is the one where Jason is being held –
without any way to tell which car he's in if they even could tell which convoy.

It’s impossible for Dick to keep track of the conversation between Rwen and Jason as they carry on talking – discussing a few of the finer points of the science involved that Dick won’t bother pretending he will ever understand.

And it seems like there’s a building interference as fewer and fewer of the words make it clearly to his ears – as bursts of static begin to block some of them out.

A part of Dick is glad that Jason is getting Rwen to talk about all of this – certain that these details will help Bruce and Babs concoct a cure, or at least find a way to help Jason come down from this high without permanent damage.

Dick can hear the purr of something wrong in Jason's voice, not quite bravado or adrenaline, but something affecting.

It has to be the drug Tolovi fed him starting to assert its influence.

They’re still three blocks from the Raven when Rwen makes Jason down another drink.

Jason makes the same protesting gurgles at the taste, adding, “Lemon or peach vodka might actually make this shit taste like lemonade, as advertised.”

This time, Jason seems to feel it more – and feel it faster.

He doesn't remark on it, but Dick can hear the way his breathing changes – the way it deepens and mellows almost like he’d settled in to a quick pace on a treadmill run.

It's easy, unbothered, not at all concerned with direction, duration, or distance – just on the workout and the potential to push himself a little bit further than he could before.

Jason's voice changes, too.

It gets deeper, warmer, and there’s an extra oomph to the growl – but it’s pure confidence and openly calm aggression, without any of the fear or fury Dick would usually expect to hear behind it from Jason.

Which doesn’t seem like it could possibly bode well.
And to make the worried, guilty swirl twisting in Dick's gut just that much worse, Jason stops talking shortly after that – so Dick can’t tell anything about his coherency or mindset. He can only stalk a convoy of humvees as he listens to a drug lord wire up his little brother on something so dangerous the government barely acknowledges that the threat exists.

Dick has failed Jason, here.

Yet again, Dick has failed to be the big brother Jason needs, and the worst part is that he can’t figure out exactly what went wrong – can’t identify the crux where it all went off course and he clearly should have done something different.

There must have been one, though.

There must have been a moment when he could’ve stopped this from happening… even if he’d just gone with Jason to check on Tim before patrol… or thought about it sooner and convinced Jason to drag Tim out for dinner at Wayne Manor…

The convoy Dick is following – and the one Barbara’s chasing – both arrive at the Raven before Dick’s thoughts can spiral much further.

Batgirl, Nightwing, and Batman gather on the Raven’s rooftop, feeling the pulse of the club’s music vibrating through the structure.

They watch in silence as the SUVs circle up in the club’s empty backlot and the goons and gangsters begin to unload.

Dick is nearly overcome with the shock of relief that strikes him when he sees Jason step out of an SUV. Dick is unbearably grateful to see Jason moving under his own power, and also somewhat unburdened to observe that Jason has stepped out of an SUV that had been part of the convoy Batgirl had been tailing.

He feels a bit bad about the relief he feels for that, but he knows that Barbara won’t beat herself up half as much as Dick would from the realization that he’d been so close to Jason and been unable to do anything to help him.

The goons and gangsters begin shuffling into the Raven as the Bats watch from the shadows above. They’ve all studied the Raven’s schematics enough to know that Jason and the crate of drugs will be heading straight down to the sub-basement.

This one, since they’ve had more time to study it, is not entirely inaccessible.

And all three Bats can take different routes inside – Nightwing through the airvents, Batgirl through the slim windows that line the ground floor, and Batman through a few layers of carefully
dearmed security access doors from the shadows outside the backlot.

A quick discussion cements the plan for Batman to cause a distraction once the trio gets inside and for Batgirl and Nightwing to work together to obtain a sample of the drug in Jason’s system and to get all three teenage vigilantes out alive.

Jason is the priority, so if a sample can’t be easily obtained by Batgirl or Nightwing, Batman himself will attempt to acquire one before getting out himself – though, only after the other three are safely away.

It’s not the best plan Nightwing has ever been a part of with Batman, but it’s the best one they have for getting Jason out safely and as he slips carefully into the airduct and begins to fluidly twine his way down to the basement, Dick feels absolutely certain that the plan will at accomplish its primary objective.

And that’s enough for now.

Chapter End Notes

If it seems like Dick is a bit overly angsty, it’s because I'm writing him under the idea that this is the first time since his parents fell that he's had some one he loves and calls family being placed in such directly life threatening peril (and he is not reacting well to that). He does address that aspect eventually, but right here he doesn't even realize that it's why he's reacting so particularly poorly... that there even IS a separate 'why' behind it.

NEXT TIME: Tim... does /things/... He's a genius and an effective plan-maker / plan-executor... He is NOT good at making healthy, reasonable, level-headed decisions...
Chapter Summary

Tim breaks all the rules.
And recruits some questionable friends.
Because saving Jason is Tim's ONLY priority.

Chapter Notes

Longest chapter yet for Manners!

Stray makes an appearance!
And several other characters who don't really do enough to get a character credit in the tags.

WARNING: Same bit of off screen non-con drug use, and one dub-con kiss / some questionable physical contact (nothing overly sexual)... and there’s yet another cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-One: Rule #21 – Don’t Talk to Strangers

Being forcibly settled inside the Batmobile gives Tim time to think – to come down from the adrenaline and fear of the immediate threats he’d faced when actively a captive of the possibly-rogue GHOST affiliates.

It gives him time to assess.

To reevaluate.

To plan.

To scheme.

Even with Spoiler’s hyperactive and unfocused commentary running in the background.

She’s been so worried about him – is now worried about how he’s doing after his ordeal.
She’s mad at him for making her worry.

She’s anxious about Batman’s reaction and how he’s definitely pissed with them both.

She’s furious at being pushed off to the sidelines like some useless kid.

None of that matters to Tim.

He’s fine, Steph made him worry first, Batman would’ve been pissed no matter how he found out about their existence, and Tim downright refuses to be genuinely sidelined.

Especially as he hears Jason talking to Rwen through the com he’s still got lodged in his ear… the bits of conversation he can hear amount to nothing more than inane posturing, but there’s an underlying thrum of threat and energy that tells Tim the little prisoner exchange that just went down is not as straightforward as it seems.

Tim was just a hostage, a variable to threaten or dispose of at the gangsters’ leisure.

Jason is… something else.

A pawn in the game, a piece on the game board in a way that Tim wasn’t… the gangsters want him for something.

There is absolutely zero possibility that something is something good.

Jason has the Bats, but there’s a hard limit to what even they can manage, as Tim well knows from having studied the Tolovis’ records. If anyone else involved is anything like the three brothers at the top of the food chain… the Bats are going to need back up.

A lot of back up.

They’ve probably already called in a few of their hero friends, but it could never hurt to have just a few more bodies in play to even the odds up a bit.

And Tim is vehemently determined to help them.

Jason sacrificed himself for Tim’s sake, after all, and Tim feels the need to at least return the favor in whatever way he possibly can.

To that end, he has to cede the point that he would not be helpful in a fight.

But he knows people who would.

And in order to talk to them, in order to recruit them, he has to get out of this car – and somehow manage to safely ditch Stephanie Brown while he does it. Preferably without alerting the Bats to any change in the pair’s itinerary.
He doesn’t anticipate the obstacles being too difficult to surmount.

“Can I borrow your phone?”

He spoke in the middle of one of Stephanie’s sentences – she frowns at his interruption, and is reasonably wary of his request. “Why?”

“Because I don’t have mine and I need to check something.”

She’s still suspicious, but she pulls the device out of the pocket stitched crudely into the thigh of her costume and hands it over. Her password is her superhero name. He’s already gotten in and established an internet connection by the time she thinks to tell him that.

He accesses his personal encrypted cloud storage and uploads a copy of her sim card… just in case. He doesn’t want this to ruin their almost kinda sorta friendship, after all.

And then he pulls a cord out of his camera case and plugs one end into the phone.

Handing Stephanie the other end, he says, “Plug that into the USB jack to the left of where a normal car would have a CD player or a nav system. I can’t reach that far.”

Stephanie blinks, but she’s too worked up and confused to do much more than process that his excuse for not doing it himself seems, objectively, mostly reasonable.

Her thoughts work the request over as she fulfills it, realizing eventually that it doesn’t actually make sense – though not quite quickly enough to prevent her from plugging in the cord.

The Batmobile reacts immediately.

Tim holds his breath and closes his eyes and clamps his hands over his ears – just in case… because he’s not sure how the car’s reaction will play out. He hears the hiss of a gas being released, but no flashes or bangs sound and a few seconds after Stephanie plugged the phone into the car. After a few seconds of silence, Tim peeks over his knees to see that she’s been sprayed with knockout gas and has slumped over the center console.

Continuing to hold his breath as long as he can, Tim works quickly to assess the situation: the phone, unfortunately, is fried. Tim will get Steph a new one in the morning, assuming tonight works out. He’ll be able to install the sim card he copied as soon as he has a replacement phone and get it back to her by the time school lets out at the latest.

The Batmobile itself is still functional, though it has kicked into what seems like an emergency back-up protocol – low power, careful speed, periodically blinking light probably linked to some sort of emergency beacon.

It still has some very good security, but it hasn’t yet been touched by Batgirl’s particular genius and it only takes Tim a few moments to get far enough inside the system to force the Batmobile’s windows to open – dissipating the remains of the knockout gas so that Tim can breathe without winding up just as unconscious as Spoiler.

He still feels a bit woozy from lack of oxygen when he manages to stick his head out and gulp down a bit of fresh air.

As soon as the danger of being immediately knocked out has passed, Tim turns towards getting the Batmobil to drive him towards the Diamond District. It’s just after one in the morning on a Thursday, with no exciting events happening around the city to lure out Gotham’s elite, so
Catwoman won’t be hanging around the Opera House right now.

She would be at one of her apartments.

Selina Kyle maintained a few dozen apartments all across the city, some under her name some under cover identities. All of them were rather nice, but she definitely had favorites and the most statistically likely for her to be staying at this week was the penthouse she had arranged for within the center of Gotham’s most expensive shopping district.

And that’s where Tim aims the Batmobile.

On emergency back up, the Batmobile sticks to driving well below the speed limit, but it gets Tim where he wants to go. He sets the car to continue slowly circling the district for the next fifteen minutes before reverting to its original destination and then he shimmies out the window and drops to the street as the Batmobile rolls passed the back of Selina’s building.

The door has a magnetic key-card reader that would be moderately difficult to spoof, but being a high end apartment building in the middle of a 24 hour shopping district meant that people were always going in and out, even at the oddest hours. Tim is easily able to duck though the door as it’s still falling closed from a socialite’s return.

He gets an odd look from the man behind the desk as he strolls inside, but Tim knows how to dissuade suspicion by looking like he knows exactly what he’s doing and has every right in the world to be doing it. The lift has significant security, but only in terms of getting to the Penthouse itself – getting to the floor right below it is as easy as simply pushing the button.

From there, he just has to walk to the end of the hall, disarm a rather overly simple emergency exit alarm, and use the fire escape to climb up the last bit of vertical rise to perch himself right in front of the windows arranged to look in on Selina’s living room.

The lights are on but he doesn’t get a chance to scan the room for occupants – or to even knock politely – before two faces appear inches away from him on the other side of the glass.

Animal faces, grinning madly with the kind of manic expressions Tim still isn’t entirely certain could possibly be natural. Hyenas in general don’t seem like plausible natural creations.

Bud and Lou start cackling, wriggling their whole bodies around in fervent, and almost obscene excitement, like overgrown dogs that simply don’t have proper tails to wag.

A beat later, the hyenas get called away from the window by a sharp whistle.

And then Selina herself appears, dressed in the elegant, and highly fashionable black pant suit get up that served her like Sunday sweats would serve the average person.

She unlocks the window and steps back to let Tim inside with a sigh.

“No that it isn’t nice to see you twice in a week, kitten,” she says, completely unsurprised that Tim knows the location of her hideout and how to get up here unnoticed, “But I would far prefer it if you came to visit me sometime for a reason other than a catastrophe with the Bats.”

“Sorry, Miss Kyle,” Tim says, carefully setting his feet down on the white tile of the floor instead of the white carpeting beside it. “And I didn’t mean to bother you when you had friends over, but it is something of an emergency.”

“It’s always an emergency with them,” Selina sighs. “What is it this time?”
“Robin’s been kidnapped by Tavian Ross and Rwen Tolovi,” Tim explains. “I was hoping you could help me get him back. Technically, I was the one who got caught and Robin offered himself up as a hostage in my place. So I wanna help him. I have to help him.”

“Aw, poor little sugar plum.”

The obnoxiously sugar sweet voice that comes discordantly from the kitchen is very probably what Harley Quinn thought of as a subtle and inconspicuous whisper, but is really far more of hoarse shout than anything.

“Harley, hush now,” admonished Pamela Isley, sitting beside her with a cup of tea held up in front of what was clearly becoming a bemused smile.

“But Pammy! Cat’s little sugar plum is clearly sweet on the birdie,” Harley continues in her obnoxious stage whisper – making Tim go beet red as Cat raises a hand to massage at her temples. “And it just doesn’t seem right that the birdie’s bein’ beat on by bozos who ain’t even got Gotham in their blood. That’s our job. Nobody should get to hurt those Bats but us!”

Bud and Lou whine in agreement and put their noses on Harley’s knees in solidarity.

“You’re saying we should help them? Help the Bats?” Pamela asks, dripping disbelief like nectar from an affronted and sarcastic jungle flower.

Harley lights up. “That’s a great idea, Pammy! We could help them! Those bozos have taken our toys and we should go show them that we won’t stand for it! Give their butts a few good bruises and make them get their ugly mugs outta our city. You’re a genius, Pam!”

Selina sighs heavily, her fingers still massaging her temples.

“This was gonna be a nice night in, kitten,” Selina mewls with malcontent. “Movie, gossip, some nail painting, even. A real girls’ night. But now we’re going to be traipsing into a den of unwashed street thugs.”

She huffs and lets her hand fall away from her face, snapping her bright green gaze to Tim’s. “I hope you know that you’re going to have to make this up to me somehow, my dear little stray – and you can start by coming with us.”

There’s a viciousness in her smile, one that bares her teeth like fangs, but there’s a certain fondness as well. Haughty and certain, she goes on, “I’ve told you before that I’ve picked up a few things for you here and there… in case you ever decide to put your sneaking skills to real use. Now is as good a time as ever to make sure all my little presents fit correctly – and maybe see if the lifestyle fits, too. Give it a test run, as it were. You might find you like it.”

Tim’s stomach sinks as Selina speaks, but he’s not exactly surprised by her demands. He had run through the probabilities, after all.

“I’ll come, Miss Kyle,” Tim consents.

He can feel it when Poison Ivy arches an eyebrow, literally feel the change in the subtle shift of moisture in the air that happens as she does it.

“No one is going to protest to this?”

“Pammy!” Harley huffs, scandalized to comical proportions, “It was your idea! And it’ll be great to see the sugar plum in action, and we finally get to play dress up with him! We don’t want to
discourage this behavior. He *never* lets us dote on him, like never *ever*. Oh, I know, we can all go out for ice cream afterwards! Positive reinforcement, Pammy, it’s a very important part of raising kids. Especially the smart ones.”

Already well beyond halfway to defeated, Ivy throws a look at Selina.

“Look, Ivy,” she starts, resignation thick in her tone, “I’m not gonna say no to you, and you’re not gonna say no to her, and nobody is gonna say no to my sweet little kitten's cry baby face, so let’s just skip to end bit and get going. So *maybe* we can get back before sunrise.”

Tim tries not to pout at the cry baby comment, but doesn’t quite manage to keep the frown off his face. Fortunately, none of the women seem to notice as Harley bounces up to give Pamela a lip smacking kiss on the cheek before rushing over to do the same to Selina and Tim.

Harley’s course is followed by Bud and Lou, her kisses too. Though the hyenas only dare to give Selina a damp nuzzle before they move to smoother Tim.

While Tim fights to extricate himself from the cuddle pile, Selina stalks off into a part of the apartment he can’t see. By the time Tim has gotten back on his feet, Selina has returned with a nondescript black box.

“You can change in the guest bedroom while I take a shower and get ready for this insanity myself,” Selina instructs, handing it all over to him.

Tim nods, but Selina has already turned away. She disappears into her bedroom and Tim makes his way to her guest room as Harley and Ivy settle on the couch.

Tim has had a sneaking suspicion ever since Selina first mentioned the idea of becoming her apprentice a few years ago that he wouldn’t like the costume she would select for Stray to wear on the streets during their nighttime excursions, and he is quickly proven unfortunately correct as he opens the box and begins sorting through the articles.

It certainly is not as bad as it could be, but it definitely suits Selina's taste more than his and is a get up constructed in a rather slinky and salacious style.

It’s a skin tight suit of blacker than black armor-tec and it has accents in charcoal and glittery onyx that give a subtle, but seductive, highlight to the swoop of every bony jut and smooth curve on his body. The plates of armor layered underneath alter the silhouette, and so do all the secret hollows and pockets he can feel – all filled with what would surely prove to be tools no thief would be caught leaving home without.

Even so, if the suit didn’t make him look like some sort of sexual fantasy ninja it would probably make him look utterly emaciated. He’s only about 80% confident in the ninja assessment as it is, but he’d rather be that than a bony husk of forgot-to-eat idiocy.

The cowl is Tim's favorite part – being that it completely and very effectively hides his identity by covering his head almost entirely. It lets just a little bit of his fringe fluff out around the cat ears, but it covers his neck and forcibly modulates his voice without any acting necessary – although Tim knows it’s better safe than sorry and plans to adopt a very different register and speech pattern
for this little outing, regardless.

His goggles, like Selina's are head's up displays with readouts from the slim computer components stashed inside his suit, and they bulge out over their eyes to distort the shape of their faces and thwart computerized recognition attempts. Tim's goggles are redder than Selina's – which helps conflate the vibrant blues of his eyes into a muddy sort of purple.

He has a tail, too – though it's more of an industrial belt strap than the kind of coy whip Selina has as part of her costume. His is attached to a cleverly embedded harness and designed more to serve as a means of hoisting him in and out of tight places than anything else.

“Doin' alright in there, bugaboo,” comes Harley's voice through the door as Tim is twisting around and around in front of the mirror.

He knows he doesn’t have time for this stupid fretting – knows that Jason doesn’t have time for it. But he can’t help the self-consciousness that strikes him.

He doesn’t even know what it’s selfconsciousness for, exactly.

But he’s still listening on the com Jason slipped him – listening to the transition as Jason is moved out of the loft at Obscura and into a car where Rwen Tolovi is working on coercing Jason into downing a dose of the absolutely wretched serum that’s been killing people all over Gotham… Jason can only hold out for so long and Tim’s knees nearly give out as he listens to Jason react to the taste of it.

Jason doesn’t have time for Tim to keep being this pathetic.

He steels himself with a deep breath and drops into the act, plasters on the mask Selina’s coached him into wearing as Stray – allows himself to fully inhabit the mask and the character it makes of him. It’s just like any other mask he’s worn. In a suit, he’s the Drake CEO in training; in his school uniform, he’s the nerdy teacher's pet; and in street clothes, he’s whoever he has to be to get where he wants to go – so becoming Stray is no challenge once he makes himself do it.

“I'm fine, Harley,” he purrs. “Just got a zipper stuck. I’m ready now, though.”

He swings the door wide and saunters through it with the kind of saucy swagger he’s seen Selina show off countless times.

Harley gives an impressed whistle as he struts towards her down the hall.

“Come on! Give us a twirl, now, baby doll,” Harley giggles, “Show us that pretty boy butt you've got goin’ on there.”

Tim doesn’t let the mask crack – doesn’t even let it shift. He knows how to hold a character; Selina's even helped him with polishing his masterly of it – teaching him that the most important part
was to stick to the story no matter what.

“If you’re uncomfortable?”

Selina’s voice is pedantic from where she’s curled up on the couch – already decked out in her full Catwoman regalia.

“Use it,” Tim replies, finishing, “If you're uncomfortable, make them uncomfortable.”

“And if anyone questions the story?”

“Play it harder,” Tim responds, letting a sly grin play across his features with a haughty confidence. “We’ve been over this, Cat, and you’re the one who said I know what I’m doing.”

Harley pounces on him – squeezing his head to her chest and squealing, “Oh, squirt, you’ve grown up so good. Ain’t he, Pammy? Ain’t he grown up good?”

“You would make a terrible mother, Cat,” Pamela drawls, all breathy sass and deep amusement. “Corrupting young children so thoroughly.”

“Motherhood is overrated. I’m the fun Aunt who breaks all the rules and lets naughty kittens chase birdies around after midnight,” Selina huffs.

“And get ice cream,” Harley chirps, squeezing Tim tighter and thoroughly cutting off any hope he has of maintaining an air supply.

“And get ice cream,” Selina relents.

Harley squeals again and gives Tim a loud kiss to the top of his head finally releasing him. Tim gasps for breath as Harley announces brightly, “I’ll drive.”

She’ll get them clear across the city in ten minutes, so no one protests. Instead, they follow after her and pile into the bright white humvee she’s using for the night.

No one asks where she got it, or if the original owner is still alive.

In mere minutes, Tim and the women he’s with from Gotham’s shadier side are standing outside of the Raven’s front door – Ivy had directed them there instead of to the Obscura, her plants had a very keen sense of the vibrations Jason gave out and it would’ve been ridiculous to question her authority on the info.

Tim is tasked with getting inside on his own, the other three will barrel through on their own way in as soon as Tim proves he can get passed the doorman.

Selina knows he can do it, and she wants him to make waves.

Tim saunters up to the bouncer with a special sway in his stride, thinking over all the most important lessons Selina has delivered to him over the last two years of casual encounters and random questions about her fascinating anti-hero activities.

*Never show fear.*
Never show weakness.

Keep your eyes on the prize.

Figure out what you want… And take it.

“Hiya, handsome,” Tim purrs as he rises up on his tip toes and wraps himself around the bouncer – who is far too busy staring and attempting to process what the hell is happening to even vaguely recall that he has a job to theoretically be doing.

The bouncer’s hands float towards Tim’s hips in a daze as Tim twines around him and gets his back to the door the bouncer should be guarding.

Before the bouncer’s hands make contact, Tim is slipping away.

“Sorry, sweetie,” he calls diving into the dark of the club’s interior, “This cat’s already got a date waitin’ inside for a show.”

Once he snakes quickly around a few corners, Tim shudders, just a bit of himself sliding back into his awareness while safely hidden in the dark as he shuffles down the stairs alone.

It’s weird playing Stray.

Weirder than playing future-CEO or innocent middle schooler.

But he can do it.

For Jason, he can do it.

For Jason, who’s breath is suddenly coming hard and ragged… and Tim knows he’s missed something… because on the car ride over things got too noisy for Tim to interpret any unique details or follow any new developments.

But he knows that Jason was in control before he got into Harley’s Humvee, and now the last hint of that control he still retains is quickly slipping.

A quick breath has Tim refocused and he’s fully inhabiting the Stray persona again long before the three women he arrived with make their own entrance and join him at the edge of the main dance floor.

The Raven has a full house and the party’s clearly bangin’.

But Tim’s studied the Raven’s blueprints closely enough to know that the real party is taking place down stairs – through over fifty feet of concrete and steel with exactly one staircase that can
access it from here, and that is secured with two vault doors and at least two guards.

But no vault has ever stopped Selina from getting what she wants, and Harley brought her hammer, so it does not take long at all to get down to the private areas where Xansa, Rwen, and Shankar Tolovi have established their current base of operations for the Blackbirds.

Half of it is lab-space, Tim discovers. The part that probably used to be a bar and VIP lounge has been converted into some sort of state of the art medical facility-esque area that probably has a lot to do with the drug research Rwen Tolovi keeps mentioning as being originally and rightfully his.

There’s no one in the lab space – all the people gathered in the basement are clustered on the far side and they're making enough noise to have covered up the commotion at the door.

It’s a fight, Tim realizes with a sinking sensation that threatens to drag his gut through the cold cement floor. It’s a bare knuckle boxing match – bloody entertainment for the vicious, addle minded masses – and Jason is the evening’s prize pit bull to be played with…

Moving without giving his body any conscious command to do so, Tim twines his way as Stray through the crowd – using subtle touches and his own lithe figure to cut a path to the center of the circle where he can get a visual on Jason.

The sight of him, bloody and battered, but grinning like mad man – absolutely manic with the ecstasy of the high he’s on from whatever Rwen Tolovi pumped him up with – nearly makes Tim’s knees give out…

But Stray knows better than to show weakness.

Stray sees Jason swaying on his feet as he uses the back of his arm to wipe a line of blood from the corner of his mouth where it’s dribbling down to his chin and Stray breaks into a smile.

It’s a Cheshire cat smile, the kind of grin that immediately precipitates a kitten feasting on a helpless little canary, and it spreads wide as Stray formulates a plan to cause a distraction.

The Bats are already here, already trying to figure out their own methods to get Jason out of this unique hell Tim abandoned him to bearing, but they’re not strong enough to take on the metas and enhanced persons that are doubtlessly lurking among the crowd of spectators.

They’ll need a massive distraction if they’re gonna get Jason out of there safely.

Especially with how obviously high Jason is at the current moment… Jason may not even be conscious enough of what’s happening to help with his own rescue.

May not even want to help.
Good thing Stray’s entire persona is built around being as distracting as possible.

Stray saunters out of the crowd of spectators, crossing the unmarked line between observer and participant with a sultry sway of his hips that makes the deliberate motion of his entrance even more obviously pointed.

He hardly spares Jason’s opponent a glance – just long enough to ascertain that the opponent is Shankar Tolovi, and while that observation sends a bolt of fear down his spine, the observation that follows close on its heels is that Shankar is looking at him with an obvious hunger that makes Stray calm down smoothly because his plan is clearly working.

The crowd goes quiet quickly as Stray saunters over to Jason – whose glazed over eyes are skimming up and down the catsuit with a potent, hormonal interest and a teenager’s best imitation of an inviting, appreciative, and persuasively bedroom bent smile.

It’s not a bad imitation – Tim notes, somewhere deep beneath Stray’s mask, it’s actually alarmingly aware in a way that makes Tim’s thoughts leap to uncomfortable questions about the parts of Jason’s life on the streets that Tim does not want to have answered – and Stray lets himself flow languidly across the ring to lay his claws on Jason’s hoodie-clad chest.

Goes one step passed acceptable to make the idea of this as just a simple charade evaporate as he tips up on his toes and locks lips with his target. With Jason.

Tim kind of wants to stab himself.

Stray is just amused, and utterly unashamed.

“There’s my big bad birdie,” Stray purrs when he breaks the kiss, loudly enough for the spectators to hear – the crowd having gone eerily silent in wake of his arrival. “You disappeared on me, again, and I was starting to get worried. But here you are, just having all this fun without me. I should punish you for that. Birdies in this city have no place in pissing off the pussy cats.”

Jason’s hands find Stray’s hips – close in without hesitation and hold him firmly flush.

He cracks another smile, this one looser and less controlled as he lets the swirl of drugs and hormones take his fuzzy mind where they will.

“You can do whatever the hell you want with me, hot stuff,” Jason breathes, voice rough and gritty was the heavy ache of a drug induced high and a heady puberty still in full swing.

A triumphant thrill runs through Stray’s body – his plan is working perfectly and even with their faces only inches apart, Jason has no idea whose eyes are behind the goggles.

Body language is a marvelous thing and Tim is very pleased with how his intensive studies are already taking leaping strides in progress.
“Let’s get out of here,” Stray purs. “Make our way to somewhere private.”

“Lead the way, pussy cat,” Jason sighs, hands tightening on Tim’s hips as Tim begins to walk Jason backwards – towards the nearest exit Tim could possibly maneuver a drugged up Jason through without significant help.

They only make it a few steps before Rwen’s voice booms out over the hush.

“Not so fast.”

His voice is dramatic, authoritative, and it makes everyone stand a little more alert.

Stray twists in Jason’s hold, keeping one gloved hand firmly over the fingers Jason has splayed over his hip. With a bored pout, Stray whines, “Who the hell are you?”

“Just a passing stranger,” Rwen Tolovi comments blithely, “Who is a lot more interesting than I first appear. We seem to have that in common, you and I. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Rwen Tolovi. And you are?”

“Not interested,” Stray snaps, leaning back into Jason’s chest with a casual inclination he knows looks just as lascivious as it feels. “You don’t belong here, stranger. You’ve banged up my birdie’s face and you’ve let your stupid drug poison my city. Promise to be gone by morning and my friends and I will leave you alone while you pack up – but I am walking out of here with this guy, right now.”

“You tell ‘em, kitten!”

Again, Harley’s voice is probably meant to be quiet.

And again, it’s decidedly not.

All eyes turn towards where she and Pamela are standing on the sidelines, the crowd immediately around them stepping back to make them all the more visible. Harley’s leaning calmly on her hammer’s upturned handle, one fist raised like she’s cheering on a nephew in a little league soccer match.

There’s a nervous tittering in the crowd and Rwen frowns.

“Friends of yours, Kitten?” the ganglord asks, keeping his gaze on Stray, but letting his attention slide to the new commers in his periphery.

“And you?”

“Indeed,” Ivy sighs, a dramatic shrug in her shoulders that throws humidity into the air with such force that it’s almost a visible haze. “But before we get on with the posturing and the inevitable stupid macho pissing match, let me ask you one thing. As one chemist to another, what exactly did you put in this drug you’ve got everyone here hopped up on? I’m sensing at least three different formulas, but all variations on the same base theme… and it’s… odd.”
“You’ve something special in your own blood, I see,” Rwen allows, without answering Ivy’s question. “As much as I would love to talk shop, I do want to reaffirm that we can’t let your kitten and the little Robin that he’s claimed leave just yet.”

Stray doesn’t curse, but he does cease coaxing Jason backwards as he levels a glare at Rwen Tolovi and waits for something he can snark at to be said.

“Robin still has a fight to finish,” Rwen explains. “It’s bad manners to cut out early, especially when he’s bound by a gentleman’s agreement. He needs to fulfill his end of it.”

At his words, Jason’s fingers tighten on Stray’s hips.

“I promised,” Jason whispers against Stray’s neck – and even through the layers of armor-tec, spandex, and leather, Tim can feel the heat of Jason’s breath against his skin.

“Robin and I have come to an arrangement,” Rwen announces to the crowd. “He tries out my personal formula, and battles it out with my brother. If he wins, he’s set to fight a representative from GHOST proper. If he wins both bouts, we’ll all go away and leave your dingy little city in the muck and mire of its own making. You’ll never hear from any of us again.”

Stray’s lip curls at the terms, at the honey thick sweetness of Rwen’s voice in speaking them so casually. It doesn’t sound like an agreement. It sounds like a flytrap.

“I smell a rat,” Selina hisses from across the ring, draped languidly across one of Tolovi’s goons. She leans on his broad shoulders and her claws splay across his chest dangerously as she addresses Rwen with a vicious snarl, “A cat’s nose always knows.”

“I’m with the Cat on this one,” chimes the bright, but forceful voice of Nightwing – who also steps fully into view and is given a wide berth by the crowd around him.

A tall young woman – slender but voluptuous in a way Dick has either failed to accurately relay or simply ‘forgot’ to mention by intent – steps up beside him. Starfire’s balled fists glow green with threat as she says, “I, too, have my thoughts aligned with the feline.”

A burst of yellow and orange lighting precipitates a fierce breeze as the only other Teen Titan able to travel all the way to Gotham from California in anything less than an hour shows up and skids awkwardly to a dramatic stop by latching onto Nightwing’s arm and swinging himself around to stand on the side opposite Starfire.

“Sorry, I’m late! So, who exactly IS the bad guy,” Wally West chirps brightly, “‘Cause I’m counting a lot of angry dudes and scary dudettes in black here…”

“Kid Flash, shut up,” Batgirl huffs, revealing her own position and striding a few steps forward to help angle the crowd’s attention away from where Stray has resumed attempting to wheedle Robin backwards.
This time he’s not as pliant or accommodating and Stray barely gets him to take a single step towards safety as Batgirl addresses Rwen Tolovi to say, “We want our Robin back, and we’re going to take him whether you like it or not. You might have that super drug on your side, but you have to admit that the odds are no longer standing starkly in your favor.”

Rwen shrugs – refusing to cede the point.

Beside Batgirl, Wonder Woman appears, placing a warm and steadying hand on Batgirl’s shoulder as she announces, “The Mist of Themiscrya would welcome a warrior of such prowess as any of you standing here – such battles you have waged, such victories you have earned… I cannot understand why an honorable warrior is draped in such ill intentions. You have malice in your heart, malice equal even to the great worth of your noble motivations. Why not simply let the boy go? Why force this drugged and dishonorable combat?”

With a sigh that shows Rwen is growing tired of having to repeat himself, he says, “For the data, mostly. I am a scientist at heart, and knowing more about the effects of my research is paramount for my Family’s effective longevity. If someone is sick, sometimes a fever is a necessary evil to purge the infection, and I have no qualms about doing what I have to regarding the security and health of my Family.”

“You have enough data for your research,” Superman says, revealing himself on the edge of yet another part of the crowd. “You drugged the boy and made him fight, now let him go.”

“I do not have enough,” Rwen snaps, vehement enough to nearly break the cool calm of his façade. “I need to see him injured, and to see how his responsiveness to being injured changes as the drug runs its course. This might be sport for Shankar and Xansa, and for Tavian and GHOST, but I need to see him fight through to the end.”

His outburst effectively silences the room.

After a brief pause to rein in his temper, Rwen goes on to add, “I made your Robin a deal and he agreed. Two fights, two wins, and we disappear forever. With aliens, a goddess, and a other of Gotham’s own oddities on your side, you might – just barely might – be able to best us all here tonight, but have no doubt that if you somehow manage to accomplish the feat, GHOST and the Blackbirds will swarm in to finish what was started here – what I’ve agreed to abort in my negotiations with Robin. You’ll never be able to fight them all, even if you occupy the city with your vigilante thugs.”

Rwen lets the heroes swallow that before he adds, “I am a man of my word. Robin wins two fights and we disappear. Simple as that.”

“Pardon me for not believing you,” Catwoman yowls with a bored antagonism.

Rwen sighs.

He lets his gaze leave Stray and Jason to look directly at Wonder Woman. “Your lasso has unique qualities, no? From what I’ve heard it can make a person be honest, even if it goes against
their will to do so. Allow me to prove my intentions.”

There’s a beat of stunned silence.

Wonder Woman’s lasso is a harrowing experience, not to be undertaken lightly.

But Rwen Tolovi offers his hand and does not pull it back as Wonder Woman approaches and pulls the golden coil from her hip. She loops it securely around Rwen’s wrist and commands, “Speak to me your Truth.”

Rwen winces, draws a sharp breath and lets the words be dragged out of him.

“I made an agreement with the boy, a binding one,” Rwen explains, “He agreed to test my formula and best two opponents. In exchange, I promised that neither GHOST nor the Blackbirds will ever venture into Gotham again.”

“And you have the authority to make that promise truly binding?”

Rwen nods at Diana’s question, without even looking over his shoulder to where Xansa, his older brother and the official leader of the Blackbirds, sits as a haunting shape within the withering shadows. “This is my research, my mission. Gotham is my operation and as such I have complete discretion over its proceedings. Let the boy fight, he will win and we will all leave without further trouble for either side to handle.”

There’s another drawn out pause as the lasso glows and then releases its hold.

“The warrior speaks true,” Diana announces, a sliver of shock hiding in the back of her tone. The only reason Stray can hear it is that he’s spent so long learning how to parse every detail out of Jason’s much more shuttered and dissuasive communications.

“Then it seems we have an arrangement,” Batman says, materializing out of the shadows.

Whiplash tears through the heroes in the crowd as everyone swivels to look at the Bat.

Stray can almost hear the crack of Nightwing’s teeth as he bites down on the vicious question of what the hell Batman thought he was doing, bargaining with Jason’s life like this.

“If you had another volunteer, would you let Robin go?”

Relief floods Stray as Nightwing reels himself back – allows the sweep of his own relief to wash over him and stands down from openly confronting his mentor.

The relief is short lived.

Rwen huffs and explains, “No one else is as perfectly compatible. I suppose I could try the kitten here, seeing as this one is the next closest to compatible among you all, but I somehow suspect that Robin might protest if he were in his right mind to do so. Cat, Canary, each claimed by the other as they are.”

He looks right at Stray as he speaks and only Stray fully understands the threat.

While even Jason can’t tell who is beneath Stray’s goggles, Rwen Tolovi has no trouble in telling that the scared little boy Jason had traded himself for only an hour ago is the one currently pressed against him and being considered for a trade back.

He would do it.
For Robin, for *Jason*, he would do it.

But Robin wouldn’t let him and Jason would be angry with him if he knew Tim was even considering it… not to mention the fact that seeing how the drug has already affected Jason makes Tim’s knees quake to consider taking on a dose himself.

“My sweet kitten is not going to be your plaything,” Selina hisses, claws digging into the goon’s chest she’s got hold of until she draws blood.

Jason’s hold tightens on Stray’s hips, before one hand slides around his rib cage to hold him closer. Some lower instinct in him – something running deeper than the drug can touch – seemingly has recognized that Rwen is talking about potentially drugging Stray and sending him into the ring instead of himself. Some lower instinct that *does not like* what he’s hearing.

“I made the agreement, I took the drug,” Jason says, low like he’s trying to control the volume but loud enough to be heard by everyone who wants to hear him. “I did it to protect my friend and I promised to fulfill my end. Let me fight like I said I would. There might be another way, but this way is the *best* way.”

His demeanor has turned pleading and his gaze has found Batman’s.

Tim’s finds it as well, glares with every fiber of his being.

If Batman nods, Stray is going to be *pissed*.

And… Batman *does* nod.

Of course, he does.

Because Jason’s right on every count.

But Tim still doesn’t want to let him go.

Stray twists, his claws finding Jason’s neck and shoulder, digging in just enough to make Jason aware that he’s almost bleeding as Stray’s terror and possessive streak join forces. Stray stares through his red-lensed goggles with a desperate plea for Jason not to do what he knows Jason will always chose to do.

“Don’t be a hero,” Stray begs, forcing Jason to look down at him.

“Too late for that, hot stuff,” Jason tells him with a smirk. “You just sit your pretty ass down on the sidelines for a beat and I’ll be back to finish this in no time flat.”

Jason plants his hands on Stray’s hips and gingerly uses his enhanced strength to gently push Stray away from him. Tim can feel how careful he’s being and still he nearly stumbles as he’s released to find his own feet – but Stray refuses to show the weakness of an uneasy stride.

“I promised, and I did it for a friend, so I have to follow through,” Jason says.
It doesn’t ease Tim’s worries, but it limits Stray’s potential to respond.

Tim pounces on Jason one last time for a tight hug

“Don’t you dare die,” Tim hisses right in his ear.

With an entirely inappropriate chuckle, Jason lets Stray skirt away and smirks boldly as he says, “Wouldn’t dream of it, pussy cat.”

With that, Stray relents to let Robin step back into the center of the ring.

And Jason rolls his shoulders to get back into the mindset of a fight.

“About fuckin’ time, Birdie,” Shankar Tolovi huffs, rolling his own shoulders and beginning to circle the ring as Jason does the same and the crowd pushes back in close.

The two combatants meet in the center in a harsh flurry of blows that Tim’s eye can barely track – it’s impossible, this speed, this strength, this obliviousness to pain and harm.

It’s unnatural and terrifying – all the more so for how wrong it is that Jason is the one who has to suffer through this fight. Tim can’t watch, but Stray refuses to let the sight of blood spots blooming on Jason’s shirt make him look away.

It hurts with every breath, but Stray stands and stares – bears witness.

Tim grits his teeth and just waits for it to be over.

Chapter End Notes

Wally and Kori are my favorite Titans. There’s probably a way the others could’ve gotten across the country, but... I really just wanted a Wally / Kori cameo so I’ve magicked Kori into having supersonic flight powers (which is really only a slight alteration) instead of using the jet or anything that would be able to hold another passenger.
NEXT TIME: Jason's PoV on everything with Rwen Tolovi's little Fight Night gone awry.
Rule #22 - Hold Yourself Accountable

Chapter Summary

Jason is a self sacrificing idiot... and he gets a little more worked up than anticipated.

Chapter Notes

Oh, Jason...

WARNINGS: dub-con drug use and sexual-ish interactions from Jason's side (the kiss and such is much less dub-con from Jason's side than Tim's)... And we're still cliff-hanger-y, but some thing does kinda resolve... ish?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Rule #22 – Hold Yourself Accountable

Jason’s still riding the high of relief at having gotten Tim out of the most immediate danger for a long while after Dick confirms that he’s got Tim wrapped up safe and sound inside the Batmobile and on his way to Agent A for a much-needed check up.

He doesn’t really catch what’s going on with anything until he’s being shuffled out of the loft with Rwen Tolovi’s hand settled heavy on his back between his shoulders.

“Don’t speak, don’t resist; I’ll explain in the car,” Rwen whispers, moving to give Jason’s shoulder a squeeze that comes uncomfortably close to breaking bone. Shit definitely creaks.

It’s about as much as he’s ever gotten about a Plan from B, so Jason rolls with it feeling only the slightest niggle of trepidation. He keeps quiet, watching the awkward posturing of the GHOST goons and their shady little guard mooks and the guys that came to back up Tolovi as they all flutter around each other with strong arm intentions that all miss their mark.

Most of the posturing is directed towards Rwen Tolovi – who does not seem to even register that the attempts at intimidation exist in any way. Like he’s just way too far beyond untouchable for their threats to even bear a pretense of trying to matter.

It would almost be funny if Jason weren’t so fixated on the fact that he’s a captive and has no exit strategy, no back up, and no real idea of what’s happening – let alone how to tell the Bats who are his would-be back up what’s happening without blowing the entire operation.

The important thing is that Tim is safe.

Jason focuses on that as Rwen leads him to one of a collection of blacked out supped up
SUVs – practically throws him inside.

The Bat com is still live in one ear – because someone, probably Nightwing, left their com unmuted – and he hears B and the others discussing the fact that getting him out of this stupid convoy is going to be unfortunately difficult to manage.

That’s okay.

As long as Tim’s safe, Jason’s done his job.

His line to Tim’s com is still live, too.

He can hear Tim inside the Batmobile being scolded by that Spoiler girl.

Jason almost has to crack a smirk as he thinks about how much he likes that stupid chick. She’s gritty and hard core in a way he connects with, and she’s just as spiked about keeping Tim safe as any of the Bats.

While Jason’s focused on listening to Spoiler chew out his baby seal, he almost misses the moment when Rwen Tolovi swings into the SUV with him and closes the door to isolate them in an almost unnervingly quiet space.

It’s only Jason’s sudden fear that perhaps Tolovi can hear the static on his coms’ connections somehow buzzing in the silence that draws Jason’s attention back to his own situation. Rwen is fortunately not paying him any real attention as the cars begin to rev up.

Once the cars actually get rolling, Tolovi lets out a held breath and then begins fussing with a fancy cabinet thing on his side of the car.

He pulls out a bottle of something fizzy and yellow, darker than most lemonades and almost solid with color – like orange juice, but brighter and more of a genuine yellow. Jason watches Rwen wrangle out the bottle and two thick whiskey glasses.

The sound of the drinks being poured seem excessively loud in the quiet of the cabin.

It smells tangy in a way that fills the cabin – citric like a lemon, but more acidy with a stark twist that feels astringent and chemical in a way that does not bode well.

Jason snorts derisively and comments, “Lemonade? I didn’t think drinks were gonna be served on this trainwreck of a drug deal you and Ross got goin’.”

“It’s not just lemonade,” Tolovi drawls, confirming Jason’s vague hunch. “And it’s not exactly a drug deal. It’s a little more illegal than that.”

Smug bastard.

Still, Jason raises an eyebrow to ask for more details, knowing that someone as proud of his own damn self as Tolovi is will spill his guts with almost zero prompt. Standard bad guy grand standing and monologuing BS and all.

Jason is not disappointed.

“The drug starting to appear on the streets of almost every major American city is being leaked from the meltdown of an experimental government program – the current… restructuring is creating a lot of disgruntled former employees with high level access,” Tolovi blandly intones, like
“Those people are rather enterprising individuals who are not pleased to be missing out on a fat retirement fund and are compensating. My brothers and I have been… correcting their rash, selfish decisions and erasing their supply lines. However, I was part of that project and my formula has recently begun appearing among the leaked samples. I’m blackmailing Tavian to return the bulk of my research to me.”

Jason huffs a laugh.

“So straight up treason instead of just the string of felonies found in the counts of murder and drug possession and distribution,” Jason synthesizes smartly. With a snort that’s not as derisive as he’d hoped it would be, he adds, “You assholes don’t fuck around.”

It’s ridiculous.

Jason would almost have to think it was a joke, but Tolovi is just too fucking pleased with himself for it to be anything but true.

Jason can’t tell if he’s impressed or not.

From anyone else, it would be idiocy to take on whole governments for little more than petty spite the way that Tolovi is doing… but from him… Rwen Tolovi is like the Bat in so many more ways than just one, constantly exuding this kind of… blanketing control that makes the ridiculous seem way less impossible.

Tolovi can sense or see – or fucking smell for all that Jason knows – how conflicted Jason is over whether or not to take him seriously.

And Rwen Tolovi is distinctly amused but Jason’s inner confliction.

“No, we don’t,” Tolovi replies – voice soft and light. “Invulnerability will do that to you.”

Without a pause betraying any hint of anxiety, Jason huffs warily, “So you really think you asshats are totally invulnerable?”

There’s a long moment of silence as Rwen looks Jason over with a dark emotion in his eyes, and something more readable that seems far too much like pity.

Eventually, Tolovi sighs.

Lets go of a thought he’s decided not to speak.

“You need to drink that if you want to survive the night,” the drug lord explains suddenly as he nods at the whiskey glass he’s set in Jason’s cup holder – voice emotionless and steady, broadly clinical as he goes on, “You might be genetically compatible, but if your system isn’t prepped before a real dose, even something small will send you into shock. That will help.”

“Sure, it will,” Jason returns with an aggressive skepticism.

“If I was going to kill you I would have done it already,” Tolovi sighs, bored but also… indulgent. “That is a lower dose of what else you’ll be receiving tonight, along with some special fillers of my own design. It will help ease the transition. I told Tavian that you were an informed volunteer, but we both know that’s not true, so you’re just going to have to trust me.”
“Why did you tell him that?”

It’s been niggling at Jason since Tolovi first said it.

Something about the way he said it.

“I enjoy seeing him panic, for one thing,” Tolovi responds right off.

A vicious edge in his demeanor rises to the surface Jason can see clearly as the gangster continues with his voice kept perfectly even, “And the unauthorized administration of a new Serum formula to an unknowing human subject is one of the things I’m blackmailing him with.”

Tolovi is telling the truth about that much, Jason’s utterly certain.

The gang lord swirls his drink and then downs all of it in one go.

A shudder of something like relief flits through him – a more aggressive, more obvious and affecting version of the physiological response Jason has to a cigarette he’s snuck away with after a particularly hard day.

The drug is definitely in the lemonade.

And it definitely creates a clear and brutal dependency.

That Jason’s likely highly susceptible to, because he’s ‘compatible’.

Whatever that means.

Jason knows it can’t bode well.

Especially for him… Family history of abuse and addiction, and all… Thoughts that he straight up shoves out of his mind because this is not the time or place for wallowing in his own frickin’ sob story.

In a frankly obvious play for time, Jason says slowly, “You say this stuff will help me survive the night, but why would you bother? Like, I get that you could’ve killed me a hundred times over, but why help me not get myself killed now?”

Tolovi sighs yet again. This one’s harsher, his patience clearly beginning to wear through the indulgent understanding that had coaxed him to answer Jason’s previous questions.

“The data, mostly. Tavian wants to see how my formula affects an unaltered system, and I won’t turn down a chance to gather more evidence of the fact that my hypothesis is correct. All data is helpful data in science, to a point, at least,” Tolovi tells him. “Besides, contrary to popular belief, I am not a completely psychotic monster. I don’t enjoy death or killing. I enjoy the fight, certainly, and I can be ruthless and unyieldingly brutal at times – but mostly for the sake of protecting my Family.”

Jason huffs at that. It’s hard to deny the appeal of being absolutely vicious to keep his Family safe – to keep innocents safe and keep the cretins that would do them harm from ever hurting anyone ever again.

“So, I drink this shit and what happens?” Jason asks, running out of options.

“It hurts,” Tolovi replies without any gentling – something Jason appreciates. “And then everything starts to itch, and tingle. Once the buzz settles, it’ll feel like you’re up on nothing more sinister than an unhealthy amount of caffeine. Exactly six and a half minutes after that, you'll be able
to take twice the dosage with the same severity of mild side effects. If you can finish that one with at
least four minutes to spare before Tavian wants you in the ring, you might survive the dose Xansa
will put you on for the fight.”

“Fight? Who will I be fighting?”

It’s not exactly fear that pricks in Jason’s gut – and it’s actually more concerning that it’s not… It makes something in the frustration and bottled up anger and anxiety Jason’s been feeling all
month unknot with a biting and eager release to get his knuckles all bruised and battered by beating
in a bad guy’s face.

He hasn’t gotten enough of that lately, hasn’t had any outlet for the aggression.

The building deficit aches inside him.

“My little brother, probably. And possibly Alistair Blake, as well,” Tolovi returns, adding
with a clipped edge hurrying his tone. “And you’ll need every advantage you can get to have any
hope of surviving a bout with either of them, so drink.”

It scares Jason more than he’d ever admit that he hardly hesitates to follow the order.

Regrets it the moment the liquid flows across his tongue.

But not because it’s drugged.

“Ugh. God damn that’s rank,” Jason splutters and coughs, his voice hoarse. “Got any vodka
to wash it down with?”

Tolovi almost chuckles. “You think vodka would resolve the flavor issue?”

This time, Jason laughs.

It’s a sharp, bitter bark of a laugh, but a laugh none the less.

“Vodka resolves a lot of issues,” Jason supplies utterly honest. His suggestion isn’t blithe, but
a genuine request for something to get the bitterness to disapate in any way possible. “And since it
feels like I just chewed on a whole pack of god damn expired cigarettes, yeah, I think some vodka
would frickin’ help.”

“Noted,” Tolovi replies, still far too amused with it all. But he seems like he’s genuinely
considering the suggestion’s merit.

He leaves Jason in peace for a moment as the swirl of whatever shit he just drank begins to
seep into his veins. Jason doesn’t have any idea what the fuck he just ingested is, but it doesn’t act
like any drug he’s ever gotten wound up on before… he can actually feel it starting to twitch into his
muscles – enhancing everything about them.

Awed in a way that probably bodes poorly, Jason asks after what exactly is happening to
him, chemically speaking. Tolovi willingly answers – though Jason still barely understands.

And then the conversation transitions suddenly, in a way that anyone listening on coms
probably wouldn’t notice unless they were listening very carefully. It strikes Jason that Tolovi did
that intentionally, that he knows Jason’s got people on coms and has been answering his question in
order to get the eavesdroppers to start zoning out.
Jason’s been distracted, so he hasn’t been watching Tolovi’s hands carefully enough to say for sure, but the buzz in his ears probably means the com links have been cut, or at the very least layered over with interference. A simple, unobserved button push could’ve done it.

“While you’re still cognate enough to care, I have a deal to propose for you,” Tolovi says as he recovers from the harshness of downsing another rough glass of his own damn drug.

“Why should I care?”

“Because it will protect your Family, particularly the boy you traded yourself to protect, as he’s compatible enough to be very interesting to those in my line of work,” Tolovi explains in a pedantic drawl. “Gotham is full of interesting oddities and how they interact with the chemicals my research involves would be very interesting to study. And GHOST likes the… rather grey and wavy line of legal justice Gotham employs.”

Sullen and wary, Jason prompts, “So?”

“This is the last shipment I need to take from Tavian,” Tolovi elucidated, adding pointedly, “We could be out of here tomorrow if we had a reason to leave.”

“But Gotham’s pretty interesting, ain’t it,” Jason connects. “A’ight, I get it. What’cha want me to do to get you asshats goin’ on the road out of town?”

“Take a real dose, and fight through it,” Tolovi proposes. “Instead of going up on whatever Xansa suggests, take a Blackbird Brew and then face off for real against Shankar and Alistair. Beat them and survive the fights, ride the high. Do that for me and we’ll leave by dawn.”

“Why?”

“I want the data,” Tolovi replies with a shrug. “You don’t need to know more than that.”

“Why the hell would I trust you?”

“Because the thing you did for your friend was honorable, and I’m not so far gone so as to have forgotten my respect for that,” Tolovi explains, a note of something tragic in his voice.

Jason wants to snort, isn’t quite sure why he doesn’t.

“I’m not the monster everyone wants for me to be,” Tolovi promises. “I can be. I’m vicious and violent and I don’t really care when I hurt someone to protect someone else, but I think you understand that more than you want to let on. If I don’t get my data from you, I’ll get it from someone else, someone less okay with being as vicious and aggressive as they need to be to really win against my brother. Someone less likely to actually win the way I want them to. If I get my data from you, I won’t need to get it from anyone else.”

Jason attempts to absorb that.

Finds it a frighteningly rational and terrifyingly convincing argument.

“It doesn’t hurt you any more than what you’ve already gotten yourself into will do by
default, and it will keep the rest of your city safe,” Tolovi tacks on. “From us, at least.”

“You have the fucking authority to really make your older brother listen? To make the whole fucking government agency shitbag of GHOST pull back?”

Tolovi tips a slow, definitive nod.

“And to make the Syndicate back out, too,” Tolovi adds haughtily. “Not that you’ve even figured out that they’re involved, or even here at all yet. But I can make them go away, every single one of them.”

“How?”

“They don’t call me the Razorwing for nothing,” Tolovi alludes dangerously, without really explaining anything. “You don’t have to worry about how. Just trust your instincts when they tell you that I really am as invincible as you don’t want to think I am.”

Jason nods again, mulling it over – coming to the conclusion that Tolovi might just be right… and that, just maybe, he is offering a legitimate way out.

Jason’s screwed up enough on this case to be wary of making decisions on his own.

But really, what’s the worst that could happen?

If Tolovi’s not being honest, Jason still has to get hopped up on drugs and fight to what will apparently be his eventual death. And nothing will really change.

If Tolovi is being honest… Jason gets hopped up on drugs and still has a brutal fight to face, but one he probably has a decent chance to survive. And maybe, just maybe, he might be able to use this terrible choice to make himself into something less like a failed Robin.

He might be able to make his Crime Alley upbringing count for something on the Robin front, to actually contribute to the Crusade in a solid, legitimate manner.

He saved Tim once tonight.

But Tolovi’s already admitted that Tim’s interesting.

And that there’s others, too, who might be at dramatic risk if the Tolovis and their cohorts stick around for any longer than tonight.

If Tolovi’s lying, nothing changes.

If he’s not, everything does.
“A’ight then, Mr Bitchass, you got yourself a deal,” Jason says, sitting tall and proud in his plush chair and swirling his empty glass as pleased smirk stretches across his face.

He feels slightly drunk, but not truly inebriated.

It doesn’t make him worry that he’s not cognizant enough to make this decision.

Tolovi nods. Satisfied. Relieved.

This drug does more than just enhance his muscles. It works on his perception, too, his intuition and the subconscious processes he relies on for rapid data collection and assessment.

Even his ability to read the microexpressions on Tolovi’s face – to hear the ache of tension being slowly settled in the back of Tolovi’s throat as he swallows.

Hell, another dose of this shit and Jason might be a god damn human lie detector.

Jason forces himself to pretend away the fact that that shit’s kinda awesome.

“We have a deal,” Tolovi agrees. Honest. Genuine.

Truly aiming for the best end he could possibly finagle out of this crazy mess.

It’s not long after that before Tolovi pours another drink and makes another gesture indicating that Jason needs to drink it.

He does so without any hesitation.

Jason makes the same protesting gurgles at the taste, adding, “Lemon or even peach vodka might actually make this shit taste like lemonade, as advertised.”

This time, Jason feels it more – and feels it faster.

It’s a compounding high, building on itself and Jason lets it all flow over him.

Jason continues chatting aimlessly with Tolovi, loses track of what gets said exactly – has to trust that Rwen’s choice to make the deal when he did means he knows Jason’s gotten pushed passed the edge of really grasping reality, that he won’t try to add caveats or details or loopholes.

He hears Tim’s voice in his head at intervals, like he’s talking to someone else and only occasionally remembers to mute his mic – or Jason could just be imagining it. Less often, but more
solidly, he hears Nightwing and Batgirl snipe something in their usual attempts to remain light hearted and up beat – hears the strain inside their voices growing as it doesn’t quite work.

At some point, the car stops.

Jason isn’t aware of it until he realizes that he’s walking, Rwen’s guiding hand on his shoulder again – heavy and grounding and searingly warm.

He feels like he’s floating somewhat as he drifts along, being lead by Rwen like a dog on a fuckin’ leash. That realization doesn’t bother him as much as he thought it would.

Especially not when Rwen’s leading him towards what is obviously and undeniable an illegal fight ring in the basement. It makes Jason’s heart begin to pound with excitement.

_Eagerness._

There’s a speech of some sort.

Jason’s not sure who gives it, or why. He doesn’t care.

Xansa’s there and the GHOST mooks he’s managed to put names to with Rwen’s help: Tavian Ross, the Fox; Alistair Blake, the Hound; and that kid no older than Dickie bird is Chris Mattingly, the White Wolf… They wear their names, their monikers plainly. With just as much force and reputation behind them as any of the Bats do – just more openly, viciously, and with a brutal kind of non-concern that says the strata of the underworld they’re from is so much more defined and catalyzed than anything that Jason’s ever seen before.

Their names aren’t masks, but they give them the same security as the Bats’ clever secrets do… Their names are walls, fortifications, _warnings._

Xansa, the Silver Wing.

Rwen, the Razorwing.

Shankar, the Firebird…

The Firebird is Jason’s first opponent and he is already impatient to begin.

But his brute aggression is boring.

What Jason finds interesting is Xansa’s reaction – the silent conversation he has with Rwen right as they arrive. It’s subtle and Jason wouldn’t notice it with any less of that strange drug inside his system, but it’s a fascinating exchange. One that proves beyond a doubt to Jason that the blithe comment Tavain Ross shot at him is entirely true: Rwen’s the one with the power here, the only one whose voice can truly matter in any kind of deal.
It makes Jason feel more confident in the deal he’s struck.

Makes the lingering niggle of worry that he’s been resisting fade enough for the excitement he feels about the impending fight to completely eclipse any drop of negativity.

Rwen’s hand is still on Jason’s shoulder and he gets steered into the center of the makeshift arena created by the enthusiastic press of the gathered crowd.

Shankar is lingering on one side of it, Tavian and the others on the opposite curve, and Rwen leads him directly into the center of the spotlight.

There’s a girl there – masked and anonymous and sterile – waiting with something like a hand gun, but pneumatic and attached to needles instead of bullets. Modified piece of tattooing equipment or something… Jason’s seen shit like that on low rent sci fi shows.

Eh, whatever works, works.

Rwen takes the gun from the girl and she promptly disappears. He exchanges the bright green cartridge that had been preloaded in the gun for one he pulls out of his pocket. The one Rwen loads is black. Oozing. Less like a drug and more like a plague.

Every cell in Jason’s body is eagerly screaming out for it.

Every instinct is screaming out to get away from it.

Rwen’s eyes are cool and empty as he turns Jason’s head up and to the side, as he lines the gun’s nozzle up with the vein on his neck that runs straight to his heart.

Jason’s stopped breathing with the tension of anticipation before Rwen pulls the trigger.

The rush sends him shuddering straight to the cool concrete of the floor.

There are no words for the sensation, no sonnets even.

Jason would have to invent a whole new language, devise a new breed of poetry from it, to have any hope of explaining the zing that hits his mucsles, his sinew, his senses and perception… with describing how it both hurts like nothing he’s ever felt and soothes like nothing he could’ve imagined.

Oh.

It’s… it’s something.
Jason knows he should… dislike it, or be scared of it, or… something.

But rational feelings left the building as soon as Rwen pulled that trigger. He doesn’t have that kind of care anymore, that kind of complicated emotion. He’s got nothing but pure sensation and no desire to figure out if that’s good or bad or something else entirely.

Isn’t bothered by that fact.

Jason’s not sure how long it takes for a semblance of reality to filter back into place.

Thinks it’s probably been a while.

Rwen’s talking. Jason thinks it’s probably to Tavian. Doesn’t care.

Rwen’s hand is still on his shoulder, but now it’s not so much guiding as it is restraining.

And the suddenly it’s not.

Rwen’s hand is gone.

And Jason is alone in the ring, facing off with Shankar.

They circle each other, feeling their opponent out.

Jason can’t help the grin that splits his face.

It has been so long since he had a real fight.

Not everything awful about Crime Alley was as terrible as B and them hoity toity types like to blankly believe. Some fights were shit to be sure, but some … some when he could earn a pretty penny from a victory and feel like he really earned his keep and comfort… that shit wasn’t bad at all.

He’s kinda missed it to be really fuckin’ honest.

And when he successfully dodges as Shakar cedes the advantage and launches the first offensive blow, the triumph that races through him with his Bat training’s clear superiority is breathtaking. He’s missed this and, hot damn, is it good to really play it hard again.

They exchange a few more blows – Shankar gets a lucky shot in and Jason bites his cheek, but every other point contact belongs to Jason. The wound on Jason’s cheek leaks a bit of blood, but hardly more than enough to make him taste the familiar tang as it dribbles down his chin – the wound inside his mouth healing over before the drips even stain his shirt.
They separate after a few dozen blows, mutually backing off for a moment as they each reassess. Shankar was expecting to floor him, Jason realizes with a bright stab of pride.

And the attention in the arena shifts.
Slides neatly off to the side as a new player steps into the fray.

Someone in a skintight leather cat suit…
Not Selina.
This cat’s younger, almost totally androgynous but mostly likely tipped towards male.

He’s all sorts of saucy and seductive as he saunters straight into the ring, doesn’t hesitate to make right for the center, hips swaying all the while… with a Cheshire Cat smile that makes Jason’s blood head south immediately.

Shit.

Holy blundering bat boys.

Jason did not know he had that fetish.

Well, fuck.

But shit if he’s gonna voice any complaint about it.
Cause hot damn.

This god damn pussy cat is right out of a wet dream Jason didn’t know he had.

The hella sexy feline could be a straight up hallucination for all Jason knows, he’s pretty damn high right now, after all.

Jason can’t even pretend to regret it.

The first moment Jason’s convinced his kitty cat is not just a hormonal hallucination is the
moment the frickin Cat locks lips with him – physical, solid, warm, real.

And there’s no shyness, no hesitation, no restraint.

Just a hot and heavy kiss with tongue and Jason melts like butter into it.

Dear god, Jason likes it.

Part of it’s the drug, obviously, increasing every type of sensitivity.

But a lot of it is just Jason, too.

And sweet jesus, the cat has a collar.

With a tag and a bright little bell on it.

The cat’s collar reads ‘Stray’.

“There’s my big bad birdie,” Stray purs when he breaks the kiss, loudly enough for the spectators to hear – the crowd having gone eerily silent in wake of his arrival. “You disappeared on me, again, and I was starting to get worried. But here you are, just having all this fun without me. I should punish you for that. Birdies in this city have no place in pissing off the pussy cats.”

Even the damn cat’s voice is sexy.

Low and pouty and confident in a way that makes Jason’s gooey insides realign themselves to suitably express the obvious effect of the appeal.

Jason’s hands find Stray’s hips – close in without hesitation and hold him firmly flush.


Jason cracks a smile, loose and uncontrolled as he lets the swirl of drugs and hormones take his fuzzy mind where they will.

He’s fourteen after all, and with his previous upbringing and current, overwhelming schedule of vigilante crime fighting, he’s never really had a hot minute to consider anything like this… to examine much about the kind of sexy that his mind or body could possibly want…
Apparently, he wants this.

“You can do whatever the hell you want with me, hot stuff,” Jason breathes.

“Let’s get out of here,” Stray purrs. “Make our way to somewhere private.”

“Lead the way, pussy cat,” Jason sighs, hands tightening on Stray’s hips as the cat begins to physically puppet-walk Jason backwards.

Jason has no idea where the cat wants to take him

Really doesn’t care at all.

Stray could cut his throat right now and Jason would die in fucking bliss.

They only make it a few steps before Rwen’s voice booms out over the hush.

“Not so fast.”

His voice is dramatic, authoritative, and it makes everyone stand a little more alert.

Stray twists in Jason’s hold, keeping one gloved hand firmly over the fingers Jason has splayed over his him. With a bored pout, Stray whines, “Who the hell are you?”

“Just a passing stranger,” Rwen Tolovi comments blithely, “Who is a lot more interesting than I first appear. We seem to have that in common, you and I. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Rwen Tolovi. And you are?”

“Not interested,” Stray snaps, leaning back into Jason’s chest with a casual inclination, with and easy, bored possessiveness, and with a potent curve to his figure that makes Jason’s head spin. “You don’t belong here, stranger. You’ve banged up my birdie’s face and you’ve let your stupid drug poison my city. Promise to be gone by morning and my friends and I will leave you alone – but I am walking out of here with this guy, right now.”

“You tell ‘em, kitten!”

Jason knows he recognizes that voice. Vaguely.

Doesn’t care – refuses to look away from Stray long enough to check on the speaker.
There’s a nervous tittering in the crowd as the spectators all turn to look at the newcomers and Rwen asks, “Friends of yours, Kitten?”

“Indeed.” It’s another voice Jason should know, still doesn’t quite care enough to look up to see why. Barely cares enough to keep listening. “But before we get on with the posturing and the inevitable stupid macho pissing match, let me ask you one thing. As one chemist to another, what exactly did you put in this drug you’ve got everyone here hopped up on? I’m sensing at least three different formulas, but all variations on the same base theme… and it’s… odd.”

“You’ve something special in your own blood, I see,” Rwen allows. Stray is pushing on Jason’s chest, working him backwards in a subtle, step by step process that does not escape Rwen’s notice. “As much as I would love to talk shop, I do want to reaffirm that we can’t let your kitten and the little Robin that he’s claimed leave just yet.”

Stray doesn’t curse, but he does cease coaxing Jason backwards as he levels a glare.

Rwen ignores the vitriol in the cat’s gaze, explaining, “Robin still has a fight to finish. It’s bad manners to cut out early, especially when he’s bound by a gentleman’s agreement. He needs to fulfill his end of it.”

Jason’s fingers tighten on Stray’s hips as he recalls the fight… that he’d literally been in the middle of when Stray had interrupted. He wants to leave it – Dios Mio, does he want to leave… Just leave right now with Stray and forget about it altogether.

But.

He did make an agreement.

He did it for Gotham, for his city – for the city that can’t be saved, but the one he could never be convinced to stop trying to protect.

And he did it for his friend.

He did it for Tim.

Tim, who can’t be brought anywhere near this drug…

Because even with Jason’s own tragic family history when it comes to shit like this, he’s strong enough to beat it. And honestly, if he doesn’t prove strong enough, if he does wind up turning out just like his mom… Well, he saved Gotham once, saved Tim a few times, and really, it’s not much of a loss to the universe if Jason’s potential gets cut short.

But Tim…

He’s got a compatibility too, according to Tolovi, at least.
And from what Jason’s seen of his coffee habit... he’s got some sort of penchant for chemical addiction too, possibly even worse off than Jason’s own genetic proclivity – more affecting anyway, because at least Jason is aware that he’s prone to substance abuse like that.

Tim’s never been exposed to something really hard to kick.

And like Sherlock fucking Holmes and whatnot, Jason’s worried that if Tim gets a taste of what it feels like to be on something good... he’s not going to be able to recognize the problem with getting high until it’s way too late to just toss that shit in the trash.

It’d be an experiment to him – a mind expansion technique.

And with how desperate Tim is to be a part of the Crusade... the physical enhancement that Tolovi’s drug clearly grants its users could be a tragically tempting thing to try...

Tim can not be allowed to touch this shit.

And Rwen promised that if Jason won this fight – which Rwen said he definitely could, and Jason’s first hand experience agrees with him – then the Tolovis and GHOST and everyone else involved with this horrible drug would leave Gotham. Rwen promised that he’d set his interest in Tim aside and just walk away.

Jason needs that to happen.

“I promised,” Jason whispers against Stray’s neck – mournfully, desperately.

“Robin and I have come to an arrangement,” Rwen announces to the crowd. “He tries out my personal formula, and battles it out with my brother. If he wins, he’s set to fight a representative from GHOST proper. If he wins both bouts, we’ll all go away and leave your dingy little city in the muck and mire of its own making. You’ll never hear from any of us again.”

Stray is stiff beneath Jason’s hands – angry, scared, and achingly frustrated.

“I smell a rat.”

This hiss is very familiar. Selina.

Jason’s almost tempted to look up and find her figure in the crowd as she goes on to growl viciously, “A cat’s nose always knows.”

“I’m with the Cat on this one.”

Now, Jason has to look.
He *knows* that voice.

It’s Dick. *Nightwing.*

Jason looks up and spots Dick immediately. Realizes exactly why the Tolovis can see right through the masks… This drug ups sensory perception… dramatically. He can almost feel Nightwing’s heartbeat, can pierce right through the voice distortion module taped against ‘Wing’s throat, can isolate the exact contours of his mask to see the face beneath it like nothing’s there at all… And the body language…

Especially with *Dick.*

It’s just *so* obvious.

Jason feels slightly less pathetic now for being recognized out of costume.

He’s not even on a really high dose, let alone a steady, constant flow of it.

If this drug really does keep building on itself perpetually… after a few *years* of taking on the regular… the Tolovis have got to be *beyond* super human at this point.

Because even Jason can see the vague glow of an aura around Starfire standing near Nightwing well before she steps up to say, “I, too, have my thoughts aligned with the feline.”

Jason can see the other metas in the crowd too, now that he’s looking, each with a faint but obvious… *glow* – Wonder Woman is here, and Superman… And Poison Ivy, who’s already announced her presence plainly. Still, it’s kinda cool that Jason can *see* them.

The alien Teen Titan’s fists glow with an almost tangible green gleam as she tightens her fingers with threat – so bright and substantial that Jason thinks it would be totally visible without any super drug enhancement.

But the super drug *does* let him see Kid Flash’s entrance, to track the kid inside the blur instead of just glazing up with the over loading input of red and yellow lighting. Wally latches on to Nightwing’s arm to drag himself to a stop before he chirps, “Sorry, I’m late! So, who exactly IS the bad guy? ‘Cause I’m counting a lot of angry dudes and scary dudettes in black here…”

A blip of amusement filters into Jason’s brain.

Dick is gonna be in *so much trouble* for calling in the Titans without B’s direct approval.

And Jason can tell he doesn’t have it.

*Can feel* Batman’s judgemental and disapproving frown as it forms nebulously in the crowd – Jason can even isolate the Bat’s exact position. Which makes him irrationally pleased with himself – particularly considering that it’s a *bad* thing that the Bat’s stealth is being totally mitigated by even a single real dose of this super drug.

Still, the smile grows to crack through his black expression and draw across his face – especially as Batgirl steps up with a sardonic and rewarding huff, “Kid Flash, shut up.”
Meanwhile, Jason suddenly realizes that Stray has resumed attempting to coax him backwards – away from the arena. This time Jason resists as Batgirl addresses Rwen to say declaratively, “We want our Robin back, and we’re going to take him whether you like it or not. You might have that super drug on your side, but you have to admit that the odds are no longer standing in your favor.”

Rwen shrugs – refusing to cede the point.

Jason… has to kind of agree, as much as he hates to admit it. Even with the Teen Titans and the Justice League peeps tagging in to help… this fight’s still pretty biased.

Beside Batgirl, Wonder Woman appears, placing a hand on Batgirl’s shoulder as she announces, “The Mist of Themiscrya would welcome a warrior of such prowess as any of you standing here – such battles you have waged, such victories you have earned… I cannot understand why an honorable warrior is draped in such ill intentions. You have malice in your heart, malice equal even to the great worth of your noble motivations. Why not simply let the boy go? Why force this drugged and dishonorable combat?”

With a sigh that shows Rwen is growing tired of having to repeat himself, he says, “For the data, mostly. I am a scientist at heart, and knowing more about the effects of my research is paramount for my Family’s effective longevity. If someone is sick, sometimes a fever is a necessary evil to purge the infection, and I have no qualms about doing what I have to regarding the security and health of my Family.”

“You have enough data for your research,” Superman says, revealing himself on the edge of yet another part of the crowd. “You drugged the boy and made him fight, now let him go.”

“I do not have enough,” Rwen snaps, vehement enough to nearly break the cool calm of his façade. “I need to see him injured, and to see how his responsiveness to being injured changes as the drug runs its course. This might be sport for Shankar and Xansa, and for Tavian and GHOST, but I need to see him fight through to the end.”

His outburst effectively silences the room.

After a brief pause to rein in his raging temper, Rwen goes on carefully to add, “I made your Robin a deal and he agreed. Two fights, two wins, and we disappear forever. With a few aliens, an Amazonian demi-goddess, and Gotham’s own oddities on your side, you might – just might – be able to best us all tonight, but have no doubt that if you somehow manage it, GHOST and the Blackbirds will swarm in to finish what was started here – what I’ve agreed to abort in my negotiations with Robin. You’ll never be able to fight them all, even if you occupy the city with your vigilante thugs.”

Rwen lets the heroes swallow that before he adds, “I am a man of my word. Robin wins two fights and we disappear. Simple as that.”

“Pardon me for not believing you,” Catwoman yowls with a bored antagonism.
Rwen sighs.

He lets his gaze leave Stray and Jason to look directly at Wonder Woman. “Your lasso has unique qualities, no? From what I’ve heard it can make a person be honest, even if it goes against their will to do so. Allow me to prove my intentions.”

There’s a beat of stunned silence.

Wonder Woman’s lasso is a harrowing experience, not to be undertaken lightly.

Jason knows that much first hand – trying it out was part of his Bat training.

But Rwen Tolovi offers his hand and does not pull it back as Wonder Woman approaches and pulls the golden coil from her hip. She loops it securely around Rwen’s wrist and commands, “Speak to me your Truth.”

Rwen winces, draws a sharp breath and lets the words be dragged out of him.

“I made an agreement with the boy, a binding one,” Rwen explains, “He agreed to test my formula and best two opponents. In exchange, I promised that neither GHOST nor the Blackbirds – or anyone else connected to us – will ever venture into Gotham again.”

“And you have the authority to make that promise truly binding?”

Rwen nods at Diana’s question, but Jason doesn’t need the lasso to confirm that much. 

Rwen is the real boss here, the one with real control.

It’s irrefutable, even with Xansa Tolovi and Tavian Ross both looking on rather bitterly from right nearby on the sidelines.

At ease with the pinful barbs that the lasso digs into a guarded psyche, Rwen says, “This is my research, my mission. Gotham is my operation and as such I have complete discretion over its proceedings. Let the boy fight, he will win and we will all leave without further trouble for either side to handle.”

There’s another drawn out pause as the lasso glows and then releases its hold.

“The warrior speaks true,” Diana announces, a sliver of shock hiding in the back of her tone. The drug means Jason can hear it loud and clear.

“Then it seems we have an arrangement,” Batman says, materializing out of the shadows.

The super drug means that for the first time in the history of ever the big bad Bat seems almost emotive as an entity.

He’s not happy.
He’s furious… and worried.

The frickin’ Batman is fucking terrified … for Jason’s safety.

Not in a way that makes Jason feel insulted, but in a way that makes him feel… valued and almost precious. It’s a strange sensation.

“If you had another volunteer, would you let Robin go?”

He means himself, obviously. Fucking martyr.

But Jason isn’t as pissed as he’d thought he’d be… it’s almost… nice… that B would do that for him. It’s not just to hog the savior spotlight. Jason can hear the concern for his own wellbeing radiating from Batman’s voice – he just wants to do whatever will get Jason and the others out of there as fast as possible.

Not because he thinks he can handle it better than Jason.

But because he thinks Jason simply shouldn’t have to handle it.

It’s practically meaningless, though. Irrelevant.

Rwen huffs and explains, “No one else is as perfectly compatible. I suppose I could try the kitten here, seeing as this one is the next closest to compatible among you all, but I somehow suspect that Robin might protest if he were in his right mind to do so. Cat, Canary, each claimed by the other as they are.”

He looks right at Stray as he speaks and something slimy niggles in Jason’s gut.

Before Jason can sort though the signal, Selina digs her claws into the chest of the goon she’s got herself wrapped around and hisses, “My sweet kitten is not going to be your plaything.”

Jason can smell the blood welling up beneath the goon’s clothes where his skin meets Selina’s diamond tipped, glass cutting claws.

Jason’s hold tightens on Stray’s hips, before one hand slides around his ribcage to hold him closer. He doesn’t know Stray, not really, but he doesn’t want to see him high and hurting.

Stray doesn’t look like Tim, not really – not in the ways Jason knows are most important, the body language and vibrant personas are just too disconnected. But Stray’s small figure, pale skin, and blindingly straightforward competence are similar enough to make Jason ache sickeningly at the idea of letting Stray be drugged – almost as viciously as if it were Tim himself.

“I made the agreement, I took the drug,” Jason says, low and controlled. “I did it to protect my friend and I promised to fulfill my end. Let me fight like I said I would. There might be another way, but this way is the best way.”
His gaze finds Batman’s, pleading.

Jason feels Stray vibrate with fury beneath his fingers.

Ignores it until he sees Batman nod, accepting Jason’s attempt to own up to his decision and accept responsibility for the choices he has made.

Stray twists, his claws finding Jason’s neck and shoulder, digging in just enough to make Jason aware that he’s almost bleeding as Stray’s terror and possessive streak join forces. Stray stares through his red-lensed goggles with a desperate plea.

“Don’t be a hero,” Stray begs, forcing Jason to look down at him.

“Too late for that, hot stuff,” Jason tells him with a smirk. “You just sit your pretty ass down on the sidelines for a beat and I’ll be back to finish this in no time flat.”

Jason intends to keep that promise just as thoroughly as the one that requires him to fight. He plants his hands on Stray’s hips and gingerly uses his enhanced strength to gently, carefully push Stray away from him.

“I promised, and I did it for a friend, so I have to follow through,” Jason says.

Stray pounces on Jason one last time for a tight hug.

“Don’t you dare die,” Stray hisses right in his ear.

With an entirely inappropriate chuckle, Jason lets Stray skirt away and smirks boldly as he says, “Wouldn’t dream of it, pussy cat.”

With that, Stray relents to let Robin step back into the center of the ring.

And Jason rolls his shoulders to get back into the mindset of a fight.

“About fuckin’ time, Birdie,” Shankar Tolovi huffs, rolling his own shoulders and beginning to circle the ring as Jason does the same and the crowd pushes back in close.

The two combatants meet in the center in a harsh flurry of blows.

It’s not like the warm-up.

This time, both Jason and Shankar jump straight to blunt brutality.
It’s no holds barred and Jason is absolutely positive that he breaks every one of his ribs three times over – breaks *everything* at least three times over, if not more. He would’ve died on the third exchange if he’d been on anything less potent than whatever concoction he’s on.

Jason’s sense of time distorts.

His only means of judging it becomes a method of watching Shanker grow increasingly frustrated as he tries to beat Jason – having clearly expected that this fight would be an easy victory. Jason isn’t willing to let him have an inch, though, and between his Bat training, the stubborn, fight wise instinct bred into him by his Crime Alley upbrining, and the drug’s influence succeeding in heightening his reflexes, Jason manages to keep the quick and vicious Fire Bird fighting on his toes.

And Jason is patient.

Far more patient than Shankar proves.

As Shankar Tolovi grows more and more frustrated, he also grows sloppy and overly aggressive. Things Jason can exploit. Because Jason has no qualms about being excessive.

The blow that finishes it should’ve been enough to make even Jason’s stomach churn.

It came as Shankar grabbed at Jason’s shoulder.

Like the bouncer at Obscura’s door, like the pimps and posh johns that rolled through Crime Alley, like the police who’d tried to take him in to Child Services after Catherine’s death…

It was a move Jason could never be caught by.

He grabbed at Shankar’s wrist and twisted, wrenching at the former spec ops agent’s shoulder until the joint popped and tore. In the same motion, he kicked at Shankar’s back hard enough to break it if it landed clean.

Shankar had grown sloppy, but not quite sloppy enough to let a kid like Jason land a kick like that – even with the distracting agony of a destroyed shoulder.

It meant that Jason’s kick landed awkwardly against his side.

A few more inches and Shanker would’ve gotten clear.
As it was, the blow shattered his ribs and sent the pieces tearing through his lungs.

The fight, for him, was over.

From the bland reaction of the crowd – simply cheering as if another epic move had been vrolled – Jason assumed Shankar would live. He was still alive at all, after all, rolling on his back and groaning with defeat – more out of frustration and shame than because of any pain.

The fight with Shankar Tolovi ends, and then quickly transitions over into the fight with Alistair Blake, GHOST’s purported Hound Dog. The whispers in the crowd call him wild.

Aptly cautious, Jason lets his opponent make the first gambit.

His movements are more technical than Shankar’s, more carefully schooled.

Unlike Shankar, Alistair felt like a military dog – trained and bred for it, but too used to military order and the rigid structure of clearly defined expectations. He didn’t have the grit in him that any sort of street brawler grew into quick as kids.

At the same time, however, Jason could feel the effects of the drug starting to wane – actually feel it starting to trickle out and away.

He needs to finish this one faster than he did with Shankar and he takes pains to make that possible. Alistair has more brute endurance than Shankar had, more doggedly straightforward determination to keep hitting where it hurts until Jason falls.

But Jason doesn’t let him have the satisfaction, even as his vision starts to go a bit fuzzy.

Eventually, Jason lands a perfectly aimed kick to Alistair’s head – heel smacking dead on at his opponent’s right temple – and Alistair crumples to the blood slicked concrete floor.

Another cheer goes up.

Someone, probably Rwen, makes another speech.
But Jason’s already halfway to oblivion and far too long passed gone to care.

The last thing he’s aware of as gravity disappers around him is the soft, electric sensation of Stray’s one hands slipping back around his waist while the other pets gingerly at the busted angles of his face.

It’s a nice feeling, very nice, and Jason smiles into it as he lets himself float.

Chapter End Notes

So this is the last total cliff hanger chapter!

Unfortunately, after this a bit of an angst spiral begins...

NEXT TIME: Tim watches the end of the fight, case wrap up begins, and he has to deal with some consequences...
Rule #23 - Leave a Note

Chapter Summary

Tim watches the conflict with the Tolovis wrap up.

And reacts to it all rather poorly.

Chapter Notes

Life has a way of just kickin' you in the teeth sometimes, doesn't it?
It's 92 degrees out and I have a cold...
Anyway, beyond the cold, I also have been having computer weirdness the last few days, soooo... I wanted to have this posted by 7am yesterday, but here we are... on the plus side, it's officially the longest chapter in the fic?

No real warnings this time, save for the fact that a lot of Tim's angsting is unhealthy and problematic...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Three: Rule #23 – Leave a Note

Seventeen minutes and forty seven seconds.

Tim counts them all.

Starts counting the instant he lets go of Jason and allows him to step back into the ring to face down Shankar Tolovi – who’s looking at him with the eager, fang drip gaze of a predator that enjoys the kill. Tim almost regrets Stray’s effectiveness at being utterly alluring, because where Shankar had seen Jason as nothing more than a punk ass kid being put in the ring like a chew toy, now he’s looking at Jason like a rival for a sexual conquest.

Ingrained machismo at it’s best.

Seventeen minutes and forty seven seconds.

It’s excruciating.
Gut wrenching, heart rending.

Tim can’t feel his limbs, hasn’t swallowed once since he let Jason go, doesn’t think his lungs ever really recalled their lessons on the art of breathing. His heart is pounding, his ears are ringing, pins and needles plague his muscles.

Every single one of the blows that Jason and Shankar exchange would kill a normal person – and each one bloodies up their clothes enough to prove it.

Tim retreats inside his head, and counts.

Stray’s façade stays bland and bored, but Tim can feel it starting to crack – knows that it’s been more tenuous than could possibly be considered acceptable since the moment Jason suggested that he ought to finish the fight.

The way he defeats Shankar makes bile rise in Tim’s throat – makes the flat line of Stray’s unamused expression tip downward into an apparent frown.

He almost doesn’t feel the slim hand that slips around the fist he has clenched tightly at his side as Alistair Blake steps up to take his turn in the ring.

The pause in the action allows Tim to look away briefly – to make startled eye contact with the piercing, inquisitive gaze of the slim girl who’s appeared beside him. She’s young – Tim can’t tell how young, but possibly as young as him – and dressed like a real ninja, rather than the sexy imitation ninja he’s trussed up as, in soft black drapes of fabric that are silent as she moves around him with a quiet but obvious and honed sense of strength that makes Tim fall still instinctively, quaking like a rabbit.

“Mask,” she whispers, tapping two fingers at her cheek.

He blinks, baffled and still rather terrified – both of her and for Jason, compounding the feeling of helpless panic growing in his chest.

As Tim looks on, the girl very deliberately moves her hands to mime an action that’s most closely reminiscent of a person using their thumbs to crack a pencil in two.

“Break.”

A distant corner of his brain wonders vaguely at what her first language could be, since it clearly isn’t English.

While that part of his brain is distracted, another part works to translate her meaning from the English words and hand signs she’s given him.

*His mask is breaking*, he interprets.

She seems to read his successful translation in his eyes and gives a nod confirming it.

Her hand darts out – so swift and sudden that Tim can’t even recognize the motion well enough to flinch – her fingertips coming to rest with startling force against Tim’s chest, right above
where his heat was desperately trying to maintain any semblance of a rhythm.

“Hurt.”

This time he can’t even nod, the ache in his throat is too overwhelming to make even a slight motion in his neck plausible.

She lets an odd little smile flicker into view.

Tim can’t interpret it, at all.

The girl tips her head towards Jason and seems to struggle, eyes crinkling at the corners as her smile puckers slightly—frustration, Tim realizes. She can’t find the English words.

“Oh,” she manages eventually, adding, “Live.”

She’s trying to tell him that Jason’s going to be okay, that he’ll live through this.

A bright nod meets his unspoken realization, something like relief pulling at the corners of her mouth and eyes.

“Oh,” the girl repeats, moving one hand back to poke at Tim’s shaking fist.

She coaxes his fingers to uncurl and then slips her own hand inside his grip. She squeezes, hard enough to tell him that he can squeeze back as hard as he needs to without having to worry about hurting her.

Tim has never felt so grateful to anyone in his entire life—let alone a perfect stranger.

Holding her hand securely to ground him, Tim turns his gaze back to the arena in time to watch Jason crack a smile that baits Alistair Blake into making the first move.

And Tim begins counting again.

The second fight lasts nine minutes and sixteen seconds.

Alistair collapses after Jason lands a kick to his head—just drops like a stone.

It makes Tim sway on his feet as that bile and dizziness returns.

The mysterious girl’s iron grip on his hand is all that keeps him standing.

Jason smirks at the crowd after Alistair falls. Raises both hands in victory and swings his smug smirk around to face Rwen directly.

And then he starts to list dramatically.

Tim is running to him as Jason’s knees give out before he even processes it—his hand still caught inside the strange girl’s grip. She’s running with him, graciously following his lead.

It’s not even a question that he wouldn’t have been able to get free, wouldn’t have been able
to simply drag her along, if letting him go to Jason isn’t what she wanted.

Jason is far too heavy for Tim to actually catch, but he can ease the way of the limp figure’s fall to the ground. He hugs Jason close, petting at his face as he tries to reassure himself that he can feel Jason’s heart still beating and his lungs still breathing.

And then the girl is there, hoisting Jason up by an arm thrown over her shoulder – dragging him out of the fray that’s crowded in close and is watching Rwen’s theatrics as he gives another speech of some sort.

Tim is torn between relief that the girl is helping him get Jason away from here, and terror that she’s going to take him away for her own reasons while Tim can’t do anything to stop her getting away.

His fears are allayed as they hit the dank, but refreshingly cool air of the alley just beyond the Raven’s fire escape. The girl deposits Jason gently against the damp brick of the alley wall, making Tim sag with relief and gratitude.

The few seconds of calm allows him to recover his wits enough to prevent him jumping like a startled deer when she turns around to face him with a sudden and aggressively blank demeanor. It’s unnerving, for a moment, but Tim can see her eyes aren’t trained on him.

Someone followed them out of the night club.

“Tim?”

It’s Barbara Gordon.

Stray’s full persona snaps back firmly into place. Play the story harder.

“Who?”

He turns around with a smirk and sets his hand on a cocked hip with fingers splayed.

Stares Batgirl down.

She frowns – too many pieces of incongruous data attempting to mesh together to make any of them fit in a way that makes any sense.

“Oh,” Tim purrs, utterly as if he’d only just realized it. “You mean Mama Cat’s sad little stray kitten with the camera. Yeah, he’s not here. He interrupted a perfectly good movie night, though, whining about how it was his fault this idiot was somehow in mortal peril or whatnot.”
Barbara’s frown deepens. A beat passes before she asks, “Aren’t you called ‘Stray’?”

Stray gives a shrug. “Cat’s affectionate nicknames run a theme without a tremendous array of variety. She tried ‘Catlad’ out on me, but uh, no self respecting feline would ever bear a collar like that for anyone.”

“You’re saying you have no personal investment in Robin’s life?”

“Not really,” Stray replies. Tim realizes that Barbara won’t buy it for a second, that he’d let his true feelings show far to clearly during the fight. Her suspicious stare bores into him for a long few seconds. Eventually, he huffs and rolls his head around his neck like his next words are some great admission, confessing, “I’m just squeamish. I’m a thief, not a thug. And Selina, for whatever reason, likes that kid – enough to help him out on movie night. I don’t know him well enough to know why she bothers, but if Mama Cat wants to help, I figure might as well.”

The suspicion doesn’t abate immediately, but it does wane at least a little.

Enough to say she’s doubting her own conclusions.

Letting his face brighten with a false spark of sudden remembrance, Tim slides his hand off his hip and down to a hidden pocket on his thigh – slips two fingers in to pull out the flash drive he has tucked away there.

“Camera kid gave me this,” Stay announces. He makes sure Batgirl’s eyes are tracking it before he whips it across the alley towards her – she catches it with the smooth motion of carefully honed instincts. “Said to pass it on to the first Bat I found. Dunno what it is or if it’ll be any help with anything, but he was pretty worked up about me getting it to you.”

Batgirl pockets the drive without inspecting it, without looking away from Stray.

His goggles do their job well enough to let him see that the pouch on her utility belt she puts it in is lined with something that’s probably able to block any kind of signal that might be piggy backing off of the drive itself.

Batgirl’s chest rises and falls in a slow, measured motion meant to breath away frustration. She’s still glaring at him from beneath the cowl, gaze wounded and distrustful.

Saying anything else would make it seem like Stray’s got a story to spin, like he feels the need to make up details to give it the illusion of reality. So Stray says nothing and stares back.
But then the mysterious girl he’d almost forgotten about taps lightly at his shoulder. He loosens up to turn and she grabs his shoulder, pulling him into the exact place she wants with enough inexorable force to make it clear that she didn’t have to warn him. He ends up with his back to the wall and his peripheral gaze still on Batgirl, while his main attention is with hers on the dark shape in the shadows on the alley’s other side.

It’s only due to the plethora of filters on Stray’s special goggles that he can see Batman before the vigilante is directly on top of them.

He suspects that the Bat was lingering further down the alley for a while before he’d stepped close enough to expose himself to the mysterious girl’s superhuman perceptions.

“Who are you?”

Tim draws in breath to respond with a properly catty retort, but the girl stops him with a painful squeeze to his shoulder.

The Bat has already heard his explanation. Giving more will only allow the detective to poke holes in the story where the pieces don’t quite line up.

And Batman isn’t talking to him anyway.

Either he doesn’t think Stray is a viable threat, or he trusts Selina Kyle enough to think that she wouldn’t set a murderer on course to rescue Jason.

Regardless, he’s talking to the girl.

“Shiva.”

Tension drops hard over the quartet still standing within the alley.

“You’re with the League of Assassins?”

The girl shakes her head.

“But Lady Shiva sent you?”

A nod.

“Why?”

“Watch,” she says. Then she makes a wide gesture at the Raven.

Batman’s frown twitches. “Is Ra’s al Ghul interested in the Tolovis?”

She shrugs.
There’s a moment of impasse, of blatant stand off.

And then a loud yawn breaks the silence as Selina folds herself out of the shadows and herself wraps enticingly around one of Bruce’s arms with one of hers flung over his shoulders.

“As… interesting as this game of mime school twenty questions seems to be, I think you have a few more pressing issues to deal with,” Selina purrs, claws gripping the back of Bruce’s neck to force him to look at her.

She gives a salacious grin, enjoying the way he allows her control, and then points his face at Jason’s fallen figure. “The bird’s in bad shape, Batsy boy,” she says. “Help him before you start doubting the motives of someone who’s helped save him.”

Batman’s glower deepens – a silent question doubting that the girl has helped save Jason in any way other than simply hauling him out of the crowd after Jason had saved himself.

Standing unflinchingly beside Stray, the girl nods.

She then pulls three vials out of the endless folds of her dark outfit – vials full of sparkling, iridescent substances. A black one like what Jason had injected with before the fight, a green one like what Rwen removed from the gun before loading Jason’s dose, and a pinkish one, that bubbled and sparked with internal lightning like nothing Tim had ever seen.

“Cure.”

The girl says – noting easily which vial everyone’s attention is fixated on.

“It’s a cure?”

She frowns, shakes her head in a slow stilted motion with her chin tipping side to side.

“Try.”

“It’s an attempt at creating a cure? An incomplete one?”

She nods again, firmly.

A sliver of the tension releases.

And then Jason groans on the ground and Bruce looks away – paternal instincts overriding the Bat’s typical priorities and giving Stray and the mysterious girl an opening. Stray does make a move to run, but the girl beats him to it like a gunshot – picking him up bridal style and dashing off at a sprint that nearly makes Tim puke.

They get impossibly far before the girl slows and decides they’re safe enough to set Stray down without looking over her shoulder for a tail.

A flickering smile ghosts across her face and she pats Tim on the head like he’s six.

“Thanks, I think,” Tim tells her. “But why help me?”

She shrugs, that smile flickering more strongly. “Nice.”
“I’m nice?”

She nods.

Tim doesn’t think that could possibly be motivation enough, doesn’t think she has enough experience with him to even be able to make a reasonable determination of that fact to base her motivation on.

She laughs at his confusion – it’s soft and catches awkwardly in her throat, but it seems like it’s genuine and happy.

She pets his head again and flits off into the shadowy maze of Gotham dark corners.

Leaving Tim alone and rather starstruck.

He’s too dazed to react in any substantial way for a moment and he stands there on the pedestrian corner simply listening to the sounds sirens and angry street traffic – Gotham’s version of a calming lullaby.

It’s not until there’s an intelligible sound in his ear that Tim wakes to the moment.

“I’ve got you, Jaylad."

The com Jason slipped into his camera bag is still in his ear. And still active.

Tim can hear Batman – Bruce, rather, the man beneath the cowl – speaking to Jason in soft, soothing tones as they wait for the Batmobile to arrive and ferry them quickly back to the Cave for Alfred to check Jason over. Tim can’t tell if the others are still there, but he thinks it’s likely. Even if they aren’t right there, Batgirl and Nightwing are likely coordinating to wrap up whatever needs to be done to oversee the Tolovis’ immediate emigration with the few members of the Teen Titans and the Justice League who’d shown up to support the Bats.

Diana, Clark, Kori, and Wally will likely stick around until morning – waiting to fully verify that the Tolovis and GHOST and everything involved with them has definitely vacated the Gotham city limits. Bruce would likely appreciate having them to manage that aspect while he’s distracted with caring for Jason, even if he’d never say it aloud.

Selina, Pam, and Harley probably disappeared around the time that Tim and the girl ran off – the three of them disappearing into the Gotham underbelly with a reasonable confidence that they could make it away without any nosy capes tailing them.

The mysterious girl is definitely long gone.

No one would be able to find her again unless she decided to be found, of that, Tim is beyond certain. She may very well have been watching them since the case first got started and they would have absolutely no way to know about it.

The only other person in Tim’s framework of concern is Spoiler.

Stephanie is likely still inside the Batcave, being checked over by Alfred before she gets deposited safely into her bed – likely well before her mother would ever be able to notice her
absence. Tim needs to get her a new phone to replace the one he fried, but that can wait until the stores open in morning. He’s got all the data backed up after all, and if he takes his time with it he can add a few secure contacts to her listings – himself and Batgirl, for starters.

Other than that, the only person who needs to be handled is Tim, himself.

He’s a distraction for the Bats – a dangerous one.

As much as he has loved the feeling of being involved and mildly helpful, nothing he’s done to aid this case is enough to counteract the damage he caused. He almost got Jason killed.

It’s entirely Tim’s fault that Jason’s hurt right now – that he’s high right now.

With his history, with his mother’s history, that is just… horrific.

And it’s Tim’s fault.

Tim has to back off.

He has to.

Has to make things go back to the way they were before he stupidly got himself involved.

The thought makes his lungs ache – and causes some pitifully childish moisture to prickle at his eyes and nose – but Tim pushes down the selfish reluctance to let go of the tentative, nebulous friendship he’s sorta developing with Jason.

It’s better for Jason if they stop interacting.

It’s better for Gotham, for everyone.

Tim knows this, and despite the irrational protest of his emotions, he would rather keep Jason safe than selfishly enjoy his company.

Resigned, Tim sighs and forces his feet to start carrying him back home.

He makes it to the donut shop where he left his pack before running off idiotically after Spoiler and collects the bike and gear he left there. The rest of the trip home passes far more quickly now that he has the aid of wheels and he makes it to his front door just as the sky starts to edge towards blue from the black of true night.

Sunrise is still about an hour off as Tim peels out of Stray’s cat suit and begins tucking the various pieces away in disparate little hidey holes he’s created inside his bedroom – initially established to hide the fruits of his night time photography escapades.

He forces himself to take a quick hot shower before he collapses into bed.

Tim lets himself sleep in until seven.
He drinks his coffee as he gets ready, fills his usual thermos, and then bikes out towards school like it was nothing more than an average Thursday.

He detours to a tech shop, instead of going in to sit through homeroom in the library as he usually would, and uses the extra forty minutes in his morning that gives him to purchase a new phone for Stephanie Brown – one that looks the same as her old one, and fits perfectly into the same bright eggplant case, but is actually a substantially better model.

Setting the phone up, he improves the device further with some beefed up security features and then syncs it to the copy he made of her previous device.

He adds Robin’s contact number, and Batgirl’s, and links to the Bat/GCPD hotlines – the ones that were text-friendly because she knows perfectly well that they have hotlines, but has always elected to send emails and such instead of calling. Tim isn’t sure if it was a dislike of phones in general or an almost admirable attempt to protect her identity enacted with flawed understanding of how digital back tracing functions, but still, she clearly prefers to text and there are hotlines, albeit lesser known and poorly publicized ones, set up to accommodate that.

After a long moment of debate, Tim adds his own contact number as well.

Labels himself ‘Kiddo’.

Phone set up and ready for its owner, Tim walks next door to the post office.

The return address he writes down for his parcel is that of the donut shop where he and Spoiler occasionally met up. He pays for same day delivery and for a verification signature to be required at the door – knowing that Mrs Crystal Brown would be away working at her evening job and that, on Thursdays, Stephanie has a babysitting gig for the entire floor of the apartment building that she lived in… which meant she would both be home and able to accept the delivery, and yet also be far too busy to open it immediately.

Which would give him a time buffer, at least, and likely keep her so distracted that she might forget to yell at him about having destroyed her previous phone to begin with altogether.

That handled, Tim heads to school.

He sits through his classes, absent and subdued.

When the school day ends, Tim is reluctant to go home.

Home is… too close.

Too close to all his Bat paraphernalia – stuff that he should probably get rid of in the near future, to force him to quit this dangerous obsession he has cold turkey.

Too close to Wayne Manor – the Cave below which is where Jason is likely still confined
and slowly recovering. (Tim refuses to think about any possible reality in which Jason is not currently and proactively recovering, any reality in which Tim’s stupidity did anything more to hurt him than to force him to the sidelines for a couple of days, two weeks at most).

And it’s too close to Jason, to places where Tim interacted with Jason… And Tim can’t, just yet; can’t bear to be so close to the places where he spent time with a friend while knowing that he shouldn’t ever see that friend again.

So, Tim does not go home.

He goes to the Coventry Gardens branch of the Gotham Metropolitan Library.

He calls Mrs. Simz to tell her that he’ll be working on a group project at the school’s library for most of the afternoon and evening. Telling her that this time he will be coming home, but that she doesn’t need to worry about leaving food for him – he and his phantom group of classmates are supposedly ordering pizza as they speak.

Tim assures her that yes, he has his key, and yes, he won’t stay up too late, and yes, he knows all the rules and how to lock all the doors and arm the alarm before bed.

Her farewell is an affectionate little hum about how proud she is that he’s finally putting in the effort to make friends. Tim’s not quite sure why the sentiment stings so much.

When he hangs up, Tim looks around himself at his surroundings, slightly lost.

Since he doesn’t actually have a school project to work on, Tim isn’t entirely sure what he wants to do here… but even staring at a wall here is better than going home.

He fumbles and fusses for a while trying to think of things to do, ways to relax, reasons this was not an entirely ridiculous idea… but eventually he finds a quiet table on the fourth floor and pulls his homework out of his back pack. He doesn’t really have to start it now – he hasn’t received any truly difficult assignments and none of the busy work is due until Monday – but at least it’s something mildly productive to do.

Tim stays until nine.

Takes his time on the bike ride home.

Fixes himself a peanut butter sandwich to eat for dinner.

Spends an obnoxiously long time in the shower.

Struggles to fall asleep.
Wakes up groggy, irritable, and somehow lonelier after just a day spent mostly alone than he felt after weeks without seeing his parents.

Even before he’d decided to pull back from bothering the Bats, Jason only ever showed up in his life a couple times a week. For a measly few hours at a stretch. It was only in this last disastrous week that he’d seen Jason for a large chunk of time every day – and yet so quickly, Tim had gotten spoiled by the company.

Steeling himself against the ridiculousness of his own psyche, Tim makes his coffee and bikes to school. Sits through the same stupid classes he did yesterday.

Dislikes every second of the school day.

Realizes that at least being stuck in school on Friday is better than being stuck at home alone unable to find anything to do with himself but worry about Jason.

Tim had forced himself not to search his information feeds for hints of how Jason was doing – not that he expected to be able to find anything, Batman was too careful to let anything slip through to the internet. Since Jason hadn’t been recognized by anyone as one of the Waynes, there was no reason for mainstream media to have picked up the story.

And since the only name the baddies had called him by was ‘Robin’ Batman would be very thorough in keeping a lid on any hint of a story how Robin had been drugged beat bloody under Batman’s watch.

An irrational flare of fury rises up in Tim as he dwells on that thought while the school day comes to a close. He nurses the anger as he walks to the library.

He’s never been angry at Batman before.

Tim has understood that Batman’s choices were not always the best options, particularly the decisions he made regarding the children in his care. That Batman’s choices were made with a certain… lack of regard or understanding of how the children would see things, and also made with a focus on the Crusade… decisions primarily made as Batman rather than as Bruce could hardly be expected to pan out well for the two kids who could hardly tell that the separation between man and mask was a solid, almost physical wall between aspects of his psyche.

Usually, Tim could step back and see Batman’s reasoning. He could understand the practicaljustifications, however unfatherly, and he could forgive Bruce for falling back on cold logic when parental warmth seemed only to complicate matters.

But in this case, Tim is… resistant to the idea of excusing things.

Batman had allowed Jason to be drugged… had given asent for him to participate in an illegal underground fight, while high as a kite on an unknown substance that has killed several dozen people in the last few weeks.

Tim blames Batman for that, is angry at Bruce for it.

Even if it was mostly Tim’s own fault, and even if it was the best course for getting rid of the Tolovis and their poison for good – which Tim is still doubtful of, seeing as he has little faith in the valid promise of a gangster drug lord’s words, Lasso of Truth notwithstanding.

Batman had still allowed it.
The decision meant that there hadn’t been an all out brawl that would’ve likely killed several of the capes and bystanders alike, and for avoiding that, Tim has to be somewhat grateful, but still.

He is capable of being glad and grateful that his stupidity had only gotten one Bat hurt while simultaneously being angry at Batman for allowing that much, he was emotionally mature enough to manage that much.

Forgiveness is harder.

It would probably be easier if he knew for certain that Jason is safe and recovering well.

Batman is one of Tim’s heroes, and eventually, Tim will probably forgive him, but for now, the anger feels good – better than the emptiness and worry.

Especially, as he makes it to the table he spent his afternoon at yesterday and slumps into the chair while realizing that he finished all of his homework yesterday.

He has nothing to do.

Nothing to distract him from the ache of loneliness and worry.

Tim pulls out a notebook and absently begins to doodle – just to make it seem like he had a reason to actually be here in case any librarians wandered up to check on things.

He winds up drawing the Robin uniform, obviously, and because his stupid little brain is fixated on keeping Jason safer because it was his fault Jason got hurt this time, he winds up drawing it was a few alterations – sketching out potential changes that could help Jason avoid his most frequent low key injuries like scrapes and twisted ankles.

Like, somehow, he can be excused for nearly getting Jason killed if he manages to find a way to keep Jason’s knees from getting banged up in a tumble.

It’s ridiculous.

It’s not like Tim will ever even be able to give these designs to Jason.

He’s backing off. He promised himself that he would.

And yet, it is something to do…

Tim latches on to that part of it and finds himself unable to force his brain to think of anything else he could do – something that could be excused as less straightforwardly ridiculous and possibly only mildly masochistic… instead of… this...

But the sketches are still something to do instead of simply wallowing.
Tim’s not a great artist, but he’s not terrible.

The sketches aren’t Louvre worthy, but they are better than average.

A Drake could not be average at anything.

His mother insisted on art classes just as vehemently as his father insisted on music lessons. As a result he is now capable of not-quite humiliating himself at painting, drawing, sculpting, violin, piano, and harp. He has only ever voluntarily stuck with one activity from any of the lessons his parents had arranged for – photography.

Which he would likely have to give up for good now…

Though… maybe he could force himself to take pictures of other things…

His habit had started because of the Bats, but he did come to genuinely like photography for it’s own sake. He could probably keep that habit… even if it might be better to quit it cold.

That’s a question for another day, however.

On this one, Tim simply stays at the library until nine, like he did yesterday, and then bikes home at a leisurely pace. It’s late enough for the Bats to be readying, but unlikely that they’ll be out and about yet – and with Jason sidelined… they’ll likely be delaying their patrol slightly to ensure that he’s secure and resting, and content with that decision.

Again, when Tim gets home, he fixes a quick dinner – pleased again at the fact that he can eat the same thing over and over without growing unbearably tired of it like some people complained about. Food is food to Tim, and as long as it keeps him alive and stays in his stomach without a fight, it’s good food and that’s good enough for Tim.

Another obnoxiously long shower.

Another mostly restless night.

Saturday hits hard.

Tim wakes up late, only getting downstairs at eight.

After waffling a while as he drinks his first cup of coffee, Tim gets dressed and bikes down the East Side to Gotham’s museum district.

He doesn’t know where he’s going exactly, but he knows he’s not going to the library.
Spending all day in the library, again, would drive him mad, especially if all he winds up working on turns out to be more sketches of an updated Robin uniform.

Tim knows the museum district edges dangerously close to Old Gotham – to where the Gordons live and to where Batgirl / Barbara Gordon spends most of her daylight hours – but Tim keeps carefully to the outskirts.

He needs the pleasant, informational distractions of a museum.

Without a clear destination in mind, Tim ends up in the Natural History Museum.

After trailing around at random, attention drifting absently off the exhibits without really catching on any of the information, Tim finds himself seated in a cool, dim corner of the Hall of Minerals. He’s not in the main area of the rock room, not anywhere near the most famous stones, or any of the precious or even semi-precious gems. He’s way off the main galleries, well away from the weekend traffic, near the azurite and smoky quartz.

There’s a corner that has bright colors, where reds and greens and yellows are all right next to each other, but Tim actively avoided that area – he’s failed to avoid the slide of blue-greens he thought was safe until an informational sign helped him remember that the cheerfully mottled color is colloquially referred to as ‘robin’s egg blue’.

Tim spends a while sitting there, just sort of frowning at the little green sign and its neatly serif-ed white lettering – somehow both warm and professional – running the words over in his head with a few quips about the unfairness of how he can consciously avoid the worst reminders of why he has nothing to do, while falling into a deeper, subconscious trap.

It’s ridiculous.

Ridiculous in general and ridiculous of him.

He’s basically pining after Robin, after Jason.

There’s some reason behind it, obviously. After all, it wasn’t just Robin that stepped in to save Tim from GHOST and the Tolovis – it was Jason.

Jason had risked his secret identity, he risked his life and sanity… to save Tim from his own stupid, thoughtless, idiotic mistake. He’d called Tim his friend, even when he was utterly lost in the thrall of the drug – had willingly taken the drug to start with and then engaged in that horrifically brutal bought of illegal fisticuffs specifically to keep a promise he made largely on Tim’s behalf. It was an agreement that had likely saved Gotham as well, but getting Tim out of the crosshairs of Rwen Tolovi had been the immediate catalyst.
Robin had been Tim’s hero for *years* at this point…

For almost half of Tim’s entire life – *more* than half of his life in terms of the years he could actually remember – Robin had been at the center of his focus.

And now that Jason had saved him – had stepped in to sacrifice himself *twice* now – and done so with such brave selflessness, it would be impossible for Tim to avoid developing some hint of hero-worship for Jason as a person… to avoid developing at least a little… crush on him.

Tim’s not quite in the throes of puberty yet, but the hormones are still there, developing.

It’s not *entirely* his fault he’s being a bit ridiculous.

Some of it’s the chaos of biology.

And with *that* awareness coming to the forefront, Tim is certain that he can tamp this idiocy down and back off like he means to – so he can keep the Bats focused on saving Gotham and protecting each other. He’s a distraction to them, a dangerous one, and with this stupid twist of physiological pining in him making him stupid and desperate, he won’t be anything but a hazardous menace to their over all well-being.

It may be a few sad, uncomfortable years, but the hormones will settle.

The crush will pass.

The world will go on as if nothing had happened anyway, so this little corner of it should be able to move on quickly enough.

It’s fine.

Tim’s fine.

He’s almost entirely resolved to that now, settled with acceptance of the inevitable conclusion he’s reached about how his strange and ridiculous feelings will fade and that they aren’t any kind of reason to reconsider his plan of backing off.

Tim takes a deep, soothing breath to settle the last of his worries.

He’ll let it go for today.

Maybe tomorrow he’ll spend some time brainstorming ways to support the Crusade from afar – more like Commissioner Gordon does… or something similar, because Tim’s not really police officer material… but still….

There’s got to be *something* he can do to support his heroes without getting so directly involved that he becomes a worse distraction…
But that’s a hard question.

One that needs to wait to be pondered until tomorrow.

He sets the question aside and stays seated for a while longer, staring at the blue-green rocks with not peace exactly… but almost an adequate kind of satisfaction.

Before he manages to raise the resolve to leave – to head back home and figure out something else to do with his new found oodles of free time – someone sits down on the far end of the bench from him and sighs.

Sighs in that way people do when they’re specifically requesting attention.

Tim usually wouldn’t care, usually couldn’t be bothered, but some niggle buried way deep in his subconsciousness bothers him – a niggle which he retrospectively comes to see as recognition – and it bothers him enough to make him look.

At Barbara Gordon.

Tim blinks, stunned.

And then he freezes up with terror.

Something must have happened to Jason.

Words fail him utterly as his lungs clench and his throat swells.

He can’t ask what happened – probably because his body already knows that his psyche won’t be able to handle the answer.

Barbara doesn’t make him wait long.

Thankfully, cuts right to the heart of the matter.

“Jason is going to be fine,” she promises.

Tim doesn’t trust that he could possibly have heard her right.
She can tell what he’s thinking without even looking in his direction.

Keeping her gaze on the rocks beyond the glass in front of them, Barbara elaborates, “It was scary for a while there. By the time we got him home, he was in a coma. We used the samples collected from the Tolovi labs to fabricate a kind of cure to purge the drug from Jason’s system. We can’t tell if it’s entirely gone or just too thoroughly enmeshed for us to detect, but it seems like it’s worked. He woke up from the coma this morning. He’ll be on strict bed rest for the next two weeks, but full recovery. He’s going to be alright, Tim. He is.”

Part of the tight knot behind Tim’s lungs loosens.

It’s enough to let him look away from Barbara.

He stares at something just beyond his knees instead.

Sits silently for a while trying to digest that information – to accept that he hadn’t really believed that Jason would be okay until just now.

Tim expected Barbara, having now delivered her message about Jason’s recovery, to get up and slip back into her regular life, but she doesn’t seem inclined to move. She’s sitting quietly on the far end of the bench from him – giving him enough room to breathe easy, but the benches aren’t so long that he can’t still feel her sitting there beside him.

She doesn’t speak again until he peeks up quizzically.

“You’ve been trying to avoid us,” she comments.

Tim frowns.

No, he hasn’t. He’s had school. And homework.

And outside of that, he hasn’t been avoiding them exactly, he’s just been staying out of their way – preventing himself from butting in where he can’t possibly be welcome.

Barbara sighs again, lets her gaze slide slightly to the side – still not looking at him, but letting herself look at his reflection in the glass.

“I was hoping that you would come talk to me on your own,” she admits, adding, “And when I tracked you heading towards Old Gotham today, I was optimistic. Relieved.”
Tim’s eyes find that spot beyond his knees again.

“But you didn’t,” Barbara states, obviously sour – not in any way accusing, but certainly in a tone laced with a more than mild disappointment. Chastisement.

Tim doesn’t quite manage to stop his flinch.

With a huff Tim doesn’t understand, Barbara admits, “Jason probably understands it better than I do… this sort of ‘go off alone to process things’ response, but I do get it. Kinda. I mean, a lot happened over the last week. It’s been overwhelming for all of us.”

Tim ducks a tiny nod of agreement.

Overwhelming is a good word for it.

“You can talk to us, Tim,” she tells him. “I mean it. You can talk to us, any of us – at any time, and about any thing. I know you know how to get in touch.”

He does know.

And he understands what she’s saying, kind of.

But he also understands that she’s wrong.

Barbara wants him to come to the Bats, but she can’t see how his involvement with them keeps putting them in danger – either that, or far more likely she, like any good Bat, is just ignoring the danger for the sake of keeping Gotham safe.

Even if the only part of Gotham this protects is one stupid little kid.

“I won’t force it on you,” Barbara promises, with a caveat of, “But you have to know that you can come to us…”

She hesitates, and Tim can feel her looking at him like she hopes he might speak up about something specific here and now.

Tim draws a blank and waits until she goes on.

“You’ve been kidnapped twice now because you’re getting close to us,” she says and Tim flinches violently at the reminder even though it’s not an accusation – to him, it feels like one, because he knows it should be. “But it’s not your fault, you know.”
Tim vehemently disagrees, but keeps silent.

“Dick’s been kidnapped so many times... while he was Robin the Rogues sometimes referred to him as the Boy Hostage instead of the Boy Wonder,” she mentioned, the curl of a slight smile making it into her reflective tone. “He did it to himself. You just got unlucky.”

No.

Tim had gotten stupid. Gotten sloppy.

Getting kidnapped twice already when he should have been smart enough to keep himself from even becoming a target.

There wasn’t any luck involved with it.

Barbara doesn’t press it further.

She looks away from him, adopting a very similar posture to Tim as she looks beyond her knees with a tangible uncertainty radiating from her as she collects her thoughts.

“The com that Jason used to talk to you, used to find you, has GPS,” Barbara admits slowly, her voice low and careful.

Tim peeks up, confused as to where this might be going, and sees that Barbara is pulled tight around herself – anxious, and maybe slightly sad.

“The com was still in your ear when you hacked the Batmobile, and when you went to get Selina... and when Stray crashed the fight night party at the Raven...”

Tim’s blood runs ice cold and he blanks out his expression as his posture stiffens.

He shouldn’t do that, he knows, but he doesn’t have a mask for this – for being blindsided without an established story to push into place ready to smoothe things out.

He doesn’t have a contingency for this...

Because this... This...

This has never happened to him before.

He’s never been ousted before.
And he’s never panicked before… panicked in a way that made him cling to Jason’s voice instead of even remembering that there was a means of doing the smart thing – that he could protect his secret, and Jason’s as well, by ditching the com altogether long before he had even made it to Selina’s place…

Tim kind of hates himself in that moment for overlooking it.

He never would have recognized that mistake in the glare of so many others he’d made this week without Barbara pointing it out to him here.

“I deleted it,” Barbara says quietly, voice booming in the hush – sounding loud even over the top of the pound of Tim’s heartbeat. “The GPS data, and all the back ups – I deleted it. For anyone who might think to look, it seems like you went straight to collect your bike before going home immediately after you went to ask Selina for help. No one else has connected any dots, and they likely won’t ever manage it… Not without help. I won’t force you to tell the others, but I think it might be good if you did. You really should consider it.”

Out of the question.

Tim can’t move, can’t breathe – is pretty sure his heart’s stopped beating.

He can’t tell if he’s angry or scared, or just flat out in pain.

The idea of having to tell the other Bats how reckless and overly involved he’s been… it’s almost enough to make him want to just leave the city for a while – to hide away somewhere far enough removed that Gotham’s Bats still seem like nothing more than scary stories.

But before he leaves, he has to know if there’s any possibility that he might be able to eventually come back.

“D-does J-Jas –” Tim’s own strangled voice coming from his started him to silence. It’s at least a bit more intelligible when he starts again, “Does Jason… remember anything?”

“No,” Barbara tells him. “Jason says he can’t remember anything, and even Bruce is actually convinced he isn’t lying – which, knowing Bruce and Jason, is a rare enough circumstance to mean he’s probably being honest about it all.”

That makes Tim relax somewhat.
It was one thing to be ridiculous and pine after a hero he’d sent into danger… it was quite another to have attempted his rescue, kissed him inappropriately, failed to save him, and then have the hero in question remember it all enough to realize what had happened.

Even if Jason didn’t remember first hand, someone would tell him what Stray did.

So Tim could never ever tell anyone that he was Stray – or it would eventually get back to Jason. It was inevitable that information like that would find the worst possible person to know of it at some eventuality…

But only the three Rogues Tim was with at the time and Batgirl herself know, and it’s unbearably unlikely that they’ll ever tell… so that part of the puzzle is the only safe piece in it.

Tim would keep it that way and they could all move on eventually.

Tim had pushed the kiss that Stray had forced on Jason out of his mind this long – so well that he’d nearly actually forgotten about the awfulness of it, of what he’d done while Jason wasn’t in his right mind to protest – he could keep pushing it aside with the rest of his stupid little crush until it went away.

Same basic plan as before.

Just with a bit more space between him and Gotham for a while.

Tim does have a spring break coming up at school.

He could fabricate an invitation to join his parents on their dig or something, get out of the country for a while. Just a little while. Come back after the worst has died down and he can push all his ridiculous feelings aside so he can help in a legitimate, non-distracting way.

It’ll be fine.

Or not.

Because frack.

Tim had kissed Jason Todd.

And had somehow managed not to think about it since then…
 Probably because he was too wrapped up in worry that Jason wouldn’t be alright.

But still. Tim kissed him.
Without invitation.
Without consent.
Without even knowing what the fack he was doing at the time…

Tim probably needs to spend a month on an uninhabited desert island to make himself actually process through that one.
He certainly isn’t going to do it here and now, not with Barbara sitting right beside him.
Barbara, whom he’d forgotten is sitting right beside him…
The thought startles him – enough to make him look in her direction.

She’s looking at his reflection in the display glass again.

This funny little expression on her face that Tim can’t navigate… It’s sympathetic, but also this strange mix of amused and sad that Tim wants to call nostalgia, but isn’t really confident enough in the assessment to do so.

He freezes up, deeply concerned about the consequences of whatever it is she’s thinking.

A small smile breaks at the corners of her mouth.

“You’re part of the team, baby bird,” she tells him, “Whether you believe it or not, you’re part of the team and we want you to be able to come to us with anything.”

Tim gives a stilted nod – knowing that it’s the expected response and therefore being unable to stop himself from giving it even though he also knows that Barbara won’t believe it.

“The big bad Bat’s gonna want to talk to you soon about all of this, soon,” Barbara warns with a resigned exhale as she looks away from him. “He’s a bit distracted with keeping Jason home. Technically, I’m officially interrogating you for him, now.”

Tim stiffens, going so rigid he nearly falls off the bench.
If Barbara’s recording them, or even just patching audio through to the Cave…

But she wouldn’t do that… would she?

She doesn’t directly address his fears, but soothes them by saying, “I’m gonna conclude that you met Selina because you’re a fan of us and took a few ill-advised trips into Gotham after dark to find us, that she gave you a talking to for it and a way to contact her in case you needed help. When Jason was taken hostage, you went to ask her to back the Bats up. Then you went home and started trying to avoid us…So here we are.”

Tim gives another stilted, half nod.

After a long pause – long enough that Tim can feel it starting to prickle into awkward territory – Barbara turns to face him more completely.

“You don’t have to come running to join the Family with your bags packed and ready to go,” Barbara says, seemingly out of the blue. “But don’t just go disappearing on us like we don’t matter to you. We get worried about you, Tim, because you matter to us. We don’t want to force anything on you, but we want to make sure you’re okay.”

“‘m fine,” Tim promises, his voice startled out of him immediately. “It’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t have to be fine, baby bird, it’s okay,” Barbara tells him softly.

Tim shakes his head and flashes a weak smile. “‘m fine.”

Barbara doesn’t sigh.

She doesn’t let what she’s thinking show up on her face.

And she doesn’t try to hug him or anything ridiculous like that.

She simply waits until the moment passes.

“I’ll let you go back to your afternoon, I guess,” Barbara tells him eventually.

As she hauls herself up to her feet, she adds, “Don’t disappear on us, Tim, okay? You don’t have to let us help you or anything, but please don’t disappear.”
Tim doesn’t know how to respond to that.

He doesn’t figure out an answer even long after Barbara leaves him alone in the rock room – even after he sits there for over an hour after she’s gone.

When Tim heads home, he’s still resolved to get out of the country for a while – but as per Barbara’s clear request, he decides not to leave immediately.

He’ll give it a week – he can survive a week of this boredom and despondency, while Jason’s stuck on bed rest… can use that time to pretend, more convincingly, that he’s perfectly unruffled – and after that, he’ll spend a week in Europe or something.

A little time, a little distance…

Everything will settle down and Tim will be able to back off smoothly.

Once far enough from the heart of the matter, he could readdress the idea of helping the Crusade from afar. Only after he’s less emotionally compromised by it all, of course.

He’s a Drake, after all, and if it has to be done, he can make it work.

Chapter End Notes

I will hopefully getting back to y'all in comments shortly, and the next chapt should go up on time next week!

NEXT TIME: Dick attempts to deal with things. Attempt being the key word.
Rule #24 - Stay

Chapter Summary

Dick attempts to deal... he needs a bit of help though, and discovers that he's got people more than willing with him.

Chapter Notes

A little jump backwards (to the start of the fight) and a LOT of angst, but look, no cliffhanger! And an almost happy, fluffy ending!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Rule #24 – Stay

Dick loses track of what’s happening as soon as he gets eyes on the fight.

He feels sick, woozy... like he’s the one being drugged against his will.

Like this is all some phantasmic fearscape created by his own mind under the terrible influence of a new formula of Scarecrow’s fear gas.

Dick is pretty sure he’d prefer being gassed.

For one thing, it would mean that none of this would really be happening – and even if he wouldn’t have been able to tell that for certain while the gas was still affecting him, he would at least be able to tell that what he was seeing wasn’t the whole story. Since he’d been more or less inoculated against most of Scarecrow’s formulas, and since he’d been trained to control the leaps of logic in his mind, he could usually tell when chemical fear was in play.

There was always this sense of induced panic... this feeling that even if all he saw were kittens and rainbows the tightness in his chest would not abate – that he couldn’t get enough oxygen into his lungs under any circumstances, even if he was stuffed into air tank with five times the normal concentration.
Knowing that much was never enough to make the panic go away, but it was usually enough to make him hope that the situation he could see wasn’t real – that eventually, he would be able to break free of the effects and dispel the illusions.

Without the promise that the fear gas would let his mind go at some point, Dick has to face the ongoing situation with the terrible certainty that it’s all entirely real.

He has to watch his little brother – his fourteen year old little brother – be paraded out like a dog at a prize fight, doped up, and just pointed at an opponent like there was no capacity for higher thinking left in him.

Dick’s there when Jason and Rwen first arrive.

He’s there to watch as Rwen makes a long winded introduction – laying out the terms of the fight, the combatants, the stakes, the definitions of ‘victory’ and ‘incapacitated’.

Dick doesn’t really listen to the speech. He’s too distracted with watching as Rwen pulls out a pneumatic injector… exchanges the green cartridge already inside it for something black and slimy… uses the injector to force the entire dose of whatever into Jason’s blood stream.

The sudden influx of chemicals makes Jason sway on his feet. He shudders grotesquely in a violent seizure and collapses straight to the concrete floor. It takes several seconds for the effects to settle in enough for him to struggle his way back up to his feet – looking crazed and wild in a way that absolutely shatters Dick’s heart.

Dick there, watching transfixed from the shadows where he’s frozen, when the first blows are exchanged. They’re tentative, testing… and yet, in a normal fight, they’re the kind of vicious blows that would ensure neither combatant could continue – would mean neither would escape hospitalization or could ever breathe on their own again.

Shattered ribs, collapsed lungs, crushed tracheas…

There’s something eerie and unearthly about how Jason and Shankar just laugh through the kind of injuries that would normally end a person.

Dick’s whole body has locked up in horror.

He can’t move, can’t intercede – can’t even wrap his brain around what’s happening.

It’s not until something comes along to shatter the scene that Dick regains any semblance of control over his own muscles.

It’s not until this new cat on the block, this ‘Stray’ character that Selina’s mentioned in passing over the last few months, shows up with enough snark and sass to shock everyone into submission. The Cat’s protégé is ballsy, daring enough to glare down Rwen Tolovi.

And he’s got a couple Rogues to back him up: Harley, Ivy, and his mentor.
It’s not until one of Dick’s own Teen Titan’s shows up that Dick actually feels like he could potentially step into the fray. With Starfire at his side, more like a capable vigilante rather than a kid in a costume – and he knows that Kid Flash won’t be far behind her.

They give him the strength to step up.

And then Batgirl and Wonder Woman and Super Man step in as well, giving Dick an actual shiver of confidence.

That confidence is rocked slightly as Rwen blathers on about having an agreement with Jason – as Rwen submits to Diana’s lasso to prove his assertion.

The ground beneath his feet is pulverized as *Batman* simply accepts the conclusion.

He finds his footing soon after – as he realizes that Batman accepts that Rwen Tolovi has made an agreement, but wants to exchange himself as the victim.

The suggestion is refused outright and Dick loses track of things again.

Reality distorts violently, impossibly, and the only reason Dick stays upright is that his Teen Titan comrades are by his sides – literally propping him up.

There’s a … *brutality* to the fight that scares him. He’s not above admitting that.

Dick knows his little wing is a bit far gone on the aggressive side, but he’s never imagined that Jason could ever be capable of this kind of violence, this kind of *excess* in vicious force.

Logically, Dick knows it has to be the drug, but somehow that doesn’t make seeing it in Jason feel any better for Dick. If anything, it kind of makes it worse – once this is over, Jason’s going to have to *deal* with it… with guilt, regret, possibly even fear of his own self.

Dick refuses to consider a reality being possible in which Jason doesn’t make it to the point of having to recover and work through what happened here…

Even as the second fight ends and Jason collapses in a slow, staged fall as he resists gravity, though he can’t help but succumb to the exhaustion and injuries haunting him.

Dick wants to rush to Jason’s side, but Stray beats him to it – along with a girl in black, Dick hadn’t noticed before. Batgirl then moves to help them get Jason outside and Dick regains feeling in his limbs enough to find another way to help things get moving.

Trusting Batgirl enough to get Jason safely home, Dick sets to work coordinating with Batman and the other Leaguers to work on containing things here and overseeing the rapid clean-up and exodus of the Tolovis and their associates.

They are leaving Gotham *tonight*.

And if he ever catches a single whiff of them again, he won’t hesitate to unleash the full
power of the Teen Titans and every one of their allies on these horrible, vile people. He doesn’t even care if they’re government related or anything.

Right now, Dick is willing to tear down the world to make sure these people never hurt his Family ever again.

He’s there at Batman’s side to flank Rwen Tolovi, with Super Man and Wonder Woman blocking off the gang lord’s other side. Keeping Rwen Tolovi isolated – threateningly isolated – is a priority at the moment, a means of ensuring that the underlings behave.

The bloody floor of the fight ring is ignored – mop up left to whatever unfortunate land lord has claim to the building when their authority isn’t superceded by metahuman gangsters.

The lab area is systematically packed up – all the equipment disassembled and stashed in cushioned black boxes that are both individually labeled and yet also nondescript. They all get rolled away into a back hallway that Dick knows leads to a loading bay.

What happens to them after that though…

With the subtle signals developed between close team mates, Dick asks Wally to tag every person present and every case being moved by them with a microtracker. The tiny computer chips in the microtrackers are just twice the size of the average dust particale, and they aren’t the most precise GPS devices, or the most long-lived in terms of battery, but the resolution gets down to about 20 yards and can remain active for just under 72 hours…

Which means they are more than useful enough to give the Bats a reasonably clear picture of whether or not these assholes actually leave Gotham by morning.

Super Man and Wonder Woman take over questioning the Tolovi Trio about how they can be certain that they will honor the agreement – that the Blackbirds and GHOST will leave, and also whoever these Syndicate people suddenly being mentioned are… that all of them will leave and never come back…

It’s an impossible deal, the way Dick sees it.

There’s no way one little fight, however brutal, however official, could make so many different organizations pull out of the city forever.

There couldn’t possibly be a way to track that, to ensure it.

Rwen Tolovi even owns up to that much.

There’s no objective way to prove the veracity of the agreement, not even Diana’s lasso can do more than tell the heroes that Tolovi truly intends to see the agreement followed.

Dick loses track of what the grown ups are discussing – talking themselves in circles rather
than actually accomplishing anything – and his attention drifts outside to his little brother and his sister. He can’t help anymore in here.

Even with Kori and Wally doing their best to keep him grounded, Dick is starting to lose touch with what’s happening.

He needs to see his brother.

A quick word to his friends and he’s heading out the door Batgirl disappeared through.

In the alley, he finds Bruce with an unconscious Jason cradled in his arms as Barbara digs through the Batmobile to make the back seat able to accommodate a person in need of medical care and someone to attend to them.

Dick volunteers for the role immediately.

Once the seat is oriented, Bruce slides Jason into place and Dick crawls in secure him and sit on the floor beside him. Babs is already slipping into the front passenger seat. Bruce says something – to quiet for Dick to hear, but he can guess that it’s something to notify Clark about the Bats returning to the Cave for Robin’s medical care.

The drive home is both impossibly long and impossibly quick.

They pull into the Cave and Bruce is scooping Jason into his arms before Dick even recognizes that they’ve already parked.

He and Barbara trail after their mentor.

Barbara has something in her hands, but she shuffles the package gingerly to the crook of one elbow and gives Dick’s forearm a supportive squeeze before she veers off towards the Batcomputer. Dick’s mind is too gummed up to even question what she’s doing.

He simply floats unbidden towards the medical bay Alfred already has prepared.

By the time Dick arrives, Jason’s hooked up to an IV drip full of fluids – mostly just hydration, because they can’t be sure what chemicals will interact with the mysterious drug.

It’s Alfred telling him this.

Alfred’s set up a chair at Jason’s bedside, has already guided Dick into it.

He helps Dick reach out for Jason’s hand, helps him hold it when Dick’s hands shake to much to get their fingers intertwined.

Jason has been hurt before, Dick knows, but never like this.

And to be perfectly honest, Dick hadn’t really cared before… he hadn’t been a real brother before. He’s finally connected with Jason, finally taken on the protector and caretaker role that he
should have been overjoyed to step into the moment he became an older sibling.

This is the first time that Jason’s gotten anything more than a mild scrape since Dick’s been behaving like a decent big brother. And it’s a bad enough injury that Dick might …

He won’t lose Jason.

He won’t.

Alfred won’t let that happen.

*Bruce* won’t let that happen.

The thought is enough to make Dick look up from Jason’s slack expression.

Bruce isn’t in the med bay.

He’s with Barbara at the Batcomputer.

They’re probably trying to synthesize an antidote.

Dick should help.

But every bone in his body feels like lead at the thought of getting up, like his muscles have turned to quicksand.

He can’t bring himself to peal his fingers away from Jason’s – can’t even loosen his hold for fear of losing the reassurance that is the feeling of Jason’s pulse beneath his fingertips.

All Dick can do is stay out of the way and will his little brother to *fight*.

Jason would snort at that.

If there’s anything Jason doesn’t need encouragement to do, it’s fight.

Alfred’s hand is on his shoulder, holding him together as a wave of emotion pummels through him – both glee at what Jason’s face would look like if he knew what Dick was thinking and absolute horror at the fact that almost wants to *smile* while his Little Wing is hurt…

Concentrating hard to manage it, Dick breathes in and out and gives Jason’s hand a gentle squeeze on each pull of fresh air into his lungs.
They can beat this, Dick knows they can – knows Jason’s way too bull headed to let something so obvious be what takes him down.

The voices at the Batcomputer are hushed, but at some point the Leaguers and the Titans arrived, so the quiet murmurs are loud enough for the occasional word to make it to the med bay. Kid Flash has brought in his mentor and Barry Allen is … not as bubbly optimistic as Dick would’ve expected the speedster to be.

Barry volunteers to stay, while Clark and Diana give well wishes and depart.

Wally and Kori join Dick in the med bay – perfectly willing to camp out there with him if he needs them to, Batglare™ or not. Dick appreciates the offer, basks in the warmth that blooms within his chest at how they mean it, but he sends them back to California anyway.

Wally hesitates, but gets shooed off by Kori soon enough.

She stays.

Dick isn’t sure how long she stays there with a warm hand on his shoulder, standing absolutely still to the side that keeps her entirely out of Alfred’s way as the butler continues to fuss over the medical aspects of their flailing attempt at seeing to Jason’s relative comfort.

But it’s probably a while.

A long while.

Eventually, Barbara appears in the medical bay – freshly showered and dressed in her comfiest Gotham Tech sweats.

Dick can barely spare her a glance as she takes up a seat beside him, delicate fingers folding lightly over his forearm.

“We’re synsethisizing an emollient,” Barbara tells him in a whisper as she gives his arm a squeeze. “It’s not an antidote, but it will help. It’s going to take another hour to finish processing and after that Barry and Bruce want to run a few final tests on how the emollient interacts with Jason’s blood before they give him a full dose…”

Numbly, Dick gives a nod.

“You should go get changed, Dick,” Brabara prompts softly, “Take a shower. I can stay with Jason for a while.”

“I can’t leave him,” Dick protests weakly.

“You won’t be leaving him. I’ll be right here with him in your place, and you’ll only be away for fifteen minutes,” Barbara soothes. “I think he’d rather wake up to see his brother beside him than to find Nightwing looming over him.”
Dick struggles to find the words for even a mildly viable objection.

Babs decides the matter before he gets a chance to voice anything by looking to Kori. The girls communicate something between themselves in a few seconds of silent glances and then Babs is giving Dick one last squeeze while flashing Kori a grateful smile.

In the same instant, Dick finds himself being physically hoisted out of his seat by the Tamaranian princess. He’s carried across the Cave and only set back on his feet once they reach the showers. His legs can barely support him and it’s only with Kori’s help that Dick can peel himself out of his costume.

She stays with him, gets the hot water going, helps scrub him clean.

Dries them both off afterwards using her Tamaranian powers.

Helps Dick into a snug t-shirt and the soft joggers he prefers to sweats – likes them because he feels like he can move without getting tangled in the excess of fabric.

Kori holds him close for a long moment after that – wrapping him up in a tight hug that feels like it might crush him, but manages to ground and center him instead. He hugs back with a fierce appreciation and no worries that he might hurt her.

“The little wing will be okay,” she tells him. “He is a very strong soul, bright and shiny.”

“He certainly is,” Dick agrees, reluctantly loosening his hug.

“I return to California, now, and will tell the others not to expect you soon,” Kori declares, running her long fingers through his hair. “Check in with us on every morning, or Wally and I will return.”

Dick nods, grateful, and pulls Kori close for a chaste kiss and one last tight hug. Then Kori leads him back out into the Cave by his hand and deposits him back beside Barbara.

She takes both of Barbara’s hands and intertwines their fingers, moving slowly and gently to wist their hands upside down in a Tamaranian gesture of sisterhood and solidarity.

Barbara flashes a smile and gives the alien princess’s hands a squeeze in return.

Dick looks away as soon as Kori leaves the medical bay, turning his full attention back to the little brother he has lying comatose before him.

He’s not handling this well, Dick knows.

He should be doing something, should be helping… if he can’t contribute to making the antidote, he could at least be tracking the tags he had Wally plant on everyone and everything in the Raven’s basement… checking up on reports of the counterfeiting and that yacht, the Havran… trying to piece together the last few threads of the casefile…

But he can’t.

The mere idea of going out of arm’s reach of Jason’s hand twists Dick’s stomach up in cruel knots and makes all his muscles turn to jelly.

He can’t move.

He can’t do anything.
All he can do is sit and wait and hope.

Hold his baby brother’s hand.

This is the first time since his parents… the first time since then that anyone he’s considered Family has truly been in mortal peril. Even Bruce’s close calls weren’t quite as… prolonged as this, weren’t quite as murky when it came to understanding the survivability.

Dick can’t imagine anything being worse than watching his parents fall, but this… this is a different kind of hurt. It’s not the same dulled confusion, the numbing shock… It’s not just the fear of losing Jason for his own sake that Dick’s feeling, but the fear of losing out on all that Jason could still contribute to making the world a slightly better place for everyone living in it.

As much as Dick wants to keep Jason by his side for the simple reason that he loves his brother, there is so much more at stake than that.

Jason’s only fourteen.

He has so much potential… so much life he still needs to live.

It’s not fair.

Dick has faith in Bruce and Barry and Barbara that they’ll be able to come up with something that will save Jason’s life, he does.

Won’t let himself waver even slightly on the front of that belief.

But it’s still not fair.

It’s not fair that there’s even a circumstance that could ever bring Jason’s survival into question… he’s too young, too sweet, too kind… he volunteered for this… Joined the Crusade because he wanted to help people in general, rather than because he needed to see justice done on a specific villain like Dick had…

The only reason Dick had gotten started in the cape and pixie boots was the drive to personally see to it that Tony Zucco paid for what he did to John and Mary Grayson. He’d stuck around and truly became Robin afterwards, but he’d started it for his own need to get justice for his parents’ deaths.

Jason on the other hand… Jason had been put in the costume to give an outlet to his own natural and utterly independent need to aggressively help.

Before Jason had even come into Bruce’s care, he had picked fights with bullies of all kinds – fearlessly standing up to schoolyard thugs twice his size and to even the worst of corrupt cops and politicians when he had no chance of winning the fights.

Even before Bruce let him have the pixie boots, Jason beat up on muggers, drug dealers, and assholes of all types. He’d stolen from people who could afford it, mostly those who deserved it, and given more than half the proceeds of what he nicked to kids who weren’t quite as slick as he could be…

Jason is a good person.

A little crass, a little rough around the edges, but still good. So good.
Jason doesn’t deserve this.

And as soon as his Little Wing wakes up, Dick is going to make sure he does better as a brother to let Jason know that he’s a great kid – Dick is going to make sure Bruce does better.

Because Jason is going to wake up.

He is.

Eventually.

It’s hard to track the passage of time in the Cave’s infirmary.

There’s no clocks around in easy view.

The light never changes, unless Alfred dims it specifically to make the suggestion that his charges attempt to get some sleep.

The beeps and whirring coming from the medical bay’s monitors and machinery is constant, too. Just a regular rhythm with no genuine sense of interval duration and no real way to track the number of iterations it’s cycled through.

The only real sense of time moving onwards comes from watching Alfred change Jason’s hydration IV – an event that takes place around every six hours.

After Kori left and Babs joined him at Jason’s bedside, Bruce and Barry came in to administer the serum they’d developed. They’d reappeared every hour after that to draw blood and test Jason’s ongoing reaction to the biochemical changes.

The rate had dropped to every two hours by Jason’s second IV drip.

By Jason’s fourth, Barry had returned to Central and it was just Bruce checking in – once every four hours, according to Barbara.

Dick thinks they’re about a third of the way through Jason’s sixth IV when he feels his brother’s hand twitch strongly in his hold.

Instantly on alert, Dick holds his breath – one hand poised above the call button as he waits to see for certain that it wasn’t just his own desperation for Jason to wake up that made him think Jason’s hand had moved.

Seconds pass in agonizing stillness.

The twitch comes again – stronger this time, radiating up Jason’s entire arm and triggering a
slow shudder of stiff muscles declaring an urge to be properly stretched out.

Dick slams on the call button – startling Barbara out of her doze in the chair beside him.

Bruce and Alfred arrive in less than a minute.

It’s still several long minutes after that when Jason groans and gives a tentative, but mostly conscious stretch – gives Dick’s hand an mostly unintentional squeeze that releases the tension behind Dick’s lungs in a single, life-giving whoosh that makes him sway on his feet.

Within the next ten minutes, Jason wakes up fully.

His vitals are checked and rechecked, blood is drawn again, and his cognitive functionality is assessed.

He doesn’t remember much after the first dose of Tolovi’s serum.

Making the deal is something he does recall, but while he knows what the deal entailed, he can’t quite nail down the details of how it was negotiated or when.

He can’t remember anything after the second dose.

The blank spots in his memory are clearly frustrating and Dick steps in to stop Bruce from continuing his interrogation before it can get Jason overly riled. For two seconds, Bruce looks like he’s going to barrel on anyway… but a lingering glance at Jason – who’s glowering at his knees below the hospital blanket like if he just glares hard enough he can develop his own version of Clark’s laser vision – and Bruce softens.

It doesn’t even take Babs and Alfred stepping in to make Bruce back down.

They remain nearby and on alert, however, just in case Bruce decides that Batman needs immediate answers more than Bruce needs his sons not to hate him.

Bruce doesn’t do anything stupid.

He lifts a hand to Jason’s shoulder and gives a nod – a gesture that would’ve been much less awkward if it didn’t look like both Bruce and Jason were desperate to give each other a hug and were simultaneously both too proud and ill at ease to manage it.

Dick does it for them.

Scoops up his brother by a gentle arm around his shoulders, and yanks his adoptive father down by a much less gentle arm thrown around the man’s neck – squeezing them both tight with relief and love and the pure joy of having his little brother be alright.

It takes a minute, but Bruce eventually figures out how to participate.

Jason remains obstinately awkward, but he does lean his head into the hug – subtly pressing his forehead up against both Dick and Bruce’s temples with a heavy, silent sigh.

Dick doesn’t let them go for a long time – a lot longer than either would’ve allowed under any other kind of circumstances. When he does let them go, he focuses primarily on helping Jason fall gently back to his pillows as he releases an exhausted sigh.

Alfred doesn’t chastise him for the exhuberance of affection, but he does comment firmly that Jason needs his rest – as do the butler’s other charges. He shoos Bruce, Dick, and Barbara out of the
med bay, chasing them all the up to the main Manor before instructing them all to get some sleep while he himself returns to tend to Master Jason’s comfort.

Bed sounds like the most amazing thing in the world to Dick.

He stumbles up the stairs to his room and collapses onto his mattress – is out for the count before he even makes contact with the soft blankets.

He doesn’t quite manage to wake up when Bruce comes in a few hours later to lay a blanket over him and softly ruffle his hair, but he does manage to nuzzle into the contact and coo with happy incoherency for a moment.

He stays semi-conscious long enough to hear Bruce chuckle and falls back into oblivion to warm echoes of Bruce’s low voice saying, “Rest up, sport. It’s been a long day.”

It’s late afternoon when Dick wakes again to the wider world.

He heads straight down to the Cave as soon as he’s conscious enough to make a vague attempt to stand. He’s not graceful as he flings himself around on limbs that still haven’t adjusted to the idea of being useful, but he doesn’t particularly care when neither stealth nor style will help him reach his destination quicker – stomping around wildly is fine if it gets him downstairs before his heart bursts from anxious pounding.

When he makes it to the Cave, he spots Jason sleeping inside the low lit glass box of his medical cubical. For the time it takes to get over to him, Dick is half convinced Jason’s fallen back into the coma – though he restrains himself enough to keep from disturbing Jason’s rest as he slips inside… checks the EEG for an assurance of continued brain activity… settles into the still-warm seat at Jason’s bedside as Alfred appears with a perfectly sweetened cup of coffee.

Alfred looks just as perfectly pressed and rested as usual – quite a feat, considering that Dick doesn’t think he could have possibly left the Cave for more than fifteen minutes at a stretch in the last few days.

Dick flashes him a grateful smile as he accepts the coffee, feels Alfred return the sentiment more than he sees it in the small curve of a smile Alfred sends back. With a nod, Alfred steps back out of the med bay, busies himself with some task or other that Dick can’t find the attention to watch. Instead of tracking the butler, Dick’s gaze draws back to Jason.

He watches Jason sleep – watches him sleep easy – and every smooth cycle of rise and fall in Jason’s chest eases a bit of the ache in Dick’s own lungs.

Twilight and trashy romance novels have made watching someone sleep into a universal joke of utter creepiness – made it seem shamefully obsessive and ridiculous.

It’s really not as bad as the psycho love stories make it seem.

It’s comforting, calming, and in certain scenarios it does make rational, reasonable sense… Watching Jason sleep is the only way Dick is able to keep himself convinced that his little brother is alive. And that is too important to let the shaming tendencies of people influenced purely by pop-
At some point, Alfred brings Dick a bagel – perfectly toasted and covered in a precariously goopy mountain of peach marmalade – and another perfect cup of coffee.

Shortly after that, Babs appears – dressed in civies like she’d actually gone outside or something already.

She settles into the seat beside him and steals a long sip of his coffee as she loops one of her arms through his with easy familiarity and iron-clad solidarity.

Leaning comfortably against Dick in silence, Barbara basks in the quiet – just as grateful as Dick is that Jason is alive and recovering.

She lets herself enjoy the moment before she breaks the silence with a low whisper, “He woke up again a few hours after Alfred sent you to bed. Went over the story again with me and Bruce. He really doesn’t remember much of anything about what happened.”

“That’s probably a good thing,” Dick supposes.

He feels Barbara nod against his shoulder.

“But it leaves us in an interesting spot,” she comments after a moment.

Dick frowns, confused.

Barbara waits for a full cycle of Jason’s heart monitor to read out before she elaborates with a seemingly unrelated remark, “I talked to Tim today.”

Guilt and worry barrel through Dick at an alarming rate – so forcefully that he might’ve found himself toppled from the chair if not for Barbara’s grounding weight against him. Dick had totally forgotten about Tim – had just let himself be so distracted by the fact that Jason had been in such immediate medical danger that he forgot Jason wasn’t the only one who’d been through a traumatic ordeal that night.

Tim might not have been subjected to the Tolovi’s drug, or even directly harmed by any of the goons, but it still would’ve been a traumatic event.

And he hadn’t even come back to the Cave to be checked out by Alfred before being sent home… he’d tricked Spoiler, Stephanie Brown, into knocking herself out in trying to hack the Batmobil before he’d successfully hacked the vehicle, directed it to the Diamond District, and then bailed out before allowing it to carry Stephanie to the Cave.

Stephanie had been check out by Alfred, been okayed to be returned home, and then had eventually been deposited back in her bedroom by one of the visiting heroes – Dick’s not sure which one, but it was probably Clark.

Tim, meanwhile, had gone to recruit Catwoman and two vaguely ninja-like unknows she claimed were her apprentices, not to mention Harley and Ivy… After that… Dick didn’t know what happened to Tim… how he’d gotten home – or even if he’d gotten home…
And he hadn’t the foggiest idea of how Tim was coping with what had happened.

Sensing his panic easily, Barbara soothes his worries by saying, “He’s physically fine, and he seems to be doing okay with everything – a little spooked, a bit worked up, but over all he seems like he’s doing okay.”

“But he’s alone,” Dick protests.

“He is,” Barbara admits with a sly lilt to her voice, “But it’s partly by choice. Having us smother him, even with good intentions, will just suffocate him. We can show support, but we can’t force it on him or he’s gonna bolt. And it’s not like when Jason runs. Jason will just disappear into Gotham somewhere, but Tim… I spent five minutes with him and had to fight hard to keep him off the ledge of nabbing plane tickets. If Tim disappears on us, he’s gonna get a lot further away than the Bowery… and he’ll vanish with a lot less warning or hesitation.”

It takes another iteration or two for Dick to fully accept the sentiment, and even then the acceptance is very reluctant – he mostly manages to accept it because his brain has moved on to yet another pressing worry.

“What are we gonna tell Bruce?”

“Selina says that she met Tim a few months ago when he was out looking to take pictures of us. She warned him off but didn’t get too invested, just gave him an address he could go to if something went really wrong – she is fond of collecting strays, after all,” Barbara explains with a clinical evaluation in her tone. “And since the GPS data from Tim’s com shows that he went to that address after hacking the Batmobile, all the evidence supports that story. After letting Selina know that Jason was in trouble, Tim walked across town, collected his bike from the donut shop, and went home. He’s been going to school and the library since then, spent an afternoon at a museum… nothing to indicate that he’s more involved than he seems. And it seems like he’s been spooked enough to back off a bit from investigating on his own.”

Dick nods, understanding her perfectly.

It would be counterproductive to tell Bruce about how close Tim is to everything now.

Bruce would just put his boot down and try to force the issue – which would probably just make Tim dig in his own heels and push back, albeit likely in a super sneaky way that would mean the Bats couldn’t swoop in to save him in the horrible, but not entirely implausible, scenario that Tim winds up in a similar kidnapping situation in the future.

Leaving things alone is probably best.

He and Barbara will have to proactively nudge Tim into being safer – make him step back by helping him understand that if he doesn’t, Bruce will try to make him stop altogether.

It’s going to be tricky to keep him feeling included enough not to be so discouraged that he keeps investigating without telling them, while still making enough of an impression to actually get him to listen, but they can probably manage it.

Honestly, they have to manage it – no matter how tricky doing so might be.
Tim’s safety and sanity depends on it.
Which means so does theirs.

Dick and Barbara sit together dozing at Jason’s bedside until he wakes up again around dusk.
They chat briefly for a while and Jason rallies his strength enough to convince Bruce and Alfred that he’s well enough to head upstairs and sleep in his own bed.

A light dinner is eaten at his bedside.
Bruce is even there to dine with them, and the meal is more pleasant than any they’ve all shared in a long while. Everyone is still either too weak or too relieved to pick a fight.

Barbara stays behind with Alfred while Dick and Bruce go on patrol.
It’s a quiet night.
The whole city seems to be in the same state as the Bats with the exit of the Tolovis and their ilk – too pleased to have their city back to themselves to bother mucking up the niceness of having it be entirely theirs again.
And it seems like it really is theirs.
The trackers Dick had Wally plant that night all register that everything involved with that terrible night – the people, the boxes, even the cars and the boat – have moved all the way across the country. They’re all gathered about a hundred miles south of the current location of Titan’s Tower.

So Dick should probably concern himself with them again in the future, but he knows that unless something significant changes, he won’t be able to shut down their criminal enterprise altogether. With that in mind, Dick puts it all out of his thoughts for a while.

Works with Babs to follow up on one last lead regarding the counterfeiting case that is definitely related, but still seems too detached to matter.

With Bruce’s help, they manage to definitively prove that the counterfeiting wasn’t actually any kind of crime ring in and of itself. It was a surge of false goods and cash being used to attract the immediate attention of a very specific group of people – since one of GHOST’s officially registered concerns, one that they are allowed to investigate on US soil, is organized counterfeiting. The whole thing was just a stunt to draw Tavian Ross and co to Gotham.

It’s a tremendous relief to have that loose thread tied up neatly.

All the answerable questions have their answers.
Any of the ones that remain, like the exact hows and whys of what remains are questions too big for vigilantes to answer. The questions of what the drug is or why the government is developing
it or why such a dangerous program seems to be in the midst of being so dramatically restructured with such utterly neglectful abandon… those are questions for people in higher, darker places … people like spies.

Dick can’t let the idea of leaving this case unfinished drive him mad.

For all intents and current purposes, it’s over.

They’re gone from Gotham, and even Bruce is convinced they won’t be back.

Bruce is less convinced that Tim is still ignorant.

Meeting up with Selina midway through patrol is actually an extremely fortunate turn of events. She submits to Batman’s curt interrogations with just enough patience to get significant answers – to give enough consistent detail to convince Bruce that Tim still doesn’t know or care about any of their secret identities – and just enough annoyance to avoid being suspicious.

When pressed on a new angle, Selina admits that, since that night, she hasn’t actually spoken to her little apprentice kittens – apparently it is plural, there are two: the girl who snagged the antidote and the boy who professed such a dramatic interest in Jason. One she sent off to New York for a while, and the other could be halfway around the world right now – since she was ready to stake out a few sunny spots in a city of her very own.

The one who demonstrated an attraction to Bruce’s little bird, the one who kissed him, might be back eventually, but right now he’s off licking wounds and learning a valuable lesson about getting overly involved because of mere attraction to someone on the other side of the law.

Dick makes the comment that every Cat has to have their caped catnip, and finds himself facing down hellish glares from both grown ups.

He bears them easily, shit-eating grin only growing wider as he picks up on more and more hallmarks of embarrassment in their expressions. It’s kind of adorable.

Dick has always loved playing matchmaker with his mentor and Selina, because they are just so perfect for each other he can’t help but want them together – and if he doesn’t help them see it, they’re never going to let themselves get close enough to genuinely be happy together.

It’s important, what he does – a public service, really.

Selina keeps Bruce just a little bit brighter in a way the Robins can’t manage, a way that’s important to Bruce’s ability to bear the darkness of Batman’s cowl. And Bruce keeps Selina on her best behavior – stealing only from people who can totally afford it, mostly those who stole their art
and jewels to start with. Their connection also keeps a route for information open, one that keeps the good guys just that little bit more ahead of the game.

The night wraps up with Dick in high spirits, and Bruce less lost to the gloom than he easily could have been otherwise.

They both check in briefly on Jason before heading to bed themselves.

The next morning, Dick and Jason have breakfast together. Play a few rounds of Super Smash Bros before Alfred sends Jason back upstairs to either rest or tend to his homework.

Barbara’s already gone back home to her condo in Old Gotham, plans to spend the day catching up on her own pile of neglected homework.

Which leaves Dick free to check on Tim.

Or at least to try to check on him.

The GPS in Tim’s bike says he’s home.

So do the lights and sounds inside Tim’s house.

But Tim doesn’t answer the door when Dick rings the bell.

Dick waits for ten minutes before trying again, debating whether or not to pick the lock on the door and just let himself inside.

He decides that it would probably be inappropriate, considering that he and Barbara had discussed and agreed upon the need to resist smothering Tim with an overabundance of concern and affection. Since Tim has been more or less deprived of such attention for most of his life, subjecting him to it while he’s under stress is… ill-advised.

Which is irksome, because this is one of the few situations in life where hugs actually are the primary solution – and Dick feels like he’s being cheated out of an important dose of cuddles.

But Dick does understand the importance of taking things slow with Tim.

Instead of forcing the issue, Dick fishes a bit of scrap paper and a pen out of his pockets and jots down a note about having come to check up and being available if Tim wants to talk – about anything at all. Adds that he’s available even if Tim doesn’t want to talk – that he’s game for it if Tim just wants to go out for ice cream or something.

Dick stick his note into the doorjamb and then reluctantly leaves Tim’s front stoop.
Vows to stick close by and keep his phone on him at all times – uses Barbara’s resources to get Tim’s number into his phone and program it with the same override he has on all his fellow Capes’ numbers to make sure that even if he silences it, when they call he can pick up.

The pattern repeats, more or less, at least, over the next few days.

Dick stays close to Bruce, making sure he’s taking care of himself and not being too hard on Jason and not going surveillance crazy on Tim… The Bat does sneak off once or twice to spy on Tim, gets at least one mild interrogation in, but over all he accepts that Jason doesn’t remember anything but is recovering well and that Tim is ignorant and spooked.

Things are a bit tense, but Dick feels rather confident that everything is going to be okay.

Or at least as okay as could possibly be hoped for in their line of work.

And for the first time in a long time, Dick is happy.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter marks the first transition to the wrap-up, but don't worry, we still have a ways to go!

NEXT TIME: Jason wakes up, confused and hurting, but not at all alone.
Chapter Summary

Pure fluffy, angsty adorable-ness as Jason wakes up and begins to deal with the Tolovi aftermath.

Chapter Notes

It's SHARK WEEK!

Sharks are awesome and a hugely important part of my existence, so I might be motivated enough to get another Chapter up this week (probably in Trading Faces). ^_~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Five: Rule #25 – Be Open to New Things

It takes Jason a while to wake up.

He can feel it.

There’s an ache in the delay between when he becomes aware of the fact that he’s not quite awake and when he sinks into reality enough to do something about it.

The first thing that comes back to him is a tingling itch of pure sensation that’s spread almost evenly through every single one of his muscles – a bit like pins and needles, but a tick more subdued and a ton more throby… like his entire muscular system has become a single, giant bruise or some shit.

The second thing that comes is the sensation of temperature. His body’s internal temperature is edging towards overly cool – not quite to the point of truly cold, he’s spent too long on Gotham’s snowy streets during the worst months of winter without any means of a respite to consider the vague chill he feels now any kind of significant cold.

That kind of cold is unique. Terrible and familiar.
A bit like the cold in his hand, but that one… that’s a different kind of familiar.

It’s an IV, he realizes after a moment spent puzzling through the sensation – an IV pumping him up with hydration fluids, electrolytes, and probably pain killers. It feels cold because it’s room temperature fluid dripping directly into his 98° veins – probably from a colder than average room, as well… a hospital bed is cumbersome and stiff in a way that’s hard to forget and the rooms that hold hospital beds always run rather frigid, even the expensive ones.

It takes another few seconds to remember that he’s probably in the Cave, which explains why he’s edging significantly more towards cold than comfortable. Even the shittiest hospital would be a warm room to wake in than the med bay built four stories underground.

Except for the hand that’s not icy cold…

The hand without the IV presumably stuck into the top of it is… warm.

Very warm.

Almost unbearably so.

It’s not a burning, like he’s stuck it on a lit burner or against the metal side of an oil drum with a street fire blazing, but it’s still trapped in a sensation of definitely too warm that makes him want to yank the limb away.

He manages a twitch, but nothing more.

It’s just a quick little jolt of the muscles in his fingers and somehow that tiny movement is so exhausting Jason has to fight hard to make it happen again.

The second time he makes his muscles kind of work makes other things change, too – makes things happen. Abruptly and completely enough to make Jason almost regret going to the stupid effort of moving at all.

The too warm hand feels a squeeze, a tense wrap of pressure – gentle, but still a shock to his system as he’s still pulsing with that aching throb of pins and needles.

Heat appears around his face, cupped against his cheek with another touch of pressure.

A hand, he realizes.

Two hands. One on his cheek and one around his own hand.

Gentle, ginger, but still too present to be truly comfortable.

“Jason?”

The voice that says his name is deep.

Warm and rumbly in a way that both puts Jason on his guard and makes his throat swell up with some knot of emotion like relief.

A thumb strokes across his cheek bone.
“You’re home, Jason,” the voice says – not Bruce, Jason realizes, Dick. “You’re safe.”

Home. Safe.

Foreign words that Jason can’t quite trust, but that he wants to more than anything.

Doesn’t think he could believe it even if Bruce himself were the one making promises.

There’s a brief kerfuffle of noise – an assault of sound and rustling movement. The hand on his cheek vanishes and then is back again before Jason can lament the realization that – as uncomfortable as it is to have the hand there – he missed it when it was gone.

There’s a low murmur.

Not Dick’s voice – higher, warmer… female.

That must be Babs.

With a fightfully grueling push of effort, Jason cracks an eye.

And then the other.

The Cave is dim.

Jason can’t tell if it’s because all the lights have been turned off or if his little corner of the infirmary has just been very thoroughly cordoned off. Besides, the Cave has never been the brightest lit room in the world, so it’s difficult to tell definitively…

Either way, without windows or an easily identifiable clock hanging within his immediate eyeline, Jason can’t begin to attempt estimating the time… or even the date.

Dick’s face is suddenly taking up his entire field of vision.

It’s pale, gaunt in a way Jason doesn’t recognize, and smiling with that obnoxious Dick Grayson signature grin of pure joy. A fucking blast of glaring sunshine, on demand.

“Hey, there, Little Wing,” Dick whispers, his big blue puppy dog eyes already flooded with a bizarre rush of tears, “Welcome back.”

The greeting makes Jason blink – would’ve made him frown with a snarky retort on his tongue if he had that much control over his muscles. He doesn’t remember going anywhere.

He doesn’t really remember getting hurt at all, honestly.

Jason would probably find that thought a lot more alarming if he were on any less than what
seemed to be a fuck ton of pain killers – and it’s the good shit, too, *clearly* – but as things currently are, he can barely hold onto the idea long enough to think he should probably care.

He’s quickly distracted by the feel of fingers on his arm – slimmer and far cooler to the touch than Dick’s, pressing gently on his bicep.

Babs.

Jason fights to turn his head towards her.

All he manages to get is a brief glimpse of red hair, pale skin, and teary green eyes framed by those thick black plastic frames of the glasses she uses when she spends an unexpected weekend at the Manor.

Before he can do more, there’s another loud shuffle of *movement*.

“Jason?”

The knot of apprehension redoubles in Jason’s gut at the sound of Bruce’s voice.

It’s graveled and rough in the kind of exhausted way Jason knows to read as *upset*.

Hearing it makes Jason’s heart rate spike – a thing he’s embarrassed and frustrated to realize is being broadcast to everyone present through the increased frequency of sharp beeps on the machine set up to monitor his pulse.

Dick’s hand pulls away from Jason’s cheek and his face slips out of Jason’s view – his hand stays on Jason’s hand, though, giving a supportive squeeze that Jason finds, inexplicably, that he deeply appreciates.

When Jason’s eyes manage to focus in the absence of Dick’s face from right in front of his own, he spots Bruce at the foot of his bed – with the welcome addition of Alfred’s stoically relieved face hovering just over his broad shoulder.

Jason tries to contract the muscles in his throat.

To force himself to swallow – to speak.

It doesn’t quite work well enough to let him get a word out.

It barely works to let him groan.
“Just a moment, Master Jason,” Alfred chides lightly, zipping off to the side of Jason’s bed too quickly for Jason to track the motion. “Perhaps it’s best to wait to speak until you’ve had a little drink of water.”

Bruce remains at the foot of Jason’s bed, hands coming to rest visibly on the handles meant to guide the gurney structure rather than dipping down to brush at Jason’s feet.

Before Jason can wonder why he seems to care about that miniscule degree of physical distancing, Dick slides back into view.

Dick’s hand has left Jason’s and now settles on his far shoulder to stabilize him as Dick lifts the back end of the bed to prop Jason up into an acceptably upright-ish position.

A straw appears at his mouth, nudging at his lip as Alfred holds the cup of room temperature water from beside his hip – close enough to feel the warmth of his presence, but not so close that it feels crowding.

Jason wraps his tongue around the straw and draws it into his mouth. He gingerly sucks down a sip – but quickly loses control of his self restraint and starts to guzzle down the liquid.

“This is the straw, Master Jason,” Alfred chastises, drawing the cup down until the straw loses contact with the surface and starts sucking up air. “You know better. Little sips.”

The water returns and Jason slows himself down.

Takes his time with draining the small cup.

Feels immeasurably better when he’s finished – still pretty damn awful, but better.

He settles back against the pillows with a sleepy sigh before his gaze sweeps back across the room to snag on Bruce – still standing like stone at the foot of his bed.

Jason is still only about halfway awake, and he has a worrisome spread of blank spots in his memory of the events leading up to whatever landed him here in this hospital bed, but he does remember enough of the night prior to the start of his memory patchiness to know that this conversation is unlikely to be pleasant.

Having been nothing but a screw up since this whole Tolovi case got started – and that on accident, no less – he’s pretty sure that having openly defied Batman’s orders, directly and consciously, is not going to go over very well with the B-man.

Benching Robin for life is not out of the range of possibilities, neither is simply barring Jason from the Robin mantle forever… maybe even getting someone else to fill the role… Jason’s not the only street rat around, after all.

Alfred’s insistence, and probably a little support from Dickie bird, will possibly ensure that Jason gets to stay in the Manor – until he’s got himself all healed up, at least – but beyond that… Jason stoically builds up a mental wall to keep himself from reacting too terribly to any unpleasant revelations about the status of his future.

The yelling is gonna make his already aching head scream, and he’s in no shape to actually
run away from any of it. He’s just gonna have to sit here and take it.

On the up side – or really, on the slightly less down side – he’s only got a rather tenuous hold on being conscious at all, right now, so he’s probably gonna pass out pretty quick once this shit gets started.

B’s got a pretty intense stare goin’ already, but it’s not quite anger – though, that assessment might just be Jason’s vision gettin’ screwy with all the drugs and shit in his system.

“It’s good to see your eyes open, son,” Bruce comments. “How do you feel?”

“I’ll be fine,” Jason promises. “How long was I out?”

“A few days,” Bruce replies, measured and careful. “Today is Saturday.”

Jason nods slowly, digesting the information and fighting down the leap to worry that’s suddenly clogging up his chest so it doesn’t filter into his voice as he asks, “And Tim?”

“Is fine,” Barbara promises, giving his bicep a reassuring squeeze. “I’ve been monitoring him very carefully since he got home safely at 3am on Thursday.”

Jason nods again, this time feeling nothing but relief.

If Babs says Tim is alright, then he’s definitely fine.

There’s an awkward pause after that.

It’s not quite hesitation to make the transition into Bat Mode interrogation, but it’s something odd. Jason simply doesn’t have the attention or energy to analyze it beyond his observation that it’s there.

“Jason,” Bruce says – his voice soft, but growing heavy with the Bat’s pressuring insistence on giving honest information, “What happened?”

With a slow, deep breath to steel him, Jason admits, “I dunno. I don’t remember a lot of it… I remember noticing that Tim skipped out of school halfway through the day, and I remember having dinner, and helping Alfie with the dishes, and then… it’s just a blur, mostly… I’ve got like flashes of stuff, but nothing that makes much sense.”

Bruce nods. His eyes are narrowed, but his piercing gaze isn’t unduly suspicious.

Which just makes Jason feel even more guilty and inadequate.

He makes a terrible Robin.

“B… I – I’m sorry… I know I screwed – ”
Bruce moves one hand from where it rests on the bar at the end of Jason’s bed to the lump of his foot under the blanket. Jason can feel the weight of it, and his whole leg starts to tingle as Bruce gives a squeeze. He fights the urge to yank his foot out of reach.

“Later, Jay-lad,” Bruce says quietly. “We’ll discuss everything that happened, later. The important thing right now is that you are alright. You need to rest, first, son.”

Jason bites back a protest.

Bruce clearly doesn’t disagree that he screwed this whole thing up – obviously, seeing as Jason did royally fuck this shit over sideways – but he’s willing to table the issue for the moment and no matter how much Jason would like to just get it over with, he’s not really in any kind of shape to push his luck. He needs to take the reprise he can get.

As Bruce rubs the top of his foot in an almost soothing gesture, Jason forces himself to give a stilted nod. Bruce nods back, and then looks over to Alfred.

“Alright, Master Jason,” the old butler says brightly, “I believe that this has been quite enough excitement for one morning. I’m going to administer a sedative now, just enough to help you get a little sleep. Is that agreeable?”

Jason nods – knowing with complete and wonderful certainty that Alfred won’t give him anything if he doesn’t overtly, actively consent to it.

The trickle of an extra something in the creeping cold of his IV hits him almost immediately and his vision starts to swim – not that it had really been all that stable to start with… He hears a comforting instruction from Bruce to sleep well and then is utterly lost to the swirl of starry blackness behind his eyelids.

His dreams are filled with Cheshire Cat smiles and the sweet smells of leather and some sort of fancy polish or cologne.

Jason doesn’t quite remember anything concrete about Catwoman’s little protégé, just that Stray was there, and that he’d been something special… unique and alluring in a way that didn’t let Jason have the half second needed to even pretend at questioning his sexuality.

It probably should have been unsettling, but like a lot of things that had crossed his mind the in last hour or so… Jason couldn’t summon up the effort or energy to make himself care before the idea that he should flits quietly away.

He sleeps well, all things considered, and the hazy dreams are pleasant.

Jason is much more coherent the next time he wakes up – feels much more human, and like he’s actually still pretty much firm in standing on the alive side of the line.

His recall is better too, memory more clear and crystalized.

Everything between dinner and the minute he got Tim out of Obscura and into Dickie bird’s finally useful, overly protective hands is stuck fast in his brain and perfectly able to be recalled with every bit of the clarity expected of a Bat brat.
There’s still a lot missing, but he remembers the deal he struck with Rwen Tolovi now – remembers the first drink, and the second, and enough of the feeling from after to know he should actively ensure that he has no idea how to get hold of any more samples of that shit.

Jason shakes himself to get passed the memory of the feeling – to refocus on skimming through the splotchy bursts of his recall from that fight night.

He remembers Stray.

Only vaguely, still, but now with enough detail to be sufficiently mortified by it all and to make bringing up the baby Cat something he wants to avoid at just about any cost.

Even more vaguely, he remembers Batman trying to bargain with his life – doesn’t quite remember the words or circumstances, but something warm curls up in his chest in a way that doesn’t feel like anger. Jason wants to roll with it – just accept the niceness of the feeling without digging deeper to examine why it’s there.

He also remembers Batman proactively deciding to let Jason go through with the fight exactly as Jason had set it up – Batman had accepted that Jason had made the best possible choice and then allowed him to follow through on executing it.

The thought makes the warm feeling in his chest curl tighter, digging in with roots and claws and the painful kind of unacknowledged hope that Jason is determined to ignore.

The only way to push his thoughts off course is to open his eyes more fully and expend the limits of his narrow span of attention on looking around him at the Cave.

There’s still no clock or calendar in easy view, but Jason doesn’t get much beyond noting that tidbit when he realizes the chair at his bedside is not unoccupied.

Bruce is sitting there.

He has a file full of what looks like spreadsheets with the Wayne Enterprises logo on them, so his presence is unobtrusive and doesn’t feel nearly as creeptastic as it could, but it still makes the skin on the back of Jason’s neck and shoulders itch uncomfortably.

“It’s good to see you awake again,” Bruce mentions quietly without looking up from his WE documents. His whisper is rough like his voice hasn’t been used much lately.

“Hmn,” Jason responded, noncommittal and wary. “How long’ve I been out?”

“Just about fourteen hours,” Bruce assures him, “It’s 2am.”

Jason’s eyes narrow. “You’re not patrolling?”

“Nightwing and Batgirl have things handled for tonight,” Bruce soothes simply.

Jason does not relax and a tight pause develops in the conversation.

After a moment of tension and silence, Bruce closes up the folder – carefully shuffling the documents spread across his lap into a neatly ordered stack within the file. He sets the folder aside with a deliberate motion and looks up to meet Jason’s rather cagey gaze with the same meditative
calm and carefully broadcast movements.

“How are you feeling, Jason?”

Jason wants to bite out a sharp ‘fine’, but Batman’s self-assement training has been too thorough and too carefully enforced for mild suspiscion to override it.

“Better than the last time I woke up,” Jason admits, cautiously adding, “My memory of what happened still has a lot of holes in it, but the parts I do remember are almost clear.”

Bruce gives a slow nod.

Then, instead of jumping into the interrogation Jason’s expecting and still kind of waiting for, Bruce asks, “And how about your body? Muscles, bones, joints?”

Still deeply cautious, Jason answered, “None of the joints feel tight or gritty, though I haven’t really tried moving any of them yet. Bones feel stable, nothing broken or anything. And all the muscles feel really sore, but the pins and needles thing from earlier – the, uh, ‘general paresthesia’ – is pretty much gone… it’s just localized to my neck and shoulders, mostly. A little bit around my ribs, still.”

Bruce nods and reaches for the chart resting on the table on the opposite side of him as the one where he set the Wayne Enterprises work file. He takes a quiet minute to make a few notations on the medical record – a file far more accurate, detailed, and comprehensive than any hospital’s record keeping bureau could possibly manage.

Concerned despite his brave front, Jason can’t quite fight down the urge to ask, “Is the tingling shit not a good sign?”

“We believe that the paresthesia is directly related to the Serum that Rwen Tolovi introduced into your bloodstream,” Bruce explains as he finishes up with detailing his notes on Jason’s updated condition. “You sustained significant injury during the brawl with Shankar Tolovi and Alistair Blake – injuries that would normally have been fatal. The Serum granted a considerable boost to your body’s natural healing capabilities. There seem to be a few lingering effects still persisting, though it is unclear as to whether the drug has entirely left your system yet or not. These effects could merely be residual.”

“But?”

“Or they may be a sign of a permanent change to your blood chemistry that we will have to carefully monitor,” Bruce explains, adding, “It may feel like the change is positive, but it is unlikely that your system will be able to sustain such a dramatic biochemical alteration without any detrimental side effects.”

Jason had to admit the idea of rapid healing super powers sounded pretty cool, but he knew enough about how biochemical components could break down inside a body and degrade the otherwise perfectly healthy aspects beyond repair.

Another hush in the conversation has descended, and though this one is much less strained than the previous pause, there is still an unspoken hum of tension in the silence.

“I’m not sorry I went after Tim,” Jason blurs abrasively, wanting to just get this part over with and preferring to be ready and on the offensive rather than getting blind sided when it inevitably comes up later. “And I’m not sorry I made the deal I did.”
There’s a sharp twitch in the muscles of Bruce’s face – a pinch around his eyes and mouth, and a twinge of something by his temple as his jaw clenches tight around the biting words of his natural and Jason-anticipated reaction.

The pause is filled with Bruce’s careful huff.

And then he says with a lightness and disregard that suggests a forcibly achieved neutral tone of voice, “We’ll discuss this later. Your recklessness will have consequences, but for right now, the important thing is that you are home and you are safe. No matter how problematic it is that you disobeyed me as your father, and no matter how your irresponsibility has risked the security of Robin’s identity in the Crusade, you are home and you are safe.”

Jason’s antagonistic gaze – which had been sort of softening as Bruce had spoken – snaps into a full-on glare at the distinct curl of suspicion that he was being lied to directly.

Bruce called himself Jason’s ‘father’.

Bruce never called himself that.

Even Alfred only cautiously contributed to conversations regarding Bruce as Jason’s guardian, referring to their relationship gingerly with the moniker of ‘adoptive father’.

Jason kicked down the stupid kid’s desperate desire to take the words as they were given – to take them without a single grain of salt and seal them up inside of him, to trust in them implicitly and rely on the warmth of all their implications as the unadulterated Truth.

Jason was way too smart for that shit.

Even if Bruce had never before said anything exclusively to say what Jason wanted to hear, he knew that Brucie Wayne was a master of it from even his limited experience at Society galas… and he knew what it felt like when other people tried to manipulate him like that.

His lip curled up involuntarily as bile rose in his throat at the idea of Bruce just letting go of the façade he had stupidly let himself believe in like a little kid had faith in Santa Clause.

So what if Bruce proved not to be a creptastic pedophile?

So what if he’d spent more money on making Jason comfortable in the last three weeks than Jason had spent on staying alive in the past ten years prior to coming to the Manor?

So what if Bruce had trained him, had given him the role of Robin, had made him feel like he could really contribute to the Crusade – to the safety of the city as a whole?

Jason was still a screw-up, and Bruce could only put up with it for so long, could only keep up a realistic pretense for so long… eventually it would’ve had to break down into something more routine and painfully formulaic.

Bruce is not Jason’s father, obviously. And he doesn’t ever pretend to be… and the only reason Jason can think of for Bruce to be sitting here, trying to convince Jason of his fatherly regard and whatever love and attachment and shit that comes with it, is that Bruce is just too tired of Jason’s fuckery to put up a more believable front to keep him calm.
Obviously, Bruce notices Jason’s deepening glower.

“I’m not… I know I’m not your father, Jason, your real father, and I do not want you to think I’m trying to replace him or ignore your history.” Bruce says slowly, speaking quietly with an uncharacteristic… almost hesitation… as he goes on, “But I still think of you as my son, in every possible regard. And while I am disappointed in some of the choices you have made, I want to make sure you understand that you are and always will be Family. Nothing about your behavior will ever call into question whether or not Wayne Manor is your home.”

Jason’s teeth grind together.

It’s pathetic how easy it is for Bruce to make him want to believe that bull shit.

The soft sound of a sigh from the medical bay’s doorway breaks the building tension of the continuing moment – so suddenly that even with the clear gentleness in the sound, both Jason and Bruce stiffen with an instinctive transition towards fight readiness.

And an equally instinctive leap to cowed restraint.

“What Master Bruce is trying to say, my dear boy, is that he loves you, Jason, as do the rest of us within the Family,” Alfred explains with no room left in his warm authority for any wrinkle of doubt. “And we are all very greatly relieved that you are recovering.”

The boiling fury that had flared in Jason at Bruce’s words settles down under Alfred’s unwavering stare. It quickly fizzes out entirely and Jason’s gaze drops to his knees.

The quiet stretches for a moment in a slow transition.

Alfred hadn’t come here simply to chastise Bruce.

He’d primarily come to inform Batman of a development occurring with Batgirl and Nightwing, who were still out around town on the evening’s patrol.

“Miss Barbara and Master Richard have encountered a quiet evening out in the city have decided to retire a tad early,” Alfred explains plainly. “In the interest of easing out of the stress over the last few weeks and months of casework, they have elected to spend the night at a safe house
in the center of down town. I believe a direly overdue rematch at ‘Super Smash Bros’ was mentioned. I gave them our full support in the endeavor.”

The perfunctory authority with which Alfred informed Bruce of decisions he would have clearly far preferred to personally control – and likely reject – nearly drew a snicker through Jason’s nose and he barely managed to suppress the satisfied smirk as Bruce fought down the glower of his own instinctive reaction. But nobody messed with Alfred.

“I highly suggest that the both of you also retire rather early, as well,” Alfred comments.

“Will do, Alfie,” Jason replies as Bruce gives a firm nod.

“I’ve taken the liberty of preparing Master Jason’s bedroom to host the IV stand and vitals monitors, if you think you’re feeling up to the transition,” Alfred mentions casually, busying himself with switching out his nearly empty hydration sack with a brand new one.

Jason considers the possibility for a moment.

It’s not a question of physically getting up there. The Cave has a freight elevator for access to the Manor – meant to allow gurneys potentially laden with unconscious victims injured above ground down into the Cave’s medical facilities without jarring them, and to allow those injured and treated below ground up into the brighter, homier environment of the Manor if their recovery called for it.

The question of whether Jason is up for it was aimed at the psychological state required for the transition. Sometimes, if the injured party returned to something that felt too normal before they were able to behave as if everything were normal, they would push themselves too hard and disrupt the progress of their recovery.

Jason is certainly prone to doing just that – though, in context of who else in the Family is up for consideration, he is not particularly or especially prone to it. Just averagely prone.

And he misses his bed.

Looking to Alfred, Jason nods. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

He feel’s Bruce’s doubtful stare boring into his shoulder, but the pressure only lasts a moment before the medical bay is swallowed up by the flurry of activity required to get Jason upstairs. They wheel him up on the hospital bed he’s already settled in and transfer him carefully to his own once they arrive to make the process as easy on him as possible.

The trip is still exhausting.

Jason’s half asleep as Alfred wheels the gurney away and Bruce secures his IV.

He’s only sort of aware of the sensation of Bruce carefully tucking him beneath the covers, and is pretty sure he dreamed up the light kiss being pressed to his temple just before the lights go out. The other dreams he wades through that night are just as pleasant and confusing.
That Stray kitten makes an appearance or two.

And Wonder Woman.

And Bruce, along with a strange sensation of certainty that Bruce is worried for him and also just a little bit proud of him.

The next time Jason wakes, he’s sore.

Not like ‘spent too long in the gym’ kind of sore, and not like ‘fell off a roof’ or ‘got hit by Harley’s hammer’ or anything… but like ‘Day 9 of being sick with the flu’ kind of sore.

He’s groggy and achey and life is just generally unpleasant.

A cool hand appears on his forehead as he groans.

“You took a turn on us, Master Jason,” Alfred mentions quietly, a pretense of chastisement. “A fever spiked a few hours ago as the last of that vile serum left your system, and the remains of your healing injuries were recognized by your immune system, but it seems to be settling now. I still insist on absolute bed rest today, however.”

 Jason nods, wholly accepting of the decree because even he’s not stubborn enough to force himself to do much when he’s feeling like this.

Grievous bodily injury is one thing, but there’s a different kind of miserable behind being sick like this that claws at Jason’s worries from before he’d come to the Manor… When home was a drafty room on the second floor of a condemned apartment building with stairs so ricktey and broken that even Jason could scarcely get up them safely and ‘bed’ was a pile of whatever blankets he could scrounge up… when getting sick meant uncertain survival and he couldn’t risk making it worse by over doing it.

He can take another day in bed if it means letting this sickly soreness run its course.

Jason must drift off as Alfred fusses.

The next thing Jason knows, he’s waking up again.

This time, it’s Bruce that approaches his bedside as he sitrs.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Bruce says, his deep voice hushed and warm. “Alfred sent me up with some food in case you were hungry – his special cinnamon and mixed-berry pancakes, lots of carbs and vitamins to help you recover. I can come back later, though.”
“Food sounds great,” Jason manages, mouth watering.

Bruce helps maneuver him upright, propping him up with pillows – sitting propper on the side of his bed with his knees curled over the edge and his tray set on a table that curled over his lap from the floor. Alfred didn’t like traditional breakfast in bed tray sets, he said that they positively ruined one’s posture while dining and that in turn upset digestion most disasterously.

Jason doesn’t mind. It takes a lot more doing to get settled, but this way he doesn’t feel quite as much like an invalid as he could’ve while stuck in bed and still hooked up to all this health monitoring equipment – and whenever he had a real injury, something truly side-lining like a few broken ribs or some shit, eating like this always made him feel a little more like a person instead of just a patient.

Besides, from this angle, he could see the TV head on – which turns out to be pretty stellar because the moment he flicks the thing on he stumbles into a good old fashioned Harry Potter marathon. The remote gets set on his tray with the buttons face down as he settles in for the long haul – turning his attention to the steaming deliciousness of his pancakes as the third years gingerly hold their hands out to Hagrid’s flock of Hippogriffs.

Bruce hovers nearby, sitting on his own prop of pillows beside Jason to ensure that he doesn’t start to list or slide off his own support – an uncomfortably crucial thing when broken ribs were in play, but really more of a helicopter parent kind of reaction when he’s in bed with what currently feels more like a cold than anything.

That thought strikes him hard and fast – with nearly enough force to make him choke on his pancakes. He’s never, even internally, referred to Bruce as his parent before… ‘Guardian’, sure… ‘adoptive’ or ‘pseudo’ parent, maybe… possibly even as a ‘father figure’…

But never genuinely as his parent, helicopter parent or otherwise.

… But Bruce is his parent… honest to sin, Bruce has done more fucking parenting to him in the last two years than Willis or Catherine ever really managed.

It’s weird thinking of Bruce as his parent… as his… dad… maybe.

He doesn’t quite trust the feeling.

But Alfred always said that even good things, if they’re new or being viewed in a new light, can be uncomfortable until you adjust to them… and this is definitely new.

Bruce has noticed his little stutter in his attempt to swallow and a muscled arm has migrated to rest around his shoulders, supporting him in case he does actually begin to choke.

Jason gets himself under control and subtly shrugs out of Bruce’s hold.

It just feels a bit too close and intimate and present to let him keep eating in relative peace. Bruce doesn’t seem hurt by Jason’s shrug away from him, but Batman and all, so Jason’s not entirely
confident in the assessment… And the arm doesn’t retreat entirely, it just moves back to rest on the layer pillows two back from Jason’s shoulders – far enough that he can’t feel the heat, but close enough for him to still feel the slightest edge of it’s weight.

It makes the back of his shoulders itch slightly, but also makes a warm buble of *something* fill up the space behind his lungs.

Jason decides not to look too deeply into it and simply finishes his pancakes.

By the time he’s cleared his plate of every last berry bit and every crumb of pancake, he’s just about snoozing into his syrup. He’s only vaguely aware of his fingers being worked off of the silver ware – of the light clinks the knife and fork make when they’re set on his empty plate.

He’s aware of Bruce shifting around him – his weight making the bed shift – but he’s only belatedly conscious of the fact that his hand whips out to latch onto Bruce’s shirt to keep him from moving entirely away.

Jason doesn’t *want* him to go – genuinely. The feel of Bruce beside him is … comforting in a way that Jason can’t quantify. He’s warm and safe and solid and… Jason wants to let himself cave into the strange ease of the sensation.

If he were more awake he’d be embarrassed, ashamed of how weak he’s being.

He’s a terrible Robin, but he is still *Robin*, and Robin should be better than this… but he can’t deny the wave of relief that strikes him as Bruce settles back down.

And he can’t stop himself from letting his head tip over onto Bruce’s warm shoulder.

He’s more or less asleep after that.

He regains a bit of awareness whenever one of Hermione’s epic one-liners makes his subconscious snicker forcefully enough to make his upper consciousness remember that it kinda wants to be awake for some of this.

At some point, Alfred’s low voice filters into his brain – probably removing the plates from Jason’s… breakfast? Lunch? *Meal*…

Then some time significantly later, during the mortifying moment of the many Harrys, the door opens again and the voices of Dick and Babs greet Bruce in low tones.

Jason wakes up slightly as Dick climbs over his bed to put a cool hand on his forehead, whispering, “Heya, Little Wing, I hear you’re still feelin’ pretty out of it.”

“‘m fine,” Jason protests, “Jus’ sleepy.”

Dick chuckles.

The sound is low and warm and deeply comforting.

“There’s still a few more movies in this marathon,” Dick mentions, scooting around so he’s
sitting beside Jason, “Mind if Babs and I join the cuddle pile to watch ‘em roll?”

“Whatever floats your boat, dickhead,” Jason shoots back.

He feels Bruce frown, feels Dick chuckle again, hears Babs just sigh warmly.

Jason’s eyes are already closed again.

More pillows appear, and blankets, and Jason lets himself enjoy it.

Forces himself to push down the worry and embarrassment at his obvious weakness, so he can engrave this moment on his memory. Tomorrow will be business as usual, probably. He thinks he’ll be able to function normally – the exhaustion and such is usually the last thing to hit right before he’s better enough to get back to work, after all.

One last round of sleep through anything and he’ll be good to go.

Dick ends up throwing his legs over Jason and Bruce, lays his head in Barbara’s lap. Babs ends up laying her head on her arms across Jason’s pillows, one hand on his shoulder. Bruce has Jason’s head against his shoulder, his arm is around Jason’s shoulders, with one hand on Barbara’s upper arm and another on Dick’s knee.

Bruce is the only one awake as the magic moves across the pond and backwards in time to greet Newt Scamander in New York – and he’s far more content than he can ever remember being otherwise, but the Bat is getting antsy.

“All three of them are missing at least twelve hours of important rest this week,” Alfred chastises before Bruce even consciously considers moving. “They will notice if you leave. They will wake and be hardly any better off for their scant moments here. Gotham is having a quiet night, no alerts on any active cases have pinged on the Cave’s system, and you have an 8am board meeting with the directors at Wayne Enterprises. The Family needs this moment, Sir.”

So don’t you dare move.

A threat veiled in polite, seemingly unrelated statements.

No one defies Alfred when he truly sets himself to wrangling a result.

Not Bruce, not Batman… Probably not even the Rogues – though, thankfully, that hypothesis has never been proactively tested.
Bruce exhales.

It’s a deep breath that shakes something loose inside his chest.

Jason vaguely feels a kiss being pressed into his hair, but even in his mostly sleeping state he thinks he should probably dismiss the feeling as some sort of tactile hallucination… he doesn’t, though, and he’s clearly riding the last of a pain killer high because he lets himself hum contentedly at the warm feeling it gives him.

For a moment, everything is okay.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Jay...

NEXT TIME: Tim handles an interrogation from Batsy and tries to get his life in order.

(Yay, SHARKS!)
Rule #26 - Do Your Homework

Chapter Summary

Tim has that conversation with Batman they’ve both been putting off, and Jason decides that Tim is not allowed to just fade away willy nilly.

Chapter Notes

I'm ALIVE! Sorta.

You ever have those days / weeks / months when Life just decides to kick you in the teeth?
Between career issues, birthday disasters, and adventures in demon-cat sitting... I'm definitely having one of those... but hopefully, I've got a plan-ish that will work to get things back under control.

Anyway, on to Timmy angsting cuteness!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Six: Rule #26 – Do Your Homework

By the time Batman gets around to interrogating him personally, Tim is ready for it.

He’s had almost a week to prepare for the ordeal, after all, so it would be utterly ridiculous for him to have been anything but perfectly prepped and ready.

Tim even manages to be the one controlling the circumstances of the encounter – well, more or less. He’d thought Batman might just break into Drake Manor at some point to make the discussion happen, Batman was certainly easily capable of it, but if he was going to do that, Tim thinks he probably would’ve done it by now.

So, operating on that understanding, Tim takes his time to truly rehearse – silently, of course, and mindful of the bugs and the keystroke logger that Batman has likely installed, but still very thoroughly. He wants to ensure that he will have a ready answer set for any question the Bat might consider asking him and by Thursday evening he knows he’s fully prepared.

When he goes out to Robbinsville with his camera, it’s the first time since his disastrous attempt to contact Spoiler that he’s left his house any time after dusk. He’s acutely aware of that fact,
and constantly reminded of it with how there’s an anxious thrum of energy in his muscles as he gets across Kane Memorial and starts pedaling deeper into Robbinsville – a thrum that would be distinctly irksome for throwing off his camera skills, messing with both the aim and focus of his shots, if snapping photos were Tim’s actual goal in heading out that night.

Since his goal is to talk to Batman, a few dozen terrible pictures seems a reasonable sacrifice. Besides, since he’s about to try to con the Bat, showing a few authentic nerves during the encounter can only be beneficial towards establishing his credibility.

He doesn’t have to wait very long.

Tim sets up to camp out and wait on the edge of a Robbinsville mid-rise, looking over a low-roofed yard of self-storage units that gets routinely checked by the Bats for any noteworthy shifts in several rather benine smuggling operations. He’s right on the edge of Gotham’s super city, just short of where the skyscraper canyons create an environment where using grapple guns and wires to swing building to building makes actual sense, so he’ll have a good view of the Bats as they fly through their patrols – in addition to the up-close view he’ll get of them when they arrive to investigate the storage yard.

It’s a good, plausible set up for a fan with just a little too much insight.

Just a little, though.

Tim won’t be able to convince Batman that he doesn’t know anything, not when this is the aftermath of the second time he’s been kidnapped because he got too close to things.

But he should be able to swing things so that Batman believes that what he knows about the Bats is entirely related to their casework, rather than their identities.

He’s going to make it clear he’s a different kind of fan – one that doesn’t care who his heroes are out of costume, and instead is entirely focused on trying to help them how he can.

Tim is going over his plan for the seventeenth iteration of ‘one last time’ when Batman appears on the rooftop with him – simply materializing out of the shadows in what is probably an attempt to avoid spooking him.

For a second, Tim is starstruck.

His hands move without his conscious consent and he snaps a picture without even checking the focus or lighting or anything – it’s just an awed, gape-mouthed point and shoot affair that makes Batman’s grimly emotionless expression twitch almost imperceptibly towards a deeply disapproving frown.

Tim almost snaps another one, so he can study the minute changes – so he can sit down and examine them in good lighting. Decides against it in time to stop his trigger finger.

The initial conversation is a lot like the last post-kidnapping confrontation Tim had with him – preconsidered questions and carefully rehearsed answers. Tim was investigating a case because he wanted to help his heroes, he got too close and got caught, he knows better now – won’t get so involved – but he still wants to see his heroes in action.

Officially, he’s out tonight because he wants to prove to himself that he’s not too scared to go outside after dark any more.

Batman frowns again at that.
"You shouldn’t be out after dark regardless, especially not alone,” the Bat points out.

Tim cedes that point, wary of letting on to how he’s been doing this for years already and has never gotten caught before – had never before gotten so overly involved that he was close enough to make any kind of real mistake that could land him in noticeable trouble.

Until recently, at least.

But Tim is backing off…

He’s going to do better – much better – at staying uninvolved… like he used to… Even if he has enjoyed Jason’s company, and Dick’s, and Barbara’s… it’s better for everyone if he backs off, so he’s going to ensure that he’s at least three steps back from everything from now on.

It’ll be fine.

And it seems to work too, because Batman only comes at the inquiry of Tim knowing the Bats and getting overly involved to help them from one other angle before he moves on to what Tim knew ahead of time would be the trickiest part of this conversation.

Jason.

Not a single media outlet had caught on to the kidnapping of a Wayne ward, and Bruce had worked very hard to keep it that way. No one had even caught on to there being a kidnapping at all, because everyone involved had a pile of their own secrets to protect – secrets that would be utterly exposed if any whisper of this scandalous scenario hit the press.

However, Tim knows Jason, personally.

They’re close enough for Batman to know that Tim would never have mistaken the identity of who it was that had come to save him – who had ended up swaping himself into Tim’s place, disregarding his own safety in favor of providing for Tim’s.

They are not, however, close enough to make Jason’s reckless drive to save Tim seem reasonable under any kind of usual circumstances. It had been the middle of the night, it had been a terribly dangerous situation, and it had been clear across town from where a civilian Jason should have been getting a good night’s rest in Wayne Manor.

Without the filter of Robin, Jason’s actions make almost zero sense.

“Jason Wayne left his home abruptly in the middle of the night, stole a motorcycle, and made his way to the other side of the city with the clear intent to extract you from Obscura by any means necessary. Why?”

Tim take a moment to savor the fact that underneath the Bat’s cowl, Bruce had referred to Jason as being a Wayne without any kind of qualifier, and had so easily referenced Wayne Manor as Jason’s home… He keeps his expression mostly blank, of course, allowing it to show only a little bit of the bashful giddiness he feels at seeing concrete evidence of the warm familial regard Bruce held for Jason.

“I… I don’t kn– I don’t… He… He, um, called me…” Tim starts, breaking off awkwardly.

Part of it is real, awe and bafflement that is genuinely reflective of Tim’s own, honest feelings – which is why this is the trickiest part of the conversation.
Selina’s taught him how to spin a story, how to play the audience.

Making something outlandish seem reasonable is perfectly possible if you give the audience you’re catering to exactly what they’re expecting... and if you inhabit the Truth of the story, if you make the lie be more real than the reality... then Truth is pretty flexible.

Even with Jason being Robin, Tim is genuinely still kind of awed that Jason came for him – especially in the way that he had, by throwing himself into such danger like he had...

It’s a bit too real, too close to real Truth to make the story’s truth easy to wear as a mask. Tim has to be very careful to keep strictly to the story he practiced in his head – careful to keep the honest Truth from leaking through.

“I’d gone out to meet Spoiler,” Tim begins, starting over from a more manageable place in the story to gain ground with, “But she wasn’t where we usually meet up, so I left my stuff and went out to see if I could just find her. I thought it might be fun to surprise her... but... I, um, I stumbled into a warehouse where that new drug was being kept... and those guys... grabbed me.”

Batman waits silently for Tim to continue, they were both very aware that his looming presence alone was more than enough pressure to encourage full disclosure.

“Jason called me. After. He called me after—after I’d been grabbed,” Tim goes on, “I’d left my phone with my stuff at the donut shop and Spoiler picked up. My call log shows they talked for about fifteen minutes... I don’t know what they said, but I think Spoiler saw me get grabbed. I think she told Jason to stay home, but... he didn’t listen. I don’t know how he found me, or why he did what he did...but he saved me... which is why I went to Catwoman – I felt like I had to return the favor somehow, but I couldn’t do anything like what Jason did...”

Tim had been hoping to get the interrogation to move on to how he knew Catwoman’s address, or how he’d hacked the Batmobile, but he’d known it was an unlikely option – Batman couldn’t be so easily led. He still had to try, though.

“You must know some reason why Jason Wayne would risk his own life so readily to save yours,” Batman presses, dark tone betraying the fact that there was emotion behind the façade.

Tim can’t tell what emotion, but he can tell it’s definitely there.

The pleasure he has flooding in at noticing that almost manages to keep him from misconstruing Batman’s words into a barb at how he doesn’t measure up – almost, but not quite. He knows he’s misconstruing them too – knows that Batman doesn’t mean he’s not really worth Jason’s time, that Jason has no real reason to be so invested in his well being that he’d so easily sacrifice his own safety – but he still can’t help but blanch at the swirl of guilt that hits his gut as the words settle into his brain.

Fortunately, the guilt is not an emotion that will break the façade of Tim’s story.

So, what shows on his face only helps make his point convincing.

“I... I don’t... know,” Tim forces out, as clearly as he can. “He’s... Jason... He’s... He’s my—my friend. And he said that a kid from Crime Alley grows up knowing how to make sure they look after the people they decide to call their own.”

It’s true, too – entirely true.

True to the point that Tim is entirely certain that if Jason learned about any random kid in the
city being kidnapped, he would probably dive in to save them with just as much reckless
determination as he had demonstrated in saving Tim.

It’s almost enough to make Batman cede the point.

“Rwen Tolovi referred to Jason Wayne as ‘Robin’. Why?”

Tim blinks.

It’s a staged reaction, but one he’s practiced over the course of years while infiltrating
hundreds of staff-only and restricted access areas – one he knows has long been perfected into an
utterly guileless innocence that can get him out of just about anything.

He blinks, projects that dull confusion of a kid in the midst of a misunderstanding and then,
with a sweet and eager edge of hope, Tim asks, “He did?”

The reaction clearly throws Batman.

He doesn’t make a comment – as that would cement the vague notion of confusion that’s
hovering lightly around his intimidating figure – but he’s definitely recalculating.

Tim frowns and makes a show of thinking over the events of that night – by actually thinking
them over so that his eyes do the correct little flicker thing of an honest attempt to recall witnessed
information.

Batman will know that Tim has a higher than average ability for total recall – not quite a fully
eidetic memory, but one that’s near enough to have gotten a note scribbled down in one of his
medical files. Tim would look ridiculous if he claimed a total blank-out, even under stress.

“Oh… I guess, he did, didn’t he? I can’t believe I didn’t catch that,” Tim complains, letting
his frown deepen. “I guess I though he was using it in general… like how most grown-ups use it…
meaning every little kid who does something brave and wonderful… I never… but they’re not from
Gotham, so they wouldn’t… They had to be using it as a name…”

With a bright-eyed interest – genuinely curious as to how Batman would handle the question
– Tim looks up and asks, “Is Jason Robin?”

Batman betrays nothing.

Tim lets his interest flicker out. “No. That doesn’t make any sense. Robin’s older. And Jason
has school in the mornings… so… But he’d make a good Robin…” Tim finishes, trailing off into a
pleased little imagining about how perfect Jason must’ve seemed for the role – at how he had
probably stuck his nose into places he shouldn’t have and found the secret out, at how he’d made it
his own after Bruce had caved and given him the role as an outlet for his aggression and his bone-
deep need to help people. “He’d make a really good Robin.”

“I thought you didn’t care about who’s beneath the masks,” Batman states.

“I don’t,” Tim promises immediately. With a shrug he adds, “But that doesn’t mean I’m not
curious about it when someone drops a plausible potential name in my lap. I won’t investigate it, I
swear, but I’m not gonna pretend it’s not interesting.”

He’s met with more silence from Batman.

Eventually, Tim begins to squirm, having nothing more to say and having to face Batman
pressuring him to say more.

It’s another long minute yet before Batman accepts the need to move on.

“If you do not believe Jason Wayne is Robin, then why did you go to Catwoman for help in rescuing him instead of Batman and Robin?”

“Batman and Robin were already there.” Tim points out, frowning again. “Well, Batman… And Spoiler and Nightwing and Batgirl, too, I think. It was really confusing. And then I was already in the Batmobile and in the middle of the Diamond District, and Catwoman gave me that address specifically in case I needed help… I know you’ve worked with her before and I just thought… I thought you could use any help you could get.”

Yet more silence from Batman meets Tim’s answer.

The feel of it is different this time, though.

More evaluative, assessing him as a whole rather than simply dissecting his response.

This silence lasts longer, too.

Long enough for Tim to start physically squirming beneath the stern, impassive gaze as the swirl of discomfort inside him makes squirming internally feel like not enough – the need to try just running away rears up in him, a powerfully persuasive idea, regardless of his odds at making the getaway clean.

He’s just about finished with his accidental calculations of his best possible route to push his odds of escape up over the 25% line when Batman comes to some sort of conclusion.

The wind changes just then, too – making Batman’s cape billow out around him.

The sight almost makes Tim smile. Because Jason is totally right in supposing that if Batman’s actually a metahuman, his main super power is the ability manipulate the drama of atmospheric cues. Jason had said it as a bitter joke, months ago – well before this stupid drug case with the Tolovis got started – but Tim keeps finding vague evidence that makes him want to wholly believe the outlandish claim.

**Focus.**

Batman has decided what to do about him – has decided whether he believes Tim’s story at all and has determined a course of action to take regarding his continued existence.

“You should not be out here alone,” Batman reiterates, something that surprises Tim.

From everything Jason has ever said, and everything Tim himself has ever witnessed, Batman is not prone to repeating himself for any reason.

“You have your pictures, you’ve gotten proof enough that we are real,” Batman lays out with a calm authority, “It is an unnecessary risk and a distraction to us to have you out here.”

“I know,” Tim admits, aptly shamed in a manner that requires no acting to portray. “I’m sorry. I… I won’t- I won’t go out again. I just needed tonight. One more outing to prove to myself that I’m not too scared to keep being me.”

“Fear is not a weakness,” Batman tells him.
“It is if it controls you,” Tim retorts with what he can admit is a petty little pout – constructed mostly of self admonishment.

“Are you afraid now?”

“No,” Tim replies immediately, adding slowly, “But only because you’re here. Before… Yeah, I’m afraid… I was afraid, setting out. I just… I had to face it.”

Batman gives a slow nod – so minute and unhurried that Tim thinks Batman might not even know he’s doing it. Bruce Wayne knows a thing or two about facing fears, Tim knows – he’s looked into it, into every tiny detail of Bruce’s life that was publically available due to the people’s obsession with the lives of the wealthy and beautiful.

What he’d found had explained a little – more than expected, really – about Bruce’s psychological connection to the Bat.

Bruce, who’s still standing silently on a rooftop, waiting for Tim to explain more.

“I… I won’t go out again, won’t get involved,” Tim says carefully, quietly enough to keep his voice from giving a betraying tremble. He doesn’t want promise this – doesn’t want to lie so blatantly to one of his heroes… but in some ways, in the important ways, it’s not a lie.

Tim will be backing off.

He’ll still be going out, still be taking pictures and helping however he can, but he’ll be staying much further back – far enough to ensure that he doesn’t get caught again.

Far enough back to ensure that not even the Bats know he’s there.

And he’s backing off from his idiotic attempt at building a relationship with them outside of their masks – attempting to make sure that they don’t worry for him, that they don’t expend any attention on him that would be better spent elsewhere.

He’s already proving mildly successful.

After that one conversation with Barbara, Tim hasn’t been ambushed by them again – has been taking pains to isolate himself from them by sticking to places he knows they have no reason to be. He’s been staying late at school, using that library for his homework instead of a public one, and he’s been going straight home to Drake Manor afterwards – staying in his room and ignoring Dick Grayson’s occasional requests to get him to open up.

He is being better.

He is.

Soon, they’ll give up altogether and refocus back on the important things, like protecting each other, instead of trying to protect him.

It’ll be okay.

Jason will get better, will recover completely.

Robin will be back out on the streets with Batman soon, and they will be able to carry on with Nightwing and Batgirl as if Tim had never stumbled awkwardly into their paths.

Tim’s not sure how long it’s been since he last spoke, promising not to go out again, but it’s
probably been a while since Batman breaks the silence.

“If you really want to help us, there are other ways – *daylight* ways,” Batman suggests lightly – a gingerness to his tone that sounds strange coming from *Batman*.

“I know,” Tim admits. “I’ll stick to those from now on, I promise.”

Batman gives a single, curt nod – this one clearly an intentional gesture, acceptance of Tim’s promise and likely a warning that he will hold Tim to that promise.

“It’s time for you to go home, Timothy,” Batman informs him.

Tim gives a resigned, but hopeful sigh, and allows Batman to hoist him up like he’s a little kid. Batman grapples down to street level, in a whoosh of air that’s just as thrilling now as the first time Tim had ever been exposed to the sensation, and then bundles Tim up in his cape before setting Tim in front on him on the beast of a black motorcycle he has waiting in the alley for just this purpose.

The ride home is too quick and too quiet, but Tim still feels moderately accomplished.

He gets himself to choke down a snack – food is important, even if the feeling of it weighing down his stomach makes him queasy enough to want to gag – and then gets to bed.

The next day is one he faces with a mild optimism and a resolute determination.

It’s not for another week and a half that his plans go awry.

The wrench gets thrown into the works when Jason gets better.

When Tim hears the knocking on the second Saturday after the terrible night with the Tolovis, he assumes that it’s Dick again – checking in, but keeping to a hands-off philosophy.

It’s not.

Instead of Dick, it’s Jason at his door.

And Jason is not the kind of guy that really takes no for an answer when checking up on his friends, especially when it’s just one measely little locked door standing in his way.

Jason rings the bell every forty seconds or so for about five minutes.
Then he just picks the lock and breaks in.

Trudges noisily up to Tim’s room.

Knocks again and then swings the bedroom door wide open as Tim sits curled up in his computer chair with a wide eyed panic at the fact that he can’t actually do anything at all in order to avoid this interaction.

It had probably been inevitable from the get go.

Tim should’ve seen it coming.

Jason doesn’t select his friends with abandon, and he certainly isn’t one to just let things go without a fight if he senses that someone he’s declared his own is attempting to pull back.

Standing in the doorway of Tim’s bed room, Jason plants his feet a little over shoulder width apart, sets his hand on his hips, and glowers.

The silence stretches out awkwardly, long enough for the fact that Tim has pretty much stopped breathing to start to effect his vision.

“You are a stupid little shit,” Jason growls, still glowering.

Somehow, Tim manages to suck enough oxygen into his lungs to stave off a fainting spell, because that would be so helpful – it’d be exactly the one thing that could possibly make this horribly awkward situation any worse than it already is.

“You know that, Timmers, right? That you are a stupid, reckless, idiotic little shithead of a genius who doesn’t know the first damn thing about working with a team,” Jason goes on with an exasperated shake of his head. “Even I know I should consult with someone before disappearing completely. Leave a fuckin’ note or somethin’.”

Jason huffs, then turns his glare straight back on Tim at full force. “You have any idea how fucking lucky you got? What if nobody figured out that somethin’ was wrong?”

The silence begins to stretch out again as Jason waits for Tim to realize that he actually wants some sort of response.

The only one Tim can manage is a timidly squeaked, “I’m sorry.”

It seems good enough for Jason, because he huffs again – a long drawn out sound that’s too aggressive to be a sigh as he forces down his temper.

It somehow clears the air enough for Tim to start breathing almost normally again.
“Next time, just call the damn Bats first,” Jason instructs firmly, “Hell, call the fuckin’ police – they aren’t all shit at their jobs, you know.”

Tim nods.

Jason looks like he doesn’t quite believe him – just the barest hint of a suspicious squint marks the edge of the proactively neutral expression around his eyes.

“I won’t,” Tim starts awkwardly, letting his gaze drop from Jason to stare at where his fingers have begun to fiddle with the phantom of a stray thread on the taught-stretched knee of his dark jeans. “Do it again, I mean. I won’t. I’m gonna step back from trying to help the Bats with any of their cases... I’m just a distraction, anyway, so... It’ll be better for everyone.”

Jason’s suspicious squint deepens back into a full-on glare.

His jaw works something over as he considers his next words carefully.

Batman has bugged Tim’s bed room, after all.

And they are still trying to keep it under wraps that Tim knows anything truly viable about the Bats’ secret identities.

“Yeah, well, whatever,” Jason grumbles, apparently unable to articulate his whatever his real frustration is while having to dance around the subject of being known by Tim as Robin. “I think you owe me a little distraction, right now, regardless. I came over here like three weeks ago to play video games and we got interrupted by another one of your stupid little stunts.”

Tim ducks his head guiltily.


“But… I have homework.”

Jason arches a skeptical eyebrow and shifts his gaze to the computer screen. The image of a fluffy blue Persian cat trussed up in a doll-size white lab coat and safety goggles as an off-screen human manipulates its limbs into explaining diagrams of what exactly will be awesome about the Red Nova event taking place in the Cygnus star system sometime around 2022 does not help Tim’s case about homework.

He’s clearly finished his homework.

Honestly, he’s finished his homework for the rest of the school year.

He finished it all last Friday... so he really doesn’t have any excuse not to head downstairs with Jason for a few hours of video games.

“Well, I ain’t playing Portal by myself, Timbo,” Jason huffs, “So, up an’ at ‘em.”

Tim gives a heavy, reluctant sigh and gingerly unfolds himself from his computer chair.
His legs nearly fail to support his weight as the pins and needles sensation strikes, and it’s an awkward, unbalanced and gangly, few steps that he takes to cross the room. Jason lets him pass out the door and follows him down the hall – refusing to take the lead even though Tim is well aware that Jason knows his way around the Drake Mansion at this point.

This time, when they make it to the game room, Jason isn’t quite as distracted by his awe and they get around to actually sticking in a game to play before anything has a chance to come up that could pull their attention away.

At Jason’s insistence, they do wind up playing Portal.

Jason claims it’s because the soundtrack got stuck in his head that morning for some reason, but Tim’s fairly certain it’s actually more of a not so subtle commentary on Jason’s opinion of Tim’s ability to utilize effective team work.

Either way, the next few hours are a strange mix of painfully awkward and breathtakingly fun.

But it somehow manages to make Tim more resolved than ever to step back.

He can’t push Jason away – first off, Tim doesn’t think he can make himself do it, and secondly, Jason would likely just ignore his efforts anyway – but he can keep quiet and uninvolved and keep making Jason have to work for any interaction between them.

Jason will get tired of it eventually and back off on his own.

Tim’s certain of it.

He knows from experience that he has a tendency to just fade out of the picture if he doesn’t actively put forth an effort to stay in it.

Eventually, Jason will be drawn away.

Which means that Tim can both move forward with his plan to back off, and simultaneously enjoy these last however many sessions of friendliness he gets without any guilt to mar the memories he’s making.

It’s fun and good and light and wonderful.

It hurts in a way Tim didn’t know anything could.

Neither of them bring up the night with GHOST and the Tolovis.

It’s obvious that both of them know they probably ought to talk about it, but neither of them make any real move to broach the subject.

And the longer they wait, the harder it gets to even consider bring it up.
Especially as the day drags to a close.

Jason stays for dinner – because Mrs Simz finds the pair of them still holed up in the media room when she comes over at five and insists that Jason stay.

He heads back to Wayne Manor before Mrs. Sim leaves.

Tim’s nanny is a tender soul and lingers to praise Tim’s efforts and encourage this budding friendship – which makes Tim want to squim and squee in equal measure.

It’s weird and wrong and ridiculous and wonderful.

It was an odd, exhausting day, but Tim survived it and he goes to bed feeling accomplished enough to actually get a good dose of genuine rest.

The following week is almost identical.

Jason comes over around 10am on Sunday.
Knocks on the door.
Picks the lock when Tim ignores him.

They wind up playing video games all day and Jason stays for supper.

Tim has school Monday through Friday, so Jason doesn’t show up until almost 4.
Follows the same pattern other wise.

Tim barely speaks to him unless Jason initiates the conversation.

After a week of this, seven days of weird and sad and wonderful something, Tim starts to forget his pull-back policy. Sort of. He still makes Jason pick the lock. But he starts interacting again, making jokes and unprompted comments instead of simply answering direct questions.

On their third Saturday of doing this, Jason drops a bomb that reminds Tim why he had the pull-back policy in place to start with.
“B’s lettin’ me go out again,” he says out of the blue while they’re washing up for dinner.

It takes Tim a few seconds to realize that he means Robin isn’t benched anymore.

“Oh,” he says, unable to articulate anything else about what’s going through his head.

There’s guilt – Tim is a distraction.

And worry – about Jason’s safety, about how he and Bruce are handling the things Tim doesn’t dare to ask about, about how Dick is handling them…

And pride and awe – Jason is so brave, and so good, and so strong…

And the ache of loneliness… because Jason’s going to be too busy for him, he’s gonna start pulling away… exactly like Tim planned, like Tim knows he should, like part of Tim wants him to… and like a bigger part of him is absolutely terrified of letting happen.

Jason pauses.

Rolls his eyes over Tim’s perfectly blank expression.

Squints.

“I’ll still be around, Timmers,” he says, slow and seriously, “You ain’t got nothin’ to worry about with that.”

“I’m not,” Tim hurries to refute. “Worried, I mean.”

Jason’s squint doesn’t let up.

“I’m… relieved actually,” Tim said, pulling a different worry off the back burner of his consideration and starts talking himself into the only defensible corner he can find. “I’m gonna be busy, too. I, uh, I got an – an, um, internship… With a Drake Labs special project.”

Jason’s expression doesn’t really change – not in any quantifiable way that Tim can name, at least – but Tim feels the edge of Jason’s suspicion sharpen.

“Yeah, um, I just got the confirmation email this morning,” Tim explains, concentrating very hard on rinsing the suds out from between his fingers. “I, uh, I start after school on Monday. It’s uh, it’s an um a coding project mostly, with a bit of chemistry… Trying to make solar power more efficient and accessible.”

“Uh-huh,” Jason murmurs darkly, frustration mixing with his suspicion now.

“I was gonna tell you,” Tim mutters. “At dinner. I wanted to let Mrs Simz know, too, and it’s kind of like an exciting thing, right? Something that should be announced at like a meal or something where the whole family is gathered? Dinner is traditionally for things like that, at least, according to the sociology book I picked up the other day.”

Jason takes a slow breath – clearly in a conscious effort to steady himself and keep from snapping something nasty at Tim.

Tim knows he would deserve it.

He just hopes that Jason buys his story.

He’s mixing a lot of bullshit with his truth, right now – pushing the limits of a believable
Tim does have something of an internship lined up, but it’s really more of a summer camp and it doesn’t start until school ceases to be a viable obstacle in late May.

And it is kinda a project with Drake Labs, but the reason Tim applied to begin with is because it has the potential to get him access to Wayne Tech over the summer – it’s the only summer camp he’s ever seen at Wayne Tech that won’t automatically kick his profile off the list for being a Drake.

He’s pretty sure that part of it is rigged because Bruce Wayne wants to keep an eye on him because Batman doesn’t fully believe he’s ignorant of the Bats’ identities, but he thinks that he can use this opportunity both to prove to Bruce that he isn’t going to investigate the Bats and to prove to the WE summer camp selection algorithms that he’s a legitimate candidate for consideration on future summer projects.

The confirmation email did come this morning, so that bit’s true.

But that’s about it.

Tim doesn’t really have anything new to keep him busy starting on Monday.

At best, he’s gonna start using some of his excess of free time to make sure he can impress when he’s actually allowed to do legitimate work on this special project thing.

“This internship thing doesn’t have anything to do with the Wayne Tech autonomous car project thingy B’s just announced, does it?” Jason growled. There was no real bite to it, certainly none aimed at Tim – Jason was just noticing the same detail about how this project would keep Tim under Bruce’s thumb all summer in a way Batman would find very useful for surveillance.

What Jason didn’t realize – couldn’t possibly guess – was that Tim didn’t care about that part. He was too excited about the potential of working with Wayne Tech to be terribly concerned with the fact that the only reason he was able to get into the program is because it made it easy for Batman to spy on him. Tim rationalizes that it’s only fair, because the only reason he didn’t get into any of the summer camps before now is that his last name is Drake.

“It might,” Tim says, answering Jason’s question as he gives up on avoiding his gaze and takes the towel Jason’s offering to dry his hands. “But only if I get through this Drake Labs thing and prove that I’m good enough to work on the rest of the project.”

Tim’s not sure if Jason buys it, but he seems to accept the explanation as good enough.

They transition into dinner with only the slightest edge of awkwardness.

The meal isn’t quite as nice and simple as the others they’ve had recently, but it’s still good, still nice, still much better than any other kind of dinner at Drake Mansion Tim’s been able to participate in. It’s good. And Tim will miss it now that it has to be over.

But he’s still glad he got the time he did.

Mrs. Simz is aptly excited about the internship.

And about the summer rugby team that Jason’s joining.

She knows both boys will be very busy but maintains high hopes that they’ll still be able to
have enough time together to enjoy their summers.

    Jason vehemently agrees.

    Tim says he agrees, but privately knows that they won’t be able to – that they shouldn’t put in the effort to force it because it’s better if they just go their separate ways.

    And better yet, he’s glad that this way, he can let Jason phase him out quickly – instead of having to watch the slow retreat in an agonizing march of inevitability.

    That night, after Jason leaves for Wayne Manor and Mrs Simz leaves to go be with her own family, Tim breathes in the heavy silence of the empty mansion and heads up to his room with a bitter sweet twist in his lungs.

    He turns on the Science Channel for background noise on the television perched in the corner of his bedroom and settles at his desk to start investigating solar power.

    Tim has absolutely no background in the science, so gaining some baseline information is crucial to ensuring his success at this quasi-internship / summer camp.

    He intends to do extremely well.

    His parents would expect nothing less from him, and Tim has grown used to the requirement of being exceptional.

    And for something like this, something that he wants like this, Tim intends to handle all the details of it with the thorough excellence he’s cultivated his whole life.

    Maybe he’ll be able to do something to help the Bats, to be useful to the Crusade, without causing any more incidents or being at all distracting.

    Maybe he can actually do something good.

Chapter End Notes

Again, sorry it took so long to update!

NEXT TIME: Jason knits himself some very special kid gloves, an exclusive brand he calls 'Tim Couture' ...
Rule #27 - Be Adaptable and Considerate

Chapter Summary

Jason finishes his recovery process, and addresses the lingering Tim Drake issues.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been a while!
Life is messy and when this kind of stress hits I turn to Video Games...
(This time it's FFXV, which is it's own problem for reasons I'll explain at the end).

Here's Jason's version of recent events!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty Seven: Rule #27 – Be Adaptable and Considerate

Jason wakes up around 10am on Monday morning with his hypothesis confirmed that everything about the world around him is now back to business.

Bruce spends the day at WE; Dick and Babs are knee deep in school work.

Jason’s still confined to bed, but he feels almost entirely better. A little weak, maybe a tad sore, but essentially, he’s totally fine.

Alfred doesn’t buy it for a second.

He doesn’t let Jason out of bed for more than the occasional bathroom break.

He does let Jason have a lap top though, which eases some of the aching boredom and the grinding feel of uselessness that’s starting to dig into his bones like crushed glass.

Jason spends the day catching up on homework, at least, while Alfred’s watching, and the rest of the time going over case notes attached to the Tolovi files – writes up his own quasi-official report. He still doesn’t remember enough to make it of any real use to anyone.

Which is annoying as hell, but not something he can really fix or anything.
Using mostly Barbara’s live-updating notes, Jason checks up on Tim – sees the GPS data with his own two eyes that shows Tim that night… in the Batmobile after Jason’s little rescue, as he forces the Batmobile to move off course to the Diamond District to where he contacted Selina Kyle, and then as he was hiking back across town to collect his bike and back pack before going straight home to the Drake Estate.

He goes over the numbers four or five times before he’s convinced enough that it’s legit, and that he should probably move on to digging into other things.

Like Selina Kyle… and her purported proteges.

Prior to this, she’d made one mention of wanting an apprentice that Jason knows of personally, about a year and a half ago when he was still new on the scene and rough around the Robin feathers. If Batman could just go about collecting so many stray humans, he had no right critiquing her penchant for helping out stray kittens – she’d been sassy and flirtatious, with no real malice in her tone. And she’d made one off hand mention about having recently spotted someone she might be interested in making into her own little mini-me.

Jason’s first thought in going over that notation now is that she meant Tim…

But if Tim’s account of when they met is accurate, she’d’ve already known Tim for at least six months… while the term ‘recent’ is pretty flexible in coming from the Cat, half a year is probably too much of a stretch.

Besides, Jason doesn’t think Tim IS Selina’s apprentice.

Stray… Stray was … different.

He doesn’t have a clear enough picture of the Cat in his memory to say that Stray and Tim don’t look at all alike, but … they didn’t feel the same, like they could possibly be the same person. The pictures Jason has of Stray’s body language… is just too disparate to reconcile with his picture of Tim…

And Tim… Tim would’ve told him if he were a master thief’s apprentice, right?

Or at least given something away… Tim is not that good a liar… especially when he’s scared as shit about the Tolovi’s nearly possibly killing his heroes… when he told them about knowing Selina at all, he would’ve been easy to see through Tim’s tale about being nothing more to her than a vague midnight acquaintance, right?

There’s a weird curl of almost doubt in him at the thought, but he’s still pretty thoroughly convinced that behind the goggles Stray is not Tim Drake.

Digging into that much is exhausting.
He has to take a break around lunchtime – Alfred brings him chicken salad sandwiches and brooks no argument against his ‘suggestion’ of Jason’s closing the laptop while he eats.

Afterwards, with food in his belly, that bizarre sense of safety still lingering in the sunny warmth of his bedroom, and the quiet of midafternoon in a household that operates primarily after dark, Jason drifts off to sleep before he can even think of getting back to work.

He’s up again by sunset, and digging through more files, Dick and Bruce check in with him around dinner time.

Dick somehow wheedled Alfred into allowing fish sticks and box mac and cheese onto the menu… which makes Jason want to drown him in his sleep or something equally dramatic because fish sticks and box mac and cheese hit Jason hard right in the childhood feels and Jason… Jason just… cannot deal with that.

He’d told Dick once, just once, that the first thing he’d learned to cook was a batch of frozen fish sticks… that he’d made them for Catherine when she’d been sick in bed, from a flu or some shit for once, and not a down swing from a chemical high… that she’d made them for him when he’d been sick…

And the mac and cheese… that was for special occasions, when they had milk and butter and a reason to use it. That was for when he got a certificate or something from school for straight A’s, or for a rare project that his teacher felt deserved commending…

Jason would never have told Dick about that, not unless he was so punch drunk on blood loss and pain meds that nothing like pride or shame or anything mattered at all any more… but he’d only been that bad off once before and Dick hadn’t been there.

At least, Jason thinks he wasn’t.

And Dick just looks so. Fucking. Proud.

His face falls a few seconds after he swept into the room with the tray in his hands and he manages to take in Jason’s stricken expression.

“Fish sticks were your sick day food when you were little, right?” Dick asks, sounding startlingly unsure for the golden boy of the Family. “Well… mac and cheese was mine… so I thought… I thought we could combine them… make a new tradition. A special Brothers Wayne sick day meal… but uh… I can ask Alfred to whip up something else.”

Dick is back pedaling, but Bruce is in the doorway and blocking his escape.

Bruce places a hand on Dick’s shoulder while keeping carefully assessing eyes trained on Jason’s face – worried, wary… and almost uncertain.

Jason can’t peg why, he’s too preoccupied with trying to force himself back under a reasonable measure of control. He can feel the edge of a panic attack threatening and he beats that shit down without a shred of mercy – he’s already screwed himself over more than enough to be considered an invalid, anything more and he’ll likely have Robin stripped from him immediately without any chance at all of redeeming himself.

“I hope you at least brought the fucking ketchup,” he growls, scooting up and over into the usual ‘meal ready’ arrangement.

There’s a beat of disbelief while Dick doubts his ears, but then he nods and breaks into a
wide smile that’s somehow twice as blinding and sparkly as the one he’d started with.

As if there’d never been a bobble in the lightness of the atmosphere, Dick bounds over to join Jason on his bed – the food tray set on the curl-over stand between them.

Bruce doesn’t adapt as quickly. He looks like he might want to press the issue of Jason’s jerk reaction, but Dick and Jason seem perfectly united on the not talking about it front and he lets it go as Dick flicks the television on to catch an episode of that crazy anime with bizarro land magical fruit eating pirates and endless layers of crazy shenanagans that are ridiculous enough to distract anyone from reality.

The rest of supper passes without event and, soon afterwards, Bruce and Dick head down to the Cave to get ready for patrol.

Jason’s definitely hit the point of healing that manifests itself in restless aggravation. He doesn’t quite resent the others for being able to head out on patrol, but he doesn’t like them much for it either.

He won’t be allowed down in the Cave, that much he knows without asking.

Instead of testing Alfred’s patience, Jason stays in his room.

Works through a light round of workout forms – including the special yoga, tai chi, weird balance thing that Bruce taught them to help them push their bodies’ limits and seamlessly blend the various martial arts elements they’re learning into one unique style all their own.

He pushes himself harder than Alfred would approve, but he’s feeling better and he needs to get back into peak condition ASAP if he’s going to convince Bruce that he’s not such a screw up that he has to be kicked out as Robin. Or out of the Manor altogether.

He has to.

The rest of the week is more of the same.

He spends the nights working up his muscles in careful, quiet routines that go unnoticed even by the sharpest eyes. And he spends the days on his laptop, not always in his bed, but always in a quiet space. By Tuesday afternoon he migrates to spend most of his daylight hours in the library, catching up on school work and checking up on the Tolovi case files – making sure that every last thread of the investigation is neatly tied up.

Rwen Tolovi may have been an arrogant bastard, but it seems like he’s actually been true to his word about getting his shit out of Gotham.

Jason feels a grim and gritty satisfaction at that fact.

The other variable Jason keeps a close eye on is Tim.
Nightwing and Batgirl have been keeping close tabs on him as well, and their reports claim he’s been very shaken up by recent events… which Jason isn’t sure how to take.

Tim has every reason to be shaken… but knowing him, even as little as he does… either Tim is way more shaken than they realize to be so openly showing signs of it or he’s faking it for some reason… or something else is happening that he’s using the Tolovi Incident to cover for…

By Friday morning, Batman’s gotten a straightforward interrogation with him and the notes from it have been typed up into the case file.

Tim is definitely scared. Very scared.

The realization makes something sharp and bitter twist in Jason’s gut.

He informs Alfred on Friday that he intends to go see Tim.

Alfred simultaneously offers resounding support, and deflates his sails completely, by grounding his ass until the next day.

He does however, offer Jason a consolation prize: helping him in the kitchen.

“If you’re well enough to endeavor a jaunt to a friend’s house, you’re well enough to aid in the upkeep of your own house,” Alfred comments, setting Jason to polishing the silver before he offers the wonderful privilege of helping him cook dinner.

Bruce is informed by Alfred that night of Jason’s intentions for the morning, and because no one argues with Alfred, Jason’s granted permission to go despite it being very clear that Bruce would like to keep him confined to the Manor for another week at least.

That night when Bruce and Dick go out for patrol, Jason ventures down to the Cave – only after Batman and Nightwing are well out into the city.

Alfred arches an eyebrow, but it’s only mild disapproval causing the curve. And it eases significantly when Batgirl checks in with the video call function on her gauntlet and grants the Cave the kind of smile that’s becoming far too infrequent from her these days.

She and Jason chat awhile and under the supervision of Alfred and Batgirl, Jason works through a few forms on the mats – moving properly through the full range of motions and putting the force and effort in it that he’d had to curtail slightly while cooped up in his room.

Jason is restless and antsy when he tries to go to bed.

Can’t sleep.
Last time he was nervous like this … well, honestly, he doesn’t exactly recall a time with nerves like this in his gut.

Last time he was nervous at all was the afternoon before he first went out as Robin, and that was different – and an oddity in its own right. An almost… good nervous. An excited kind of nervous.

This… is different.

He’s not sure what he’s expecting.

Tim… if he’s not… okay… Jason’s not really sure what he’s gonna do, but if he is… he’s still not sure what he’ll do because there’s no way a kid like that should be okay with anything that’s recently happened to him.

Nothing about any of it bodes well.

He punishes his pillow for most of the night, beating it into something comfy enough to snatch a few hours of fitful sleep between bursts of restless movement.

By nine in the morning he can’t keep himself in bed.

Alfred has breakfast ready for him. Dick isn’t awake yet and Alfred suggests that perhaps leaving before Jason’s adoptive brother rouses would be best.

Dick wants to help Tim as much as Jason does, but his methodology and the arbitrary lines in the sand he draws are not always compatible with Jason’s… and Dick’s methods have yielded results that the butler has been finding less than satisfactory.

A different approach is necessary.

And Jason’s had success with him before.

Jason shrugs.

But the vote of confidence soothes the something spikey in the space behind his lungs.

It’s warm enough that he doesn’t need a coat, but the wind is still… refreshing and he keeps his pace quick as he travels over to the Drake Mansion.

He contemplates taking the short cut through the yard, hopping the wall, and slipping through the Drake’s garden, but decides that getting mud all over the Drake’s freakishly sterile house probably won’t put Tim in any kind of mood to open up.

The way by road’s not that long anyway.

He makes it to Tim’s door by 10, knocks, and receives the same treatment Dick did when he came by to check up – he’s ignored.
Rings the bell, knocks again, same shtick.

By 10:05, he’s done.

He picks the lock.

Marches straight up the stairs to Tim’s bedroom.
Flings the door open.
Comes face to face with the pasty ass baby seal and big ol’ god damn bambi eyes.

Freezes the fuck up.

Because Tim might not be Stray, but Stay got Jason’s stunted little brain thinkin’ about things it’d never really bothered with before and suddenly those bambi eyes… are a lot more interesting for a whole mess of reasons that should probably be reviewed very carefully behind closed doors before Jason even pretends to think about acting on any one of them.

Tim is sitting at his computer chair, and it’s slowly rotating underneath him from how he jumped when Jason burst open the door – Tim’s head is rotating on his neck like a particularly creepy gyroscope or something. His focus is utterly unwavering and very distracting.

He tugs at his sleeves, hands resting in his lap in a way that would’ve derailed Jason’s ability to pay attention to his own brain even further if not for the sudden rush of anger in him at the sleeve thing – the sleeve thing that hides injuries he shouldn’t have, and seems disturbingly like it’s already becoming a dangerous habit.

Jason doesn’t think he’s gotten any new injuries since the kidnapping stupidity, what with the Bats all hovering like helicopter parents who’ve never been told that stalkery is a unhealthy pastime, but he latches onto the anger – grounds himself in it.

He glowers at Tim and growls, “You are a stupid little shit.”

Bambi blinks and Jason feels a little more solid.

"You know that, Timmers, right? That you are a stupid, reckless, idiotic little shithead of a genius who doesn't know the first damn thing about working with a team," Jason goes on with an exasperated shake of his head. "Even I know I should consult with someone before disappearing completely. Leave a fuckin' note or somethin'."

Jason huffs, then turns his glare straight back on Tim at full force. "You have any idea how fucking lucky you got? What if nobody figured out that somethin' was wrong?"
The silence seems to stretch past any possible limit.

It’s worse than talking to Bruce, worse than talking to a frickin’ white board… the kid is the blankest slate of utterly uncomprehending Jason has ever seen.

It makes Jason want to take the few steps to cross the distance between them so he can grab the idiot’s shoulders and shake some bloody sense into him.

But if he grabs Tim’s shoulders – and oh hell do his fingers twitch with anticipation – he’s not sure he’ll be able to think straight enough to remember why he’s still angry.

And his anger just keeps building and boiling over on itself.

Until something in that stupid little robot brain clicks and Tim squeaks, “I’m sorry.”

And just like that everything deflates.

Jason hangs his head and huffs because he’s not entirely sure what he’s supposed to do now because the anger was definitely all that was keeping him propped up until just now.

But Tim’s still hella skittish.

His apology was a squeak. And Jason can hear how his breaths are coming fast in shallow pants that are definitely not helpful to sustained health.

As much as Jason wants to beat the snot of the little sucker, Tim needs to be healthy enough to make that survivable. Stupid robot is gonna rattle his brain right out of his ears.

So.

Pause.

Normal.

Tim needs Jason to pretend things are normal enough for him to calm down and then maybe they can start getting at the issues that have Tim so rattled – and have Jason very reasonably worried about his sanity.

Jason can do that.

Last time Tim got himself nabbed and Jason came over to check on him, they just kinda ignored that bit of it. They worked it out. And Tim totally owes Jason some game time in that sweet
ass media center he got to see but not utilize last time he was here.

"Next time, just call the damn Bats first," Jason instructs firmly, trying to force the last few stabs of tension out of the air before he transitions into playing at normality, "Hell, call the fuckin' police – they aren't all shit at their jobs, you know."

Tim nods.

Like he’s taken the instruction to heart as gospel truth.

And that is just the biggest pile of steaming hot shit Jason has ever seen.

Dumbass figured out who Batman was at like nine years old. Frickin nine.

He’s a dog with a god damn bone and there is no way in hell he’s just gonna let shit go.

But calling him out on that right now won’t help anyone, though Tim seems to notice that Jason’s not quite on board with his story.

“I won’t,” he says – clearly attempting to reassure Jason that he means it.

His gaze drops from Jason to stare at where his fingers have begun to fiddle with the phantom of a stray thread on the taught-stretched knee of his dark jeans. "Do it again, I mean. I won't. I'm gonna step back from trying to help the Bats with any of their cases... I'm just a distraction, anyway, so... It'll be better for everyone."

His jaw works something over as he considers his next words carefully.

Batman has bugged Tim's bed room, after all.

Jason is limited in how he can respond, but that’s okay... they’re gonna try playing normal here for a bit, after all.

"Yeah, well, whatever," Jason grumbles, forcibly dismissing his frustration. "I think you owe me a little distraction, right now, regardless. I came over here like three weeks ago to play video games and we got interrupted by another one of your stupid little stunts."

Tim ducks his head guiltily.
"Well?" Jason prompts after a beat. "Media room. Chop, chop."

"But... I have homework."

Jason arches a skeptical eyebrow and shifts his gaze to the computer screen.

The image of a fluffy blue cat trussed up in a doll-size white lab coat and safety goggles as an off-screen human manipulates its limbs into explaining diagrams of something that looks like an exploding bowl of electro-acid koolaid does not help Tim's case about homework.

He's clearly finished his homework.

"Well, I ain't playing Portal by myself, Timbo," Jason huffs, "So, up an' at 'em."

Tim gives a heavy, reluctant sigh and gingerly unfolds himself from his computer chair in a languid, petulant motion that is just So. Not. Helpful. to Jason’s ability to focus.

Tim’s legs almost fail to support him, and Jason has to clench his fists against his sides to keep from moving as Tim wobbles. Tim rights himself under his own power and shuffles towards Jason with a lingering uncertainty in his steps.

He passes Jason in the door without pausing to notice the way Jason’s gone stock still – gone Bat still – and keeps right on shuffling down the hall.

Jason follows at a mild distance.

Playing normal might be more difficult that Jason imagined, but he’s still determined to finagle it somehow.

He follows Tim into the Media Room and at his insistence, they do end up playing Portal – which is fortunate, because it takes a solid chunk of Jason’s concentration to solve the puzzles, even with Tim’s impressive robot brain helping. And the occupied piece of his brain keeps the rest of it busy enough to focus on making Tim interact with him – instead of allowing it rein to get side tracked into thinking about the way Tim’s massive sweater is falling off one shoulder or how he bites his lip when he’s confused by a ridiculously illogical twist in the game – which is important because Tim is pretty much refusing to interact with him.

Tim seems willing to suggest options for getting through the puzzles, but won’t say more than a word on what he’s been doing lately.

Won’t explain why he’s been ignoring Dick’s attempts to check up.

Won’t explain why he looks so fuckin’ sad every time he looks down during the waits on one of the load screens.

It’s fun and light and really… nice, otherwise, but Jason’s not as easy with the situation of
playing pretend normal and he’d thought he would be.

Neither of them bring up the night with GHOST and the Tolovis.

It’s obvious that both of them know they probably ought to talk about it, but neither of them make any real move to broach the subject.

And the longer they wait, the harder it gets to even consider bring it up.

Especially as the day drags to a close.

That cleaning lady / nanny that Tim was always on about, Mrs. Simz, she finds the two of them holed up in the media room around five and demands that Jason stay over for supper. She honestly does it in a ‘sorta suggestion, really an order’ manner that Alfred uses – not nearly as powerful or potent, but reminiscent enough to make Jason kinda want to stay.

And she’s not half bad, he supposes as the meal unfolds.

She’s not Alfred, but she’s a pretty good cook and she makes Tim clear his plate with subtle looks and pressures that don’t make him feel cornered. Clever lady, good priorities.

Keen eyes, too.

She spends the whole evening observing Jason carefully, with an indirect stare that’s not quite as forcefully evaluative as Batman’s, but one that’s still nothing to sniff at.

Jason had been pissed with Mrs. Simz for the whole *letting Tim sneak out* thing that she’s clearly very guilty of allowing, but she does seem to be genuinely invested in his well being.

She seems to support Tim’s friendship with Jason, something on which Jason has rather mixed feelings… Jason’s friendship with him keeps Tim a bit too close for comfort to the dangers of the Gotham underworld. On the other hand… Tim would clearly be emboiled in the madness anyway and being close to Jason and the Bats now meant that people were out there looking for him, and ready to fight, when he went missing…

If Jason hadn’t been worried about Tim’s involvement, he may not have noticed Tim’s kidnapping until after Rwen got his hands on him, got that drug in his veins… Of course, if Tim hadn’t been worried about Jason, and actively digging for information to help his case, what are the odds he would’ve been able to happen upon the details that lead to his kidnapping at all?

Spinning himself in circles would get him nowhere and Jason forces his thoughts out of the ridiculous rut they’re digging.

By the time Jason gets back to the Manor, he’s exhausted.

Dick and Bruce are getting ready for patrol, but they ask about how Tim’s doing and how Jason’s day went. It’s casual, familial… nice.

He goes to bed less than an hour after they leave for Gotham proper.
Sleeps the whole night, soundly.

Wakes up Sunday morning ready to do it all over again.

Jason’s determined to make Tim open up again, to relax out of this weirdly skittish shell he’s wrapped himself up inside in wake of the Tolovi incident.

Jason goes over around 10am on Sunday.
Knocks on the door.
Picks the lock when Tim ignores him.

They wind up playing video games all day and Jason stays for supper.

Tim has school Monday through Friday, so Jason doesn’t head over until almost 4. Follows the same pattern other wise.

Tim barely speaks unless Jason initiates the conversation, or he brilliantly intuits a solution to one of the puzzles they’re working through.

It’s… kind of alarming, definitely worrisome.

Particularly combined with the weird mix of happy and sad that keep flitting across the intentional blankness of his primary expression.

Jason does make a bit of progress with him.

It takes almost a full week, and a transition to a game with a more involved and elaborate storyline, before Tim starts snarking at the idiotic characters, but he does. And once he starts snarking at the game he starts more openly interacting with Jason again – letting himself relax.

He still makes Jason pick the lock when he comes over – which is odd and a bit concerning, yet not any kind of actual barrier – but he starts to laugh and smile more freely.

Jason continues working with Tim, and he recovers from his ‘skiing accident’ enough to go back to school himself – and to start working out again, really working out, training his body rather
than just doing the minimal to maintain it.

Everything starts to return to normal, slowly but surely.

Jason starts pester B to let him out in the suit again, cautiously at first – wary of the possibility that pushing the issue might just send him straight to stripping the mantle. But as Bruce shows no signs of considering taking Robin off the streets for good, and Nightwing reluctantly announces that he probably should consider heading back to California soon, Jason gets more vocal about being ready to head back out.

It takes two more weeks for Bruce to consent to a slow reintroduction of a patrol routine.

The Friday night he agrees is one Jason spends elated.

The Saturday morning afterwards is one Jason spends conflicted.

If he goes out at night, and maintains his standing at school, he’s going to have much less time to spend at the Drake Mansion with Tim.

He doesn’t want that fact to send Tim back into that skittish little shell he started in.

Jason hems and haws over how to bring it up until they run out of time to waver. Mrs Simz has already arrived and sent them to wash up for supper before Jason manages to awkwardly spit out, “B’s lettin’ me go out again.”

Staring at the run of water over his hands, Jason can’t see Tim’s expression, but he can feel the confused little robot brain whirring through the possibilities of meaning – clicking through them systematically until it lights on one that makes sense.

“Oh.”

There’s a lot in the word.

Realization that’s grim in a way that makes Jason sure Tim understands he’s talking about Robin. There’s also disappointment – reflective of that flash of sadness that’s been flitting over his expression when he’s not focused on keeping it blank or snarking at an NPC.

He knew this was coming, obviously – has clearly been dreading it.

Jason shuts off the water and turns to scan carefully over Tim’s face.

He gets absolutely nothing from it.
Blank wall, worse than B.

Jason squints. Stares harder, tries to get *anything* out of him.

Doesn’t get much, but can guess that the mix of dread and resignation in the one syllable response Tim gave might be covering loneliness. It’s not like Tim’s got many other friends, not like Jason’s really had to fight for his time or anything…

"I'll still be around, Timmers," he says, slow and seriously – watching Tim carefully as he speaks, "You ain't got nothin' to worry about with that."

"I'm not," Tim hurries to refute, stepping up to wash his own hands. "Worried, I mean."

Bull. *Shit.*

Jason doesn’t let his scrutiny ease.

Tries to figure out exactly what Tim’s focused on that’s keep him all wound up.

Before he figures it out, Tim’s pushing out another string of words – not stuttered, but not quite steady either, "I'm... relieved actually, I'm gonna be busy, too. I, uh, I got an – an, um, internship... With a Drake Labs special project."

It seems true.

But Jason’s suspicious. Mostly of why Tim hasn’t brought it up before now.

It sounds like something he should have been excited about, enough to talk about as a possible option for his summer, even if nothing was settled yet.

"Yeah, um, I just got the confirmation email this morning," Tim explains, concentrating very hard on rinsing the suds out from between his fingers. "I, um, I start after school on Monday. It's uh, it's an um a coding project mostly, with a bit of chemistry... Trying to make solar power more efficient and accessible. Maybe find a way to make it applicable to taxis."

"Uh-huh," Jason murmurs darkly, frustration mixing with his suspicion now.

Again, it sounds true.

But Jason’s acutely suspicious.

And not only of Tim.

B’s been working on something lately, something with Wayne Enterprises that sounds eerily similar… If Tim’s just getting himself stuck under B’s thumb… maybe this isn’t actually a good thing. Jason wants to think it has potential to give Tim something interesting to do all day during the summer break, possibly with people.
"I was gonna tell you," Tim mutters appologetically, breaking Jason’s concentration as he steps back from the sink—while avoiding Jason’s gaze. "At dinner. I wanted to let Mrs Simz know, too, and it’s kind of like an exciting thing, right? Something that should be announced at like a meal or something where the whole family is gathered? Dinner is traditionally for things like that, at least, according to the sociology book I picked up the other day."

Jason wants to smack the idiot.

Seriously.

Jason can’t tell if Tim really means it, if he’s genuinely that ridiculous.

It’s… plausible.

Jason takes a slow breath—carefully running over his next words.

He can’t tell how much of what Tim said is true, how much is bullshit, or if he should actually try pushing for the truth… it could just backfire on him. He’d gotten Tim to open back up a lot over the last few weeks, and yet, it would not take much at all to send him back into that stupid skittish shell.

But he does have to check.

"This internship thing doesn't have anything to do with the Wayne Tech autonomous car project thingy B’s just announced, does it?"

"It might," Tim says, answering Jason's question as he gives up on avoiding his gaze and takes the towel Jason's offering to dry his hands. "But only if I get through this Drake Labs thing and prove that I'm good enough to work on the rest of the project."

And he just… looks So. Damn. Hopeful…

He wants to get this project greenlit—even if it means being caught under Bruce’s thumb, Tim wants it more than Jason’s seen him want anything.

Unsurprisingly, even to himself at this point, Jason caves to the hidden pleading in Tim’s stupidly big blue bambi eyes.

Tim formally makes the announcement of his internship at dinner and Mrs Simz is aptly excited for him about it.

Jason uses the opening to announce that he’s got summer plans of his own, a bullshit story about joining a rugby team that will explain any new bruises fairly easily and also excuse the fact that he’ll have far less time to hang around here at the Drake Mansion.

That night when Jason leaves, he does it with a mix of excitement and trepidation.
He’s glad to be going back out with B, and foiling a jewelry store robbery only an hour into patrol makes him certain that he needs to be out helping the Crusade, but he does still worry about how Tim is coping.

He intends to keep checking up on him.

It’s not perfect, and it’s not a solution, but it’s a plan… and that might just be enough for now… they’ll test it out, reevaluate if it seems like Tim’s not moving on from the Tolovi shit, see if they can figure out something else.

But for now, it’s a plan.

And Jason can work with that.

Chapter End Notes

So this is probably going to be the last chapter set up quite like the current pattern.

I've jumped into Babs' PoV and it's been cool - but between work stress and life stress, it's been tricky. So Babs' chapter got out of control long and may be re-worked and divided up into smaller bits...

Annnnd, because I've logged a few too many hours on FFXV as a distraction from life... there's a solid possibility for an MT!Prompto fic popping up here in the next month or so...

Anyway, NEXT TIME: A peak into Babs' role as the long-suffering know-it-all... ^_~
Rule #28 - Support Your Family

Chapter Summary

Babs may not have been directly involved from the very beginning, but she'd certainly been watching all along.

Chapter Notes

Sooooooo Life has been pretty vicious lately.

This chapter has a narrative style switch up. I'm not entirely satisfied with it, and I might rework it to be more like the other chapters, but I'm leaving it for now.

Thanks for sticking with me! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Eight: Rule #28 – Support Your Family

Barbara Gordon was no one’s fool.

She felt plenty foolish much of the time, but she knew she had a good head on her shoulders and that even a genius was sometimes forced to admit they can’t connect all the dots.

She was not a savant, after all – and sometimes she really did appreciate the reasonable social skills that come with possession of a limited genius.

Social skills allowed her restraint and clarity when dealing with the unique craziness of the people she’s come to consider Family over the last few years.

Those skills, combined with her observational abilities and impressive intuition, mean that Barbara Gordon is one of the very first people inside the Bat Clan to realize that Timothy Jackson Drake is Important.

From the moment that Dick mentioned that Jason had made a friend, Barbara realized that Tim is important. Jason didn’t make friends easy, and he certainly didn’t take exception to just anyone, so the fact that Jason openly expressed any kind of interest in the kid clearly meant something fairly substantial.
It was a much more significant something than it seemed the rest of the Bats realized.

By the time the case revolving around the new drug sweeping into Gotham had gained it’s own file inside the Batcomputer… Babs knew that Tim was going to be a truly permanent fixture in their lives.

That Tim had been so determined and idiotic so as to intentionally injure himself in order to draw enough blood to make a sizeable sample for testing the interaction of fresh blood with the contaminants found in drug tainted blood simply confirmed her hypothesis.

Timothy was a Bat.

By simple merit of stupid do-gooder dumbassery and brute willpower and utter disregard of the common bounds of sanity, Timothy Jackson Drake was a goddamned Bat.

Whether he knew it or not.

Whether anyone else knew it or not.

Tim was a Bat, and already knee deep in the self-destructive determination to prevail and extract justice and protect the city that they all loved.

She sent him an email attempting dissuade him from continuing his investigation, but she knew as she did it that even if he made a valient attempt at listening to her instructions, it was more of a delay tactic than any kind of genuine deterrent. She never entertained a genuine hope that he would even attempt to comply, but she nursed a rather impressed resignation to it when she got the ping that said Tim figured out how to open her missive.

The boy was definitely Bat material, in more ways than one.

Barbara resolved right then to watch him – to keep a subtle, but very close eye on him as the days and weeks progressed and the drug case continued to develop dead ends.

Barbara was out patrolling on her lonesome when Dick and Jason found Tim at the Wayne
Gala for the Arts… she had long ago bored with how quiet the night was – how they all had been since this drug started moving in – and she was frustrated by the brick wall she’d run into regarding her own case in Chinatown.

She watched Dick through the museum’s security feeds as he awkwardly attempted to connect with Jason – still caught up in trying too hard to treat him like a beloved brother to really key in on how Jason just wanted to feel like a person. Dick was usually a people person, but Jason was particularly adept at throwing him off his game in a way Dick couldn’t navigate.

It’s been kind of fun to watch him squirm and struggle, Barbara admitted – laughing at his ridiculous flailing is like a sitcom tailored to her exact tastes and it had quickly become something of a guilty pleasure of hers. And since she was so all-consumingly bored and stuck and frustrated, she’d take her giggles however she could get them these days.

She was still wandering the streets in a semblance of her usual patrol that night, but she was only poking her nose into the most suspicious places. The rest of her attention was on the security camera feeds she’s tied into her gauntlet display allowing her to catch every detail as she watched Dick and Jason at the Senior Showcase Art Museum Gala …

And then… she found a particular warehouse.

It was a warehouse clearly relevant to the current case and her detective instincts were screaming at her to investigate further… but… there are some things that Barbara Gordon knew better than to force herself to do.

This wasn’t just about facing her fears or staring down the darkness that lurked in Gotham’s alleyways… the absolute carnage inside that warehouse was something that no reasonable human had to pretend they were comfortable with… at least not alone.

She pinged an alert requesting back-up to the Cave, though she suspected that Agent A had already contacted Batman about the possibility she could need help.

Resigning herself to waiting for Bruce to show, Barbara leaned up against the exterior wall of the warehouse and turned her full attention to Dick and Jason at the Gala.

It meant she was actively watching as Dick and Jason spotted Tim.

It meant she saw Jason’s immediate reaction to noticing Tim’s arrival, that she saw it all in beautiful HD – and because she had been the one who re-hashed the museum’s security, it was a good enough quality picture to see the reaction in detail and far enough removed from the situation to see the whole of it clearly.

That boy was just about as far gone already as anybody she’d ever seen.

And there was no going back.

Babs knew that much well before Bruce stepped up to her dad to try out the excuse that Tim was just an ‘important family friend’ – the excuse was pathetic and flimsy and just plain ridiculous, even when considering all the nonsense Brucie Wayne usually spouted.
Seriously Bruce, just stop…

The Gordons tolerate your bullshit, they do not buy any of it.

The only reason he was talking to the Commissioner was that Barbara needed him to leave the Gala early – to don the cape and cowl ahead of schedule and … essentially come save her. She was supposed to be a big vigilante now, but there were some things that still… some things that got to her in a way she couldn’t conquer with plain old Gotham grit.

Her dad had nightmares about the things he’d seen, so she didn’t feel too pathetic for having a weak stomach when it came to walking into a warehouse that was absolutely plastered in human gore… It was a crime scene that required Bruce’s involvement anyway, being that it’s a new death very likely related to the new drug – though it was a far more vicious death than any of the others she’d seen, what was left of the body still displayed the hallmarks of the overdose symptoms. The odd swelling of the blood vessels and the blackened ichor that stiffened them from the inside and made them visible even from a distance.

Barbara couldn’t do any more on her own even if it wasn’t quite so horrific.

She had secured the scene and was now standing outside to wait for Bruce.

It made her stomach turn to consider what was behind the door – made it swirl in such a vicerally appalled manner that she couldn’t even start running through the standard procedures for processing a crime scene.

She’d secured the scene and chose to ignore it while waiting for Batman.

Because Batgirl knew her limits and knew that loosing her lunch over a dead body would not only contaminate the scene, but be utterly unbecoming – would be a disgrace to the Batgirl cowl. She’d rather admit openly to being squeamish, wait carefully, and follow the proper emergency procedure, than pretend not to be squeamish and ruin this potential break in the case, thereby risking the safety of her city.

Instead of thinking about the horrors behind the door at her back, Barbara forced herself to focus – watching Dick and Jason and Tim run around on their ridiculous little museum heist.

Tim was caught up in playing with a laser, Jason was condumed with trying to keep him from having a panic attack, and Dick… was running from security – like an oversized puppy playing keep away with a stick.

It made a fond smile tug at Barbara’s face, even as she calculated how much work is going to be involved with trying to scrub all the evidence of their shenanigans from the museum’s security systems. It wouldn’t be too hard, not for her.

And it was worth it to watch Dick and Jason and Tim all working together like the team Barbara already knows they will inevitably become.

Watching them keeps her spirits up until Batman arrives.
He was disappointed in her, obviously.

He didn’t say anything about it, but it was Batman, he didn’t say anything. Period.

But Barbara knew the cant of his shoulders, and the particular twist to the perpetual expression of an almost-frown she could see beneath the cowl… and Batman was disappointed.

In her.

Again.

That had been the biggest adjustment in joining the Bat Clan – feeling like a failure on a frighteningly regular basis.

Prior to joining up with Batsy, she’d been the golden girl – a truly gifted genius with the potential to really go places. But now… now she had a mentor who was actually able to teach her things, things she couldn’t learn from a book, and that was new.

But so was the possibility disappointing her mentor.

All her previous mentors had loved her, even though they’d only managed to teach her a few things here and there. Bruce could teach her so much more, about… well about nearly everything – save for things regarding healthy emotional relationships or the means for maintaining a reasonable work-life balance, but still – he could teach her so much, and she could do so much for the city with his help, for the world, honestly, and that… well, it was worth feeling inadequate a lot of the time.

It rarely helped much in the moment to remember that, but it has always been true.

That night, Barbara met Tim in person for the first time.

Technically, she’d encountered him before, but only in passing; at the police station, or at public forums, or at Galas with his parents – never as a significant entity in his own right.

Tonight, he was significant.

He was sitting in Bruce’s chair at the Bat Computer – absolutely dwarfed by everything around him, but not intimidated by that in the slightest.

Tim worked the Bat Computer like a pro.

To the point that when he is forced to leave for the night, Babs made absolutely certain to do a few dozen checks to make sure he hasn’t tacked on any back doors for the system in his own bedroom to exploit – because Barbara had the corner on that market, and for all he was impressive, Tim was still just a kid… He should not be subjected to the full range of what the Bats encounter on a night to night basis.
She already felt guilty enough with what she’d discussed with him in explicit detail.

Though… Tim seemed to have appreciated the gory particulars to a rather worrisome extent… she’d worry about that later, however. Chalk it up to appreciating the honesty for now.

In the meantime, she wanted to focus on the case – on what she could contribute to the effort, and to making significant, viable progress with solving it.

When Alfred came back from setting Tim up in a guest room for the night, he was wearing a serious expression that only came up when he was worried about the Family.

Dick and Jason went to join Batman, but they hadn’t been active on coms… still, something could’ve happened and Barbara knew better than to ignore that potential, no matter how paranoid the consideration may seem.

“What’s wrong?”

Alfred gave a little sigh – a sign of fairly deep distress, coming from him – and said seriously, “Master Timothy declined supper. He did eventually accept the hot chocolate, and yet… It worries an old man to see such a sweet boy so uncertain of how to accept help. It’s nearly as trying to my nerves as when Master Jason first came to us.”

“Master Timothy?” Barbara asked, that slight, nearly fond smile tugging at her again.

Outsiders weren’t referred to as young masters in Alfred’s vernacular. ‘Mister Drake’ had gotten himself into a spot of trouble several months ago that had gotten Alfred aptly worried, but now Master Timothy was drawing out his true mother hen-ing capabilities.

Alfred arched an eyebrow in her direction – questioning, quelling, and conspiratorial all at once. Barbara could never make sense of how effectively the old man managed that, but his ability to pack so much into a single expression wasn’t relevant to the point he was making.

That point being Barbara was not the only one who has noticed that Tim was important.

Alfred was the real detective here, always had been… and he was duly insulted that Barbara would ever question his instincts when it comes to the Family. Not terribly insulted, but distinctly unamused.

“He’ll come around, Alfred,” Barbara assured the butler, wishing she could do more to genuinely help in soothing his worries. Alfred was the bedrock of the Family, crucial to the very existence of the Bat Clan and any hopes they maintained of continued survival.

“Let us hope so, my dear,” Alfred said, refocusing. “Now, the others will be back shortly, but in the meantime, what can I do to help? A grilled cheese, perhaps? Or rather… I suppose tonight is more of a banana smoothie night, isn’t it. Green tea and soy, I take it?”

Gratitude flooded through Barbara – who hadn’t even realized that she was also supposed to
be hungry by now, who hadn’t yet realized that the idea of actually eating food might make her stomach so upset it could cause her to slide out of her chair.

She managed to right herself before she swayed too far, but her stomach definitely couldn’t take real food right now. The sugars and vitamins and proteins of a smoothie would be enough to keep her going, and be light enough for her to keep it down.

More of Alfred’s magic at work.

With a satisfied sigh as Alfred returned with her ‘meal’ Barbara refocused, turning back to her data as she tried to finagle out some sort of new pattern inside the numbers when working with Tim’s hypothesis as the primary sort filter.

It pushed them father along on understanding the serum than any of their previous clues had managed. It connected a few key dots within the attack patterns of the other cases that had otherwise been considered more or less anomalous.

Which was enough to get Barbara through the night.

It was enough to get her through the next day.

Barbara muddles through her collegiate course work at a plodding pace, honestly avoiding the moment when she was finished enough to warrant checking back on the Bats’ secure server to check on the drug case… to see if the light of day could help her make any new connections.

She put it off until the evening, waiting until after she’d has a pleasant dinner with her dad and then sent him off with her usual combo of a smile, a kiss, and a wish to be safe.

Then she got back to work.

Dick had made a few connections – arrived at definitive conclusions for the coordinated involvement of multiple unknown subjects.

It meant the night’s patrol started off on a reasonably positive note, for her at least. She knew things are probably rather awkward at the Cave – what with Jason still being stuck with Dick as Bruce resisted the urge to bench him outright.

Yet another reason Barbara wass glad that she had her own little safe house in Old Gotham to keep her gear and the physical copies of her evidence and case files. It was much more efficient for her to jump a few blocks over to get ready for patrol than it would be to head all the way out to Bristol to get prepped in the Cave.
It also meant she gets to avoid the awkwardness of a strained atmosphere that existed around an over stressed Batman and the worried father hiding somewhere underneath the cowl.

So getting ready for patrol on her own was a relief, as always.

Barbara took what had become her usual loop over the last few months – heading north from Old Gotham to circle back around through the East Side and then weaving through Chinatown. She currently possessed an absolutely nonsense assortment of clues collected for her mess of a counterfeiting case – all of them centered around Chinatown – and while she didn’t hold out much hope for a break in the case, she still performed her nightly due diligence.

Wrapping up her usual investigation a bit early at Batman’s decree, Barbara met up with Dick and Jason on the edge of her current territory to check up and commiserate.

Dick decided to use the kid gloves with her a bit excessively when bringing up possibilities for how the criminal justice classes he was taking out in California could offer her a new perspective to investigate, but he wasn’t truly condescending. And with him, she knew he truly meant well… he was just an overly sensitive, and oversensitized, idiot still reeling from his many fights with Bruce and Jason.

And after playing mediator between those two bull-headed morons all afternoon, it was hardly a surprise that Dick was stuck in the mindset for treading on eggshells. She let it go with nothing more severely chastising that a few mildly exasperated eyerolls.

And then Jason made his case breaking, street genius observation.

The one that changed everything.

Barbara never really figures out how he spotted them, how he recognized the dire importance of the two shadows slipping through Chinatown’s main tourist trap street market from 250 yards out – her genius simply didn’t work the way Jason’s does.

Because Jason was a genius, Babs would hear nothing even hinting at the possibility that anyone might think otherwise.

She knew Dick agreed whole heartedly, and that even Bruce could admit that Jason did indeed have a special kind of skill with people – with understanding how the hidden things behind the human psyche moved to make an individual person tick.

Jason recognized the importance of those two – of the people Barbara would later come to realize were Rwen and Shankar Tolovi – the instant that he spotted them snaking through the market. Dick manages to see it once he’s been told more or less exactly what he’s looking for, and Barbara too, succeeds in seeing the ripples once they’re pointed out explicitly.
In retrospect, the ill-fated confrontation in the alleyway was beyond inevitable.

There was no possible way the Bats could’ve uncovered the Tolovi’s involvement with the case without stumbling upon them blindly and taking the initiative to investigate. The Tolovis covered their tracks too well, operated within a sphere of secrecy that put to shame every single alternative clandestine operation the Bats had ever dealt with previously.

So stumbling in blind for their first encounter was an inevitability.

Funnily enough, it was Batman that pointed that fact out to her.

In the aftermath of the close call.

It was well after the growling terseness of Batman’s emotionally distanced chastisement for their recklessness had sent Dick and Jason running off across the rooftops. After he had gotten her nerves to settle by ordering her to give a coolly detached report of the situation. After she realized exactly how close a call it had actually been – how the demonstrated ease of the strangers’ combat abilities meant that this confrontation could have gone very, very badly.

They had gotten lucky. More than lucky.

The Tolovis cared more about keeping the cops off their tails – cared more about how the heat from a triple homicide would make moving around the city undisturbed much more difficult – than they did about putting a few reckless punks in costumes in their places.

The Batman façade never broke, never even cracked, but Barbara could feel Bruce’s deeper concern behind the mask. She could feel the weight of a father figure’s worries.

Bruce has never accurately known how to help her – he simply believed that helping her get back on her feet and helping push her focus onto solving the case was the best way he could support her. He wasn’t entirely wrong about that and Barbara truly did appreciate the effort.

But she couldn’t just brush off a near death experience the way Bruce could – the way Dick and Jason could… if those to idiots have even managed to realize how close the call had actually been, yet.

She didn’t go back to the Cave that night.

She went to her safe house and took a long hot shower with smooth jazz blaring from her speakers. Then she went back to the condo she shared with her dad, the cozy collection of safe
spaces she has always thought of as *home*.

And when she got back to her bedroom – still decorated with the remnants of the rather idiotic, but clearly quite impactful, white and grey and purple color scheme of her very early childhood – Barbara curled up in bed and drifted loosely off to sleep.

Barbara doesn’t so much as think about logging onto her system, doesn’t even *look* at the outer casing of the tech, until late the next morning.

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Chapter End Notes

NB, this chapter is just a short one because Babs’ section got to be more than twice as long as any other chapter so I decided to split it up into at least two (probably three) parts, the next of which I should be able to get up by next week!
Chapter Summary

Part 2 of Babs' PoV!

Chapter Notes

I split up Babs' bit into what's become three sections, because it was just EXCESSIVELY longer than any of the other chapters and I want to get it posted for you guys at a semblance of a reasonable pace. ^_~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty Nine: Rule #28.2 – Support Your Family (pt 2)

When Barbara wakes up and eventually convinces herself to check up on the situation her system has been quietly monitoring, she notices that Jason’s been logged on almost continuously since he got back to the Manor around 4am.

He’s been watching a new tracker he’s activated – doing so very carefully, so as to keep the activity from catching Bruce’s attention – and that tracker is currently parked outside the particular Gotham Academy campus where Timothy Drake attends middle school.

It’s a worrisome observation, but not overly concerning – Barbara doesn’t know when he put the tracker on Tim’s bike, or what exactly pushed him to do so, but for the moment, it looks like Tim is safe enough and that Jason’s got a handle on whatever’s got him worried.

Turning reluctantly to her own work, she starts with uploading the pics she snapped with her cowl’s lenses before the confrontation yesterday had escalated into a fight – uses those images to scan through the facial recognition programs she has plugged into every database she’s ever heard of holding an identity collection.

She gets results on the Tolovis pretty quickly.

All of the information she drags up is… disheartening, to say the least.
She’s about ready to admit that the information is overwhelming, about to allow herself to feel so outclassed that she permits herself to take a break she doesn’t need – to take a walk or something to let her nerves settle – when Dick texts her, asking her to lunch at the aquarium.

Barbara knows as well as he does that it’s not a romantic overture – that it’s a careful invitation to discuss something of a sensitive, and likely personal, nature. It’s clearly serious enough that she would never dream of refusing him, but she can’t say she agrees to the meeting without any drips of hesitation crawling down her spine.

She gets to their usual spot beneath the shipwreck in the shark tank a full forty five minutes before Dick asked to meet – lays back and tries to relax by watching the black tips circle the wreck above her on their serene patrols.

Dick gets there early too, though only by five minutes.

The *woosh* of the doors at the end of the tunnel is what alerts Barbara to the arrival of someone with very soft footsteps – because they don’t make a sound as they tread up the rickety set of metal stairs that lifts up onto the tunnel walkway. Who else but Dick would it possibly be?

She sits up and smiles at him as she scoots down the bench to let him sit beside her.

He smiles back, and the expression isn’t pinched with any underlying angst. It’s a strange kind of relief that fills her when Dick sits down beside her with a languid sigh that presses their shoulders together, but relief nonetheless – he’s deeply concerned, but not overwhelmed by it.

That’s comforting, at least.

Mildly.

So it’s probably not about a fight with Bruce.

It’s probably something about Jason, though probably not a *fight* with Jason.

And if it’s about Jason, it’s very probably *also* about Tim.

Turns out, Dick *does* want to talk about Tim.

And how he’s been running around Gotham at night for *waaaay* longer than any of them had realized. How he’d been in the alleyway when they’d first encountered the Tolovis – how he’d gotten his own ID on the perps (which actually deeply impresses some distant part of the *hacker* side of the girl, a part that’s not horrified by all the disturbing revelations of painfully ridiculous *child endangerment* allegations being made), and how he’d gotten the investigation to move one more giant leap forward by bringing the question of where the Tolovis were hiding out to *Catwoman* (of all the people Tim could have somehow become friendly with… seriously, this kid will be the death of her).
Dick is terrified that Tim’s getting himself into the kind of dangerous trouble the sidekick Bats won’t be able to get him out of – at least, not without giving up his secret to Bruce.

It’s a valid concern.

Telling B comes up as a possible solution, because B will shut that shit down the instant he figures out what’s going on with Tim.

Or, he’ll try to.

Tim… doesn’t seem the type to take that sitting down.

He’s already managed to evade the Bats for years, after all.

And sure, they hadn’t been actively looking out for him then, but still…

It’s not like Bruce is going to convince him to quit with a stern conversation and some Bat brand intimidation. Tim is either at the downright stupid fearless point in his adolescent development, or he’s just ridiculously crafty and determined – or a combination of both… it doesn’t really matter anyway, as either of them would render Bruce’s usual tactics moot.

Either way, telling B won’t help.

But they have to do something, because Tim is worried about Jason – to the point that he probably won’t let Jason go anywhere without him – and Jason is dead set on going to investigate the Tolovis’ night club hideout tonight…

So Barbara knows she has to intervene, because she won’t… she can’t patrol tonight.

The thought of suiting up and stumbling upon another alley with a pair of impossibly powerful bad guys makes her stomach sink, and the idea of wandering into another bloody warehouse crime scene – which had probably been a scene of the Tolovis’ making – causes her joints to lock up and her sinking stomach to churn with a riotous burst of bile.

Barbara volunteers to play baby sitter.

It’s as much for her sake as it is for Tim and Jason’s.

They all need a night off; a night away from the insanity of the current case.

Dick is suitably soothed by the time their discussion closes, and he’s made sure to check on Barbara herself too – to somehow care for Jason and Tim and Barbara all in one single go of aptly
dramatic big brotherly affection.

He helps her stand and literally spins her in a waltz down the tunnel – it’s not romantic, and Barbara is suddenly flooded with a feeling of contentment with the realization that she truly doesn’t want it to be anything more than what it is. That whatever it is feels more intimate and supportive than anything had felt when they had been truly trying to make the romance work.

They head upstairs, gorge themselves on massive, delicious, salads and discuss the fact that – regardless of Tim’s clearly imminent involvement in the Bats’ lives on the Crusade side of things – Bruce is already apparently half way to adopting him into the Bats’ daytime Family.

Something about a summer camp conceived and engineered specifically to suit Tim’s own interests and his natural inclination to get his hands dirty by digging into the problems of modern living by exploring possible solutions through science and engineering innovations.

Bruce is putting in extensive effort on this.

It makes Barbara smile.

Tim deserves a Family.

And while the Bats are a dysfunctional one on their best days, she knows that it’s due to an over abundance of caring, and a heavy dash of emotional stupidity, rather than the kind of viciousness or neglect found in other family structures.

The Bat Clan is not a great family, or a truly healthy one, but they are genuinely Family – in a way that makes the fights and drama completely worth the strife. They love each other, and want what’s best for each other, even if they show it through… ineffectual gestures.

She knows that Tim doesn’t understand what’s wrong with his current family situation, why it honestly is questionable enough that she’s not sure she can even call it a family situation…

And Barbara thinks she might have a way to introduce him to a different kind of family life – one that might help him start to recognize that what the Bats want to give him is something good by pulling into a real Family.

As soon as she splits with Dick, Barbara calls Jason – predictably, he’s already with Tim.

Barbara orders the pair of them over for dinner, non-negotiable, and once she knows they’re resigned to coming over, she begins to scheme.

It feels nice to be focused on something important that isn’t gruesomely bloody or immediately life-threatening… something that still carries weight and can legitimately change lives, but doesn’t have the gore factor that makes the current case so… abhorrent.
Barbara gets Jason to help her cook and leaves Tim to the warm but cautious care of her father – Jim Gordon knows how to deal with kids, unique kids in particular. And he knows how to handle all kinds of trauma that such kids could possibly have encountered.

Tim seems uncomfortable, but he does settle in and open up and relax more than he would’ve with anyone else sitting on the couch beside him.

Meanwhile, Barbara confronts Jason about his concern for Tim – gets Jason on board with helping her keep Tim on the sidelines, while still prepping him for the inevitable eventuality of Tim joining up with the Crusade.

While talking with Jason about how to keep Tim safe, she spots something about his concern that she is entirely certain Jason himself hasn’t noticed about his own regard.

Not only is his reaction hilariously Bruce-like, there’s something else in Jason’s concern, something genuinely fond in a way that she’s never seen from Jason before… He clearly already thinks of Tim as part of the Family – as a part of the Family he’s more seriously invested in than he is with Dick or even Bruce. Babs isn’t entirely sure what he thinks is behind that, but she knows it will be a fantastic show to watch as it develops and they both mature.

Because, from what she can see, it’s not something that’s just going to go away.

Even if no one else has noticed it yet.

Which actually makes the next point Barbara needs to bring up even more crucial to the overall safety and sanity of the Bat Clan: Tim needs training.

Maybe not Bat training, exactly – not with Bruce looming above him, and the expectations of Batman hanging over his head, but something… Because Tim isn’t going away, and he’s already an important part of the Family – doubly so for how he’s gotten Jason reinvested in being a part of the Family – which means he’s going to have to confront the same dangers as the rest of the Family… Maybe not directly, and dear god she hopes that Tim stays under the villain radar, but still.

Tim is going to be close enough to the dangers of their lives that he needs to be taught some skills to help him get through it successfully.

Jason is not going to like her conclusion.

She tells him about it anyway.

With her father in the other room, exerting influence as Commissioner even in his civilian clothes, it goes over better than it could have – as well as could possibly be expected.
Jason does not like the idea of accepting that Tim is going to be around anything like the dangers of the Gotham underworld, but he does come around to seeing her point about ensuring that he’s prepared to face those dangers, regardless. And he sees her point about including Tim as being paramount – if they push him away, it’s not going to deter him at all, from anything except perhaps asking for help.

Jason himself is very familiar with the concept… and he’s sheepish enough about it to prove to Barbara that he’s self aware of his own issues with it. She can tell he doesn’t quite recognize her sublayer of chastisement, though – but that’s a problem for another day.

Getting Jason comfortable with asking for help is an uphill battle.

Barbara already has enough to work on over dinner.

It’s very obvious that Tim is uncomfortable through the entire meal.

But uncomfortable or not, Tim seems like he’s enjoying the experience – and with Babs, her father, and Jason all working to help him understand that this is what a family should feel like, Barbara is fairly confident that the experience is going to stick with Tim for a long while.

Even as the night continues and Babs pushes into territory referencing the potential for Tim to join up with the Bats more directly – potential that he, obviously, wildly misinterprets at first because he’s clearly an unsocialized ball of angst and self doubt – Tim still seems uncomfortable but happy in a way Barbara hopes she can make stick.

She’s confident in that hope being fulfilled by the time Dick shows up for his share of the pot roast she promised him – confident enough to let Nightwing inside and encourage his light hearted banter and teasing. At first, his arrival goes over rocky ground – being that it reminds Tim about the ongoing case and the fact that Babs and Jason should theoretically be working on it with Nightwing directly, but Dick’s bright smile and open hearted goofiness get a soft smile settling onto Tim’s face eventually.

And Tim’s smile means that Jason’s glower lets up too.

For a moment, at least.

Jason’s glower returns full force as bed time approaches, as Tim’s skittish shyness redoubles because he’s heard Babs and Dick discussing the evening’s Crusade activities and apparently feels guilty all over again for preventing them from handling the situation sooner.

Whlep, it’s not as bad a reaction as it could be.

Though, she does note that Jason takes longer in the shower than usual – and that he makes a pit stop when he detours down stairs to the laundry room, a pit stop that probably involves him searching through her emergency storage hidey holes for some of her old Bat Tech prototypes (you
can’t just get rid of that kind of advanced technology, after all).

She gives it a sweep after she’s sure the boys have settled down and discovers that two old coms are missing – nothing that screams ‘serious problem’, but something she knows needs to be kept under close surveillance. If Jason has a specific worry that he’s not sharing, Babs needs to be on top of tracking it – because confronting him on it will not help.

She’s managed to convince Dick on that front, with both Tim and Jason, but she’s still a decade away from gaining any significant ground on it with Bruce.

The next day, Barbara watches Jason’s electronic activity.

She watches him as he uses his phone every five minutes to check on the tracker he stuck on Tim’s bike. She watches him get home and use his desktop to nudge at Tim’s system, testing the security in a way that she can immediately tell will prove futile and yet won’t alert Tim to the careful probing. Jason has something specific he’s looking for – something that probably relates to the fact that Tim left class early – but he knows to be cautious in looking for it.

Barbara doesn’t know Tim well enough to be certain of his inclination towards desiring perfect attendance, but she can call up his school records to see that he’s never skipped out in the middle of the day like this before.

So Barbara does her own probe of Tim’s net activities.

Instead of trying to get in to Tim’s system like Jason did, Barbara encircles his system with her own and watches where Tim is probing out into the wider netscape. It’s not as accurate or as clear a means of watching his activity, but she can tell when he starts digging into the top secret dark servers of secure government agencies by utilizing their inter agency email systems.

She can’t see what he’s looking for though, not exactly.

And she doesn’t know enough about what he’s thinking to be able to guess.

It’s frustrating.

And worrisome, as Tim’s outgoing signals trace through NSA emails into far deeper systems – using back doors into the hidden servers in a way Barbara is torn between calling recklessly inelegant and ingeniously difficult to pin down. The systems he’s hacking will definitely know they’ve been hacked, but he’s being so slippery and so obtusely vague and random with the files that he’s opening that it will most likely be interpreted as a glory hound hacker going after the net-cred.

Which means the government itself will contribute to the cover up, because they won’t know anything in particular was stolen and they wouldn’t want to encourage the behavior by rewarding it with fame.

It’s risky, but clever – and almost fool proof if it pans out properly.

She knew she liked Tim so quickly for a reason.

But the little idiot is definitely going to get himself into some boiling hot water here soon if he’s willing to use such a brute force strategy to acquire information.
Tim doesn’t seem like the kind of kid to do that without the prompt of a specific and acute motivation spurring him on… this seems like the kind of last minute recon to verify a hunch before more a definitive action it taken – an action that Tim should not be taking.

Should not even be considering taking…

When Tim pulls out and his entire residence goes tech dark, Barbara sighs and pings Dick – who is already out patrolling as Nightwing alongside Batman.

She finagles a window of privacy for she and Dick to talk.

There is a mugging taking place over towards the West Side, so she doesn’t feel too guilty when she chooses to send Batman away. Especially when she gets Dick to admit that there is probably a few very good reasons to worry about Tim at the moment.

Dick’s worried now, but Jason’s been worried all afternoon.

Barbara texts Jason, gets him to admit that he not only took the coms she already knows he swiped, but also gets him to connect to the conversation she’s having with Dick.

He doesn’t waste time with fretting uselessly – Jason has a very specific concern: Tim’s bike has left the grounds of Drake Manor.

Barbara doesn’t quite know what she’s feeling.

It’s a lot like panic, but… focused.

Getting Tim into Bat Custody is suddenly TOP priority and she knows exactly what is needed in terms of accomplishing that goal – knows that it’s worth everything.

Using a tap on the GPS in Tim’s phone, she guides Dick and Jason towards him.

He’s heading towards a donut shop in Robbinsville, if her intuitive systems tracker has read his GPS history correctly. Which, because it’s her, is probably worth betting on.

Barbara realizes fairly quick that it’s not going to be enough.

Just getting Nightwing and Jason there won’t be enough… Tim’s slippery, and by the way he’s absolutely booking it across town, he’s determined. To do what, exactly, Barbara doesn’t know, but he’s not going to be swayed from it without a dramatic refute to allowing it.

They’re going to need Batman to intervene or they will definitely lose the kid.

And possibly lose Jason too… because he’s stopped responding on his borrowed com.

Barbara prays that he’s using the other com to track Tim – because Tim seems to have left his phone on the roof of a donut shop where Spoiler, of all people, is waiting in a panic.
Jason’s location is easy to find as he heads south, because he’s definitely using those old coms, and fortunately that means Tim’s location is also easy to triangulate. Robin’s resourcefulness is truly at it’s very best when combined with Jason’s natural paranoia and someone with zero self preservation instincts for Jason to fixate on.

But still… They need Batman.

Barbara sends Dick after Tim, and pings Batman to intercept Jason.

Bruce’s underlying Papa Bear nature and Batman’s military stringency merge to create a rage like none other Barbara has ever personally borne witness to – but she can’t be arsed to care while her birds are still flying blind and desperate.

Jason is gonna be in deep shit for this, but she’ll help him out of the hole he’s dug for himself once they get Tim safely tucked back into his bed.

Barbara somehow manages not to spill too many details on why Tim is running around Gotham and has probably been kidnapped by the Bats’ prime suspects in the drug case, or how they’re currently tracking him. It’s mostly because Batman is so pissed at how Jason’s defied orders and is out on the streets that he’s entirely consumed with getting his errant son to safety.

Dick has Spoiler with him, trying to catch Tim before his kidnappers arrive at their destination – which will make rescuing him that much more difficult and dangerous.

At this point, it becomes clear that all hands are needed on deck and Barbara starts hurrying through a warm-up routine to get her muscles ready for an unexpected patrol while she frantically shimmies into her Batgirl gear – never more thankful that she’s established this safehouse instead of keeping all of her gear at the Cave.

She snags an extra layer of armor for Spoiler’s torso – just in case Batman decides, like she did, that excluding Spoiler is simply too inefficient to currently bother with…

Barbara gets to Chinatown faster than she thought was physically possible.

Bruce is in an alley outside a night club called Obscura. Dick is there too.

Jason, however, is inside – with Tim, and Tavian Ross… That name has come up in her research – as an old associate of Rwen Tolovi’s, one that’s still officially a part of GHOST. It’s a name that screams very bad news. Especially when Tolovi shows up, too.

She gets her com synced to the frequency that the other Bats are currently on and listens in with them as Jason selflessly negotiates for Tim’s freedom.

He does it in a way that makes Barbara want to strangle him, but Jason manages to wrench an effective solution out of this mess that sees Tim safely and immediately into the hands of those
who want to protect him.

Tim is released and Barbara feels something thorny unclench inside her chest.

Batman gives a no-nonsense order to shove both Tim and Steph into the Batmobile – to be ferried to Alfred waiting in the Cave, where they can be cared for now, and dealt with later.

With the youngest kiddos out of the line of fire, attention turns strictly towards getting Jason free as well… but Jason’s situation is trickier… and gets even worse as a change of venue comes up… a transfer that’s executed by experts in urban warfare…

Following one of the convoys that may or may not be carrying Jason is nerve wracking.

It’s even worse as Barbara realizes that their coms are being jammed too, in addition to the GPS… She can’t tell when it started exactly, the transition was seamless, but at some point after Jason gets Tolovi to explain a little more about the drug and the organization that created it, the signal becomes garbled. A few words escape clear enough to understand, but none that actually give insight on the actual discussion being had between the ganglord and her brother.

Barbara sinks into a focus beyond conscious awareness.

She has to let her internal emotions hide away in dark corners as things with Jason begin to spiral away – has to, lest she risk a complete break down.

Because Jason is important to her.

And she can’t bear to watch him be drugged and bloodied in a bare knuckle fight that is vicious beyond any kind of words she can fathom. It hurts her to watch the situation unfold, even after she’s pushed away the part of her that wants to react to that emotional pain.

And then Stray shows up.

With friends. But it’s Stray that has her truly interested.

Stray could be any age between twelve and seventeen, could be even older if it’s a girl beneath the goggles and careful layers of shape-dusiguising armor – though Barbara thinks it’s probably not a girl. Thinks – in the back of her overly focused, overly stressed, analytical mind – that it’s probably a boy, probably a specific boy… if Jason’s smile is anything to go by…

It’s a smile she doesn’t think the others have seen on him before.
But it’s the same one Babs saw on his face when he and Tim stayed over at her place… when Tim managed nail the timing on the chorus of the drumline on one of Jason’s favorite songs while they were playing rock band… It’s a smile Barbara doesn’t even think Jason knows he’s ever worn, telling in a way Jason would never want to be…

And that smile means Stray… Stray is probably… probably has to be… Tim…

Which…

Can’t be possible…

Can it?

Barbara latches onto that suspicion as the situation spirals away from her control – she made an attempt to help distract the ring to let Stray whisk Jason out of there, but it got shut down before Jason made it three steps. And as the fight resumes – as it redoubles in the kind of brutality that twists her heart to watch – Barbara focuses on Stray…

She tries to find some hint of Tim beneath the goggles – some hint that Jason clearly managed to pick up on… and tries to figure out why… why Tim would sign up with Selina, why he wouldn’t tell the Bats, why he wouldn’t have more training before hitting the streets…

All she can come up with is a vague idea that Selina wants an apprentice and wants Tim to be that apprentice, and that he’s never taken up the offer… But the need to save Jason made him reconsider, and now he’s signed on to a supervillain internship…

It’s an utterly horrible, terrifyingly plausible, theory.

Barbara vaguely wonders how binding the agreement is… wonders if it’ll at least get him a little training before he’s forced into another conflict… She doesn’t think Selina would put Tim in danger, not intentionally – she’s… a questionable person in some ways, but she’s mostly good… good enough to make Bruce, whose whole world is black and white, and right and wrong, see some things in shades of complicated grey.

But Stray has another friend, someone cloaked in loose folds of dark fabric that looks an awful lot like it hails from the same style of garb that the League of Assassins utilizes…

The potential assassin holds Stray’s hand – helping Tim through the emotional turmoil of watching Jason in the ring… If Stray really is Tim… he’s a much better liar than Jason seems to believe, because his mask of vague disgust and broad indifference is a solid enough poker face that Babs thinks Bruce would lose money on it in a card game.

Barbara is uncertain, and she dislikes being uncertain – but being uncertain of Stray’s identity lets her fixate on trying to puzzle through it, and that is a far better thing to focus on than watching Jason fight in this horrid Tolovi drug-induced pseudo-death-match.
So focus on that, she does.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Babs' pov part 3!
Eventually, the fight *does* end.

It takes that fact an awkwardly long moment to sink in – for everyone in the makeshift arena, but it takes a beat even longer for everyone else to process than it does for Stray and his little friend. The pair dash into the center of the ring to catch Jason as he begins to collapse – his final fight having been soundly won and his muscles giving out as the adrenaline dissipates.

Batman and Nightwing set about getting the exact terms of the Tolovis’ immediate egress from Gotham handled and executed, while Stray and the stranger start dragging Jason away from the scene – Barbara follows them, certain that the boys can handle the gangsters and that someone needs to keep an eye on Jason.

Besides, this gives her a semi-private opportunity to chat with Stray about the person underneath the goggles.

It doesn’t go the way she thought it would.

If it *is* Timothy Drake underneath those bulbous orange goggles, he can lie like a *pro*.

No hesitation, no drama, no extraneous details… Just a damn good cover story and the know how and die hard grit to stick to it properly.
Barbara doesn’t get to dig into the details too much, because Batman arrives to take over the mini-interrogation. And then Catwoman joins in too – though her intent is clearly to derail it, which she accomplishes with her usual, sensual ease. On another night, it would be amusing to observe how easily swayed Bruce is by Selina – heartwarmingly adorable, even – but tonight it’s just a strange mix of relief and suspicion.

Barbara doesn’t want Bruce to know if it’s Tim beneath the goggles – that is a turn of events that could only go poorly for everyone – but she wants to know… and she thinks Selina knows it by the wary squint and the almost apologetic smile she sends Barbara’s way.

Mentions of a head-start on something of a cure for Jason get made, the stranger’s possible interest and allegiances get analyzed, and no real questions get any answers.

While Bruce is distracted by the soul mate he won’t admit constantly holds nearly the entirety of his attention, and Jason manages to stir in such a way so as to remind everyone what the most important thing in the current situation actually is right now, the mysterious probably-assassin scoops up Stray and they vanish into Gotham’s shadowy labyrinth.

Bruce summons the Batmobile as he and Barbara move to inspect Jason to make an almost-blind assessment of the damage. Selina sweeps up the strange girl’s chemical offerings, and secures them in an empty pocket of Bruce’s utility belt – moving into his personal space with easy confidence and an uncanny familiarity with which pockets Bruce keeps empty.

Dick shows up as they work on getting Jason into the back seat – the bulk of the situation inside has been handled and the Leaguers are taking care of the remaining details.

The ride to the Cave is excruciating.

Deathly silent, unbearably slow, and impossibly fast in a reckless way that feels both beyond idiotically perilous, and yet nowhere near risky enough to have pushed the limits enough to matter – even though it’s probably a miracle they didn’t crash a hundred times over...

Alfred has Spoiler knocked out on a gurney in the medical wing, visible through the glass walls keeping her separated from the main Cave. Babs makes a mental note to check in on that situation later, but focuses on helping Dick get Jason situated on the gurney Alfred has rolled over for him – Bruce, meanwhile, goes straight for the Batcomputer to analyze the chemical samples the stranger acquired for them.

Bruce is too distraught to be useful in the medical arena, and so is Dick – but while Dick is rendered useless in all possible arena and has taken up a chair at Jason’s bedside like a veritable zombie, Bruce is compelled to focus his distress into something that may help his son.

Barbara checks in with Alfred to see if there’s anything she can do, but with Jason’s current condition being so… nebulous, his injuries seemingly healed but his body probably still hurting, and with that awful drug still coursing through his bloodstream at unknown saturation levels… all they can really do is hook him up to fluids to keep him hydrated.

It’s just banana bag of hydration, electrolytes, a few key nutrients, and a basic wash of antibiotics, just in case… It’s all just something to keep his body functioning as well as possible under its own healing power but nothing really medicinal… nothing that can actually help.
With a heaviness hanging over her shoulders, Barbara joins Bruce at the Batcomputer and soon they’re both joined by Barry Allen.

It’s slow going but there’s definite progress being made and before the second hour’s up, they have something tangible to add to Jason’s IV that will emolliate the lingering effects of the drug that’s already sent him spiraling into a coma.

While the medicine is added to Jason’s IV, Barbara checks with Alfred regarding Spoiler.

She apparently arrived unconscious – the results of an attempt to hack the Batmobile, a successful one, he adds almost inaudibly with a pointed look to encourage Barbara to quietly dig deeper into the situation.

Superman volunteers to set Spoiler safely back into her bed before he heads out on the return trip to Metropolis as he and Wonder Woman give their farewells.

The Flash is going to stick around to make sure that the counter drug they’ve crafted actually works the way they hope it will.

Dick’s friends from the Teen Titans volunteer to stay, as well.

Their offer is the first thing to draw Dick out of his own semi-catatonic fugue state.

He and Kori shoo Kid Flash off, but Starfire will not be sent away.

Seeing her effortless protectiveness, her genuine and deep concern for Dick sends of pang of something tight and hard to swallow through Barbara’s chest. It’s not jealousy exactly, but it’s also not entirely free of the kind of fearful longing and egregious self deprecation that brings violent jealousy to life.

For approximately fourteen seconds, Barbara remembers how she felt when she dug into the background of Princess Koriand’r of Tamaran… buxom, unabashed, affectionate, powerful, and both sexy and sweet beyond adequate description, seeing Dick date Kori felt to Barbara like watching every aspect of herself being unbearably replaced with an updated and highly improved new model.

But it wasn’t that.

Barbara knows that.

Knew it even when it stung too much to think about with a clear headed honesty.

Koriand’r is a true blood royal, a living goddess, by any estimate.

It simply isn’t reasonable for Barbara to compare Kori to herself against a human scale of criteria to measure any kind of base attractiveness.

And furthermore, Barbara’s relationship with Dick had been different than the one Kori currently shares with him, and any similarities were superficial overlays at best.
They were just Babs’ own ego centric vanities getting in the way of truly seeing.

And Kori is… empathetic, beyond all reckoning, truly understanding in a way that clearly can’t be human, that marks her out as both alien and genuine royalty. She’s too good, too kind, to emphatically caring and wonderful to be any mere mortal or member of the human race.

She and Barbara care for Dick, love him, and Kori will never deny the continued existence of Barbara’s feelings for him, or how deep they run. She knows they’re different, knows that – at the heart of things – what’s most important is that they both want what’s best for him.

They want him safe and happy.

Barbara allows herself to wallow in self pity for fourteen seconds.

Then she spins on her heel and marches off to take a shower. Dear god does she need one, and Barbara can admit with a level mind and only the slightest brush of bruised feelings that Kori is the one between them who can provide Dick with the most comfort right now.

Barbara cleans off the grit and the grime of the night, washes away the worst of the strain still tight in her muscles… changes into her comfiest Gotham Tech sweats. Emerges after a lingering for nearly hour under the comforting barrage of eternally hot water to find Dick and Kori still as statues in exactly the place where she left them, hovering at Jason’s bedside.

Dick is still in his full Nightwing getup – hasn’t even managed to remove his mask.

It’s not what Dick needs, but it’s something that Kori wouldn’t have reason to think about. As a Tamaranian princess, her superhero persona and her daylight role within society at large are exactly the same – she can’t fathom the wear and tear and mental toll of maintaining dichotically separate identities for day and night, let alone for how those incongruous identities can hurt a fragile self of mind that doesn’t entirely suit either character.

Dick needs a shower, needs to be a human again instead of a vigilante – needs to be the Dick Grayson that isn’t just the Wayne Ward or the circus kid. He needs to be a big brother.

Barbara gives Nightwing a rundown of the situation.

Gives Dick Grayson a reason to transition out of the mindset of being on the job, communicates what needs to happen for that to Kori in nothing more than a weighty look.

Barbara stays with Jason, trusting Kori with complete faith to man-handle Dick into a shower and some fresh clothes – to drag him out of his own head long enough to help him remember how to bring himself back to being human.

When the pair of them return, Dick looks a thousand times better – still worn, still worried, but human and like he knows he’s truly loved.

Kori deposits Dick back into the chair beside Barbara.

She takes both of Barbara’s hands and intertwines their fingers, moving slowly and gently to twist their hands upside down in a Tamaranian gesture of sisterhood and solidarity.

And then she takes her leave.
Dick and Babs wait together in silence and mutual support through the night.

The next morning she calls her father, checks in, gives vague details about friends being excitable and girls’ nights being called for the occurrence of some so-called ‘adventure days’ and such. It’s a huge advantage to be both at home and at university in the same stretch of time, being that she can just fall off the face of the earth like a college student whenever she feels like it, and pop back on the grid without any real questions being asked.

A ten minute phone call and Barbara’s taken care of her alibi for the next week at least.

She hopes it won’t take Jason that long to wake up, but she’s fully prepared to wait it out for that long and even longer, if necessary.

After her phone call, she moves to the Batcomputer.

Checks up on Tim. And the Batmobile he hacked.

Follows the com Jason had him linked to.

Tim IS Stray.

It’s an undeniable fact.

And it’s enough to be a serious problem… if left unaddressed, or if addressed improperly.

But… it’s easy enough to hide…

For the first time since she truly came into considering herself a genuine member of the Bat Family, Barbara subverts the trust she’s earned and uses her skills to actively hide something from Bruce directly. She makes it look like Tim hacked the Batmobile, and then called on Selina and her friends for help, before walking back to his bike and heading home.

It’s only been about twelve hours since he got there, so Bruce definitely hasn’t managed to check up on Tim’s activity yet – Tim is considered low priority while Jason is still comatose.

Bruce’s current absence is a circumstance brought about by means of Alfred and Barry, likely ganging up to drug Bruce into a sort of medically induced pseudo-sleep for an hour or two.

But regardless, it means that for now, Barbara is alone and able to cover her tracks on editing the Batcomputer’s archives without worry of being caught in the act. She covers everything up before she can think of a reason to hesitate and then goes back to her chair beside Dick, resumes waiting for Jason to wake.

With Alfred’s help, she coaxes a bit of food into Dick, somehow eats something herself.
She keeps an eye on Tim’s activities (just a cycle of home and school and library in an alarmingly anti-social cycle of clearly cognizant avoidance), and she runs coms for Bruce when he goes on a brief patrol that night… rinses and repeats the next day.

Bruce has just finished up his shower from his post-patrol routine on Saturday morning, and she’s been dozing off for about twenty minutes, when Dick explodes into action as Jason jolts and shudders into a painful kind of almost wakefulness.

Hugs and happiness and a bone-deep relief flood the Family, and even though Jason’s bout of consciousness is fleeting, it marks a turning point that renders him as being fully out of the darkest part of the woods.

It’s not… *enough*, exactly, but somehow Barbara feels like it’s still going to be fine.

Now that Jason’s awake and as healthy as could be expected, Barbara can turn her attention more fully to Tim, leaving the rest of Jason’s care in Dick’s overbearing hands – and with Alfred forcing him up to bed for a while, Dick will be rested enough to handle it on his own.

Barbara takes her own nap, then showers and gets dressed in proper clothes – still a comfy kind of civvies, but ones appropriate for venturing outside in public.

Being Saturday, Tim doesn’t have school.

He’s gone to a museum instead. On the far edge of Old Gotham, where he’d have the least possibility of running into any of the Bats going about the daily lives of their cover stories.

Which makes it clearer than ever that he has been proactively avoiding them.

It *could’ve* been coincidence before – that he was too stressed with keeping up with school work while worrying about Jason to actually come over and inquire about him, or to send a question off to any of the contact numbers Barbara knows Tim has for all of them… but now… he’s not occupied with anything he *needs* to do, so he’s occupying himself with things that keep him away from the Bats for reasons other than necessity.

Avoidance is the only real answer.

Which is *not* a good sign.

It could be for a simple reason… like Jason’s usual pattern of problem solving by retreating into his own head with the kind of issues that are more emotional than not… just an internal retreat for a while to sort himself out before coming back to deal with things as usual.

Or not.
Barbara needs to talk to him in person to have any solid idea.

She finds in him a dark corner of the geological wing, staring at a piece of stone like it’s personally offended his existence. He’s so intent on staring that he doesn’t notice her arrival.

Nearly jumps out of his skin when he realizes who exactly has sat down next to him.

Yeah. He’s decidedly not in a good way.

It pulls painfully at Barbara’s heartstrings.

She wishes she’d been more proactive about checking up on him before now – understands and accepts her own reasonings for why she wasn’t, but still…

Handling Tim… it’s a delicate dance… a carefully balanced act of impressing upon him that the Bats want to help without backing him into a metaphoric corner.

Trying to convince him that he can come to the Bats to talk, to convince him that none of this is really his fault – that even though he’s been kidnapped, even though it’s happened to him twice now, it’s not his own doing so much as a twist of bad luck and the natural consequences of being close to the Bats – is like trying to save the Titanic by bailing out the flooded holds with a plastic beach bucket.

Barbara doesn’t push it further.

She’s in this idiocy for the long haul and the short game isn’t her priority. She’ll get Tim to come around to seeing things clearly, eventually, and she’ll keep chipping away at his resistance for however long it takes to wear it down.

For now, she has one more pressing line of inquiry.

Stray.

She’s not entirely certain that she wants Tim to admit to her that he’s the one behind the mysterious kitten’s orange goggles.

Barbara blindsides him with a few leading statements and he stiffens like he’s nothing more than a talented amateur playing at his very first round of chess in the lying game’s big leagues – clearly panicking beneath the blanked out mask of a neutral expression he’s adopted.

Barbara assures him that she hasn’t told Bruce – that she hasn’t told anyone – and he reacts to that revelation with the almost professional cool that she’d seen earlier from Stray. His mind is probably running at ten thousand miles a minute, but there’s nothing at all that gives an outward indication of it, but a moment later, his voice is strangled and stuttering when he forces out a question.
asking if Jason remembers anything from his ordeal.

When Barbara assures him that Jason’s memory is almost entirely blank, Tim relaxes… if only fractionally. He maintains the perfect blankness of his façade, but something in his posture wilts and he leans unconsciously towards the comforting warmth radiating off of Barbara.

It’s a good sign.

It means that Tim trusts her implicitly, even if he won’t talk to her openly.

Barbara watches Tim’s face in the reflection of the gems’ exhibit casing. Only the barest hints of minute changes expose the fact that Tim’s thoughts are a whirlwind roaring in between his ears – that he’s going over the entire ordeal with a different lens than before.

Barbara’s not sure what lens exactly, but it makes a red tinge crawl up his neck so she thinks she might be able to guess at something of what the kid’s remembering.

That is an entirely separate can of worms and it’s going to be it’s own long road to handle, but Tim’s only twelve for goodness’ sake and Jason’s only fourteen. They’ve got time to work it out if it’s destined to evolve into anything more than an unspoken mutual crush.

It’s difficult for Barbara to contain her urge to let a fond smile peel across her expression, but she’s glad that she manages it when Tim suddenly seems to remember her presence.

She can’t quite resist the urge when it rears up again in the face of the terrified little bunny rabbit gaping at her in white-out levels of horror and confusion and uncertainty.

He doesn’t know what she’s thinking, doesn’t even know what he’s thinking, and his brain has definitely come straight to an abrupt and screeching halt.

With careful words and a deliberate, slow delivery, Barbara gives him a blanket assurance that he is an important and deeply valued part of the team – already one of the Bats in all the ways that matter.

She also makes sure to warn him that Batman will want to talk to him soon.

To that warning, Tim reacts differently – surprisingly.

Instead of shuttering his expression, or panicking, or anything else she’s seen from his during this encounter, he rolls into a steady focus – calm and collected in a way that reminds her of Bruce with a startling degree of resemblance.

Yep. That look is all Bat.

Barbara tells Tim that, officially, she’s interrogating him on behalf of B, as a precursory measure, and promises that she’s going to maintain a plausible cover story for him.
He’s startled by her easy soft assurances, surprised by them like he’s still utterly bamboozled by the idea that she might be on his side.

A bit belatedly, he gives a stilted nod of heartfelt thanks.

There’s another long pause between them.

Just before it gets awkward enough to make Tim begin to spiral inside his own head again, Barbara sighs and tries once more to let him know that he’s already become an important part of the Family.

“We get worried about you, Tim, because you matter to us,” she concludes, “We don’t want to force anything on you, but we want to make sure you’re okay.”

Tim is clearly baffled by the sentiment.

Tries to give her some bullshit promise that he’s okay, that he’s fine without the support structures of the Family she’s trying to tell him he already has a valid claim to embracing.

Barbara doesn’t sigh.

She doesn’t let what she’s thinking show up on her face.

And she doesn’t try to hug him.

She simply waits until the moment passes.

The she lets him know she would appreciate it if he didn’t disappear on her – and from his brief flicker of utter terror that she’s some sort of mind-reader, Barbara knows she hit on the money and is glad she decided to move on the vague and fretful hunch.

Then she tells him that she’s leaving him up to his own devices and slips back out into the weak sunlight of a dreary Gotham afternoon.

She makes it back to the Cave to find Dick sitting at Jason’s bedside, returned to his vigil.

Barbara joins him, basking in the solidarity and relief found in sitting with Dick as they watch Jason sleep easy. She lets herself enjoy the moment, lets them both relish in the relative scraping of
peace they’ve managed to carve out of the chaos.

She wraps her hand around his and squeezes gently as she draws a deep breath.

“I talked to Tim today,” she forces herself to say eventually, breaking the quietude.

It hurts Dick exactly like she knew it would, and she stays still and quiet and steady and grounding as the riot of emotions barrels through him – the guilt and fear and worry he’d surpressed for Tim while he’d been focusing on Jason.

It takes a lot to talk Dick down from his panic.

It takes the projection of confidence that Barbara doesn’t fully have settled herself to convince him of the notion that Tim is like Jason in his avoidance tendencies, but so much worse with them because of the bottomless resources (and his awareness of those resources) that he has at his fingertips.

She knows that one push too far will send Tim skittering away from them – possibly out of their reach forever – but if they don’t push at all, they’ll likely lose him in a different way.

Dick latches on to the one thing that’s been her foremost worry as well: the fact that Tim is alone in the aftermath of all of this, the fact that Tim doesn’t have anyone to help him through any of it… The psychological exhaustion that comes from a traumatic event like this isn’t something can or ever should be worked through entirely alone.

It takes a while of talking through it, but Babs manages to convince both Dick and herself that staying close, but not too close is the only safe call they can make.

And then Dick asks the other important question: “What are we gonna tell Bruce?”

It would be counterproductive to tell Bruce about how close Tim is to everything.

Paticularly with what Barbara knows about his role as Stray… She considers telling Dick about Stray’s identity, but ultimately decides that there’s no reason to worry him any more dramatically than how his current helplessness has already rendered him feeling.

Instead of telling him the whole truth, Barbara spins the story she gave to Bruce already: about Tim somehow knowing about Selina’s hidey hole, going off to ask her for help rescuing Jason, and with that accomplished, Tim walked backed to his bike at the donut shop and then made his own way home.

Shortly after Dick and Barbara mutually agree that it’s probably best to leave everything well
enough alone, Jason wakes up again. They spend the rest of the day at his bedside.

Alfred and Bruce join them for a quiet dinner.

Delightfully, the meal is more pleasant than any other they’ve all shared in a long while.

Everyone is still either too weak or too relieved to pick a fight.

Eventually, Bruce is lured back to business and he takes a restless Dick with him out on the night’s patrol while Babs and Alfred stay behind to watch over Jason as he falls back to sleep.

It’s a blissfully quiet night on the streets and Barbara thanks every deity that might be listening for such little miracles as that.

Over the next few days, things get back to a semblance of normal.

Babs closes up her counterfeiting case with Bruce’s help as they determine that the incidents were fabricated by the Tolovis to get the attention of Tavian Ross and his crew – who apparently officially specialize in counterfeit cases in their work with GHOST.

It wasn’t supposed to make sense or be solvable, it was supposed to be confusing enough to validate Tavian Ross coming in person. Without the Tolovis around, without a need to create random and confusing incidents meant to gain outside attention, the case practically closes itself and the problem with fake goods and fake bills simply disappears.

Barbara eventually goes back to the condo she shares with her father – a careful trail of backdated receipts from a spa spilling from her purse, and stories about adventures with friends who will have her back on confirming details with zero notice (because they’ve prepped for emergency getaways like this… because they have strict parents too and they all know that sometimes a girl just needs a few secrets to stay sane, and with a cop for a dad and the tragic circumstance of living with him while in college, Babs has got to need it bad sometimes…).

She goes back to attending classes, going out on patrol at night, and keeping an eye on the parts of her Family that are determined to be uncooperative and self-destructive.

Dick is struggling to get Tim to let him in – to let him in emotionally so he can try to help or even just to let him into his house so he can hang out for no reason other than to facilitate their budding friendship.

And Jason simply refuses to stay in bed.

Especially after he gets moved upstairs to his bedroom instead of the Cave’s med bay.

Within a week, he’s begging to get back out on the streets.

They get a couple of calm moments in, some long overdue family bonding time over movie marathons with comfort food and decadent sundaes. It’s not nearly enough to satisfy Dick, and far too much to be a comfort to Bruce or Jason, but Barbara thinks it’s perfect.
Still, she’d like to keep Jason in bed recuperating far longer than he’d ever be willing to allow, and she coordinates with Alfred to both hold him back for as long as possible, and to help the others come to terms with the facts of reality.

Bruce is distracted with the effort of willfully blinding himself to Tim’s awareness of their nighttime activities to catch on to Alfred’s maneuverings. And Dick is being pulled in so many directions by his worries for Tim, his duty to help Bruce protect Gotham, and his responsibilities for his classes and with the Titans to pick up on Barbara’s subtle shoves moving him towards the the Manor door and back to San Francisco.

Dick is almost ready to head back out west to Titans Tower when Jason first heads out to try getting through to Tim – Dick’s worries about Tim are probably the last thing holding him in Gotham for the moment, and Jason’s probably the only person who can get through to him.

Barbara may commandere a satellite to watch Jason live as he attempts to make it past Tim’s barriers. Tim doesn’t come to open the door for him, but Jason just picks the lock. From there, it’s a simple matter for Barbara to access the Bat bugs and to hack Tim’s own security system to listen in on how the conversation progresses.

It’s remarkable how easily Jason gets Tim to just roll over and relax with him.

It’s the kind of thing that makes Barbara want to smile like a giddy school girl watching a Korean soap opera – witnessing an adorable rut of drama and tension that yanks on a person’s heartstrings in all the right ways.

After that, things get back to their real normal very quickly.

Dick goes back to California.

Bruce calms down and gets back to trying to finagle a means of connecting with Tim as his daytime persona.

Jason goes back to being his usual bratty self, somehow being even more endearing for it than usual – and eventually, Bruce lets him head out again in Robin’s pixie boots. The Bat sticks a bit closer to his bird, but he still lets Jason use his wings – flying through the night to save the wretched souls of Gotham.

And Barbara finds her zen again.

She is part of the Crusade and it’s a part of her, so there’s no getting out of it no matter how many doubts she has. Sometimes, the doubts make her scared enough to think about quitting, but most days she can see how impossible that would be for her – and some days she can even come to terms with that. She’s never going to be safe or calm or happy in the way that other people hope to
be, but at the same time, she can find a kind of content fulfillment that very few other people could ever hope to even imagine.

It might not be the perfect happy ending, but it’s about as good as it could possibly be.

And more than that, it’s a good day and a good night where both are always filled with measurable progress and the potential to make the world a better place for everyone.

Her Family is safe and sound and doing something truly good to help the City.

And that’s really all that Barbara needs to know to feel good as she lets herself sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Two more chapters to go people!

NEXT TIME: Important Associates get their own PoVs shared on the Bat Family's evolving circumstances.
Rule #29 - Flock Together

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the mysterious drug case Gordon gets a few assurances from the stewards of the Wayne Family's sanity.

Chapter Notes

And across town a trio with their own investment looks on as proud, protective aunties.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty One: Rule #29 – Flock Together

Three months after the incident with the new drug that had been plaguing Gotham mysteriously wrapped itself up, Gotham Police Commissioner James Gordon finds himself at yet another high society gala hosted by Bruce Wayne to celebrate the importance of Wayne Enterprises and to support one of the Waynes’ innumerable charities.

It’s three months after a bare-bones casefile containing a report on certain individuals with insanely high places within the government’s classified information centers was dropped on his desk by a particularly obnoxious bat themed vigilante. The file explained enough to prove to Gordon that while he will never know exactly what happened, he can now rest more easily with the knowledge that it has been resolved… well, it’s been settled enough to set aside.

Gotham never stays quiet for long, but that case had been a particularly awful nettle in Gordon’s side and it has felt good to breathe without it goring him these last few weeks.

Ever vigilant, Commissioner Gordon’s gaze skims over the assembled crowd of VIPs and politicians – all trying to rub elbows and smooze their ways into the good graces of Gotham’s own version of royalty. The Waynes are beyond wealthy, the kind of respected and powerful (old money wealthy, with the class to prove it) that garners places in echelons high above any other realm in American society. They’re innovative and influential, and so much richer than sin that it puts even most oil sheiks and China boom billionaires to shame, which means that no matter what room you put them in, the whole world within it revolves entirely around them.

It’s never very hard to spot their orbit in a crowd.
Even now that there are more of them than there used to be.

Gordon tries not to think about those days when Bruce Wayne was just a burgeoning young man himself, attempting to reenter Society after spending several years abroad. Foreign schooling had given Bruce both an excellent education in all sorts of worldly matters (and somehow also enough business sense to keep Wayne Enterprises swell with profits despite being considered almost universally inept in such dealings) and it had given him a chance to come to terms with the tragic deaths of his parents.

Bruce had been too young, and too isolated, to cope well at home – despite the attentive care of his family butler, Alfred Pennyworth.

Almost twenty years later, when Bruce had returned to Gotham as a new man, Gordon had perhaps been the only person besides that kindly old brit to realize just how deeply Bruce’s childhood scars still stung.

It hadn’t gotten any better for him after coming home.

If anything Gotham made Bruce’s on-going process of healing and recovery all the more difficult. And frankly, Gordon was not at all surprised when the young man began taking certain things into his own hands – and more often than not, Gordon was grateful for a helping hand on the good guys’ side who was not bound to the letter of the law.

He’d always considered taking a more… proactive approach to law enforcement, but he believed firmly in the idea of institutions – of having rules in place to help attempt to mitigate the effects of police corruption. As Commissioner, he was finally able to make significant changes to clean up the sordid ranks Gotham’s law enforcement, but it was not the kind of accomplishment that could be made at a sprint.

Things are better now.

Better for both Gordon and his police force, and better for Bruce Wayne.

Gordon had watched the young man flounder for more than half a decade before another tragedy of dead parents had brought Richard Grayson into Bruce Wayne’s life.

That kid was some kind of miracle worker.

Within a month of meeting Dick Grayson, Bruce began to smile in public again – a real smile, the kind Gordon remembered from before the Wayne Family had been reduced to a lone
survivor of the name and a loyal house hand.

Bruce had returned to the public eye in a picture of him at the entrance to a charity gala, standing tall and proud, but all alone.

Three months after he’d met Dick, Bruce introduced his newly adopted son to the press on the steps of Wayne Tower, with Alfred, Dick, and Lucius Fox standing by his side.

From sole survivor, Bruce had gone to belonging with a family of four.

And then Gordon’s own daughter had dated Bruce’s son, and even though their romance hadn’t ended in marriage, Barbara still seemed inexorably attached to the Wayne Family.

Gordon wished he didn’t know why, and he still pretends not to have a clue because he has no right to criticize her choices… Especially not when Batgirl is making such a difference in her own right with keeping Gotham’s streets as clean as possible and dramatically inspiring the dreary city’s lethargic and desensitized citizens.

And she’s ensured that Bruce Wayne’s family gatherings include at least one more person every year, and she frequently insists on her father’s presence as well. Holiday meals in Wayne Manor began to suit the opulent dining hall where they were always held – no fewer than five places were ever set, even when Lucius Fox spent the time with his own growing family.

There had been a few good years of that before Jason Todd arrived.

He’d always been a handful, the little rascal – possibly even dangerous, but no matter how much or how viciously he fought with Bruce or Dick or even Barbara, Jason had made everyone associated with the Waynes seem so much more alive and human.

And now there is a new addition being incorporated into things that seems to have already made a significant difference. He’s somehow calmed the others down, wrapped them up into a bubble and made them into a cohesive unit that works together with far less internal conflicts than Gordon would have imagined possible from them.

Timothy Drake has his own family – but so does Barbara, and honestly, with how clearly attached to and protective of him that all the Waynes have become so quickly, Gordon thinks it might be worth looking into Timothy’s circumstances at home.

Bruce doesn’t look to adopt children out of even moderately happy home-lives, actively distans the idea if the resistance Barbara met in attempting to work her way into the brood is anything to go by, and yet Bruce has looked ready to sign the papers for almost half a year now…

Because Gordon knows where this is heading.
He’s seen Bruce wear this look before, the one he’s been casting Timothy’s way throughout the entire evening this gala has been dragging on: it’s pride. And not just any pride, but pride in a youngster that he considers a son. It’s the same look he had at Dick Grayson’s high school graduation. And when the short story Jason wrote last year had won a national prize after it had been mysteriously and anonymously submitted to a literary magazine.

And this gala is celebrating the latest advancement at Wayne Tech – a breakthrough technological leap in the science of solar power, one that might very well have applications in agencies like NASA. And it’s a breakthrough that WE’s tech division is attributing almost entirely to Timothy Drake (who is resolutely insisting that it was mostly Lucius Fox’s guidance that led him and the rest of the small team of interns to happen upon the discovery).

Tim has his own orbit carved out through the room, his own pack of smoozers and high society leeches and he’s almost as easy to spot in the crowd as Bruce.

The other kids have their own circles, as well.

Linked together even when they’re nowhere near each other.

They are simply individual parts of a single star system, circling each other in shining circuits as the rest of the population of limp rocks and gaseous fools are drawn along behind.

Eventually, the stars circle in to find each other, carefully extricating themselves from their packs of smoozers and overly interested parties to find refuge with each other in the corner – well, the young ones escape, anyway. Bruce himself cannot join them at the moment, as the distraction he provides is a large part of what allows the youngsters their current peace.

Gordon watches the kids interact, perfectly at ease in a way he’s rarely seen from them before – especially while they were caught up in a public function.

Until Tim joined their bizarre little menagerie, none of the kids (not even Barbara) had ever looked comfortable in one of these Society settings. Gordon couldn’t blame them for the unease, he’d been doing this for thirty years now and he still felt awkwardly out of sorts. But Tim was perfectly comfortable with mingling among Gotham’s high society at these events – and when Tim was with them, Dick and Jason looked much more akin to willing participants.

They look good together. Happy.

It takes a few bloated seconds for Gordon to realize those words weren’t just his own wandering thoughts commenting on the obvious.

Lucius Fox has appeared at Gordon’s shoulder.
Fox is the man credited with most of the day to day operations of Wayne Enterprises, as well as with most of the advancements achieved by the massive company’s technical division.

Gordon knows that for all his playboy persona presents Brucie Wayne as an empty headed do-gooder, Bruce is actually a very competent CEO and an astute negotiator, so he’s assumed that Bruce handles more of the company’s enterprises than most people assume – which means it’s fairly likely that he’s also more involved with the technical side of things than the general public believes. But he’s also inclined to trust the popular opinion that Wayne Tech is Fox’s own personal playground – there’s always a certain smugness to his smile when he is at a press conference arranged to announce some revolutionary new technology that makes Gordon feel like he was always directly involved, no matter how humbly he represents his part in it.

And now, Fox has that same grin – satisfied, proud, and just slightly smug – as he reiterates the point, “Those kids certainly make some kind of special little team together.”

Gordon huffs. “The Drake kid looks about eight years old next to the others,” he comments. It’s a point that’s not exactly true, though – Timothy Drake should look out of place next to them, should look far too young to associate with the others, but he’s too competent for that. Out of all of them, young Timothy is actually the one that suits this setting best – is the one that allows the others to relax into their places at this kind of party.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Fox returns lightly, “He’s one smart cookie, that one. He’s Wayne Enterprises’ fastest rising new recruit. Three months ago, Tim was just a random kid who’s essay got him into a spring boot camp that gave him a plausible leg up into a WE summer camp. As of Monday morning, he’s going to be my personal summer intern – an official attachment to the wider company with the potential to push him into a career the instant he turns eighteen.”

A vague noise of malcontent escapes Gordon’s throat.

Fox chuckles.

“He wants to help this city, Commissioner,” Fox tells him after a moment of quiet. “He wants to help and he knows he’s capable of doing far more than most his age to proactively improve life in every one of Gotham’s dark nooks and dingy crevices. I’m sure you’d rather have his drive to help fostered into an interest of reasonable career opportunities rather than forced into any kind of more unconventional approach to keeping Gotham safe.”

The older man arches an eyebrow in Gordon’s direction – somehow both refined with chastisement and childish with teasing all at once as he admits to being complicit with his boss in the after hours endeavor that Gordon still swears in all official capacities he has no knowledge of Bruce Wayne’s possible involvement.

Another sound of discontent rumbles in Gordon’s chest and he grumbles, “He’s still too young to be facing the kind of pressure these people want to put on him.”

“Perhaps it seems that way,” Fox concedes. “But the person putting the most pressure on that kid is Tim Drake himself. He’s worse than Bruce, you know; worse than Bruce ever was.”
Gordon sighs at that.

Bruce had always been a persistent child, driven. When his parents had died, it was Bruce’s
dogged follow up that was all that had kept the case open after the first month of fruitless
investigation. And Bruce had been motivated by good reason, by a direct and personal reason that
was all-consuming in a way Gordon could rationalize from a kid who’d just been traumatically
orphaned. Timothy Drake has no such clear cut reasoning.

However, among all the people who might be qualified to make a comparison between
young Bruce Wayne and the newest child to find some sort of shelter under his wing, Lucius Fox
was the highest possible authority. If Fox said Tim was worse, there could be no doubting the
statement, however implausible the sentiment seemed.

“You’ll look after the kid, right?”

Teasing demeanor pushed aside, Fox replies seriously, “Of course. He’s Family.”

Gordon finds that he is not surprised by the conviction behind the confession. Tim Drake has
made himself a crucial part of the Wayne Family – had been close enough for them to consider him a
critical aspect of their world for longer than any of them likely realized. Gordon had known as soon
as he’d seen Tim with Dick and Jason at that Senior Showcase gala at the Gotham Art Museum.

He almost wants to be amused by how thoroughly Timothy has twined his way into the thick
of the Family, how diligently all members of that family keep pretending he’s nothing more seriously
attached to them than some kind of significant family friend. It’s a ridiculously blatant falsehood
coming from people Gordon knows can beat lie detectors without batting an eye.

If not for the weight of a dozen still open case files sitting heavy on his desk, Gordon would
probably be convinced to laugh outright at the absurdity of how Bruce Wayne and his brood of
misfits seem to believe that they can just pretend Tim into a role on the sidelines of their absolute
circus of a home life.

While Gordon is musing about the inevitability of Tim’s continued involvement, another
familiar face appear on the outskirts of the party: Alfred Pennyworth, come to shepherd the children
back home and up to bed.

Even from across the room, Gordon can see them grumble about leaving early – can see
Alfred stare them into submission with a single quelling look and a dry comment about something or
other that the kids know they should care about and yet clearly don’t.

They all obey his orders, though, they’ve all begun to move in accordance long before their
grumbling’s even finished.

The old butler pauses on the edge of the party before he leads the kids away, gaze finding
Bruce’s among the crowd. A nod and a smile pass between them that soothes some of the constant
worry lingering in Gordon’s chest whenever he’s forced to think about the man Bruce Wayne has
ruthlessly carved himself into being.

And then the butler looks at him, passing along the same smile, the same assurances.

He will look after this Family.

Doing so is, and always will be, his only occupation.

Alfred is nothing if not loyal, and he will care for every single member of the Wayne Clan – even the ones who aren’t yet convinced that they are genuinely part of it.

Gordon nods back, feeling more at peace with his universe than he has in a long while.

At his shoulder, Fox sighs and comments, “Well, we’d best get back to making the rounds, eh? These socialites won’t smooze themselves, and you’ve got to be around to make sure that none of the gossiping turns to actual scandal.”

Gordon groans at the reminder, but parts ways amicably with Fox.

He makes his way weaving among the high society peacocks with his usual expression of curmudgeonly acceptance of his public duties as Commissioner, but his heart is more at ease than it has been in at least a year. He’ll not soon forget Alfred’s silent promise, nor lose the feeling of blanket reassurance that he feels from it.

It’s a good day in Gotham when nothing goes so wrong Gordon has to reevaluate his situation for the questionable morality of being the person who is tasked with drawing the official line between black and white.

And it’s a good night in Gotham when Gordon can fall asleep after then end of a long day feeling like, perhaps, there’s something to be said for finding hope in the dark places after all.
Across town on the very same night of the gala celebrating the development of a new kind of solar technology and the formalized attachment of Timothy Drake to Wayne Tech’s Lucius Fox, the sole late-night employee of an old fashioned ice cream parlor lies on his back with his cheek pressed into the sparkly red vinyl of a curved booth with his hands and feet tied together above him like a pig ready for the spit.

The ice cream parlor’s single flat screen television is tuned into the live coverage of what’s happening inside that very gala being hosted by Wayne Enterprises.

Three of Gotham’s notorious Rogue Gallery sit at the ice cream counter – and not just any Rogues, but the Gotham City Sirens.

Catwoman has the most typical sundae, something actually on the menu: a signature dish call *Cat’s Got the Cookies & Cream*, made out of cookie dough, cookies & cream, and the House blend of crème de la crème with caramel and French vanilla, with a massive chocolate chip cookie cut into cat ears and the scoops and toppings arranged to make the sundae look like a very self-satisfied house cat.

Poison Ivy’s got the simplest arrangement: just two scoops, one scoop of peanut butter & mango, and another scoop of lavender citrus (all of which are vegan and sustainably sourced, and all of which sound absolutely disgusting, but the poor employee has tried them all as part of his training and has to admit they are surprising tasty in small doses).

And then there’s Harley Quinn, whose bowl is just a melted swirl of sweet goop scooped out of at least a dozen different flavors and a mish-mash of toppings all stirred up until it has reached an even consistency and a startling resemblance to fresh vomit. The other Sirens seem unbothered by it, but the employee find himself mourning the lost importance in the art of presentation – which surprises him all the more so because he hadn’t realized he’d reached a point of attachment to his job where he’d become so deeply invested in any part of it.

The Sirens are watching the goings on of the Gala, glued to the screen and gossiping over Wayne’s latest achievement with the fervor expected of any true Gothamite.

And, like all good aunties should, they’re cooing over the way their chosen godson or some unofficial relation of theirs – seemingly one of the various wards Wayne’s acquired, though the employee can’t tell which one of them the women mean – looks all grown up and gorgeous in his big boy britches, that he looks good and natural and at home in a suit mingling with the others in his flock.

“Such a shame we couldn’t take the kitten out for ice cream tonight,” Harley sighed, “He deserves it, surely does. Can’t you get the Bat to do something about it, Cat? He needs to let us spoil him a little! We didn’t even get to go out after that daring rescue he pulled for his little lost love bird, and we promised that we’d take him!”

“B does not actually know how involved my kitten was with that fiasco,” Catwoman harps snippily, “And I intend to keep it that way. You know how moody he gets when he feels like one of his children is being threatened or endangered or even just annoying their ridiculous way into any kind of moderately serious trouble.”

Ivy huffs a sultry laugh, “And you two *just* got back on good terms, didn’t you? Are you
really worried about the kid having to face B’s emotional constipation, or are your concerns a little closer to home? Cats aren’t exactly the most friendly of creatures themselves, and you’re especially testy when you have to warm your bed up all alone.”

Catwoman elects not to answer the accusation, instead taking a large bite of ice cream covered chocolate chip cookie.

The good natured ribbing and light hearted teasing continues through the whole of the gala’s live coverage. As the coverage wraps up, Catwoman sighs heavily and comments one more time that her little kitten isn’t quite so little any more and she hopes ‘those idiot bird brains realize what a blessing they’ve scored’.

The Sirens then turn off the television and clean up the counter – they wipe everything down and even go so far as to clean their dishes. They leave money for all the ice cream and toppings they used, and include a very nice tip for the employee – who’s far less self pitying regarding his circumstances after he’s been carefully untied and set back on his feet (this little adventure has more than paid for itself, left him with a great story to tell next time he hits up his local bar, and given him a compelling reason to convince his boss for either a raise or at the very least, some sort of hazard pay bonus).

Harley Quinn gives him a pat on the head like he’s eight years old and then twirls around to follow the others out into the black of a Gotham night.

The employee sits himself back down at the counter he’d been tending before the Sirens had shown up and goes back to playing with his phone for the remainder of his shift – though now, he’s telling the thrilling story of his evening rather than simply browsing in boredom.

So, honestly, he counts tonight a win.

And hashtags it all with the usual #OnlyInGotham.

Chapter End Notes

Alrighty folks, it's been a good run and we're almost at the end!

(Though, I've actually got ANOTHER pair of stories brewing for this fandom already...)
THANK YOU ALL FOR READING! And kudo-ing, and commenting, and sticking with me through the last, what? EIGHT MONTHS? (Wowo... ~200k in eight months is pretty dang cool, if I do say so myself...) Anywho, THANKS!

NEXT TIME: Alfred gets the last word, as is only proper.
Chapter Summary

Alfred reflects on the journey to this point, and on the challenges that may yet ahead.

Chapter Notes

Alfred is just the most amazing person literally ever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty Two: Rule #30 – Love. Unconditionally.

It was a year after the loss of Thomas and Martha Wayne, a year that young Master Bruce had spent trying to solve their murders and not spent trying to heal, that he first said something to Alfred out of misplaced pain and anguish that was genuinely hurtful.

To this day, it was still the worst thing he had ever said.

‘You’re not Family, Alfred,’ he’d shouted, ‘You can’t understand.’

And Alfred, grappling with his own feelings of grief and with his fear for his young ward – for the lonely little boy he knew now that he would raise in the stead of Thomas and Martha, who had always been shier and sweeter and far more fragile than the boy Thomas had been while he’d been just a youngling – had let his hurt get the better of him.

‘I have known your parents, I have loved your parents, for three times the number of years that you have even been alive, Master Bruce. I can understand your loss far better than you seem to know; it is you that cannot understand mine,’ he had retorted – he’d snapped, with an intended meanness, and the utmost unprofessionalism.

He’d cooled quickly; enough to promise Bruce that no matter how bratty he got or how testy Alfred became, he would always love him – to say reassuringly, ‘I well near raised your father, and I shall now raise you as well. No matter what your thoughts on the matter may be, you and I are Family, Master Bruce, and we shall bear the burden of this trial together.’
They’d fought again, after that, fought more seriously, even – when Bruce had announced his intentions to go abroad, when he’d returned with a notion to become a vigilante, when he’d first taken in a child who was hurting as he had once been hurting (and arguably still is hurting, even now) and had taught him how to overcome those aches with his own brand of public service… but never had their fights made Alfred worry that Bruce didn’t know – in every fiber of his being – that Alfred loved him, without requisite or expectation or qualifiers.

Alfred knew with utter certainty that Bruce understood that while earning the old butler’s approval was often beyond him, and that while Alfred strongly disagreed with many of Bruce’s choices, Alfred’s unconditional love was never something that Bruce had to earn.

Master Richard had immediately understood that much instinctively as well, bearing his own brand of warmth and love and Family that meant he never even considered the possibility that he didn’t belong – that he could ever not deserve to belong.

He had doubts, obviously, regarding himself as a good person and his ability to actually do any good in the world – doubts regarding his crime fighting skills and his place in Bruce’s esteem and his role in the Crusade – but he never had any doubt that he belonged to the Family.

He knew what love felt like, and even though Bruce was terrible with showing it, and even though Alfred’s own affections were quiet and cool compared to the overwhelming warmth of Richard’s circus family – and to the child’s own outpouring of love – Master Dick understood that he would always have a place within the Family.

Even if that place was not static or simple.

Master Dick was hurt by Jason’s arrival, by the surprise of it and by the choices Bruce made in passing on the Robin name – by making Robin into a mantle that could just be shunted off from one person to another without the originator’s consent or consideration.

But even with how vicious he got in attacking Bruce’s choices, he loved his father figure and knew that he was loved in return – and he knew that Alfred would support the both of them in trying to work this out, in healing as best they could, and in moving forward as a Family.

Jason was different.

The only love Jason had ever felt before joining the Waynes was fleeting – and conditional on the limited lucidity of his unfortunate mother. And after she had passed, the concept of love had been as thoroughly lost to Jason as if it had been a physical object.

By the time he’d come to the Manor, he’d been lost in the darkness for so long that Alfred feared he may never come to fully inhabit the belief that his place in the Manor – his place in the Family whose House it was – could never be questioned.

Two years into the arduous endeavor of raising him, and Jason was still ready to hit the
streets again on a moments notice – he still believed that his ability to perform as Robin to Batman’s standards was the factor upon which his permission to be comfortable was contingent.

He believed that Alfred cared for him, but he was as of yet unconvinced that Alfred cared enough to love him even if he was angry with him. Disapproval was a far riskier card to play with him than it had been with Bruce or with Dick…

Disapproval sent Jason into self deprecating spirals that made him question his own worth as a human being – made him question his right to be alive at all, let alone to live in such splendor as the Manor (fortunately, as of yet, Jason seemed too stubbornly resilient and determined to live, even if just for the spite of it, to make Alfred truly worry for his immediate safety when he got wrapped up in his own thoughts).

But even so, they were making progress.

He was more comfortable in the Manor, staking out places to call his own usual spot in rooms other than the bedroom assigned to him – started leaving his personal belongings in places that weren’t specifically labeled with his name being attached as explicit permission.

And he was slowly coming to accept Dick’s brotherly overtures.

There was less animosity in his rejections now, more curmudgeonly affection – and Alfred knew that Dick could feel the difference. Both boys were smiling more, both more often and with more genuine happiness behind the gesture.

Part of it was time, the simple truth of everyone growing more comfortable together as a Family – of growing past old spats and sore spots.

And part of it was Tim.

Timothy Drake was a wondrous little boy, a child that loved every member of the Wayne Family as thoroughly and utterly and unconditionally as Alfred himself. Timothy could see the Family’s cracks, could analyze each individual’s personal failures and shortcomings, and he could see how they hurt each other without any intent to do so – he could see the exact barbs that rubbed each one wrong, and could effectively force himself in to alleviate the pressure.

Alfred was grateful for his existence long before he realized that Tim was to become part of the Family as well. For a moment, it seemed as though Tim was destined to simply be a neighbor, someone influential and impactful, but still… distant, attached more to their own family than to the Waynes’.

The butler noticed it before Miss Barbara Gordon did, but only just.
He noticed it when Jason was beginning to fray again, when he’d internalized a series of mistakes as Robin as a black mark on his being as a person.

Alfred had tested the hypothesis of Timothy’s import when he’d caught Jason readying to leave – readying to bolt into the twisting labyrinth of Gotham’s underbelly where he had a reasonable chance to hide from even Batman’s near all-seeing eyes.

The mere hint of a suggestion that Timothy might not be fairing well while his parents were away was enough to coax Jason into waiting out the weekend, which in turn was more than enough to convince him to stay altogether – to calm the storm well enough to let a certain kind of peace reign until the next inevitable blow up.

It was an altogether revolutionary observation, and a startlingly refreshing few days of true comfort among the children under his care within the Manor.

Peace like *that* had never settled on them before while Jason had been present.

It was a sign of good things yet to come, even if the intervening periods had a few rocky patches with a brutal roughness – patches that needed to be coped with and merely *survived* in the given moment before they could eventually be resolved.

Timothy was part of the Family in Alfred’s eyes long before most of the other members even considered him a relevant factor.

He was far easier to work with than Jason, but like Barbara, he had his own family to consider outside of the Waynes.

Barbara was her own story, a girl who’d chosen of her own accord to become Family, whether the Family liked it or not. Alfred approved of her tremendously.

She’d even, very carefully, arranged for her father, Commissioner Gordon, to be considered as a part of the Waynes’ extended clan.

Alfred did not worry about her half so much as he fretted for the others – a pursuit Barbara had been quick to join him in, especially after she’d noticed the true attachment and undeniable importance of Master Tim.

Together, Barbara and Alfred fussed over young Master Tim – who was not only lost when it came to an understanding of truly unconditional love, but was also outrightly convinced and frustratingly stubborn regarding the ridiculous belief that he did not deserve it (assuming, in fact, that he could ever be convinced it existed at all).

Lucius Fox was serving well to help them both with that.
Eventually, Alfred knew they would win Tim over. His calm confidence in that irrefutable fact was enough to allow Barbara to find her unfailing reserves of sweetness and patience.

It may take them a while, but Alfred knows Tim will come into the Family eventually – in his own time, when he is well and truly ready to accept the love they wish to give him.

It’s been five months since the last time Jason even considered leaving the Manor, and Alfred knows that their current peace won’t hold forever – he can feel another blow up of tensions beginning to brew beneath bitter comments and self doubt and fearful concern, feelings mingled evenly between Bruce, Dick, and Jason, all.

Even Tim may not be able to assuage whatever fight is brewing, but Alfred has no doubt what so ever that Tim will be a crucial element in how the conflict resolves.

Alfred loves his Family, loves them all; unreservedly, categorically, and more completely than they could ever come to understand – no matter how their choices and failings and personal idiocies hurt him, and hurt each other, in the short term.

From the very beginning, the most important rule Alfred has followed in terms of teaching his Family how to be a Family is the simplest one of all: Love. Unconditionally.

Always.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's all folks!
(For this story anyways)

Thank you all SOOOO MUCH for being such an amazing crowd through this craziness, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the series as much as you've loved and supported this one!

A new chapter of Red Rising should be up later this week, and a new story (a kind of super angsty one about how Tim convinced Jason to come back to the Family and play
by the No Killing Rule, because what this fandom and this series TOTALLY needs is just MORE angst... (but it's also shaping up to be pretty cute)) will start being posted next Monday!

Once again: THANK YOU ALL!
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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!